

Task and finish groups guidance

Task and finish groups are informal, usually small and time-limited bodies comprised of councillors and, at times, co-optees brought in from outside the council for their specific skills and experiences.

A parent (Scrutiny) committee (PSC) establishes them to undertake a discrete piece of more in-depth scrutiny work, and report back to that committee with their findings and recommendations.

Councillors should not embark upon work where there is no ability to make recommendations. For example, if a service has just been commissioned, running a scrutiny task group is unlikely to add value, although scrutiny may wish, in time, to have an assurance role. Likewise, if a decision has already been taken, or an inspection reached a judgement (CQC, Ofsted etc) scrutiny looking at the same issue is unlikely to add value.

1. Establish membership

Ordinarily this will be agreed by the PSC but the membership may be drawn from across the entire elected members (other than Executive Members).

Membership should have regard to the political proportionality of West Berkshire Council. Before finalising the membership of the Task Group, the PSC Chairman should consult the Leaders of each of the political parties or groups to ensure they are happy with the nominations.

Nominated Members should ensure that they have no prior involvement to the matter being considered.

Members who have professional or lived experience may be helpful in informing the review. Consideration should be given to whether they could best be used as a witness or as a member of the Task Group. It is also good practice for the task group members to reflect on existing perspectives that may influence a way of thinking, and to approach the review with an open mind.

2. Setting Up: Scoping & Terms of Reference

An Officer from Democratic Services supporting the Task Group shall draft the Terms of Reference (TOR) for approval by the PSC.

The TOR should define objectives, scope, methods, timelines and resources, along with stakeholders and witnesses that may be required.

Members should ensure clarity of purpose—the central question or hypothesis that the review will investigate and whether this is of a Service, Policy or Issue-led Review.

Background research may be required, and Officers and subject experts may be able to assist with any policy context, legislation, existing council reports (either public facing or internal), benchmarking data, etc.

The Task Group may consider evidence in open or confidential session as the Chairman thinks appropriate following advice from the Monitoring Officer. Reasons for the approach should be clearly recorded.

3. Planning Witnesses & Stakeholder Engagement

The Task Group should refer to the TOR.

Evidence may be gathered through various methods, such as written submissions, interviews, site visits, and consultations.

Task Groups should seek to engage with a broad range of witnesses, such as council officers, Members of the Executive, external experts, service providers, service users, community representatives and other stakeholders.

When witnesses are invited to give evidence, it should be made clear this is to support the Task Group objectives, how their testimonies will be used and whether their contributions will be anonymised. The Privacy Notice should be shared with witnesses when they are invited to give evidence.

Notes from witness sessions (or extracts thereof) will be shared with witnesses to confirm accuracy. Notes from one witness session will not be shared with other witnesses, unless agreed by all parties.

4. Timing & Approach

Consider the resource available to support the Task Group along with witness and expert availability.

Timescales will depend on the complexity of the matter and urgency. However, as a rule of thumb, Task Groups should be able to conclude their reviews in no more than six or seven sessions. If it is looking likely that a review will take significant longer, then it may be necessary to reduce the scope of the review.

Create an action plan that outlines responsibilities, timelines, and success metrics - ensuring the Task Group monitors progress and resource allocation.

5. Conducting the Review

Throughout the review, keep referring back to the TOR to stay on scope and ensure core questions are addressed.

Use evidence-based methods: document reviews, interviews, consultations, site visits, public engagement, and workshops - aligned with what the TOR envisaged.

Wherever possible, the Task Group should seek to triangulate evidence from different sources.

6. Developing Recommendations & Follow-up

Work with the Democratic Services Officer who will prepare the Task Group's report and finalise the Task Group recommendations for the Executive that are rooted in the evidence and aligned with scrutiny's remit.

Recommendations should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) so all parties are clear about how and when they should be implemented and the expected outcomes.

The draft report will be submitted through the usual internal governance process before consideration in any public forum. This allows the report to be checked for factual accuracy and to ensure that it complies with current legislation. It also allows for discussion as to the realism of recommendations. While officers and Members of the Executive can make suggestions for changes to the recommendations, it is the Task Group's decision whether to reflect these comments or not. If any recommendations or advice are not adopted in the final report from the Task Group, this should be clearly documented along with the rationale for the decision.

The report will be presented to the PSC, which will agree whether the Task Group's recommendations should be referred to the Executive (or named partner organisation) for consideration, or whether changes should be made / further work undertaken by the Task Group.

If it is agreed that the Task Group's recommendations be referred to the Executive for consideration. Officers from the affected service areas will be asked to draft a report, setting out the proposed response to each of the Task Group's recommendations. Responses should indicate whether recommendations have been accepted or rejected, and timescales for delivering accepted recommendations, or reasons for rejecting recommendations.

7. Monitoring & Reporting Back

The recommendations should be tracked through future meetings of the PSC; once the recommended action has been implemented and the impact is apparent, monitoring should cease.

Share outcomes and commitments where appropriate with relevant stakeholders to foster transparency and accountability.