

# **Slough Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee:**



## **Appendix C PROPOSING TOPICS FOR SCRUTINY**

**A GUIDE FOR COUNCILLORS**

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This guide has been designed to support Councillors in Slough to propose topics suitable for scrutiny. It relates specifically to scrutiny of issues/matters in the borough, where you may have concerns about inequality or under-performance of public services for example.

This guide does not directly apply to the scrutiny of strategy and policy development work, although many of the principles also apply. A separate guide, written mainly for officers but relevant to Members, can be found here:

[Guidance for scoping pre-decision scrutiny topics](#)

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## 1.0 The role members in relation to scrutiny.

Two of the key responsibilities of a member of the Council's scrutiny committee is to:

- **Reflect** residents' concerns about public services in Slough, either because they are failing to deliver as expected across the borough or that certain communities of place, interest or association are receiving a poorer service than others;
- **Review** Council policy, the way policies are implemented and their impact on local people; and

Councillors best carry out these responsibilities when they drive scrutiny with an independent mindset (as the statutory guidance requires), amplifying the voices and concerns of local people, driving improvement in service provision for them, and providing constructive challenge to the Leadership Team.

Scrutiny does not mean a generalised oversight of the Council and its partners or mirroring their agendas. Often there is a belief that trying to do anything "less" would result in key issues falling between the gaps. In fact, keeping a general watching brief over everything in the local area would not be possible. As the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) notes, if you try to do that it would greatly reduce the impact of scrutiny<sup>1</sup>.

Other Councilors can play an important support role for the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee (CISC) by acting as the ears and eyes for their local community and identifying topics and issues that should be brought to the attention of the committees members for them to consider whether they should include the matter in the CISC forward plan.

### 1.1 The forward plan

There are two key opportunities to influence the content of the Forward Plan. Each Municipal cycle, the annual forward plan is shaped in May-June each year, and then refreshed in November and December. The initial draft and the refresh are informed by:

- legislative and constitutional requirements;
- Horizon scanning by directorates (performance reports, inspections, risks);
- Reviewing issues identified by residents (inc. surveys, complaints, member enquiries, FOI);
- Review of the topics remaining in the current forward plan: and finally;
- Members' and residents' proposals.

A long list will then be subject to prioritisation to deliver the annual programme or the refresh of, on average 2 key topics per Committee meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> CfGS, Good Scrutiny Guide, pg. 22-23 [www.CfGS.org.uk/the-good-scrutiny-guide/](http://www.CfGS.org.uk/the-good-scrutiny-guide/)

## 2.0 What topics are suitable for scrutiny?

**“Scrutiny has the power to look at anything which affects the area or the area’s inhabitants”**

This means that scrutiny is not limited to reviewing Council Services. Topics that scrutiny could consider are:

- High profile issues in the borough and high-profile national issues impacting the borough, issues of local political contention, issues on which people hold strong views and areas of local community concern<sup>3</sup>
- Investigations that “follow the council pound” from the bottom-up – i.e: scrutiny of organisations that receive public funding to deliver goods and services in the borough<sup>4</sup> from the perspective of local people at the receiving end;
- Topics with a ‘focus’ for scrutiny chosen by you and fellow scrutiny councillors. Statutory guidance suggests that selecting a focus, such as ‘risks’, ‘authority’s finances’ or ‘the working with partners’, can help you filter the right topics for the authority at a given time and cutting across substantive topics/areas; and.
- Residents’ suggestions, risk and complaints data, council priorities outlined in the Council Plan, emerging policies and strategies, and ward councillor suggestions are all potential sources of topics for the work programme.

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<sup>2</sup> MHC&LG, Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities, paragraph 49-51, p21 [www.gov.uk/government/publications/overview-and-scrutiny-statutory-guidance-for-councils-and-combined-authorities](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overview-and-scrutiny-statutory-guidance-for-councils-and-combined-authorities)

<sup>3</sup> CfGS, Good Scrutiny Guide, [www.CfGS.org.uk/the-good-scrutiny-guide/](http://www.CfGS.org.uk/the-good-scrutiny-guide/)

<sup>4</sup> MHC&LG, Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities, paragraph 46 pg.20 [www.gov.uk/government/publications/overview-and-scrutiny-statutory-guidance-for-councils-and-combined-authorities](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overview-and-scrutiny-statutory-guidance-for-councils-and-combined-authorities)

### 3.0: Proposing a topic

A member can propose a topic for scrutiny at any time and, in doing so, should consider the criteria set out in Section 4.0 and Figure 1. A template is available (Appendix A) for you to complete that will provide important information relating to key scrutiny criteria, upon which the Committee will accept or reject your proposal. Alternatively, you can propose a topic online using the following link: [Proposing a topic for Scrutiny](#) or the QR Code on the right.



In submitting a topic for the Committee's consideration, you should provide as full an account as possible of the issue you are concerned about, providing any relevant evidence you can.

Once you have completed a Scrutiny Topic Proposal Form, you should email it to the Committee Chair (copied to the Governance and Scrutiny Officer (GSO)). The Chair and/or officer will probably contact you to discuss the topic before it is put before the Committee at the next available meeting.

#### 3.1 Criteria for selection of topics (Fig 1.)<sup>5</sup>

**“Scrutiny members should accept that shortlisting can be difficult. Scrutiny committees have finite resources and deciding how these are best allocated is tough. They [members] should understand that, if work programming is robust and effective there might well be issues that they want to look at that, nonetheless are not selected”.**

In submitting your proposal, you will want to maximise its chances of being selected for inclusion in the forward plan. Understanding the common criteria that Scrutiny Councillors will apply to their decision making process will therefore help with this.

They will address systematically the following key questions about each topic:

- Does this issue affect a significant number of borough residents?
- Are some residents in a particular community of place, interest or association not getting the same service as others?
- Is there any initial evidence that suggests there is an issue that warrants the committees' attention? and
- Can scrutiny add value, for example by contributing to better performance or better outcomes for residents?

If your answer to these questions is **NO**<sub>1</sub> then it is unlikely your proposal will be shortlisted, and you may want to consider alternative courses of action (Fig. 1.). If you have answered **YES**<sub>2</sub> then you should submit your proposal, including as much information as you can.

<sup>5</sup> MHC&LG, [Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities](#), Paragraph 57, pg.23

If the key criteria set out in Section 3.1 are broadly met, then understanding the information the committee members consider when evaluating an issue/topic may also help. As long as your proposal does not duplicate others' work in the organisation, prioritisation can be determined considering the answers to the following questions:

- Is the issue strategic and significant?
- Is it an issue of concern to stakeholder organisations and/or external partners?
- Is the scrutiny timely/what does it take precedence over?<sup>6</sup>
- Are the resources available to conduct an effective scrutiny investigation
- What would be the most appropriate way to conduct a scrutiny investigation

#### **4.0 Finally**

As scrutiny in Slough takes shape, it is seeking to increase local community/resident involvement. You can support this by inviting members of the public in your ward to suggest topics themselves by directing them to the link or QR Code above.

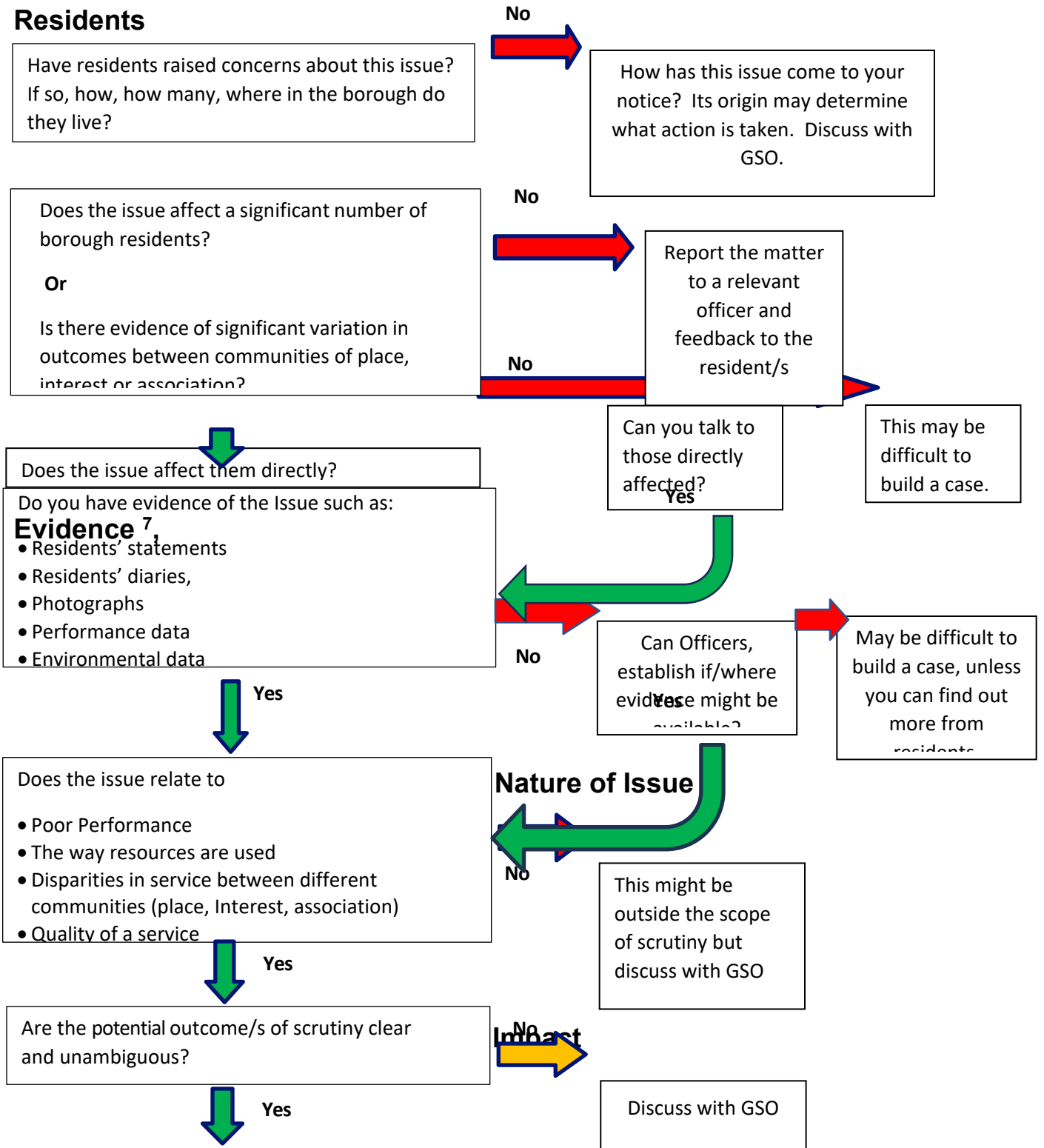
If you have time, you may even want to help them with their submission.

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<sup>6</sup> Normally there will be an average of 2 key agenda items per meeting. It therefore follows that if a new scrutiny topic is proposed then a topic currently on the forward plan must be sacrificed.

**Figure 1. CRITERIA FOR SCRUTINY TOPICS**

**Residents**



**Complete and Submit your proposal**

<sup>7</sup> [Data Sources for Slough](#)

**Appendix A: PROPOSAL FOR SCRUTINY** email to  
[Michael.edley@slough.gov.uk](mailto:Michael.edley@slough.gov.uk)

Name	Date:
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**Brief description of Issue**

**How did this issue come to your attention?**

**What proportion of the borough's residents are affected?**

**EVIDENCE:** Set out /Point to the evidence you have in relation to this issue

**OUTCOME/S:** What improvement/change could scrutiny achieve