

Meeting: Council
Portfolio Area: Council Wide
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ANNUAL REPORT – SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE & SCRUTINY PANELS
(Constitutional Services Division)

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1 PURPOSE

To report on the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the four Scrutiny Panels during the 2004/2005 Municipal Year.

2 RECOMMENDATION

That the following be noted:

- (a) The work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the four Scrutiny Panels during 2004/05.
- (b) The Scrutiny Overview Committee's decision to base its scrutiny role on high priority topics and the availability of resources.

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 being consulted on items prior to their consideration by the Executive; the 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 2004/05.
- 3.2 The scrutiny studies initially undertaken by the Panels and the Scrutiny Overview Committee ranged from basic monitoring of performance in specific areas of Council Service delivery to the drafting of Council-wide strategies.
- 3.3 At the beginning of the 2004/05 Municipal Year, following a series of Member Workshops, the Committee reconsidered its approach to scrutiny. Members reasoned that, given the limited officer resources available to assist with scrutiny work, topics for scrutiny should be prioritised and should be measured against a customised template for scrutiny.

- 3.4 Subsequently, the Committee decided to scope any topics suggested for scrutiny using the template exercise in order to establish the relative priority of each topic and the availability of resources to undertake the work. These scoping sessions are attended by the Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee and the Chair and Vice Chair of the relevant Scrutiny Panel, together with appropriate officers. Topics, which do not fulfil the scoping criteria, are referred on to Departments for any necessary action, but they are not proceeded with as areas for scrutiny (e.g. communal cleaning).
- 3.5 The work of the four Scrutiny Panels is very much Member led and 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 Whilst 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 carried out in 2004/05 and does not quote all the activities of each Panel.

4.2 Scrutiny Overview Committee

The Scrutiny Overview Committee is currently responsible for looking at the Council's Equalities and Diversity Strategy, as well as a strategy and priorities for a Council's Social Policy. It has scrutinised the Council's recruitment policy and a Member/Chief Officer Workshop was arranged in January 2005. The Committee has also considered a Briefing Note on Sickness Monitoring, with a subsequent request for an annual update.

In addition, this Committee has received progress reports on the improvement plan suggested by the Housing Technical Services Informal Working Party and adopted by the Executive on 27th October 2004, and is currently receiving updates on the refurbishment of Harrow Court and its implications.

Following requests for details of the implementation plan for the Council's Car Parking Strategy (a Strategy with which the Environment & Economy Scrutiny Panel was heavily involved in 2003/04), the Committee is awaiting information relating to the proposed action plan and will seek further details of the implementation plan in the coming Municipal Year.

The Scrutiny Overview Committee has also requested the Executive to examine the arrangements for the cleaning of play areas following concerns expressed by the Old Stevenage Area Committee. The Executive has asked that officers explore options to address this issue without incurring additional costs.

The Scrutiny Overview Committee considered in depth the East of England (EERA) on 9th February 2005 when witnesses were called to give evidence, following which recommendations were made to the Executive before the Council's formal comments were submitted to the East of England Regional Assembly.

In 2005/06 it is planned that the Committee will direct the Scrutiny Panels to look at areas of the Council's budget on a thematic basis.

Chair's Strategic Review of Scrutiny

Over the last year, the Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee has carried out a strategic review of the operation of scrutiny, with the objective of maximising the efficiency of scrutiny and minimising the resource required to service effectively the Scrutiny Overview Committee, the four Scrutiny Panels and to contribute to the servicing of the Joint PCT Scrutiny Committee.

The review is currently being considered by the Chief Executive and the Strategic Directors.

To date the Chair has outlined the following issues for determination/consideration:

- a clear way forward for scrutiny that concentrates on fewer topics to be dealt with in a more effective and efficient manner
- the structure is cumbersome and resource hungry
- there is a clear requirement for a dedicated resource to assist member led scrutiny
- there is a need to examine pre-scrutiny of the Executive decisions as an aid to efficiency
- all areas for scrutiny/pre scrutiny will in future be channelled through the Scrutiny Overview Committee and arrangements for scoping and measuring against the scrutiny template (referred to elsewhere in this report) before any Panel's work is agreed
- Panel annual work plans will initially be agreed via the Scrutiny Overview Committee, subject to successful scoping and measuring against the template
- in general, operational matters will not be considered by the scrutiny process

4.3 Environment & Economy Scrutiny Panel

This Panel has been involved in a workshop dealing with 'Awareness and Understanding' of Sustainability and the Council's Energy Strategy. The appointment of a new Energy Manager should enable the Panel to embark on an overview of the project plan.

Scrutiny of procedures for dealing with unkempt properties has been undertaken, and the Panel considered proposals for the cleansing arrangements associated with housing communal areas, although the scoping exercise led Members to refer this topic to be dealt with by the appropriate Departments. The Panel has also kept an overview of the development of an Environmental Management Strategy and the associated study on open spaces, sport and recreation to meet advice outlined in Planning Guidance Note 17: Sport & Recreation.

It has been suggested by the Scrutiny Overview Committee that this Panel may be asked to scrutinise the Green Waste Collection Service in 2005/06.

4.4 **Housing & Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel**

The Panel receives the Minutes of the Joint PCT Scrutiny Committee (Stevenage Borough Council and North Herts District Council) and keeps an overview of any decisions made by that body. The Panels main work during 2004/05 was to finalise scrutiny of the Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy in the Borough and to make recommendations thereon to the Council's Executive, the majority of which were accepted. Members of the Panel have been appointed to serve on the Housing Allocations Policy Review Working Group, a body established by the Executive Councillor (Housing).

Arising from the Panel's recommendations on anti-social behaviour, the Executive asked that consideration be given to undertaking scrutiny of the County Council's Youth Service. This proposal was considered by the Scrutiny Overview Committee who were advised that Government guidelines were shortly to be issued in respect of Youth Service provision. It was agreed that scoping of this topic should be undertaken following further information from the County Council following the publication of the Government's Green Paper.

A key area of the Panel's work for 2004/05 has involved scrutiny of Stevenage Leisure Limited (SLL). As well as considering quarterly monitoring reports on SLL's performance indicators and budget situation, the Panel was able to question the Managing Director and Finance Director of SLL following a presentation to its October 2004 meeting.

The Panel has been involved recently in scrutinising the Housing Anti-Social Behaviour Procedure and Racial Harassment Policy, prior to reports on both of these matters being considered by the Executive. The March 2005 meeting of the Panel received an update on the progress of the refurbishment of Harrow Court following the recent fire but, bearing in mind the Scrutiny Overview Committee's view that this is currently an operational matter, any scrutiny required will be considered at a later date.

4.5 **Partnership & Community Scrutiny Panel**

The main topic for this Panel's scrutiny during 2004/05 has been an overview of Community Associations in the town. Member visits to all the Community Centres were undertaken and similar sized/type of authorities were consulted on their approach to Community Centre grants. The Community Centres' review work will be completed and reported in 2005/06.

Following on from scrutiny work undertaken in 2004/05 by this Panel in respect of the former Joint Local Committees, a scrutiny workshop in respect of the new Area Committees was organised in January 2005.

This Panel is working jointly with the Resources & Corporate Management Panel on Benefits Take-up and the Grants to Voluntary Bodies process. A scoping meeting has been arranged in respect of scrutiny of Benefits Take Up and, as soon as a Principal Community Development Officer is in post, a two stage scoping exercise can be undertaken in respect of the Grant Aid process.

4.6 **Resources & Corporate Management Scrutiny Panel**

The focus of the Resources & Corporate Management Scrutiny Panel during 2004/05 has been on joint working with the Partnership & Community Scrutiny Panel. This has involved the proposed scrutiny of Grant Aid and Benefits Take-up, the work on which will be ongoing through 2005/06.

In common with the majority of the other scrutiny panels, the Resources & Corporate Management Scrutiny Panel has received regular monitoring reports on performance, in this case the Chief Executive's Department's Best Value Performance Indicators. The Panel has received presentations on Treasury Management and new PERICLES Revenues and Benefits System, and has considered reports on the Annual Internal Audit Report 2003/04 and the Strategic Audit Plan 2004/05 – 2008/09.

A major element of the Panel's work is budget scrutiny and along with the other Scrutiny Panels, this Panel will be directed by the Scrutiny Overview Committee to adopt a thematic approach to scrutiny of the Council's budget in 2005/06.

4.7 **Joint Primary Care Trust Scrutiny Committee**

As has already been stated, the Housing & Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel receives the minutes of the Joint PCT Scrutiny Committee meetings, from which it has been noted that the PCT/Committee has divided itself into 3 sub groups. These have reviewed the General Practitioner Contract, Teenage Pregnancy and the Elizabeth & Victoria Courts consultation on care for sufferers of dementia.

The PCT Committee has considered in-depth the case for a GP Service for Great Ashby and has regular updates on Patients' Forum activities. The provision of 'Super Surgeries' is likely to be another topic for scrutiny.

For the Municipal Years 2005/06 – 2006/07, the Joint PCT Scrutiny Committee will be clerked by SBC Committee Services officers.

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 2004/05 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, dependant upon the study being undertaken, support the Panels, subject to the demands of their primary role as a Head of Service/Principal Officer. 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 2005/06.

It should be noted that, given the Council's new Strategic Organisational Review, senior officer responsibility for scrutiny is being considered.

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 with the Partnership & Community and the Resources Corporate Management Panels undertaking work on Benefits Take Up and Grant Aid as a starting point.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

- Minutes of Panel and Scrutiny Overview Committee meetings 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005.
- 'Changing Gear' – The Council's Corporate Business Strategy 2002/03 – 2006/07.
- Report to Scrutiny Overview Committee – 29th November 2004 – Scrutiny Work Plans.