Request for consideration of an issue by Overview and Scrutiny

---

Guidance on the use of this form:

This form is for use by councillors and members of the public who want to request that an item joins an Overview and Scrutiny agenda. Any issue may be suggested, provided it affects the BCP area or the inhabitants of the area in some way. Scrutiny of the issue can only be requested once in a 12 month period.

The form may also be used for the reporting of a referral item to Overview and Scrutiny by another body of the council, such as Cabinet or Council.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee receiving the request will make an assessment of the issue using the detail provided in this form and determine whether to add it to its forward plan of work.

They may take a variety of steps to progress the issue, including requesting more information on it from officers of the council, asking for a member of the overview and scrutiny committee to 'champion' the issue and report back, or establishing a small working group of councillors to look at the issue in more detail.

If the Committee does not agree to progress the issue it will set out reasons for this and they will be provided to the person submitting this form.

More information can be found at Part 4.C of the BCP Council Constitution
https://democracy.bcpcouncil.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CommitteeID=151&Info=1&bcr=1

Please complete all sections as fully as possible

1. **Issue requested for scrutiny**

Performance Management, Commercial Oversight and Best Value within BCP Council's Seafront Trading Operations.

I request that Overview and Scrutiny examine whether the Council's current arrangements for managing, monitoring and reporting on its seafront trading operations provide sufficient assurance that commercial objectives are being achieved and that publicly owned assets are delivering best value for residents.

Recent Freedom of Information responses indicate that kiosk opening times are not set or monitored centrally, staffing deployment by individual site is not recorded, and no site-level performance reports, benchmarking information or year-on-year comparisons are held. Whilst revenue data exists, there appears to be limited management information available to assess the relative performance of individual venues or identify opportunities for improvement.

Given the prominence of these seafront locations, their role in generating income for the Council, and the financial pressures facing local government, scrutiny is requested to determine whether current governance and performance management arrangements are sufficient to ensure that commercial opportunities are being maximised and public assets are being managed effectively.

2. **Desired outcome resulting from Overview and Scrutiny engagement, including the value to be added to the Council, the BCP area or its inhabitants**.

The desired outcome is an evidence-based assessment of whether the Council has appropriate systems, performance measures and governance arrangements in place to effectively manage its seafront trading portfolio and maximise value from publicly owned assets.

The review should seek to:

• Establish what operational and financial performance information is currently collected and used by management.
• Determine whether existing arrangements provide sufficient assurance regarding efficiency, profitability and service delivery.
• Assess whether the Council can demonstrate that it is achieving best value from its seafront trading assets.
• Identify opportunities to improve commercial performance, customer experience and income generation.
• Consider whether site-level reporting, benchmarking and trend analysis should be introduced or strengthened.
• Improve transparency and accountability in relation to commercial operations operated by, or on behalf of, the Council.
• Examine whether current operating models are delivering the optimum balance of financial return, visitor experience and community benefit.
• Consider whether alternative operating models, including partnerships with local businesses, specialist operators, artisan traders or concessionaires, could improve performance and generate additional income.
• Explore opportunities for pilot schemes or trial arrangements that would allow different commercial approaches to be tested and evaluated using measurable outcomes.
• Identify any organisational, procurement or governance barriers that may be limiting innovation or preventing potentially beneficial commercial opportunities from being assessed.

This work has the potential to generate tangible benefits for the Council, residents and visitors. Improved performance management may identify opportunities to increase income from existing assets, improve the quality and attractiveness of the seafront offer, support local independent businesses and strengthen the local economy.

The review could also help determine whether selected sites would benefit from alternative operating arrangements, including partnerships with local independent operators or artisan traders, where these may offer greater flexibility, innovation, customer appeal or financial return. Any such consideration should be evidence-led and based on measurable outcomes rather than assumptions about the relative merits of Council-operated or externally operated models.

Ultimately, the review should provide assurance that seafront assets are being managed in a way that maximises value for taxpayers, enhances the visitor experience, supports local enterprise and contributes positively to the reputation of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole as a premier coastal destination.

3. Background to the issue

This request arises from information disclosed through Freedom of Information requests together with observations of Council-operated seafront venues and correspondence concerning their commercial management.

The Freedom of Information responses indicate that:

- Kiosk opening times are not centrally prescribed or monitored.
- Staffing deployment by individual site is not recorded.
- No site-level performance reports are held.
- No year-on-year comparative performance reports were identified.
- Revenue information exists but is not supported by broader operational performance analysis.

These responses raise questions about how performance is measured, how underperforming assets are identified, how operational decisions are evaluated and how the Council demonstrates that commercial objectives are being met.

Additional concerns arise from observations of Council-operated venues compared with nearby private-sector operators. For example, on a recent day of mixed sunshine and showers in Southbourne, nearby businesses including Cafe Riva and SOBO Beach were open and attracting customers. By contrast, the Council-operated Prom Café at Fisherman's Walk was closed. The site displayed ice cream prices but no opening times and provided no clear indication of the wider food and drink offer available. Whilst a seating area is provided, there is limited covered seating available during poor weather compared with nearby competing venues.

Similarly, concerns have been raised regarding the operation of the Durley Chine Eco Hub, where questions have been asked about customer demand, utilisation of the site and the Council's willingness to consider alternative commercial approaches or trial opportunities that may improve performance.

These examples do not in themselves prove underperformance. However, they illustrate why robust management information, benchmarking and performance monitoring are important. Without such information it is difficult for councillors, residents and taxpayers to understand whether Council-operated venues are achieving their commercial objectives, maximising revenue opportunities and delivering best value.

The purpose of this scrutiny request is therefore not to review individual operational decisions or the performance of individual staff members. Rather, it is to establish whether the Council possesses sufficient management information, governance arrangements and commercial oversight mechanisms to effectively manage its seafront trading portfolio and maximise benefits for residents and taxpayers.

4. Proposed method of scrutiny - (for example, a committee report or a working group investigation)

A formal scrutiny review supported by officer evidence, documentary analysis, benchmarking and comparison with good practice elsewhere.

The review could include:

• A report from Seafront Services and relevant corporate officers setting out current performance management arrangements.
• Examination of the operational and financial data currently collected.
• Review of commercial objectives, performance indicators and reporting mechanisms.
• Assessment of how opening hours, staffing levels, product mix, facilities, marketing activity and asset utilisation are evaluated and monitored.
• Consideration of whether sufficient information exists to demonstrate compliance with the Council's Best Value duty.
• Examination of how opportunities for innovation, commercial partnerships and alternative operating models are assessed and evaluated.

The review should also include benchmarking against comparable coastal destinations and local authorities to understand how other organisations manage and maximise the value of similar assets. This could include consideration of:

• Performance monitoring and reporting arrangements.
• Opening hours and seasonal operating models.
• Use of concessions, licences and partnerships with independent operators.
• Support for local businesses and artisan traders.
• Customer experience, facilities and weather resilience.

• Revenue generation and commercial strategy.
• Approaches to activating underutilised assets and sites.

Potential comparator locations could include Weymouth, Swanage, Lymington, Milford-on-Sea, Brighton and Torquay, together with any other coastal authorities considered relevant by officers or the Committee.

Where examples of good practice are identified, the review should consider whether similar approaches could be trialled within BCP and implemented on a rolling basis where there is clear evidence of potential benefit.

If appropriate, the Committee may wish to establish a small cross-party working group to undertake more detailed investigation and report back with recommendations.

5. Key dates and anticipated timescale for the scrutiny work

It is requested that this matter be considered for inclusion within the Committee's work programme at the earliest practical opportunity, given that the seafront trading season is already underway.

Rather than waiting for a final report at the conclusion of a lengthy review, the emphasis should be on obtaining key management information quickly and implementing improvements where appropriate as findings emerge.

Suggested approach:

• Initial consideration by Overview and Scrutiny – next available meeting.
• Request for officers to provide details of current performance monitoring arrangements, available management information and commercial objectives.
• Identification of any significant gaps in reporting, benchmarking or performance measurement.
• Where practical and appropriate, introduction of improvements on a rolling basis throughout the season rather than waiting for completion of the review.
• Periodic progress updates to the Committee as further information becomes available.

This approach would allow opportunities for increased income generation, improved customer experience and operational improvements to be realised during the current trading season rather than being deferred until a final report is produced.

6. Notes/ additional guidance

This request is submitted in the public interest and is intended to support constructive scrutiny of governance, commercial performance and best value arrangements.

The request does not seek to challenge individual officers, staff members or operational decisions. Rather, it seeks assurance that appropriate systems, data and performance measures are in place to enable effective oversight of a significant portfolio of publicly owned commercial assets.

Given the importance of seafront trading operations to visitor experience, local economic activity and Council income generation, there is a legitimate public interest in ensuring that opportunities for improvement are identified, evaluated and acted upon where appropriate.

The review would provide assurance to residents, councillors and stakeholders that public assets are being managed effectively, transparently and in a manner that maximises value for the communities they serve.

Document last reviewed – January 2022

Contact – democratic.services@bcpcouncil.gov.uk