

## **Report from the Essex Scrutiny Officer and Chairman Network meeting – 29 July 2011**

A networking meeting for the Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny functions and their officers was held at Chelmsford. The purpose was to create a network for the Scrutiny function and to share best practices or information on how the Scrutiny function can work across district boundaries.

The following points were raised and discussed:

- County informed the group that would devolve Local Health issues from County Scrutiny if appropriate.
- We discussed Partnership Scrutiny where councils share functions or services and how this could be achieved.
- The issue of Localism cropped up. There were no clear guidelines issued by the Government as yet. There was likely to be an impact on Greenbelt land if a Council did not have a clear LDF in place, explicitly mentioning Greenbelt land and what could be done with it. Authorities would benefit from sharing their experiences of problems raised by the new Localism Bill.
- Under the proposed 'New Planning Guidance' it was noted that authorities may be asked to go back to or "protect" their old 'Local Plan' instead of developing a new LDF. This was still in flux. A letter from Greg Clark, Minister for Decentralisation and Cities, dated 25<sup>th</sup> July has subsequently been received and they have asked for views on the draft 52 page policy document which was issued at the same time.
- The issue of Safeguarding Children was raised. Were authorities aware of their responsibilities and were they doing enough to train their Members and Officers in recognising these problems. We drew the attention of the meeting to the recent T&F Children Services Panel just completed at EFDC and promised to send the minute taker a copy so we could include it in the final set of minutes.
- Training for Members: members needed experience, knowledge and education to act as efficient O&S members. Providing an external Trainer was very expensive, but would be manageable if several authorities pooled their resources and had joint training sessions. It was noted the EFDC recorded some of their training sessions and made them available for members who could not attend a particular training session. We have already been approached by Harlow to see if we can run joint O&S training for members which is being progressed.
- It was noted that good Overview and Scrutiny was not party dependant, working better as critical friend without party loyalties.
- The meeting discussed the webcasting of meetings and were they worth the outlay. Noted that EFDC were now getting around 20,000 hits per annum of their webcasts; it was good for transparency and for letting the public view any specific item they wished to. ECC were very interested in this and asked for further information.

- The proposed new Police and Crime Commissioner – the various authorities were still unsure of what this would mean to them and the police service they would get. EFDC noted that Chief Superintendent Simon Williams and Cllr Anthony Jackson would be at the 6 September Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting to talk about the new Police Service and the way the proposed budget cuts would affect them. Members from other authorities were welcome to come and listen to the Superintendent or they could watch it on line via the webcast.
- Armchair Auditors – this touched upon community engagement with councils and their publication of any spending on their websites.
- Under Any Other Business, the proposed demise of the Highway Panels was discussed. It was noted that they were not disappearing but would be subsumed into the new Locality Panels. It may be that adjoining Districts would be put together under one meeting to rationalise the work of highway officers, as roads crossed boundaries. The make up of the new Locality Panels would be agreed with County and Districts on how they would be organised. More information would be sent out as and when County had made more detailed plans.

The Chairman asked any feedback be given to County on what the current 'hot' O&S topics were; what problems they faced and any type of good practice that could or should be shared with other authorities.

It was suggested that we arrange these meetings regularly and it was suggested every six months which was agreed.

Cllr Richard Bassett  
EFDC, Chairman Overview and Scrutiny