

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee consisted of the following members:

Councillor R Morgan (Chairman)
Councillor K Angold-Stephens (Vice Chairman)
Councillors M Colling, A Green, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs A Haigh, D Jacobs, J KNapman, R Law, G Mohindra and Mrs L Wagland.

The Lead Officer was Derek Macnab, Deputy Chief Executive.

Terms of Reference

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee's main functions are to monitor and scrutinise the work of the executive and its forward plan, external bodies linked to the District Council and the Council's financial performance. It is tasked with the consideration of call-ins, policy development, performance monitoring and reviewing corporate strategies.

The Committee's workload over the past year can be broken down as follows:

(a) Scrutinising and monitoring Cabinet work

The Committee reviewed and commented on the Cabinet's Forward Plan and work programme where they identified areas for further consideration. The Committee has a proactive role in this area through carrying out pre-scrutiny work. This involved receiving and considering the Cabinet agenda prior to the Cabinet itself.

Call-ins

The Committee considered three call-ins this year. The first one in September was a call-in of the Legal and Estates Portfolio Holder's Cabinet report regarding the consideration of rent deferment for the shops in Loughton Broadway. The report was called in by two different sets of councillors. The Committee debated the merits of the call-in and were heartened to hear that the Portfolio holder had reconsidered the original decision and had offered a rent rebate of 20% to the traders for an eight month period. The Committee confirmed the original decision providing the Cabinet pursued the 20% rent reduction for the period of 8 months.

The second call-in in September 2009 was about the provision of a sports hall at Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool. They were supportive of the new hall but had concerns between the gap between the closing of the sports centre and the opening of the new hall. What was in place to take up the slack? The committee found that there would be no loss of facilities to the area as the new hall was being built and confirmed the original decision.

The third call-in happened in December 2009 and was about the arrangements regarding scanning planning files. The members calling this in had concerns about local councils having access to the files once they had been transferred. Would they have the right technology to read them and would not any technology be made obsolete within a few years as they evolve and move on. Paper records would not have that kind of problem. On consideration the Committee confirmed the original decision.

(b) Standing Panels work programme monitoring

The Committee received regular updates from the Chairmen of the various Scrutiny Panels reporting on the progress made with their current work. This had allowed the Committee to monitor performance, prioritise work and when necessary adjust their work plans to take into account new proposals and urgent items.

(c) Items considered by the committee this year

This year the Overview and Scrutiny Committee received presentations on, and considered such topics as:

Presentations:

(i) In July 2009 the Committee received a presentation from Lonica Vanclay, the County Officer responsible for the commissioning side of youth provisioning. She was accompanied by Nigel Varnam, who was responsible for the co-ordination of youth provision in the district area. They spoke about the provision of youth services within the District. It was noted that the range of the provisions needed to be publicised across the district. Schools were actively involved in working together and collaboration between the schools and county had improved over the last year.

(ii) In October 2009 the Committee received a presentation from the Essex Fire and Rescue Services. Ray Skinner, the Community Commander of the Essex Fire and Rescue Services came and spoke to the Committee about the provision of Fire and Rescue Services for Essex and the District and informed them of the latest developments in the Fire and Rescue Service.

(iii) In November 2009 the Committee received a presentation from three Councillors from the Epping Forest Youth Council. They outlined their work programme for the year ahead and giving examples of the work done so far. They were also there to ask for funding for their work for the year. The committee agreed that they should receive their funding and recommended this to the Cabinet.

(iv) In January 2010 the Committee received a presentation from the District Valuation Officer for East Anglia, who spoke to the Committee on local business rateable values. He was robustly questioned by the members of the committee, other members present and also by leave of the chairman, members of the public. He was left with a very firm impression of our opinion on the recent NDR increases in our area and the effect it was having on local businesses.

(v) In March 2010 the Committee received a presentation on the North East **London Health Services Consultation document**

Other topics considered:

(i) The Public Relations and Marketing Officer briefed the Committee on the consultation on the Forester magazine. Feedback supported the current A4, colour format, the quarterly distribution and agreed that it was clear and easy to understand. It was noted that the magazine was predominantly read by the older residents of the district. Focus groups were also held and these elicited a great deal of feedback. The Committee endorsed the recommendations in the report and recommend them to the Cabinet.

(ii) The Chairman of the Leisure Task and Finish Panel constituted last year presented the Panel's report on the provision of a Sports Hall at Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool. The Committee noted that the joint use agreement had been agreed to be ended, whereby King Harold School would run the current sports facilities themselves. The Panel had agreed that the new project represented value for money but also recognised the current financial circumstances of the Council and Country as a whole. They also recognised that Waltham Abbey would welcome a new sports facility. They recommended to Cabinet that the new sports hall be endorsed and that the joint use agreement with King Harold School be ended. Cabinet accepted this and the new sports hall will be going ahead.

(iii) In July 2009 the Committee reviewed and endorsed the Safer Cleaner Greener Strategy and the Enforcement Strategy for the Environment and Street Scene Directorate. They also responded to the Flood and Water Management Bill Consultation document.

(iv) In October 2009 the Committee received a report rounding up the actions and outcomes of the recent fires at Birchwood, Nazeing. This had been scrutinised by both the Planning Services Scrutiny Standing Panel and the Safer Cleaner Greener Scrutiny Standing Panel looking at the history of the site and the action taken by local responsible authorities, such as the Fire, Police and the Environmental Agency and EFDC and the provisions being put in place to stop such a thing happening again.

(v) In November 2009 the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) carried out a consultation exercise on Housing growth in the region, giving 4 growth scenarios covering the period 2011 to 2031. There were 3 questions directly about these scenarios and on the regional impacts of the scenarios. The results of the consultation would enable the Regional Assembly to prepare a draft plan in 2010 for full public consultation. The Committee considered the four scenarios that were presented to it and asked that a fifth scenario be considered which deals with the realistic assessment of infrastructure provision in terms of the implications for deliverable housing and economic growth. They noted that the information on Harlow's future growth was misleading. The consultation document should have given far more detail about how the figures for the 4 scenarios were going to be split between Harlow, East Herts and this district. They believed that this authorities growth totals proposed in scenarios 3 and 4 were unrealistic and undeliverable in this district. These comments along with others were passed on to EERA.

(vi) They also considered, in November, the Key Findings Place Survey report. The survey took place from September to December 2008 and was a postal questionnaire delivered to a random sample of over 1,350 residents who were asked questions about where they lived, public services and feelings about social cohesion. They also considered the report of the debt management review sub group, which is detailed below as a case study.

(vii) In a packed meeting in November, the Committee considered the Essex County Council Consultation document on Mineral Extraction in the county and looked at staffing in the Planning Directorate. The proposals sought to make changes to staffing within Planning Services in particular enhancing the Enforcement Team and make provision to preserve protected trees within existing CSB budgets. On consideration the Committee agreed the recommendations made by the Planning Services Standing Panel.

(viii) In December 2009 a report came to the Committee from the Constitution and Members Services Standing Panel, reviewing the working of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees. The report covered several different issues connected to Overview and Scrutiny. Such as:

- Councillor call for action;
- Local Democracy including the Economic Development and Construction Act and the Community Empowerment Bill;
- the Joint Budget Meetings;
- dealing with Consultation Documents;
- Outside Speakers;
- Overview and Scrutiny Member Training;
- Reports of Chairmen of Panels – streamlining procedures;
- Publicising Overview and Scrutiny and Local Authority Website Review;
- Call-in arrangements –‘E’ call-in; and
- Civic Events – Chairman of Council’s Guidelines

Being wide ranging, the report had brought forward a number of smaller refinements to the operation of scrutiny at the council together with a number of proposals for further reports in the next year. The proposals fell mainly into two areas, a) the need to respond to new legislation; and b) enhancements to encourage community participation.

(ix) In January 2010 the Committee considered the budget report outlining the budget proposals for 2010/11. The Committee welcomed the proposed new Council Tax rate of 1.5% and that the Council would be maintaining frontline services in difficult times. They also welcomed the fact that the Council’s reserves would be maintained.

(x) The Committee also considered the annual review of the Contract Standing Orders. The Constitution and Member Services Standing Panel recently reviewed the work of a cross directorate working party of officers that reviewed the contract standing orders with the view of ensuring that these documents are up to date and reflect current statutory requirements and operational needs. They then brought their findings and recommendations to the O&S Committee who noted that the number of significant changes proposed were relatively limited in number and the remainder were minor drafting changes relating to post titles, changes in responsibilities and updating for new legal requirements.

(xi)

(d) Case Study: Debt Management Review

One of the many issues facing residents during the current downturn is where to access quality advice when they get into financial trouble. Following a discussion at Council in December 2008, we felt strongly that a review of current advice provision was needed.

During 2009 we commissioned a small group of members to look at this issue and come back with proposals. This group comprised of Councillors Jon Whitehouse as Chairman, and Councillors Ken Angold-Stephens, Mrs Antoinette Cooper, and Mrs Janet Whitehouse.

District Council officers and representatives from the District Council's Benefits Service, Housing Services, Voluntary Action Epping Forest, and Epping Forest CAB attended meetings to give evidence to the Subgroup.

It was clear from the research carried out and the various presentations that the downturn had meant many more residents were accessing debt advice services, especially the CAB service. The additional numbers coming forward, compounded by a lack of suitable additional and alternative interviewing rooms, had increased significantly the CAB's caseload. .

Many of the agencies in the public and voluntary sectors were very much aware of the impact locally. For instance, Housing Benefits and Council Tax Rebate cases had placed additional pressure on that service, particularly given the shortage of private interview rooms at the Civic Offices. The benefits system was also complex and difficult to understand.

The recession had led to greater demands on VAEF and the voluntary sector in general, with greater training costs and volunteer bureaux facing the administrative burden in terms of the placement of volunteers.

However, we found that many agencies had taken action to mitigate against the worst effects of the downturn. We recognised the good works of Essex Savers and Credit Unions to provide financial support. Additionally, the statutory agencies had effective services and procedures in place as part of their regular ongoing provision whatever the prevailing economic situation.

The Sub Committee agreed a number of actions it could implement immediately and put forward a number of recommendations for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it considered might ameliorate the impact of the economic situation locally, including becoming a signatory to the Small Business Engagement Accord (in November 2009) and linking the District Council website to Benefits Information. More significantly, following consideration of our report the Council has given further accommodation support to the CAB.

We have also made recommendations encouraging District Council employees, through the induction programme, to get involved in volunteering and voluntary work. We have also agreed to further promote the benefits of voluntary work through publicity in The Forester and other publicity outlets. We have also pressed home the need for more facilities for interviewing benefits claimants to be addressed through the Customer Transformation Programme or another Civic Offices work programme. We will follow the implementation of these recommendations with interest.