

COUNCIL



Report subject	Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report
Meeting date	9 December 2025
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	<p>This is the annual report of the Statutory Scrutiny Officer on Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) activity within BCP Council for which there is an annual requirement to report to Council. This promotes visibility of the O&S function and Council ownership of activity and any improvements required.</p> <p>The annual report contains a summary and analysis of O&S activity during 2024-25, reflections on working practices and identified improvements to strengthen the O&S function.</p> <p>This report was preceded by consultation on proposals with the O&S Board and Committees and comments raised by O&S members are summarised within this report.</p>
Recommendations	<p>It is RECOMMENDED that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Council consider and comment on the annual report. Council agree the minor amendment to O&S committee remits as outlined in figure one. To maximise the resource available for O&S work, Council agree the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> for pieces of in-depth work, the constitution be updated to allow one scrutiny topic to be undertaken at a time across the whole O&S function, with one further topic being scoped during the same period. the O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs group role be strengthened to include a responsibility to agree the priority of all work topics across the full O&S committee structure. the O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs group strengthen scoping for all O&S topics by reviewing key lines of enquiry for topics on an ongoing basis to provide peer test and challenge.

	iv) the Monitoring Officer be delegated to make the associated updates to the Constitution.
Reason for recommendations	The Constitution requires the Statutory Scrutiny Officer to report to Council on an annual basis on the work of Overview and Scrutiny, including recommendations for any changes that may be required to ensure the function remains fit for purpose. The report must be informed by consultation with the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the O&S Committees and referred to the four O&S Committees for comment. Consideration and comment on the annual report by the O&S Committees and Council upholds principle b) of good scrutiny, as outlined in the Constitution, that O&S shall 'be a Councillor led and owned function that seeks to continuously improve through self-reflection and development'.
Portfolio Holder(s):	Not applicable – Overview and Scrutiny is a non-executive function.
Corporate Director	Aidan Dunn - Chief Executive
Report Authors	Lindsay Marshall – Overview and Scrutiny Specialist
Wards	Council-wide
Classification	For Decision

Background

The Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report

1. ['Overview and Scrutiny: statutory guidance for councils and combined authorities'](#) by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC), recommends that councils report annually on their Overview & Scrutiny (O&S) function and activity. The purpose of the report is to outline the activity and output of the O&S function over the previous year and to identify improvements for the function to ensure it remains fit for purpose. This report is based on the municipal year of May 2024 - April 2025.
2. The report will be received by all O&S Committees and at a meeting of Council but is aimed at all stakeholders of O&S – this includes those within the Council, external partners, and the public and communities served by the council.
3. This is the report of the council's Statutory Scrutiny Officer, who is responsible for supporting and promoting O&S activity. Contribution has been made by other officers who provide support to O&S, and Chairs and Vice Chairs of O&S committees. Comments made by Chairs and Vice Chairs through consultation are reflected within the body of this report.

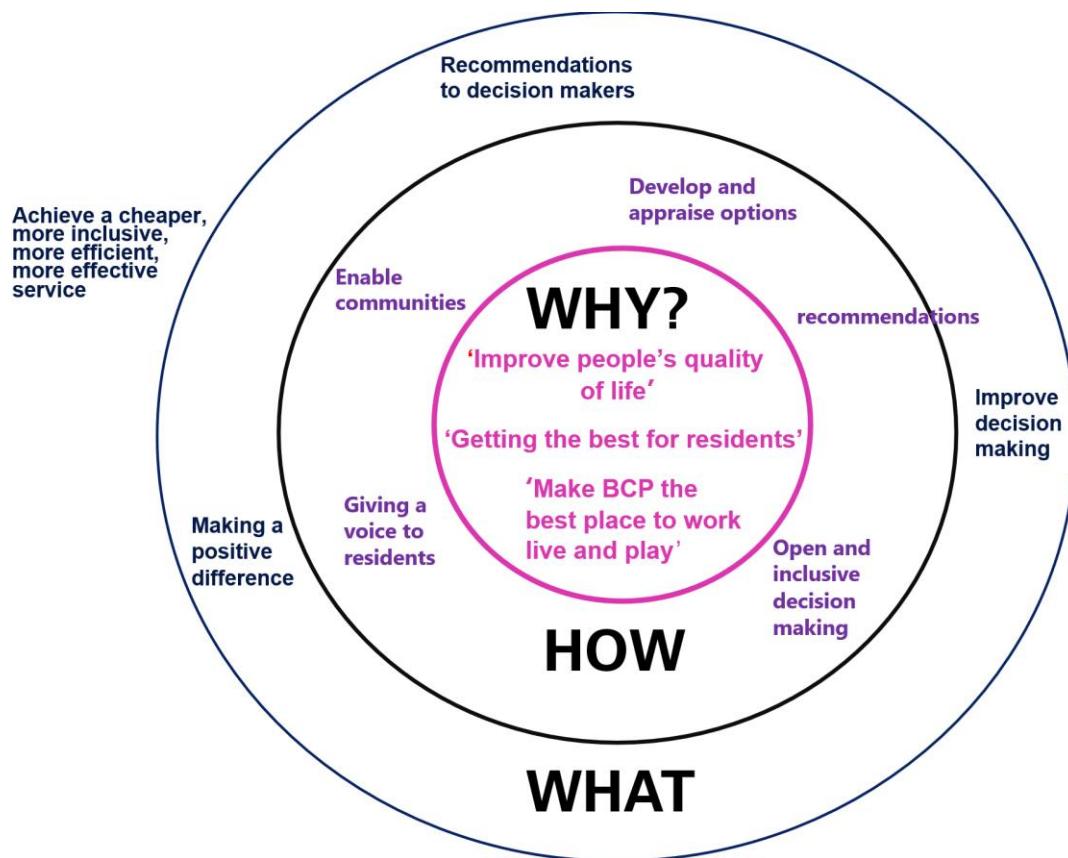
What is Overview and Scrutiny?

4. The purpose and principles of overview and scrutiny and its role in supporting the ambitions and values of the council is set out in Appendix 1.

What does good scrutiny look like?

5. There is not one definition of good scrutiny. In development workshops in 2025, stakeholders of O&S worked together to articulate their view on what good scrutiny looks like in BCP council. This is illustrated below as a 'What/ How/ Why' of good scrutiny, and an outline of good scrutiny ways of working:

Good scrutiny – what/ how / why – defined by BCP O&S members, Cabinet and senior officers:



Good scrutiny – ways of working – defined by BCP O&S members, Cabinet and senior officers:

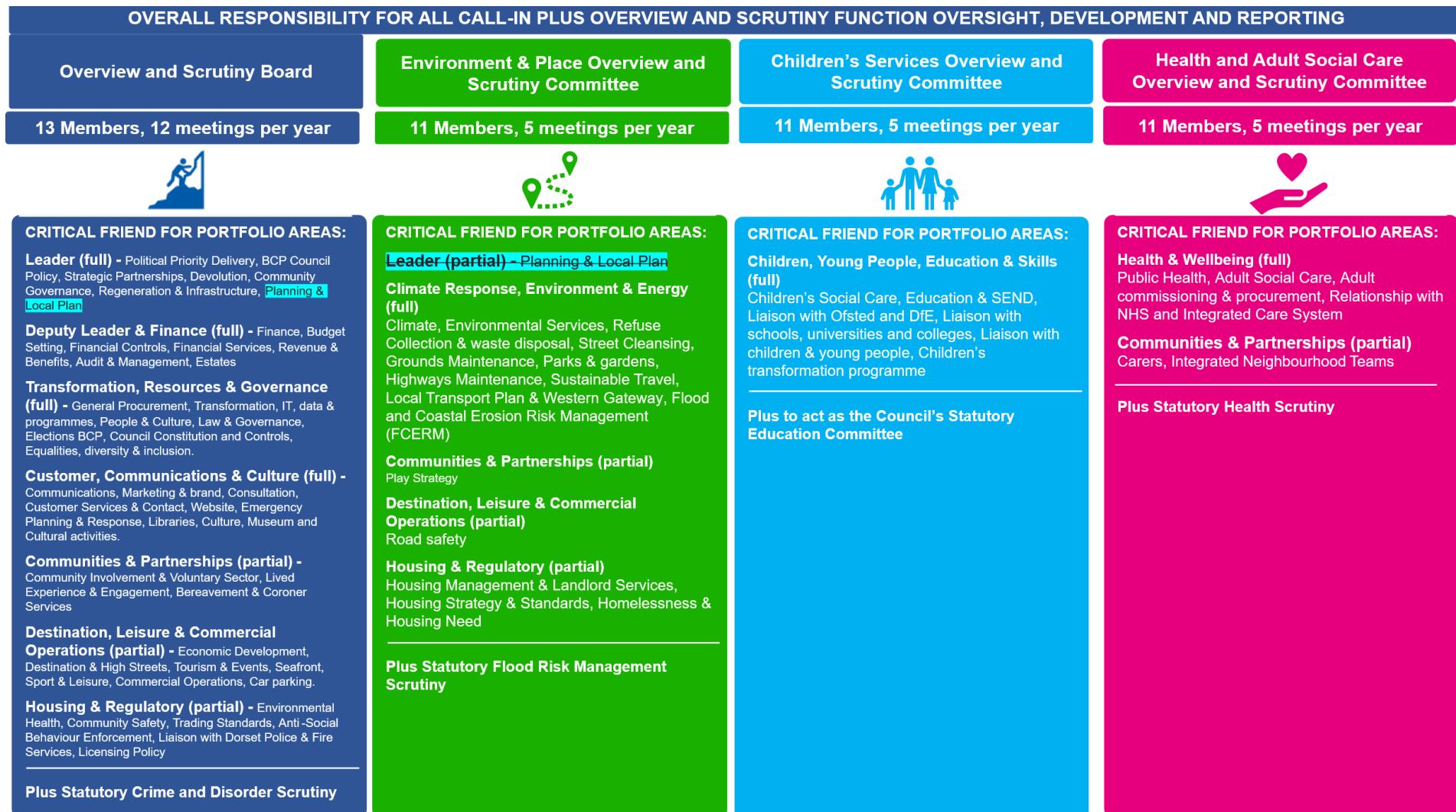
Approaches	Ask sensible questions Critical friend Sharing information Exploring information and data Wider input from members and community
Accountability	Accountability, defending decisions Holding systems, officers and outside bodies to account Asking questions of officials and portfolio holders
Policy development	A check on policy Adding value to the position, policy on output Opportunity to refine decisions and ensure views are considered
Overview and direction setting	More overview –forward looking Venue for fresh ideas

6. Understanding what good scrutiny looks like in BCP is important as this helps stakeholders of O&S work towards a common aim and to reflect on how well the organisation is meeting this aim. This annual report forms a key part of the reflection process and allows councillors the opportunity to refresh their understanding of the aims and purpose of scrutiny.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee structure

7. The current Overview and Scrutiny Committee structure is illustrated in figure one below. The Council's Constitution makes provision for any changes required to the structure to be reported to Council as part of this annual report, to ensure committees remain fit for purpose. Councillors will note that 'Planning and the Local Plan' is highlighted and listed under the responsibilities of the O&S Board and removed from the responsibilities of the Environment & Place O&S Committee. This change was agreed by the Monitoring Officer in 2025 in consultation with O&S Chairs under constitution rules relating to joint working, to allow for more flexible interaction with the developing local plan through the higher frequency of O&S Board meetings. It is suggested that this now be agreed by Council as a permanent change to ensure clear lines of reporting.

Figure One – Overview and Scrutiny Committee structure



Overview & Scrutiny Activity 2024/25

8. A full outline of Overview and Scrutiny activity during this reporting year is attached at Appendix 2. This includes a summary of scrutiny topics and outcomes by committee, improvements and successes, and future aims.

Overview & Scrutiny Action Plan

9. An O&S Action Plan was agreed by Council in September 2023, to identify strategic actions to improve O&S activity in BCP Council and bring working practices in line with statutory guidance. Actions were originally planned for completion within one year but have slowed as a result of resource pressures with core service activity prioritised over action plan progression. The plan now is now at over 75% completion. More detail is set out in Appendix 2 and the full O&S Action Plan is available to view as a background paper to this report.

Recommendations from Council to Overview & Scrutiny

10. During 2024/25 there was a marked increase in recommendations from Council to Overview and Scrutiny committees to undertake work (detailed further in Appendix 2). This increase shows a greater council-wide understanding of the role that O&S can play in developing policy and providing critical friend test and challenge to issues of importance to councillors and residents.
11. When receiving a request for work, including requests from Council, O&S committees are required to weigh up the likely added value of any work suggestion and the resources available to it to proceed with the request. Many suggestions from Council to scrutiny have been agreed by O&S committees but not yet progressed owing to lack of work programme capacity. O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs have asked that, through this report, councillors be reminded that whilst Council can ask Overview and Scrutiny to undertake work, it is in the gift of the relevant O&S committee to determine whether to agree to this request and when to timetable work, taking account of other work programme priorities.
12. Many recommendations from Council to O&S result from motions raised by councillors. To make this process more effective, it is recommended that Councillors wishing to raise a Council motion for O&S work seek prior consultation with the relevant O&S Chair. This will enable them to gain an understanding of available O&S resources, the alignment of their motion with existing work programme priorities and so the likelihood of their work suggestion being agreed / progressing in a timely way through O&S.

Resourcing Overview & Scrutiny

Background and Challenges

13. Resources available to support Overview and Scrutiny are stretched and have been well documented in previous annual reports which are available to view as background papers. The most significant pressures relate to previous cumulative Council decisions to increase the number of O&S committees and meeting numbers over time, not matched by officer resource to support these. Accompanied by an increase in other committees also resourced by the same team (Democratic Services) the overall resource available to support Overview and Scrutiny work has reduced whilst the level of O&S and other committee activity has increased. This is illustrated in figure two below which shows the total meeting numbers resourced by the Democratic Services team.

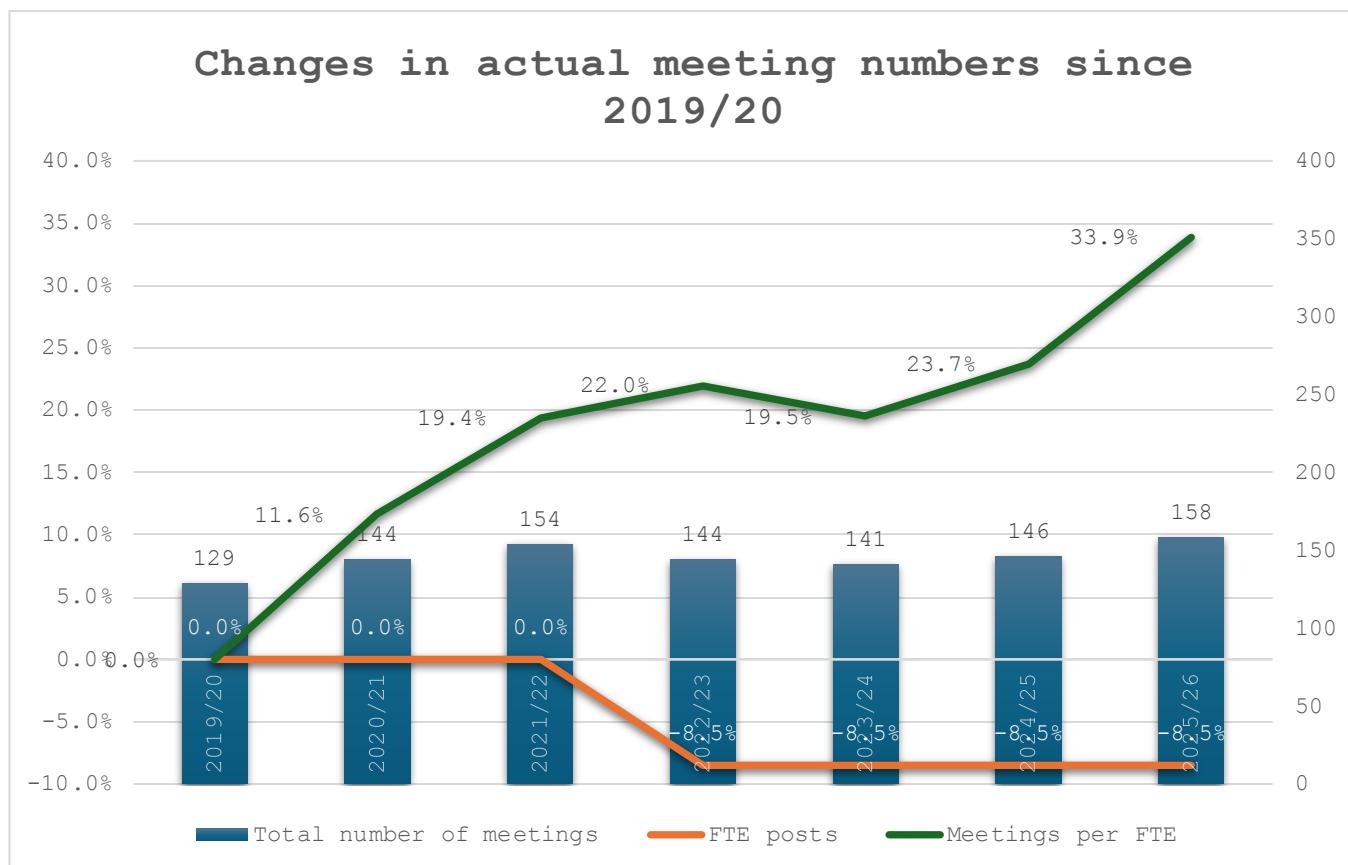


Figure Two – BCP meeting numbers in relation to Democratic Services Team resource.

14. More recently resource has been further strained by a high number of working groups and other in-depth scrutiny work (such as committee based proactive inquiries) scheduled to take place concurrently, as permitted under the constitution. An increase in work programme suggestions being received from councillors and other council bodies has also been seen, and day to day advice and guidance to councillors and officers on O&S has also increased in line with this. Whilst this reflects a healthy engagement with the O&S function and a wider understanding of the ability of O&S to undertake work which contributes to the priorities of the Council, this has added additional pressure to resources.
15. The impact of highly stretched resource has been a slow rate of progression for planned work, delays to strategic O&S work (such as annual work programme activity), limited resource available to respond to arising issues throughout the year and the likelihood that O&S outcomes have been limited in value as planned work has not benefitted from effective levels of officer support.
16. Scoping support: analysis of scrutiny outcomes in 2024/25 indicates that the current level of activity in O&S could benefit from strengthened scoping to plan for valuable outcomes. In 2024/25 an average of 25% agenda items across all O&S committee meetings led to recommendations. Whilst not all scrutiny work will lead to recommendations, this figure indicates that there is room for more targeted selection

of scrutiny topics and stronger scoping of the topics selected to ensure that O&S activity has impact.

Addressing resource challenges

Levels of concurrent work

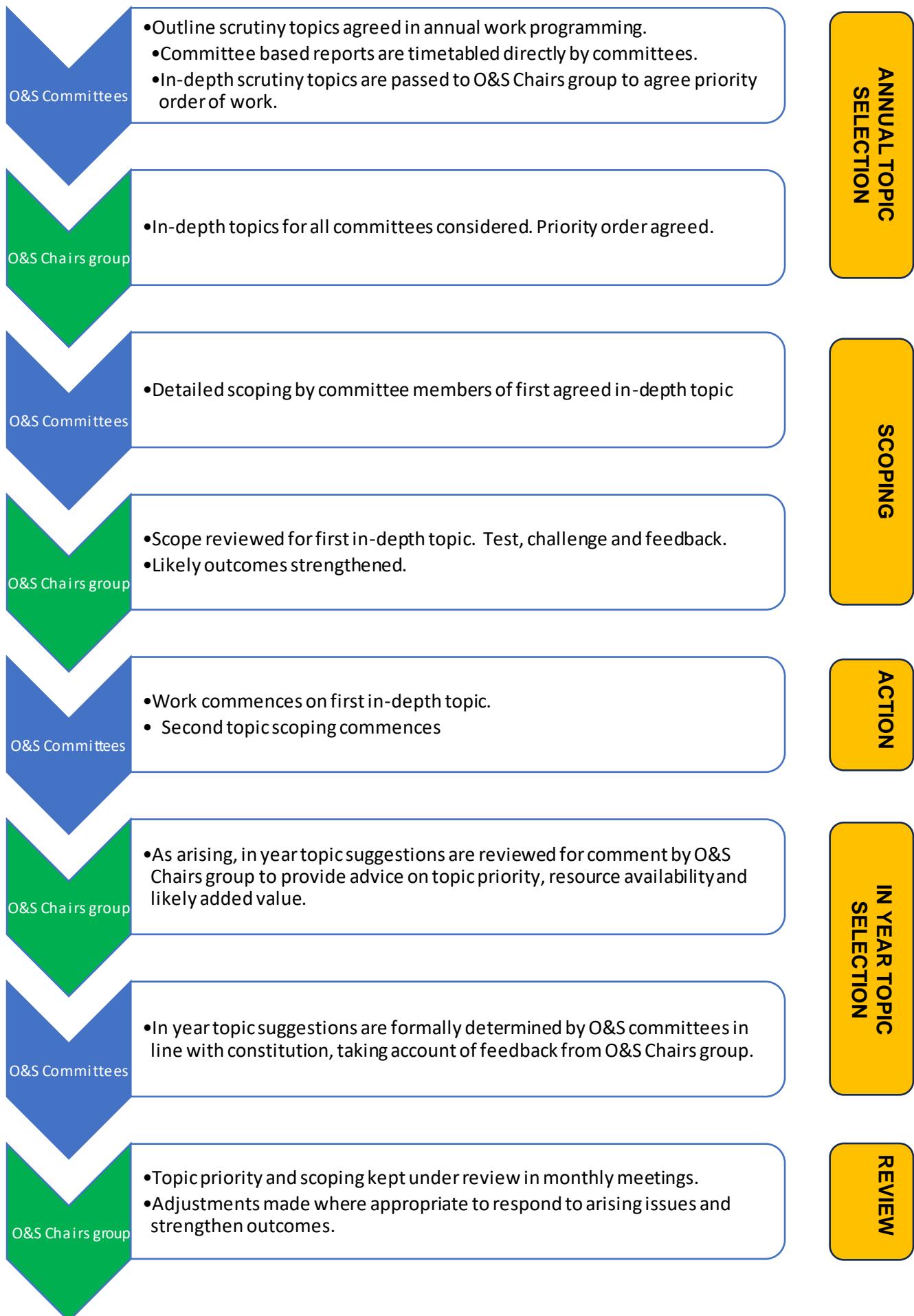
17. Under current Constitution rules, up to four committees are able to undertake one piece of in-depth work concurrently with no limit on scoping activity. This high level of concurrent activity across all O&S committees dilutes the level of officer support that is available for this purpose and risks a quantity over quality approach. To make better use of existing resources it is recommended that greater controls be placed around the use of resource for work that requires significant planning and resource to undertake (eg. working groups/ in-depth committee inquiries). **For pieces of in-depth work, it is recommended that the constitution be updated to allow one topic to be scrutinised at a time across the whole O&S function, with one further topic being scoped during the same period (Option A).** This will enable greater and more timely focus and support to selected topics in train.

Topic prioritisation

18. To agree the priority of in-depth topics, **it is recommended that the O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs group role be strengthened to include a responsibility to agree the priority of all work topics across the full O&S committee structure.** Currently, all O&S committees are able to decide their own work priorities. It is not proposed that this be changed but adding a level of O&S leadership sign off to the implementation of in-depth work will provide tighter grip to the use of resource and test and challenge to the selection of topics before work commences.

Topic scoping

19. To plan for valuable O&S outcomes, **it is recommended that the O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs group strengthen scoping for all O&S topics by reviewing key lines of enquiry for topics on an ongoing basis.** This group of O&S lead members have received a higher level of training in achieving effective O&S outcomes and are well placed to provide peer challenge.
20. Figure three below illustrates the proposed oversight to be provided by the O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs group. It is intended that this will provide opportunity for an ongoing dialogue with committees to give views on topic suggestions, resource availability and likely added value of the topics suggested. It is suggested that this be kept under continuous review to ensure that arrangements are fit for purpose.



Maximising Resource – Rapporteurs

21. Along with effective topic prioritisation, O&S resource can be maximised by a member-led approach to scrutiny that capitalises on the strengths and interests of individual committee members. An effective way to do this is through the use of rapporteurs. O&S committees have appointed more rapporteurs in 2024/25, and O&S Chairs intend to embed the use of these further in future. Rapporteurs are councillor champions appointed by an O&S committee to work independently towards an agreed remit and report back to committee. The model is suited to the progression of light touch scrutiny topics and research, such as gathering background information on a topic through conversations with officers and portfolio holders. By establishing rapporteurs O&S committees can spread workload across members with relevant skills and interests and progress issues in a timely way.
22. As a working method, rapporteurs rely on officers and portfolio holders working with them in a flexible and transparent way to share information, as they would if a committee report were requested by an O&S committee. O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs have asked that awareness of rapporteurs be raised through this annual report. Further information on rapporteurs and other working methods that will maximise resource is contained within Appendix 2.

Consultation with Overview and Scrutiny Committees

23. On behalf of all O&S committees, the O&S Board hosted a discussion on the proposals set out in this report at its meeting on 17 November 2025, inviting all O&S Chairs to contribute.
24. Below is a summary of views raised by O&S members during discussions:
 - Acknowledgement of the need to prioritise resource and support from the O&S Board for the recommendations outlined in this report to address this.
 - A preference from councillors for greater dedicated O&S resource levels and a request to officers to continue to explore opportunities to achieve this within the context of the financial challenges faced by the council.
 - Acknowledgement of the significant improvement in the organisational culture that supports O&S work in BCP since this was highlighted as a concern within the Best Value Review in 2023. O&S members noted the view of the O&S Specialist that working relationships with senior officers and the Cabinet were now effective with a clear understanding of the role and aims of scrutiny; O&S Chairs were highly trained and member conduct at meetings was productive. These improvements provided the necessary foundation for effective scrutiny and the rationale for now addressing the O&S resource constraints referred to in this report, with a view to increasing the overall impact of scrutiny work.
 - Frustration from councillors that motions referred from Council to O&S committees with a request for action are not able to be progressed in a timely way due to limited O&S resources.
 - Support for a greater member-led approach to O&S work, including wider use of rapporteurs to independently undertake specific elements of work and report back to committees. O&S Councillors requested the development of a rapporteur guide and awareness raising with officers across the organisation to ensure that O&S rapporteurs can be effective.

- The need for committees to maintain close oversight of the type of scrutiny work selected and that this should include a balance of pre-decision scrutiny (Cabinet reports) and proactive enquiries responding to ward and community concerns.
- Queries regarding how many in-depth work items are achievable within resources within a year, and the hope that the Chairs group can take a pragmatic and flexible approach to prioritisation of in-depth topics so that as much work as possible can be progressed. O&S members acknowledged that this will be variable depending on the depth and scope of each in-depth topic selected.

Options Appraisal

25. Option A (Recommended option) -

- i) for pieces of in-depth work, the constitution be updated to allow one topic to be undertaken at a time across the whole O&S function, with one further topic being scoped during the same period.
- ii) the O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs group role be strengthened to include a responsibility to agree the priority of all work topics across the full O&S committee structure.
- iii) the O&S Chairs and Vice Chairs group strengthen scoping for all O&S topics by reviewing key lines of enquiry for topics on an ongoing basis to provide peer test and challenge.
- iv) the Monitoring Officer be delegated to make the associated updates to the Constitution.

More detail on this option is outlined in paragraphs 17-20 above. This option is preferred because it will allow work to progress in a more focussed and timely way and will release capacity for greater scoping support for agreed priorities. The option does not require any significant change to the current O&S committee structure or committee numbers and has no financial implications. This option was supported by the O&S Board when it considered this report.

26. Option B – Arrangements for in-depth work levels remain the same but resource is released to support this work through a review of the O&S committee structure to reduce committee numbers and thereby reduce meeting numbers.

A review of the O&S committee structure will be required if this is the preferred option, including stakeholder consultation. This will divert officer resource from ongoing O&S work priorities and so has not been provided in detail with this report. If this option is preferred, the detail of this option will require further consideration and reporting.

27. Option C – Arrangements for in-depth work levels remain the same but resource is released to support this work through a reduction in the overall number of meetings across all O&S committees.

A review of O&S committee numbers will be required if this is the preferred option, including stakeholder consultation. This will divert officer resource from ongoing O&S work priorities and so has not been provided in detail with this report. If this option is preferred, the detail of this option will require further consideration and reporting.

28. Option D – Arrangements for in-depth work levels remain the same but resource to the Democratic Services team is increased to provide greater support to O&S work.

To advance this option, a bid will need to be prepared to set out the required resource. This will divert officer resource from ongoing O&S work priorities and so has not been provided in detail with this report. If this option is preferred, the detail of this option will require further consideration and reporting.

29. Option E – Arrangements for in-depth work levels remain the same but in-depth work is outsourced to an external body such as the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, to undertake work on behalf of the council.

(Note – this option was considered unfavourable by the O&S Chairs' group in early consultation due to likely prohibitive costs and reduction in council ownership of work. If this option is preferred it will require further consideration and reporting to identify financial implications).

30. Option F – No change.

If no change is made resources will be used to support statutory work as a priority (eg. scheduled meetings and associated activity). Non-statutory O&S activity may be delayed or not delivered. This includes a delay to the progression of working groups and in-depth O&S work and limitations on scoping support which will affect the outcomes of work. Additional O&S activity such as annual work programming may not be supported and committees will instead plan work on a rolling basis. Proactive budget scrutiny, over and above committee meeting-based scrutiny, may not be fulfilled.

Summary of financial implications

31. There are no direct financial implications related with the production of this annual report. The report explores the implications of resourcing O&S in paragraphs 13 to 22 above. Should options D-E above be supported it is recommended that a further report be brought forward to set out the detail of financial implications associated with pursuing these options.

Summary of legal implications

32. Overview and Scrutiny is a statutory function of all councils operating an executive model of decision making. Improvements to the function, outlined in the report, will ensure that the work of O&S Committees in BCP Council complies with relevant legislation and upholds statutory guidance.

Summary of human resources implications

33. There are no human resources implications arising from this report.

Summary of sustainability impact

34. There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

Summary of public health implications

35. There are no public health implications arising from this report.

Summary of equality implications

36. Equality impact screening has been undertaken in relation to the preferred option in the report and the EIA is attached at Appendix 3. This has indicated that there are no equality implications relating to the proposals within this report and so no mitigations are required. Should other options within the report be preferred these will be the subject of a further report and associated EIA as appropriate.

Summary of risk assessment

37. The improvements identified for O&S, as set out in Appendix 2 and recommended above, will promote the upholding of statutory guidance and valuable O&S outcomes. There is a risk that the guidance will not be properly upheld by the Council if actions identified within this report, particularly those to address resources, are not taken; although this risk is low as it is for each local authority to implement their own scrutiny arrangements in response to the statutory guidance.

Background papers

Published works:

- ['Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities'](#) the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC)
- [Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24](#)
- [Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2019-23](#)
- [Overview and Scrutiny Action Plan](#)

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Overview and Scrutiny statutory powers and BCP context

Appendix 2 – Overview & Scrutiny 2024/25 Activity

Appendix 3 – Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening Tool