

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT: MUNICIPAL YEAR 2009/2010

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth report of the Overview and Scrutiny Structure of Epping Forest District Council. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Panels were 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.

At the beginning of the 2009/10 municipal year the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to the setting up of five Standing Panels and one Task and Finish Panel for the year. Half way through the year a second Task and Finish panel was established.

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.

Alongside its challenge role, the scrutiny function has also continued to engage positively with the Cabinet and there continues to be cross party 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 for this municipal year, 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 and their terms of reference. Although the panels have no powers to make decisions they can put forward recommendations for consideration, either by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee or with the permission of the parent committee, to the 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 the 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 four call-ins this year (for details, see Scrutinising and Monitoring Cabinet Work on page 6). These were on the Legal and Estates Portfolio Holders decision on the “The Broadway, Loughton – Rent Deferment Scheme”; the Leisure and Wellbeing Portfolio Holders decision on the “Provision of a Sports Hall at the Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool”; the Cabinet decision on “arrangements regarding scanned planning files”; and a Housing Portfolio Holders Report on the release of a restrictive covenant.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee membership consisted of 11 Councillors who were appointed at the Annual Council meeting.

Standing Scrutiny Panels

A Lead Officer was appointed to each panel to facilitate its process. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the terms of reference for each of the Panels on the basis of a rolling programme. The Standing Panels have a ‘rolling programme’ and consider ongoing and cyclical issues. Five standing Scrutiny Panels were established, dealing with:

- i. Housing
- ii. Constitution and Member Services
- iii. Finance and Performance Management
- iv. Safer Cleaner Greener.
- v. Planning Services

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. Two Task and Finish Panels were established during the year, they were:

- i. Pltt Review on Flooding Task and Finish Panel;
- ii. Sustainable Communities Task and Finish Panel.