



SCRUTINY



Epping Forest District Council

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
ANNUAL REPORT
2005-2006

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT: MUNICIPAL YEAR 2005/2006.

Introduction

This is the first report of the new Overview and Scrutiny Regime as instituted by the Full Council in April 2005 after an exhaustive review of the old Overview and Scrutiny system by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee members in conjunction with the officers in the Research and Democratic Service section.

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. 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 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 Executive and there continues to be strong cross party political co-operation between members on all panels

At the first meeting of the new style Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2005 the committee reviewed the procedures and conditions that the new system was to work under. The meeting set the scene for the new arrangements 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 they have no powers to make decisions (unless granted delegated powers by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee) they can put forward recommendations for consideration.

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

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

In terms of the role of the Committee itself, it liaised with the Cabinet about work plans, engaged with external bodies and pre scrutiny work at its meetings during the week before Cabinet and dealt with those items referred to the Committee by the work programme. Call-in would continue and liaisons with the Cabinet would take place to discuss the wider work programme that would be approved and reviewed annually.

A Lead Officer was appointed to each panel to facilitate its' process. It was anticipated that Lead Officers would liaise on a regular basis with the relevant Chairman. They would also meet to agree terms of references of panels and priorities of reviews and their work plans.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee membership consists off 11 Councillors who were appointed at the Annual Council meeting. They are:

Councillor Mrs D Collins (Chairman)

Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse (vice Chairman)

Councillors Mrs D Borton, M Colling, K Faulkner, P Gode, F Maclaine, Mrs P Smith, D Stallan and M Woollard.

Standing Scrutiny Panels

The Committee noted the main objectives of panels. The Standing Panels had a 'rolling programme' and would consider ongoing and cyclical issues. Pro rata rules applied to Membership and all Members were welcome to attend meetings. Five standing Scrutiny Panels were established, dealing with:

- i. Housing
- ii. Constitutional Affairs
- iii. ICT and E-Government
- iv. Finance and Performance Management
- v. Environmental and Planning.

Standing Panels were required to regularly report to the Committee on progress with the work they were carrying out.

Task and Finish Panels

The Task and Finish Reviews would be restricted to dealing with activities which were issue based, time limited, non cyclical with clearly defined objectives which they would report responses to within a set deadline. Pro rata rules did not apply to membership, however panels must consist of a minimum number of members to carry out its programme and not consist solely of a single party. Cabinet Members would not be able to serve on panels that bore directly on their Portfolio. It had been decided that Membership based on expertise rather than pro-rata requirements would facilitate the work of such panels. Five Task and Finish panels were established during the year, they were:

- i. T&F panel on Externally Funded Leisure Services and Youth Provision
- ii. T&F panel on Register of Local Development Proposals (now completed)
- iii. T&F panel on Travellers Issues
- iv. T&F panel on Member Training (now completed)
- v. T&F panel on Local Area Agreement for Essex (now completed).

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

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Introduction by the Chairman:



"This year has seen the implementation of the new scrutiny panel system with the introduction of the new Scrutiny Standing Panels and the Task and Finish Panels. It has worked very well and has enabled the workload of the O&S to be increased by breaking it down and dividing it between these new panels, a more efficient system, and one that enables a more rigorous examination of the topics being scrutinised.

As for the parent Overview and Scrutiny Committee, our main functions are to monitor and scrutinise the work of the executive and its forward plan, external bodies and financial performance. It is tasked with the consideration of call-ins, policy development, performance monitoring and reviewing corporate strategies.

The Committee also has responsibility for determining the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Work Programme and receiving regular reports from the Standing and Task and Finish Scrutiny Panel Chairmen to ensure that their targets are achieved.

The Committee has met once a month on the Thursday prior to Cabinet.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Vice Chairman, Councillor Mrs Whitehouse, The Chairmen of the Standing and Task and Finish Panels, and all the committee members for their leadership and valuable help in making this a successful beginning, a new look Scrutiny for Epping Forest District.

My thanks also to John Scott, Simon Hill, and Staff from Democratic Services who have supported us so wholeheartedly throughout the year"

Councillor Diana Collins
March 2006

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee consisted of the following members:

Councillor Mrs D Collins (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs J H Whitehouse (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Mrs D Borton, M Colling, K Faulkner, P Gode, Mrs A Grigg, F Maclaine, Mrs M Sartin, D Stallan and M Woollard.

The lead officer was John Scott, Joint Chief Executive.

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

(a) Scrutinising and monitoring Cabinet work

In accordance with the new arrangements, the Committee had taken a more proactive role in this area through carrying out pre-scrutiny work. This had involved receiving and considering the Cabinet agenda prior to the Cabinet itself. The Committee reviewed the Cabinet Forward Plan and identified areas for further consideration. The Committee considered and supported one call in this year on the purchase of recycling boxes, recommending that certain elements of it be supported.

(b) Work Programme Monitoring

At each meeting, the Committee received reports from the Chairmen of the various Scrutiny Panels to report on the progress made with their current work. This has allowed the Committee to monitor performance, prioritise work and when necessary adjust their work plans to take into account new proposals and urgent items. The Committee recognised the importance of sufficient officer support in order for scrutiny to become a more proactive arm of the Council, and has therefore forwarded proposals to allow secretarial support for their meetings.

(c) External Organisations- Review of Performance

During the consultation process for the Community Strategy, Aidan Thomas and Marina Sherriff of the Local Strategic Partnership attended one of its meetings in July 2005 to report on the work of the partnership.

Furthermore, in light of the governments challenging programme to improve health services, Aidan Thomas this time in his role as the Chief Executive of the Epping Forest Primary Care Trust (PCT) and Terry Hanafin of the Essex Strategic Health Authority (SHA) attended meetings in October 2005 and February 2006 to consider and respond to the consultation process for changes to the structure of PCTs and SHAs designed to facilitate a 'patient-led' NHS. The Committee questioned the representatives, sought assurances and carefully took into account the needs of residents. They choose to support a solution that should ensure that services remains as close as possible to the local community and providers.

Two other major issues considered were the loss of Highways to the County and the Highways Local Service Agreement. In November 2005, the Committee invited Mr Paul Hardy, the Manager of the Area Highways Office to engage in a question and answer session. As a result of the discussion, Mr Hardy undertook to identify and report back on progress made with outstanding work including residential parking permits, Town Centre enhancements and Parking reviews. Consideration was given to the issue of Member involvement in the process and concerns expressed about response times to highways related issues.

Councillor Woollard and Mrs Grigg sought questions for the presentation through the Members Bulletin.

A presentation on Neighbourhood Policing was also given to the Committee on 2 March 2006 by Andy Adams, Chief Superintendent and Divisional Commander (Western Division). Neighbourhood policing is to be rolled out to every division in Essex during 2006.

STANDING PANELS.

1. HOUSING STANDING PANEL.

Introduction by the Chairman:

"It has been my privilege to be the first chairman of this newly constituted Housing Standing Panel. We were tasked to undertake reviews of a number of the Council's public and private sector housing policies and to make recommendations arising from such reviews to the Housing Portfolio Holder or Cabinet as appropriate. We were also to undertake specific projects related to public and private sector housing issues, as directed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. In addition the panel undertook ongoing monitoring of various housing activities, including the Annual Ethnic Monitoring Review of Housing Applicants and Housing Allocations in accordance with the Code of Practice in Rented Housing and the progress made with the housing Strategy and HRA Business Plan Action Plan, and the Housing Service Development Plan.



The Panel has work hard this year and I would like to thank my Vice Chairman Councillor Mrs Gadsby for her invaluable help, the Committee for their valuable input and diligence and, of course the officers (especially the lead officer Alan Hall) who helped steer the panel through many a complicated report with timely advice."

***Councillor Stephen Murray
March 2006.***

The Housing Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor S Murray (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs R Gadsby (Vice Chairman)
Councillors K Angold-Stephens, R Chidley, P Goode, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs J Lea, L Martin, Mrs S Perry, T Richardson and Mrs J Whitehouse.

The lead officer was Alan Hall, Head of Housing Services. We also appreciated the Housing Portfolio Holder, Cllr Michael Heavens, attending all of our meetings, to help us with our deliberations.

The Panel was assisted by Molly Carter, the Chairman of the Tenants and Leaseholder Federation, who had served at meetings as a non co-opted member to provide the views of residents and stakeholders.

The Panel scrutinised a number important issues over the past year, which included:

Three Information Evenings on Housing and Basic Housing Law. These were informal sessions given to the panel members to increase their basic background knowledge on housing to enable them to better appreciate the issues they would encounter during the year.

The Panel considered and commented on various Housing Service Strategies including:

- Older People Service and Housing Management;
- Housing Management;
- Tenant Participation;
- Homelessness Strategy;
- House Sales and Leasehold Services;
- Rent Administration and Collection;
- Housing Allocations;
- Housing Advice; and
- Epping Forest Local Supporting People Strategy –2006-2010.

The Panel received and considered six-monthly progress reports on the Housing Service Development Plan, formulated following the Best Value Service Review of Housing Services.

The Panel received reports on:

- Ethnic Monitoring – Housing Register and Allocations;
- Empty Properties in the Private Sector;
- Housing Allocations Scheme;
- Choice Based Lettings;
- Introductory Tenants Scheme;
- Witness Protection Mobility Scheme;
- Development of an Empty Property Strategy;
- Increasing the amount of affordable housing in the District;

In particular, the Panel have spent much time working up a new, comprehensive Empty Property Strategy. This piece of work was instigated in July 2005 - the Panel considered a few reports on the issues, including a scoping report and a report on the possible use of collaborative initiatives and enforcement for inclusion within the Empty Property Strategy. They hope to consider the draft Empty Property Strategy early in the next Council Year.

The panel also looked into the need to improve the levels of affordable housing available in the District. Their review had taken into account the concerns expressed at the low levels of affordable dwellings in the District compared with the increasing need and expectations in the Council's Best Value targets. In researching this the panel identified sites for possible development, reviewed whether a change in planning policy should be proposed, requested a feasibility and consultation exercise, explored initiatives involving other authorities and the Council's ability to provide additional resources and utilise existing ones.

2. CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING PANEL.

Introduction by Chairman:



"As Chairman of this Scrutiny Standing Panel I have been very fortunate to have as my vice chairman Mrs Pat Brooks who has proved to be extremely helpful. I must also thank my fellow Committee members for their attentive and incisive contributions through the last year.

As a panel we were tasked to undertake reviews of constitutional, civic, electoral and governance matters and services for members on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. We then reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Cabinet and the Council (as appropriate) with recommendations on matters allocated to the panel.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the officers who helped this panel, especially Ian Willett, my lead officer who helped smooth things along and kept us on track."

*Councillor Richard Morgan
March 2006*

The Constitutional Affairs Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor R Morgan (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs P Brooks (Vice Chairman)
Councillors D Bateman, R D'Souza, Mrs J Davis, J Demetriou, Mrs A Haigh, J Markham, Mrs P Richardson and D Stallan.

The Lead Officer was Ian Willett, Head of Research and Democratic Services.

The Panel scrutinised a number important issues over the past year, which included:

- A presentation on elections;
- They reviewed the protocol on Partnerships and other External Organisations;
- They considered a consultation document from the Electoral Commission;
- They considered draft guidance from the Standards Committee on Member Services; and
- Considered the new Electoral Candidates Pack.

The panel received reports on:

- Elections in 2005;
- Options for Enhancing Debate at Council Meetings;
- Council Meetings – Review of Questions and Motions Procedure;
- Council Meetings – Review of Future Role;
- Contract Standing Orders – Review;

- Elections;
- Member Services – Policy;
- Electoral Pilots;
- Electoral Administration Bill;
- Review of Area Plans Sub-Committees;
- Housing Appeals Panel – Title, Terms of Reference and Procedures;
- Complaints against Councillors – Review of Support;
- Civic Protocol.

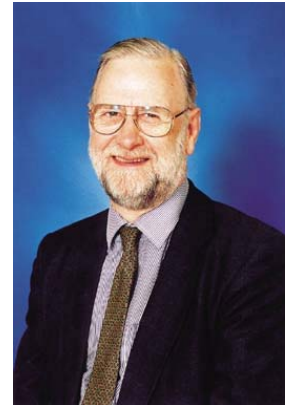
As an example of the panels work, in November 2005 the panel endorsed a pilot on electronic counting at elections, with signature checking innovations for votes and to test anti fraud measures – especially in relation to postal voting.

The panel was currently looking at a number of options for enhancing debate at Council meetings. They had explored, amongst other things, having presentations from external organisations with specific recommendations, State of the District Debates and verbal unannounced questions on topical issues. All members were to be canvassed to ascertain their views on which options should be taken forward. The panel was also presently considering the scope of the Planning Sub Committees by reviewing the number of councillors on each committee and the distribution of their workload.

3. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND E GOVERNMENT STANDING PANEL.

Introduction by Chairman:

"As chairman of the new scrutiny standing panel I have had great pleasure in chairing this interesting and informative panel. Our terms of reference were to consider how the implementation of the ODPM Implementing e-Government (IEG) Priority Outcomes and the Local e-Government Strategy should be monitored and prioritised. We also considered the Council's IEG Government Returns, to review the Council's ICT strategy, to monitor progress on the Council's ICT Service Business Action Plan and to consider the introduction of the Re-use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2005. We are currently overseeing the emerging Customer Services Transformation Programme.



During this busy year I have been greatly helped by my Vice Chairman Councillor Mitchell Cohen, my fellow panel members, and of course the officers who have guided us through the e-jungle, especially my lead officer Adrian Scott, to all of whom I would like to express my thanks."

Councillor Fergus Maclaine
March 2006

The ICT and E Government Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor F Maclaine (Chairman)
Councillor M Cohen (Vice Chairman)
Councillors S Barnes, Mrs D Borton, M Colling, Mrs D Collins, T Farr, P McMillan, Mrs P Rush and Mrs M Sartin.

The Lead Officer was Adrian Scott, Head of Information and Communications Technology Services.

The Panel scrutinised a number important issues over the past year, which included:

Reports on:

- E Government;
- Corporate Contact Centre – Scoping Study report;
- Members Connectivity Scheme;
- E-Procurement;
- ICT Strategy – Review 2005;
- Corporate Contract Centre Progress report.

The panel also received a presentation by 'Foresight Consulting' on the proposed Customer Services Transformation Programme.

One of the first things that the panel considered was the Scoping Study Report on the implementation of a Corporate Contract Centre. They considered the initial costings and the accommodation and staffing aspects.

The panel went on to oversee the implementation of the Committee Management System (CoMs) and the Members Connectivity Scheme, presently unrolling, with its Gold and Platinum training sessions.

4. FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT STANDING PANEL

Introduction by Chairman:



"This is the first time the Council has had a Scrutiny Group whose sole task is to keep a watchful eye on the Council's Finances and its performance. This first year has been a very full one with new arrangements for monitoring performance indicators and an emerging new Council Plan.

Our work in this area is much assisted by officers of the Finance and HR and Performance Management Services.

It is pleasing to note that the Council's performance against its Key Performance Indicators remains at a high level and the authority is financially stable.

We look forward to playing a formative role in the new Council Plan during the next year"

***Councillor Jon Whitehouse
March 2006***

The Finance and Performance Management Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor J Whitehouse (Chairman)
Councillor A Green (Vice Chairman)
Councillors S Barnes, R Chidley, Mrs D Collins, T Farr, K Faulkner, Mrs R Gadsby, R Goold

The lead officers were T Tidey and R Palmer, Heads of Human Resources and Performance Management Unit and Finance Services.

The Panel scrutinised a number important issues over the past year, which included:

Best Value Performance – The Panel agreed to monitor a 'basket' of Key Performance Indicators for the first time. These indicators are based upon our core services to the public and were subject of discussion and comment on a quarterly basis throughout the year.

Budget Scrutiny – We have played an active part on the formulation of the Budget for 2006/07, which began as far back as September 2005 with an issues paper on the budget. Our considerations have included financial monitoring of this years budgets and forward scrutiny of all of the proposed Portfolio Holder Budgets for next year. We have asked a number of our Portfolio Holder Colleagues to review elements of their budgets for the next year including: Local Land Charges, Grant Aid, Street Cleaning Teams and North Weald Airfield income.

Council Plan 2006-2010 – At a special meeting we received and commented the proposed new Council Plan. The Council Plan sets out the Council's ambition and priorities for the next four years, showing how the authority will support the Community Strategy through its

community leadership role. The Plan also provides an opportunity to identify and promote the key aims that will build upon the Council's previous successes over the medium-term and will show how the Council intends to achieve its priorities and manage its resources to secure their achievement and maintain our continuous improvement. This is now being consulted upon and we look forward to playing a key role in the helping to achieve targets set for the Council.

Additionally, the panel received reports on:

- User Focus work undertaken by the Audit Commission
- A public Consultation and Engagement Strategy
- Fees and Charges
- Performance by our Planning Service
- Four Year Budget Forecasts
- Performance Management Framework

The Panel has both reported to the main Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to the Cabinet on budgetary matters.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL AND PLANNING STANDING PANEL

Introduction by Chairman:

"It has been an interesting year, chairing one of the first Scrutiny Standing Panels for this authority. We have scrutinised the Council's Waste Management Policies and the Local Plan (seeking to keep it up to date), we have responded to the Governments' Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005, are currently in the middle of looking into the Re-use of Buildings in the Green Belt and are also monitoring the West Essex Waste Management Joint Committee and their deliberations. The Panel also looked at the East of England Plan, they invited local parish Councils to a meeting to discuss their exclusion from the Examination in Public, resulting in letters expressing the panels concern were sent to the Inspectors. The panel held a debriefing meeting about this at the end of February.



I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Vice Chairman, Councillor Woollard, the other Councillors on the panel and of course the lead officers, John Preston (Head of Planning Services and Economic Development) and John Gilbert (Head of Environmental Services)."

***Councillor David Stallan
March 2006***

The Environmental and Planning Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor D Stallan (Chairman)
Councillor M Woollard (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Mrs M Boatman, Mrs D Borton, A Lee, P McMillan, T Richardson, Mrs M Sartin, Mrs P Smith and K Faulkner,

The Lead Officers were J Gilbert, Head of Environmental Services and J Preston, Head of Planning Services and Economic Development.

The Panel scrutinised a number important issues over the past year, which included:

Reports on:

- Local Plan Alterations – Update;
- East of England Plan;
- Local Plan and Scheme;
- Re-Use of Buildings in the Green Belt;
- Cleaner Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.

One of the issues the panel considered over the last year was a response to the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 which included crime and disorder, nuisance parking offences, abandoned vehicles, litter and refuse, graffiti, waste, fixed penalty notices

and other notices. A full response to DEFRA was complied and endorsed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Following this initial review the Panel will next be looking at the issue of Community Wardens and Police Community Support Officers to see how best the Council can make positive use of the new powers that the Act has made available.

TASK AND FINISH PANELS

1. TASK AND FINISH PANEL ON EXTERNALLY FUNDED LEISURE SERVICES AND YOUTH PROVISION (Now Completed)

The Task and Finish Review was set up to recommend arrangements for the monitoring of the Council's Leisure Management Contract, to identify future youth provision needs and how these could be met and review External Funding for Leisure and Cultural Opportunities to maximise future benefit and highlight good practice.

The task and Finish Panel on Externally Funded Leisure Services and Youth Provision consisted of the following members:

Councillor Mrs A Grigg (Chairman)

Councillor A Lee (Vice Chairman)

Councillors Mrs P Brooks, R Chidley, Mrs D Collins, Mrs J Davis, Mrs A Haigh, L Martin, D Stallan, T Richardson and K Wright.

The Lead officer was Derek Macnab, Head of Leisure Services.

The Panel scrutinised the following issues over the past year:

(a) Monitoring Arrangements for the Leisure Management Contract

In light of the decision to appoint Sport and Leisure Management Ltd (SLM) to manage and develop its major Leisure Facilities and Swimming Pools, the Panel formulated monitoring arrangements for the contract. They questioned officers, spoke to the Development Director for SLM Ltd about ensuring quality and customer care and heard the views of the UNISON regional officer on progress with negotiations. They noted the proposals for the establishment of a Monitoring Board, to include Members and the Directors of SLM Ltd. and made proposals on the composition and the reporting line of this Board. They requested that it comprise of cross party representation and report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee regularly to secure scrutiny involvement and party representation in the arrangements. The OSC and the Cabinet agreed a finished report.

(b) Youth Provision in the District

The Panels review on youth services was aimed at enhancing the opportunities provided by the various agencies involved in service delivery in the District. Of key importance was to consider the future role of the Council in this area. They noted the potential changes in focus being driven by Central Government and some of the main issues of concern for young people. They felt it was important to hear directly from young people and visited some of the youth projects in the District. This covered Waltham Abbey Young Persons Information Centre, Waltham Abbey Youth 2000, 'The Box' in Epping' and the new Ongar Leisure Centre. They viewed the various support services and facilities provided, funding arrangements, the user base profile and special needs support and requested that provision be made in the Grant Aid Budget for the Council to remain an active partner in the provision of voluntary sector/joint funded youth initiatives.

The Panel responded to the Government Green Paper entitled 'Youth Matters'. They received details on the vacant Young Persons Officer Post and recognised the contribution the role made to the Councils capacity to address young peoples issues. The Panel recommended that the post be retained but refocused to encourage young people to become more engaged in the decision-making process and citizenship to make a positive contribution to the issues affecting them. A draft Job Description, and a request to develop an Audit of Youth Opportunities in the District was formulated and supported by the Cabinet.

(c) External Funding for Leisure and Cultural Projects

It was noted that in recent years, Leisure Services has enjoyed a success in attracting funding to support the delivery of Local Leisure and Cultural opportunities through the establishment of effective working relationship with external partners. In January 2006, the panel considered details on the sources of external support secured over the last five years, the type of projects delivered, features of a successful application and the process used by the council for submitting bids. We requested that the Head of Leisure Services submit a report to the Cabinet for the enhancement of youth provision during 2006/07.

2. TASK AND FINISH PANEL ON REGISTER OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS (Now Completed)

The Task and Finish Panel was set up in June 2005 to investigate and review the Council's existing policies for parking in residential areas and to recommend any changes in policy necessary to ensure equality of treatment across the District. The Panel also considered the process for recording and prioritising highways maintenance issues with a view to forwarding recommendations to the Highways Authority.

Aside from these Highways issues, the Panel took on a separate review to devise a procedure to allow Members to formally register matters of concern in their wards and raise serious concerns for inclusion in the future Overview and Scrutiny work programme.

The task and Finish Panel on Register of Local Development Proposals consisted of the following members:

Councillor F Maclaine (Chairman)
Councillor Angold – Stephens (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Mrs D Borton, Mrs J Davis, A Green, J Hart, D Kelly, Mrs J Lea, Mrs S Perry, Mrs P Richardson, K Rush, G Stollar, Mrs J Whitehouse and M Woollard.

The Lead Officer was John Scott, Joint Chief Executive.

The Panel scrutinised the following issues over the past year:

(a) Parking in Residential Area and Highway Issues

The panel acknowledged that, in recent years, the level of car ownership throughout the District has significantly increased leading to widespread parking problems and a shortage of

provision. We noted that these circumstances compromise the character of areas and were detrimental to the local environment. A lack of provision often generates strong feelings.

They took the view that current policy should be reviewed, otherwise residents might feel that the Council was ignoring their needs. It was determined that a review on vehicle cross over policy (to ease problems and address the compelling needs of recent cases at the Housing Appeals Panel) should be instituted.

To gain a real insight into the issues across the District, the panel canvassed Members through the Bulletin to seek their views. Arising from their responses, a sub group carried out a full day site visit to recognised 'black spots' both in and outside the District to gather first hand evidence and interview officers at other Authorities to see problems and solutions elsewhere. A full report was produced on the day and photographs were reported back for elucidation (the photo shows car parking in Borders Lane). The Panel really benefited from this direct approach and felt that it provided a valuable basis for formulating solutions.

In conjunction with this review, the panel reviewed more general highways issues. This involved questioning the Manager for the Area Highways Office, Mr Paul Hardy, the Portfolio Holder and highways and housing officers. This was to seek clarity on the terms of the new Local Service Agreement (LSA), the scope of the Districts influence following the changes and emphasis the importance of establishing arrangements to ensure that local issues were given due consideration and Members views heard.



Having carefully considered the evidence, the Panel formulated a comprehensive set of proposals designed to ensure that the LSA is regularly monitored, a member forum established to consider highways issues and that a data base is set up to prioritise projects on non housing land. They also recommended that residents parking schemes and wider reviews were undertaken as a matter of urgency and public consultation arrangements.

(b) A Member Led Review – officer comments

The Panel led this review right from the start and sought to involve all members of the Council to ensure that a district wide approach was taken. The Vice Chairman of the Panel, Councillor Angold – Stephens, made a significant contribution to the review by personally collating information from a wide range of sources, producing and circulating questionnaires and in depth reports for the meetings and drawing together all the issues in a final report on behalf of the Panel. The Panel and officers wish to express their appreciation to him for this hard work.

(c) Register of Development Proposals

We acknowledged that it is essential that Ward Members were provided with the opportunity to formally flag up issues of concern on behalf of residents and track action being taken. This would enable Members not only to ensure that an issue is recognised for consideration but also allows them to demonstrate to their constituents that their concern are being addressed.

The Chairman of the Panel, Councillor Maclaine, formulated a series of proposals for consideration and a draft version of a pro forma. This suggested that a mechanism be devised to 'lock in' issues until completion, include provision for the addition of issues on an ongoing basis and in time become available electronically. It was acknowledged that this latter option

would complement the priority outcomes in the Council's E - Government Strategy which suggests that a similar forum should exist to allow the public to submit and monitor issues.

To submit the panels' views, Councillor Maclaine produced a full report for the November 2005 OSC together with a form for registering and monitoring outstanding issues affecting a ward. The Portfolio Holder in conjunction with officers is presently considering the operation and resourcing of the scheme prior to implementation.

3. TASK AND FINISH PANEL ON TRAVELLERS ISSUES

This Panel was charged with reviewing the arrangements for dealing with unauthorised development on traveller owned sites, the management of unauthorised encampment issues, the need for changes to 'tolerated sites', government guidance on needs in the context of the District Local Plan and the Essex Needs Assessment and the results of the Commission for Racial Equality on traveller issues outstanding Policy Working Group issues.

The task and Finish Panel on Travellers Issues consisted of the following members:

Councillor P McMillan (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs D Borton (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Mrs P Brooks, Mrs D Collins, K Faulkner, P McMillan, Mrs P Smith, Ms S Stavrou, T Richardson and J M Whitehouse.

The Lead Officers were J Gilbert, Head of Environmental Services and J Preston, Head of Planning Services and Economic Development.

The Panel scrutinised the following issues over the past year:

(a) Specific Sites

In relation to this review, the panel thought that it was important to see for themselves the scope of problems and carried out a tour of the traveller sites in the District. Their discussions focused around proposals for Paynes Lane and working to securing solutions to what has been a long, complex and expensive process. They considered access and enforcement issues and the views of residents in the area. From these investigations, the panel formulated proposals that were subsequently supported by the Cabinet for clearance and further work on the possibility of bringing the site under council control to facilitate work.



The panel received reports on action on Birchfield and Hamlet Hill Sites.

(b) Policy Review

In September 2005, the panel attended a conference in Newmarket about government policies on traveller issues indicating that local authorities should take action to assess traveller needs and make appropriate provision in Local Plans robust enough to withstand legal challenges. They considered the national need and in this context the number of pitches that the District might be expected to provide. The Panel requested that officers find out if the District had any provision for travellers and gather information on existing traveller sites. It was recognised the need to deal with the question of tolerated sites and it is intend to review this issue.

(c) Outstanding Work

There are a number of issues still to be determined including the findings of the Commission of Racial Equality study on travellers that will inform the panels' deliberations. Their next meeting is due to take place in April 2006.

4. TASK AND FINISH PANEL ON MEMBER TRAINING (Now Completed)

The Panel was charged with recommending a programme of skills training for Overview and Scrutiny members, a member training programme template for future year, commencing 2006/7 and an annual review process. Also to recommend proposals for a seminar after May 2006 to review the new Overview & Scrutiny arrangements

The Task and Finish Panel on member Training consisted of the following members:

Councillor Mrs M Sartin (Chairman)

Councillor Mrs K Rush (Vice Chairman)

Councillors Mrs J Davis, J Demetriou, R D'Souza, F Maclaine, R Morgan, Mrs P Richardson and D Stallan.

The Lead Officers were Tony Tidey, Head of Human Resources and Ian Willett, Head of Research and Democratic Services.

The Panel scrutinised Member Training over the past year:

They recommended that any changes to the member training programme be formulated in 2005 and implemented in 2006. They would then have time to identify the implications of the new arrangements for training and allow them to feed such information into the review. A pro-forma on Scrutiny Skills training was sent out to the members for comments. On receipt the panel looked at the skills set required by scrutiny. These included:

- Principles of Scrutiny and effective methods;
- Financial Scrutiny;
- Planning/ Scoping investigations;
- Questioning; and
- Gathering/ Evaluating Evidence.

The panel looked for and found a single provider to deliver these modules. The panel then formulated a training programme for 2006/07 that would consist of formal inductions and welcome sessions and mandatory training courses.

The panel also conducted a survey on member attendance at mandatory training courses. Group Leaders were then informed about the results.

5 LOCAL AREA AGREEMENT FOR ESSEX -TASK AND FINISH PANEL (Now Completed)

To review proposals by the County Council for new Local Area Agreements (LAA) for Essex.

The Task and Finish Panel on the Local Area Agreement for Essex consisted of the following members:

Councillor K Faulkner (Chairman)

Councillors M Colling, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs M Sartin, D Stallan, Mrs J H Whitehouse and J M Whitehouse.

The panel scrutinised the County Council's proposals for new Local Area Agreements (LAA) for Essex. The LAA was a contract between Local and Central Government, which was intended to secure improvements across a number of key areas for a three year period. This panel met once only in November 2005 after which they submitted a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee where their recommendations were endorsed and forwarded on to the Cabinet in December of last year, and Council in February this year.

CONCLUSION

This is the first year that this new system of Scrutiny has been in operation at Epping Forest where the committees are split into Standing and Task and Finish Panels. It has been a steep learning curve for all concerned. Members had been able to take ownership and learn to drive the scrutiny process and officers had to be reactive enough to meet the members needs and ensure the smooth running of the process.

There were concerns raised about staff resources at the beginning of the year and a dedicated officer post for scrutiny was advertised in the autumn of 2005. However, the post was unable to be filled due to lack of suitable applicants. With a little rearranging of duties, Resources and Democratic Services have now provided a Democratic Services officer who's workload will mainly be concentrated on the scrutiny side.

There was only one call-in this year that was supported by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and subsequently agreed by the cabinet.

The Standing Panels have proved themselves over the year – specialising in one service or particular aspect of the council and looking into that topic in depth when needed and keeping a continuing eye on cyclical and annual issues.

The Task and Finish Panels have also proved to be very effective especially the short term quick “in and out” investigations such as the Task and Finish panels on Parking and the Local Area Agreement.

Feedback is always welcome especially with a new structure as this. If you have any comments to make on the new scrutiny arrangements, on how it has worked or places where it may have fallen down (whether you're a councillor or an officer) please let Adrian Hendry in Research and Democratic Services know (email: ahendry@eppingforestdc.gov.uk).