

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT: MUNICIPAL YEAR 2007/2008

Introduction

This is our third report of the new Overview and Scrutiny Structure as instituted by the Full Council in April 2005. The Committee is charged with reviewing Cabinet decisions, the Corporate Strategy, the Council's financial performance and also scrutinising the performance of the public bodies active in the District by inviting reports and presentations from them.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to the setting up of four Standing Panels this year and four new Task and Finish Panels.

A review session was held for Overview and Scrutiny members in September 2007 in which they reviewed the current O&S arrangements. This has led to a more professional and comprehensive examination of the areas they were asked to scrutinise.

What is Scrutiny?

Scrutiny in local government is the mechanism by which public accountability is exercised. The purpose of scrutiny in practice is to examine, question and evaluate in order to achieve improvement. The value of scrutiny is in the use of research and questioning techniques to make recommendations based on evidence. Scrutiny enables issues of public concerns to be examined. At the heart of all the work is consideration of what impact the Cabinet's plans will have on the local community. However, the overview and scrutiny function is not meant to be confrontational or seen as deliberately set up to form an opposition to the Cabinet. Rather the two aspects should be regarded as 'different sides of the same coin'. The two should compliment each other and work in tandem to contribute to the development of the authority.

The 3 key principles of effective scrutiny in practice are:

- Scrutiny as "critical friendship" through constructive but robust internal challenge;
- Scrutiny as evidence based research and analysis using expert witnesses and public consultation;
- Scrutiny as a strategic programme investigating key council priorities and reflecting the concerns of the local community.

Scrutiny at Epping Forest utilises the 'PICK' system when setting its priorities. PICK stands for:

P = Public interest: the concerns of local people should influence the issues chosen;

I = Impact: issues that make the biggest difference to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the district;

C = Council Performance: areas in which the Council and other agencies are not performing well;

K = Keep in Context: need to avoid duplication and wasted effort in identifying issues.

Alongside its challenge role, the scrutiny function has also continued to engage positively with the Cabinet and there continues to be strong cross party political co-operation between members on all panels.

Scrutiny has continued to provide valuable contributions to the Council and the Cabinet remained receptive to ideas put forward by Scrutiny throughout the year.

At the first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in June 2007 the committee reviewed their procedures and agreed the membership of panels.

Members were reminded that under the arrangements Scrutiny Standing and Task and Finish Panels had been established to undertake scrutiny reviews. The Committee had been tasked with agreeing the Membership of these panels, their terms of reference, work plans and reporting deadlines. Although the panels have no powers to make decisions they can put forward recommendations for consideration, either by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee or Cabinet or Council.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviews the need for the continuation of Standing Panels prior to the end of the Council Year.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee coordinated with the Cabinet about their work plans for the year and pre scrutinised their reports at its meetings a week before Cabinet would meet. Liaisons with the Cabinet would take place to discuss the wider work programme that would be approved and reviewed annually. This acted as a troubleshooting exercise, finding out problems before they arose.

The Committee also engaged with external bodies in order to scrutinise parts of their work that encroached on the District and its people.

The Committee received one call-in this year (for details see Scrutinising and Monitoring cabinet Work on page x). This was on the Cabinet decision on the release of restrictive covenant, Loughton Hall.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee membership consists of 12 Councillors who were appointed at the Annual Council meeting.

Standing Scrutiny Panels

A Lead Officer was appointed to each panel to facilitate its process. Members liaise on a regular basis with the relevant Chairman to agree terms of references of panels and priorities of reviews and their work plans.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the work programme and terms of reference for each of the Panels on the basis of a rolling programme. The Standing Panels have a 'rolling programme' and would consider ongoing and cyclical issues. Four standing Scrutiny Panels were established, dealing with:

- i. Housing
- ii. Constitution and Member Services
- iii. Finance and Performance Management
- iv. Environmental and Planning.

Standing Panels reported regularly to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on progress with the work they were carrying out.

Task and Finish Panels

The Task and Finish reviews are restricted to dealing with activities which are issue based, time limited, non-cyclical with clearly defined objectives on which they would report responses and set a deadline to report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Five Task and Finish Panels were established during the year, they were:

- i. Leisure Task and Finish Panel;
- ii. Crime and Disorder Task and Finish Panel;
- iii. Town Centre and Car Parks Task and Finish Panel;
- iv. Provision of Value for money with Planning Services Task and Finish Panel.

The Task and Finish Panels on Crime and Disorder, Town Centre and Car Parks and Leisure that had begun during the municipal year 2006/07 carried on in this year.

Task and Finish Panels are required to regularly report to the Committee on progress with the work they are carrying out.