

Meeting: Council
Portfolio Area: Council-Wide
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ANNUAL REPORT – SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE & SCRUTINY PANELS

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1 PURPOSE

To report on the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the four Scrutiny Panels during the 2003/2004 Municipal Year.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the following be noted:

- (a) The work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the four Scrutiny Panels during 2003/04.
- (b) The Scrutiny Overview Committee's decision to develop its scrutiny role in line with the four ambitions of the Council as set out in the Corporate Business Strategy.
- (c) The arrangements for benchmarking and Councillor development concerning overview and scrutiny.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Council's current scrutiny structure comprises the Scrutiny Overview Committee, and four Scrutiny Panels – Environment & Economy, Housing & Wellbeing, Partnership & Community and Resources & Corporate Management. The Scrutiny Overview Committee's work includes the initial consideration of Executive decisions; undertaking cross-cutting and/or Council wide scrutiny such as Equalities and Diversity; and maintaining an overview of the work of the four Scrutiny Panels. In accordance with Article 6.04 of the Council's Constitution, this report is submitted to give Council an annual update of the scrutiny work undertaken during 2003/04.
- 3.2 The studies undertaken to date have ranged from basic monitoring of performance in specific areas of Council Service delivery to the drafting of Council-wide strategies.
- 3.3 The Scrutiny Overview Committee decided in 2003/04 to ask the Panels to concentrate on one or two major areas for scrutiny as well as their regular scrutiny tasks such as the budget and, in the main, this request has been adhered to.
- 3.4 The work of the four Scrutiny Panels is very much Member led and wide ranging. The Scrutiny Overview Committee considers and confirms the Work Plans of each of the Panels.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 While Members serving on the individual Scrutiny Panels will be fully aware of the work undertaken, it should be noted that the following is only a summary of work undertaken and does not quote all the activities of each Panel.

Environment & Economy Scrutiny Panel

- 4.2 The work on the Stevenage Car Parking Strategy was a major study that started in 2002/2003, instigated by this Panel. The objective of the study was to review and develop the Council's Parking Strategy and Members undertook a number of workshops which resulted in a draft Strategy for the Town centre, Residential areas, the High Street, Old Town, Neighbourhood Centres and Employment areas, all of which were subsequently approved by the Executive as a draft for public consultation during the 2003/04 Municipal Year.
- 4.3 The Environment & Economy Scrutiny Panel undertakes the monitoring of the performance of the Authority in relation to the Food Service Plan. The Panel recognised the need for its membership to be fully briefed on this matter before presentation. The monitoring work on the Food Service Plan is on-going and in the overarching report covering all local authority audits the Food Standards Agency noted the scrutiny by Members in Stevenage of the plan and the role of the Panel was highlighted as Best Practice.
- 4.4 The Panel played a major role in the Best Value Review in 2001/02 of Environmental Cleansing and Grounds Maintenance, resulting in a 2 star service with good prospects for improvement. Subsequently Members requested that annual reviews of the 5 year Improvement Plan be undertaken. Officers therefore presented a report in 2003/04 on the current progress, highlighting the achievements and the work still to be done. One of the outcomes of this work has been the recognition of the need to embark on a wide programme of publicity around litter and fly tipping to ensure that the public were fully aware of the Council's policies and consequences of offences being committed.
- 4.5 Other matters reviewed and/or investigated by the Environment & Economy Panel have included the Kerbside Recycling Scheme and the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, the latter then being the subject of a report to the Executive with recommended changes being agreed to that Policy.
- 4.6 The Environment & Economy Panel has already given preliminary consideration to scrutiny of Energy Consumption, and Workshops have been arranged to progress this work during 2004/05. Work has also commenced on identifying options to resolve issues relating to unkempt properties.

Housing & Wellbeing

- 4.7 Since its inception the Housing & Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel has considered a wide range of matters within its remit. The Panel has received reports on specific areas of service performance in the Housing Division on a regular basis during 2003/04. However, the focus of its study work during this period has been on health matters and Anti-Social Behaviour.
- 4.8 This Panel has led on the drafting of the Council's response to "Investing in Your Health" – a review of Health Services in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire. This response was endorsed by the Executive in July. This was the result of work undertaken with Hywel Jarman (Director of Communications and Public Involvement,

Beds & Herts Strategic Health Authority) and Dr. Neil Roberts. The Panel has also met with Dr. Raymond Jankowski who attended a meeting on behalf of the North Herts and Stevenage Primary Health Trust for a debate on Health Improvement and Modernisation Plan 2002-04 and Richard Edwards (Project Director, Public and Patient Involvement in Health – Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Pathfinder).

- 4.9 The Panel turned to a particular local matter in August 2003 when the closure of a GP surgery in Shephall was announced. The Panel invited representatives from the Primary Care Trust (PCT). Jill Peters (Chief Executive, North Herts and Stevenage PCT) and Dr. Tony Kostick (Chair of Professional Excellence Committee, North Herts and Stevenage PCT) met with the Panel, together with Barbara Follett MP. From these discussions it was apparent that the Council could not influence the decision on this occasion but the Panel drew up a number of recommendations for future partnership working with the PCT that have been endorsed and are in the process of implementation. The recommendations' included SBC representation on the PCT Board and since the Panel meeting Councillor Richard Henry has been appointed to the PCT in a personal capacity.
- 4.10 Work on Anti-Social Behaviour protocols commenced with a workshop session to identify key issues and prioritise the themes for study and the Panel considered this matter further at its meeting on 11th December. Police Inspector Dean Patient was invited to attend the Panel at its meeting on 26th February, with the Panel concluding this part of its scrutiny work at its meeting on 14th April. It now remains for the Housing and Wellbeing Panel to identify costings of the proposals.

Partnership & Community Scrutiny Panel

- 4.11 The key theme for the Partnership & Community Scrutiny Panel has been community engagement and has particularly focused on the St. Nicholas Pathfinder for Community Development of Neighbourhoods. Members of the Panel have attended St. Nicholas Pathfinder meetings and talked to Community Centre Managers and Chairs and will be using the evidence coming forward to review the operation of Joint Local Committees.
- 4.12 For its study on community engagement the Panel has visited Redditch, which has a number of parallels with Stevenage and which operates neighbourhood meetings that are a useful comparison with our own JLC's. Members came away from that visit with a number of ideas and approaches that are to be discussed in a roundtable meeting with the Chairs of the SBC/HCC Joint Local Committees. A visit to Southampton was also undertaken on 10th December. Proposals were considered in February and April to further increase community engagement and input into JLC's. The Panel's recommendations about future arrangements for the JLC's will be submitted to the July Executive meeting.
- 4.13 The Panel has been leading on the initial Member input to the Community Strategy, which was then considered by the Local Strategic Partnership and submitted for adoption at full Council in January. Additionally, Members have been scrutinising the Council's new Consultation Strategy.

Resources & Corporate Management Scrutiny Panel

- 4.14 The Resources & Corporate Management Scrutiny Panel has undertaken a steep learning curve and held a number of sessions on knowledge building on subjects such as Emergency Planning, the Annual Audit Report, the Pension Fund, Corporate Procurement and budget monitoring.

- 4.15 Of particular interest has been the Council's performance against the Best Value Performance Indicators and other locally established performance measures, particularly in relation to the Finance Division. A "Finance Performance Dashboard" has been designed and areas for further development and study may be quickly recognised.
- 4.16 The Panel has been reviewing the operation of the new Post Office Payment cards, particularly the level of take-up and performance. This study work will continue.
- 4.17 A major project over the last year has been the replacement of the Council's Financial Information and Revenue Systems and the Panel has scrutinised the officers' project plans for each aspect of the scheme. Particular emphasis has been put on the Risk Register to ensure that it is as comprehensive as possible.

Joint Primary Care Trust Scrutiny Committee

- 4.18 The Joint PCT Scrutiny Committee with HCC and North Herts. District Council was established in May 2003. SBC Members have taken an active part in this Committee with Councillor Michael Downing being appointed Chair. The first meeting agreed the establishment of three client focus groups – Adult (to include GP issues), Children and Elderly, which met on 11th March. A further meeting of the Joint PCT Scrutiny Committee was held on 28th April 2004.

The Scrutiny Overview Committee

- 4.19 The Scrutiny Overview Committee itself has recognised that some matters are Council wide and may not be comprehensively reviewed by a single specialist Panel. At the November meeting of the Scrutiny Overview Committee appropriate stakeholders were invited to the meeting and a workshop led by Colin Hann of Managing Diversity Associates. Members advised on other areas that might be addressed in the Action plan devised from the Council's Equalities and Diversity Strategy that has been subject to scrutiny.

"Changing Gear" – Stevenage Borough Council Corporate Business Strategy 2002/03 - 2006/07

- 4.20 The work of the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the Panels already links to the Council's ambitions as determined in the current Corporate Business Strategy. In order to be involved in the comprehensive review of the Strategy, Officers have been requested to submit a consolidated summary report based on the results of the BVPI Surveys (General Housing, Benefits & Planning) to the July meeting of the Scrutiny Overview Committee.

Benchmarking and Councillor Development

- 4.21 Benchmarking Workshops arranged through INLOGOV on overview and scrutiny for all Members and Senior Officers to identify individual and corporate areas for development were arranged for 15th, 18th and 22nd March. Following these workshops, and taking on board the comments made in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the Council, the ongoing development of scrutiny is being considered in depth by the Scrutiny Overview Committee. To this end, the Committee is having regard to reviewing best practice, broadening the evidence base, looking at study methods and further Councillor development skills. This specific responsibility has been included in the draft terms of reference submitted to this meeting.

- 4.22 Scrutiny Panels' Workshops were organised in April to consider the Panels' Work Plans for 2004/05, and the suggested topics were further discussed at an extra meeting of the Scrutiny Overview Committee on 17th May 2004, when the Work Plans for each Panel for the coming Municipal Year were agreed. Meetings of the Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs have subsequently taken place with the Panels' Lead Officers, and the main scrutiny topics for 2004/05 and methods of undertaking this work are in train. The Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee have requested that visits to Authorities renowned for their scrutiny work be arranged in order for them to report back on good practice.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Legal Implications

Overview and Scrutiny is undertaken by Councillors in accordance with the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000.

5.2 Policy Implications

Many of the specific overview and scrutiny projects undertaken during 2003/04 were linked to the Council's Corporate Business Strategy – "Changing Gear".

5.3 Staffing and Accommodation Implications

Currently there are no dedicated staff resources to support overview and scrutiny. Various senior officers from around the Council, dependent upon the study being undertaken, support the Panels. As part of the Corporate Improvement Plan agreed arising from the Peer Review the Performance, Priorities and Improvement Group (18th November 2003) has agreed that consideration of dedicated officer support for scrutiny be considered as part of a review of the political management structure. However, there is no budget provision identified for 2004/05.

5.4 Equal Opportunities Implications

"A fair and inclusive community" is one of the Council's ambitions as stated in the Changing Gear Programme. To date the Scrutiny Overview Committee itself has taken the lead in scrutinising the Council's Equalities and Diversity Strategy and Action Plan. It also plans to oversee scrutiny investigations into aspects of the Council's Social Policy during 2004/05, with the Partnership & Community Scrutiny Panel undertaking work on Benefits Take Up as a starting point.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- Minutes of Panel and Scrutiny Overview Committee meetings 2002, 2003 and 2004.
- "Changing Gear" – The Council's Corporate Business Strategy 2002/03 – 2006/07.

APPENDICES

- None