

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT: **MUNICIPAL YEAR 2006/2007**

Introduction

This is our second report of the new Overview and Scrutiny Structure as instituted by the Full Council in April 2005.

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

This year Overview and Scrutiny had implemented a training programme for councillors, delivered by a consultant who helped develop the councillor's skills on running scrutiny, asking relevant questions and probing deeper into issues that affect the Council and the wider community as a whole. 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. 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 following a change to the administration to a two party system in 2006. The Cabinet remained receptive to ideas put forward by Scrutiny throughout the year.

At the first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in May 2006 the committee reviewed their procedures following the training received. The meeting took the opportunity to continue 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 the panels 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.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee liaised with the Cabinet about work their plans for the year and pre scrutinised their reports at its meetings during the week before Cabinet met. 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.

It Committee also engaged with external bodies and dealt with those items referred to the Committee by the work programme,

The Committee considered two call-ins this year, the first was on the Cabinet decision on the maximum length of cross-overs in May 2006 and secondly on the cabinets decision on Free Saturday Parking in January 2007.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee membership consists 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. Lead Officers 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. Five standing Scrutiny Panels were established, dealing with:

- i. Housing
- ii. Constitution and Member Services
- iii. Customer Services and ICT
- iv. Finance and Performance Management
- v. 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. Local Strategic Partnership Task and Finish Panel;
- iv. Services for Older and Disabled Persons Task and Finish Panel;
- v. Town Centre and Car Parks Task and Finish Panel.

The Task and Finish Panel on Travellers Issues that had begun during the municipal year 2005/06 carried on in this year, finishing in July 2006.

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 is the second year of the Council’s new scrutiny system breaking down the topics being scrutinised into Standing and Task and Finish Panels and the main Overview and Scrutiny Committee, enabling a larger workload to be tackled and scrutinised. This has proved to be a very successful way of working through the large amount of topics that a Council’s Scrutiny structure is asked to consider over an average year.

As the Overview and Scrutiny Committee we have taken on numerous topics, including looking at the Epping Forest College, the Draft Council Plan for 2006-10, the proposed service levels at Whipps Cross University Hospital and the Police merger proposals. Also, a few days before each Cabinet meeting we meet to pre-scrutinise their agenda, enabling us to pre-empt any decisions and if need be, invite that member of the Cabinet to attend our meeting to answer any questions or concerns that we have about a particular report.

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.

This is my first year as Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and as luck would have it, the Council began web-casting some of its meetings from the summer of 2006. This meant that our Committee was available to watch live on the web or at a later date, thus opening up the meeting to a much wider public than would be normally be the case. This, I understand, is proving to be a much appreciated resource, well used by the public.

I would like to take this opportunity to give my personal thanks to all the people from outside organisations who visited our Committee and Panels during the last year and gave us the benefit of their expertise and answered our (hopefully) pertinent and probing questions. We were very grateful that they took the time to help us out.

I would also like to express my thanks to my Vice-Chairman, Councillor Mrs Janet Whitehouse, the members of the O&S Committee, all the Chairmen of the Standing and Task and Finish Panels, the members of those panels and of course all the officers who support the Panels and my Committee and make our jobs that much more manageable.”

Councillor Richard Morgan
April 2007

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee consisted of the following members:

Councillor R Morgan (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse (Vice Chairman)
Councillors D Bateman, M Cohen, M Colling, R D’Souza, Mrs H Harding, P House,
G Mohindra, Mrs P Richardson and M Woollard.

The Lead Officer was John Scott, Joint Chief Executive (Community Services).

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 and 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 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.

The Committee considered two call-ins this year, the first was on the Cabinet decision on the maximum length of cross-overs in May 2006 and secondly on the issue of the cabinet's decision on Free Saturday Parking in January 2007, neither of the call-in were supported and the original decisions stood.

The first call-in was originally considered by the Task and Finish Panel on residential parking. Part of their recommendations being that the maximum length of a crossover remains at 6 metres. The Cabinet endorsed this, acknowledging that the Task and Finish Panel had considered all aspects of this topic. However this part of the report was called-in by some members who thought it to be inflexible in the face of parking hardships of the residents and the public concern this generated. On balance the Committee supported the views of the Task and Finish Panel and the Portfolio Holder.

The second call-in on the provision of free Saturday parking was not at issue with the decision but with the assertion that the Cabinet failed to properly consider and justify the decision, in particular the financial aspects of the decision, the criteria for the review had not been established so that the success of the scheme could not be properly measured and there had been insufficient consultation with Town and Parish Councils and local ward members. After debating the decision taken and the call-in arguments the Committee agreed with the Cabinet's decision to provide free Saturday parking. However, the Committee did ask that the Portfolio Holder report back to them on the review procedures that were put in place.

(b) Standing Panels work programme monitoring

The Committee received regular updates 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.

(c) Items considered by the committee this year

This year the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a diverse range of topics, such as:

i) A presentation by the principal of Epping Forest College, David Butler and Roger Neville, the Chairman of the College Board, on its future plans and development. The college is seeking to develop part of its site to facilitate redevelopment of the college campus. The Committee, as well as commenting on these plans, also scrutinised the alleged problems posed by the students to the surrounding area. The Committee talked through these issues with the college and got a better understanding of the colleges problems.

ii) The Committee also received a presentation by Councillor R Chambers, Chairman of the Essex Police Authority and Mr R Paddock the Deputy Chief Executive and Treasurer, on the proposed merger of Bedford, Essex and Hertfordshire Police areas. The Committee scrutinised the proposal and submitted a response to the consultation exercise being carried out by the Government, stating in the strongest terms, their opposition to the proposed merger. In the end it was hoped that the Committee's recommendations were taken into consideration by the government and helped in their decision not to go ahead with the proposed merger.

(iii) The Committee also considered a report of the Constitution and Member Services Panel on their review of the Structure and Membership of the Area Plans Sub-Committees. They supported the principle that all members of the Council be members of their local sub – committee. They also considered their recommendation that no change be made to the structure. They felt that this conclusion did not address the aims behind the review, which were to balance out the work load of the Sub – Committees and shorten the timescale for dealing with them to improve Best Value performance and secure further funding. As a consequence the Committee recommended to the Council that the present Area Sub – Committees B and C be combined. This changes has already come into effect.

iv) The Committee considered and commented on the draft Council Plan for 2006-10, they endorsed the key measures contained within the plan and made comments on several sections of the plan to be passed on to the Cabinet for their consideration.

v) The Committee met the Local Commissioner for Children and Young People (CYPSP) Ms Lonica VanClay twice during the year, who reported on her role in the identification and commissioning of services for the 0-19 age range. The second time she reported to the committee, updating the structure of the CYPSP and the developments on the developments of Children's Services within the District.

vi) The Cabinet were invited to present their plans for the year ahead, the Committee considered the schedules with a view to selecting issues for pre-decision scrutiny. They hope to develop this role over the next year.

vii) The Committee received a presentation from James Slater, the Deputy Chief Executive of Waltham Forest Primary Care Trust, Mr Alan Clarke of the Barking and Dagenham PCT, Aidan Thomas, Chief Executive of the West Essex PCT and Mrs Catherine O'Connell, Locality Director, West Essex PCT, on the 'Fit for the Future' review of Northeast London Healthcare, currently being undertaken by the Northeast London Strategic Health Authority. Resulting from this the Council Appointed a member representative to the proposed Joint Security Committee being set up by four London Boroughs, Havering, Redbridge, Barking and Dagenham and Waltham Forest. This is due to meet in April 2007 and the Committee awaits the results with interest. This will be a first for the Council, participating in a cross border scrutiny.

viii) Chief Superintendent Andy Adams, the Divisional Commander for Essex Police gave a presentation on their Neighbourhood Policy Initiative and wider issues. He attended

the Committee twice during the year coming back to report on progress with local initiatives and wider policing issues.

ix) The Committee considered a report of the Task and Finish Panel on Town Centres and Car Parks, making early recommendations to the Cabinet concerning the development of the new parking enforcement contract.

x) The Committee also considered the report from the Constitutional and Member Services on their review of the Structure and Membership of the Area Sub-Committees. They recommended that no change be made to the structure. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee did not feel that they could put forward the no change recommendation to the Council, and additionally recommended the principal of all members of the Council be members of an Area Plans Sub-Committee.

xi) The Committee scrutinised the Highways Local Services agreement - **TO COMPLETE AFTER MARCH MEETING**

STANDING PANELS

1. HOUSING STANDING PANEL

Introduction by the Chairman:

“This is my second year as Chairman of the Housing Standing Panel and again we have had a busy year looking at various Housing Strategies and schemes that the Council has instigated to help the public access our housing stock. In addition we also undertook ongoing monitoring of various housing activities such as the annual Ethnic Monitoring Review.

As always I would like to thank the Councillors and officers who have put in such hard work to help make this Scrutiny Panel run smoothly in carrying out its invaluable role in scrutinising the Housing Services in Epping Forest District. My special thanks to Mrs Molly Carter, the Chairman of the Tenants and Leaseholder Federation who also attends our meetings as an outside member of the Panel.”

Councillor Stephen Murray
April 2007

The Housing Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor S Murray (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs R Gadsby (Vice Chairman)
Councillors K Angold-Stephens, D Bateman, Mrs P Brooks, Mrs D Borton, Mrs H Harding, Mrs J Lea, G Mohindra, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs J H Whitehouse and J Wyatt.

The Lead Officer was Alan Hall, Head of Housing Services. The Panel also appreciated the Housing Portfolio Holder, Councillor D Stallan, attending the meetings to help them with their deliberations.

Mrs Molly Carter, the Chairman of the Tenants and Leaseholder Federation, who attends the meetings as a non-voting co-opted member to provide the views of residents and stakeholders, assisted the Panel.

Terms of Reference

The Housing Standing Panel is 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. They also undertake specific projects related to public and private sector housing issues, as directed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

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

i) The Choice Based Letting Scheme – the Council had agreed to work in partnership with five other local authorities, creating a consortium of six authorities, Brentwood BC, Broxbourne DC, Chelmsford BC, East Herts DC, Epping Forest DC and Uttlesford DC. The scheme would advertise any vacancies in the housing stock of the relevant authorities. The people on the housing register could then express their interest in any property advertised.

The Panel considered the proposed scheme and were advised of its implementation and use throughout the year.

ii) Housing Services Strategy on Empty Council Dwellings – the Panel considered the Council's strategy on the amount of time council dwellings are empty between tenancies are kept to a minimum and assists the Council in discharging its duty to people who are homeless or otherwise in housing needs. The Tenant and Leaseholders federation had already considered and had supported this strategy.

iii) Empty Property Strategy – they considered and commented on the draft Empty Property Strategy, which set out the action the council intends to take to bring long-term empty homes back into use. The Panel asked that officers put in extra safeguards into the report that went to cabinet to stop landlords receiving more than one grant per property.

iv) Private Sector Housing Strategy – the Panel looked at and commented on, the draft strategy that will lead to substantial changes in the enforcement of the Private Sector Housing Standards and the arrangements for giving financial assistance to promote the repair and improvement of sub-standard private sector housing.

v) Housing Service Strategy on Harassment – the Panel considered the strategy on harassment relating to the Council's approach to dealing with acts or allegations of harassment involving members of the public who are recipients of housing services. Housing Services condemns all forms of harassment and bullying and recognises that harassment is defined by is defined by the impact on the victim of harassment, not by the intentions of the alleged perpetrator.

vi) Housing Service Strategy on Equality and Diversity – the Panel reviewed the Council's strategy on how the Council proposed to promote equality and diversity in line with the Council's Corporate Equality and Diversity Policy.

vii) Housing applicants Ethnic Monitoring – reviewing the ethnicity of applicants on the housing register compared with the ethnicity of those allocated accommodation.

2. CONSTITUTION AND MEMBER SERVICES STANDING PANEL

Introduction by the Chairman:

“This year we looked at a variety of topics including reviewing the future shape of our Council meetings, how we could improve our Civic Ceremonial functions and how to improve the structure of our Area Planning Sub-Committees, which proved to be a contentious issue with every member holding their own strong views on their future.

I would like to express my thanks to my Vice Chairman, Councillor Mitch Cohen for his valuable support over the year and of course, to the members of the panel for their important contributions.”

Councillor Richard Morgan
April 2007

The Constitution and Member Services Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor R Morgan (Chairman)
Councillor M Cohen (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Mrs P Brooks, R Church, R D’Souza, J Demetriou, Mrs A Haigh, J Markham, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs P Smith and Mrs L Wagland.

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

Terms of Reference

To undertake reviews of constitutional, civic, electoral and governance matters and services for members on behalf of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Council and the Cabinet with recommendations on matters allocated to the Panel as appropriate.

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

(i) Area Planning Sub-Committees, Review of Structure – the Panel considered the structure of the Area Planning Sub-Committees. The review stemmed from the desire to give all Members a place on their local Sub – Committee and the need to even out their workload.

The Panel canvassed all Members and the Local Councils who expressed strong support for the retention of the area based structure to ensure that the cases continued to be determined by the local members. There was also some support for the strengthening of this especially for the rural areas. The Panel also heard from planning officers who clarified that any reduction in the number of Sub – Committee might marginally quicken the process for determining applications and help us secure our best value targets.

The Panel did not fully support any of the alternatives and felt that they were likely to create new problems. They resolved that no changes be made to the current structure of the Sub – Committees. They did however support the principle that all Members should be members of an Area Sub Plans – Committee having considered the high levels of support for the principle amongst Members. They also felt it important that the views of the Sub –

Committee itself be sought. Both the Sub – Committee and the Council have approved the proposals to come into effect in May 2007.

(ii) Council Meetings, Review of Future Role – the Panel also changed the rule for debate at Council meetings to enable back-bench members to question their Cabinet colleagues without notice. This has enabled them to ask question on topical issues and hold the Portfolio Holders to account on any pressing issue. The arrangements have now been in place for several months and have been welcomed by Members. The Panel also introduced State of the District and Single Issue debates. The first of which will be held on the new Local Government white paper which seeks to make key changes to local government. The forum will provide an ideal opportunity for Members to learn more about the paper and consider how we should respond to the challenges.

iii) May 2006 Elections – the Panel reviewed the May 2006 elections covering the electronic electoral pilot, turnout, polling stations, postal votes, spoilt ballot papers, police liaison, complaints, the count and budget issues.

iv) Review of Civil Ceremonial – The Panel set up a subgroup to undertake an in-depth review of the Civic Ceremonial function. The review revealed that the Chairman's Office had, over a number of years been supported by additional working hours by the Chairman's Secretary, without which many of the Council's high quality events would not have been delivered. The Panel had secured further support through the budget process to better reflect the staffing required for the events. The Panel have also reviewed the use of a civic car. Whilst many districts run a full time vehicle for the Chairman's use, we rely on a hire car when the function requires the use of a car. This budget had not kept pace with increasing costs and placed the Chairman at particular disadvantage and we have agreed with our Cabinet colleagues, a modest increase in this budget. The review also covered the safe custody of the Civic Regalia, Civic Hospitality and Retiring Gifts for long serving Councillors.

v) Reuse of Public Sector Information Regulations - the Panel reviewed the draft policy for the reuse of public sector information held by the Council and how it would respond to any requests which would be difficult without a policy which reflected the requirements of the regulations.

vi) Audit and Governance Committee – the Panel reviewed the need for and agreed to the setting up an independent Audit and Governance Committee. This independent Member group is to provide an effective challenge to the executive, conduct independent scrutiny reviews and effective leadership on governance.

3. CUSTOMER SERVICES AND ICT

“This is my first year as the Chairman of this Panel, which has proved to be an interesting and informative experience. One of the main tasks we undertook this year was to get the pilot for the Council to webcast some of its meetings, off the ground. This was started in the summer of 2006 and has proved to be a very successful in bringing our important meetings to a wider public audience.

I would like to thank my Vice Chairman (Councillor Mrs Rush) for all her help during the year and of course the Lead Officer for this Panel, Adrian Scott.”

Councillor Mrs Maggie McEwen
April 2007

The Customer Services and ICT Standing Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor Mrs M McEwen (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs K Rush (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Mrs D Borton, R Church, M Cohen, R D’Souza, Mrs C Pond, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs P Smith, Mrs L Wagland and J M Whitehouse.

The Lead officer was Adrian Scott, Head of Information and Communication Technology.

Terms of Reference

- (1) To consider the introduction of a Customer Services Transformation Programme* (CSTP) on behalf of the Customer Services, Media, Communications and ICT Portfolio Holder and to make any resulting recommendations to the Portfolio Holder or Cabinet as appropriate.
- (2) To consider the specific ICT role within the CSTP and agree which elements of this project should be monitored and reviewed by other O&S panels/committee.
- (3) To consider the business case and technical proposals for all major ICT systems on behalf of the Customer Services, Media, Communications and ICT Portfolio Holder prior to consideration by Cabinet.
- (4) To monitor and review progress on the implementation of all major ICT systems.
- (5) To report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Council and the Cabinet with recommendations on matters allocated to the Panel.

*The Portfolio Holder has agreed to temporarily suspend the CSTP in order for the Council to give resource priority to other projects in light of the Council’s current financial position.

The Panel scrutinised a number of important issues over the last year, which included the following positive outcomes:

Customer Services Transformation Programme – the Panel received a report from an outside consulting firm on the proposed phased implementation of the Customer Contact Centre. We made some very important comments on the possible structure of the plans which were subsequently considered and agreed as appropriate concerns by the Cabinet.

Should the CSTP be subsequently be re-introduced by the Cabinet we will continue our monitoring role again next year.

Webcasting Pilot – a webcasting pilot had been agreed as part of its 2005/06 e-government strategy. We were consulted early in our year on the webcasting pilot and helped set down a protocol for operation of the pilot. Later in the year we received an interim report on the pilot on the encouraging first few months of the pilot. We considered and agreed officer proposals for full evaluation in the summer of 2007 and proposals to extend the current contract until March 2008 using existing revenue funding.

Replacement of the Local Taxation and Benefits ICT System – The Panel considered a draft report to the Cabinet on the replacement of the Local Taxation and Benefits ICT System. Our monitoring role continues into the new year and we will report as necessary on this project and other major ICT systems into next year.

ICT Desktop Strategy 2007-2009 – At our February 2007 meeting we received proposals for the three year desktop strategy. The desktop strategy brings a formal approach to the procurement of both the IT equipment and software. The Strategy will contribute to the Council's cross cutting efficiency agenda by driving down IT costs whilst ensure that all staff have access to the appropriate and adequate level of IT to carry out their job function. We positively endorsed this strategy.

4. FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

Introduction by Chairman:

“This Panel’s task is to keep a watchful eye on the Council’s finances and its performance. As always, we have had a very busy year scrutinising the whole budget making process, the Essex Local Area Agreement, the draft Portfolio Budgets for 2007/08 and scrutinising the performance of our Local Land Charges section. We also set up a small sub-committee to handle some detailed work on ‘Value for Money’ that the main panel just did not have time to investigate.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my vice Chairman for the help he provided during the year and, of course, the lead officers for their invaluable help and advice.”

Councillor Jon Whitehouse
April 2007

The Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel consisted of the following Members:

Councillor J M Whitehouse (Chairman)
Councillor J Hart (Vice Chairman)
Councillors Mrs R Gadsby, R Church, M Colling, Mrs A Cooper, R D’Souza, P House, D Jacobs and R Morgan.

The Lead Officers were Tony Tidey, Head of Human Resources and Performance Management and Bob Palmer, Head of Finance.

Terms of Reference

- To review Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) and Local Performance Indicator (LPI) and to make recommendations for corrective action in relation to poorly performing BVPIs and LPIs;
- To consider and make recommendations as appropriate on the Council’s annual Best Value Performance Plan;
- To undertake a full review of the existing Council Plan and to make recommendations to the Cabinet;

- To develop arrangements to directly engage the community in commenting on and shaping the future direction of services to make them more responsive to local needs, including the development of proposals for effective consultation through an annual community conference and to annually review the consultation exercises undertaken by the council over the previous year;
- To consider the draft budgets for each portfolio and to consider financial monitoring reports on key areas of income and expenditure for each portfolio.

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

- i) The Key Performance Indicators for 2005/06 and 2006/07 of the 100 or so performance indicators, the Cabinet chose 40 of these as Key Performance indicators as crucial targets and aimed to have at least 40% of these indicators in the top quartile. The Panel noted that the indicators for 2005/06 were comfortably above their targets, the final figures for 2007/08 would not be known until early next year;
- ii) Examining the Gershon Backward Looking Statement for 2004/05 for EFDC to be submitted to the Department for Communities and Local Government;
- iii) Reviewing the levels of income generated from Local Land Charges search fees, and how Section are dealing with the recent shortfall in income due to the number of personal searches now taking place. They welcomed the news that the turn around time for searches had dropped from fourteen working days to six and that the County Council had also provided extra resources to help in the searches;
- iv) Looking at the financial implications behind the number of staff vacancies and also looking at the Evaluation of Recruitment and Retention Strategy for EFDC. Currently the Council was in a better position than it has been in for a while, it was successful in the area in attracting trainees and having them continue in post once they have been trained;
- v) Examining the Data Quality Audit and the Value for Money Strategy undertaking an assessment of the overall management arrangements of all local authorities to secure data quality and value for money strategy. This assessment had provided an opportunity to set out an overall corporate approach to ensuring data quality, through the development of a Data Quality Strategy;
- vi) Receiving the Quarterly Financial Monitoring schedules for the year;
- vii) Scrutinising the Comprehensive Performance Assessment Improvement Plan, prior to Cabinet consideration;
- viii) Consideration of the Essex Local Area Agreement and considered the proposed actions and targets within priority areas of the agreement to be adopted by the Council;
- ix) Assisted the executive on the proposed review of the Council's Consultation Plan for 2006/07 and were unhappy with the limited consultation proposed;
- x) Examining the Value for Money Analysis for 2005/06. In order that this massive piece of work be studied in detail a sub-group was set up, consisting of 3 members, to look into this. This is an ongoing task and the Panel is awaiting the report of the sub-group with great interest; and
- xi) Considering the draft Portfolio Budgets for 2007/08 and the revised four year forecast including the proposed level of Council tax increase for 2007/08 and receiving the Fees and Charges proposed for the forthcoming financial year (2007/08), the Panel recommended the general increase of 3.5% to the Finance Cabinet Committee.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL AND PLANNING SERVICES STANDING PANEL

Introduction by Chairman:

“We meet on six occasions throughout the year and shaped policy on some of the most significant issues facing the local community. We formulated comments on the Draft East of England Plan, waste management, traffic issues in rural areas, the use of Community Wardens and consulted with local councils, residents and experts from external agencies during the process.

I would like to thank my Vice Chairman (Councillor Doug Kelly) for all his help during the year and of course the Lead Officers for this Panel John Gilbert, Head of Environmental Services and John Preston, Head of Planning Services and Economic Development.”

Councillor Mrs Penny Smith
April 2007

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

Councillor Mrs P Smith (Chairman)
Councillor D Kelly (Vice Chairman)
Councillors D Batemen, Mrs D Borton, Mrs A Cooper, D Jacobs, A Lee, G Mohindra, Mrs P Richardson, Mrs L Wagland and J Wyatt.

The Lead officers were John Gilbert, Head of Environmental Services and John Preston, Head of Planning Services and Economic Development

Terms of Reference

1. To keep under review the activity and decisions of the West Essex Joint Waste Committee.
2. To consider what changes are practical and desirable to Council policies concerning the reuse of redundant and other buildings in the Metropolitan Green Belt.
3. To consider the arrangements by which the new Local Development Scheme is being brought into operation.
4. To consider matters which arise through the process that the Government is driving to bring in an East Of England Plan.
5. In the context of the DERA ‘Cleaner Neighbourhoods Consultation document’ to consider the viability of employing uniformed wardens, the formulation of a response to the document and the financial consequences of these matters.
6. In relation to Traveller issues to consider and monitor:
 - (a) the measures previously agreed by the Council to secure the clearance of the top level of the sites at Paynes Lane and the actions agreed for Birchfield;

- (b) the position regarding tolerated sites and;
- (c) the management of travellers who enter onto land within the district with a view to unauthorised encampments;
- (d) Government's guidance on the needs of travellers in the context of the Council's review of its District Local Plan and the Essex Housing Needs Assessment;
- (e) the results of the Commission for Racial Equality's study on traveller issues once published;
- (f) That the draft list of current and past sites within the District produced by Planning Services be completed and updated and made available to the Environmental and Panel Services Standing Panel.

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

i) Traffic Issues in Rural Areas - The Panel received a presentation from Keith Lawson of the Essex County Council who helped scope its review of traffic issues in the rural areas partly caused by action to diversify farms. They took on board local concerns about commercial vehicle activity in Roydon and Nazeing and organised a focus day for local Members to identify some simple, practical cost effective solutions to the concerns. They will make recommendations on this in the new year. The issues have been reported to the Area Highways Manager and the Area Highways Panel which has raised awareness of the review to secure support.

ii) Clean Neighbourhoods and Street Wardens - The Panel continued to consider the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 which enables Local Authorities to issue Fixed Penalty Notices to deal with litter, fly tipping graffiti and other types environmental crime. The Panel heard from Essex Police and the local Street Warden Resource Centre to examine the possibility of using Street Wardens, our own staff or Police Community Support Officers to implement the new powers.

Some of the Panel visited Colchester and Braintree to observe the work of their street wardens. They appreciated the role that they performed but felt that our own local issues might require a different approach. They balanced this against the high costs of the posts and decided not to recommend their use in the District. They intend to identify more cost effective and practical measures to clean up our streets at their next meeting in April 2007 and report their recommendations in the new-year.

iii) East of England Plan - The Panel helped shape the EFDC response to the Draft East of England Plan. They expressed concern about the location and number of new houses identified for our District and strengthened the case for development at alternative locations. This has since been incorporated into the latest draft of the plan.

The Panel also pressed for sufficient infrastructure and funding for the proposals and are waiting to see whether this case has also influenced government thinking!

iv) West Essex Waste Contract - The Panel continued to monitor the procurement of the West Essex Waste collection and disposal contract. The Panel will continue to stress

the need for arrangements which support our new recycling service and help us achieve our target. They will seek to ensure their comments are fed into the process.

v) They considered a report on Planning and Economic Development enforcement statistics. Members had originally expressed concerns about the Council's ability to monitor planning infringements and wished a breakdown of enforcement statistics.

vi) Planning Enforcement - Monitoring of Activity- The Panel arranged for regular reports to be included in the Members Bulletin on current planning enforcement activity. As a result Members are now able to keep a watchful eye over such investigations and flag up any issues of concern for investigation and action.

TASK AND FINISH PANELS

1. LEISURE TASK AND FINISH PANEL

This panel was set up to consider the four topics for Review as identified by Overview and Scrutiny Committee i.e.

- i) Future management of Waltham Abbey Sports Centre*
- ii) Review of the future Management of the Roding Valley Meadows Local Nature Reserve*
- iii) Review of Arts Development in the District and*
- iv) The District Council's role and involvement in Outdoor and Community Events.*

Under the Chairmanship of Councillor Mrs Harding, they gathered evidence and information in relation to the four topics through the receipt of data, presentations and by participation in fact finding visits.

They consulted with Partners, Agencies, Stakeholders and Users of the services under review. They established key issues and future needs and evaluated all relevant facts in relation to the topics under review in an objective way and to produce recommendations for future action accordingly for two of the four topics this year. To establish whether there are any resource implications arising out of the topics under review and advise Cabinet for inclusion in the Budget Process 2007/08.

The Leisure Task & Finish Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor Mrs H Harding (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs P Brooks (Vice Chairman)
Councillors M Colling, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs J Lea, J Markham, S Murray, Mrs P K Rush, Mrs P Smith, P Turpin and J M Whitehouse.

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

Site Visits Undertaken by the Panel

The Panel made various site visits during the year to gain first hand experience and a feel for the items they were scrutinising. The Panel visited the Waltham Abbey Sports Centre and Swimming Pool, the Roding Valley Meadows Local Nature Reserve, the 'Donny South' Event at North Weald Airfield, the Copped Hall Charity Fun Run, and the Ongar Arts and Education Centre at Great Stoney.

Presentations Received/ Consultation undertaken

1) The Panel received a presentation on the current State of the Arts and Art Development in EFDC by the Arts Officer, the Dance Development Artist and two community artists who presented an informative and unusual audiovisual presentation.

- 2) The Panel also questioned the Arts/Activities Co-ordinator at Sherrell House (a care home in Chigwell), the head of the Ongar Music School and the manager of the IC Youth Dance Group at Ivy Chimneys School;
- 3) The panel received an informative presentation on his organisation at the Great Stoney Ongar Arts and Education Centre by the Director of Theatre Resources;
- 4) They received a presentation on the Council's role and involvement in Outdoor and Community events from the Council's Marketing and Events Manager.
- 5) The Head Teacher of King Harold School, the School Bursar and the Chairman of School Governors for the School were invited to discuss the future management options for the Waltham Abbey Sports Centre.
- 6) The Panel also spoke to a local user of the Roding Valley Meadows Nature Reserve; representatives from the Roding Valley Liaison Group; the Chairman and some members of the Local Nature Reserve Management Committee; some representatives from the Essex Wildlife Trust; the Warden of the Roding Valley Nature Reserve and the Botanical Recorder for Essex. The Panel also talked to EFDC's Countrycare Manager.
- 7) The Lead Officer also met separately with the head of the Grange Farm Trust to discuss the future management of the Roding Valley Meadows Local Nature Reserve. They currently part own and part finance the reserve.

Outcome

The Panel has issued an interim report on the Management of the Roding Valley Nature Reserve where they recommended that the Essex Wildlife Trust continue to manage the reserve and they be given a contract for a twenty year period (in order to attract external funding). This would not entail any additional expenditure on the Council's side and would ensure the continuation of the reserve's management.

Because of the wide scope of the work this Panel, they have found it impossible to bring all the items on their remit to a conclusion in the time scale allotted to them. As a result they have asked the parent Overview and Scrutiny Committee to extend their timeframe into the new municipal year.

2. CRIME AND DISORDER TASK AND FINISH PANEL

The Panel sought to consult the Police on pinpointing the areas causing concerns, the PCT to establish the link between mental health and crime, a fact finding meeting with the Probation Service, the Fire Brigade, Transport for London and the EFDC Anti Social Behaviour Officer.

Councillor M Cohen (Chairman)

Councillor M Woollard (Vice Chairman)

Councillors D Bateman, P Gode, Mrs A Grigg, Mrs A Haigh, D Jacobs, R Law, R Morgan, Mrs C Pond, P Spencer, D Stallan and J Wyatt.

The Lead Officer was John Scott, Joint Chief Executive, Community Services.

Presentations Received/ Consultation undertaken

The Panel received presentations from and consulted with:

- 1) The Divisional Commander for the Police (Western Division) on EFDC's ability to scrutinise the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership.
- 2) The Director of Public Health, the Lead Commissioner for Mental Health from the West Essex Primary Care Trust and the Associate Director from the North Essex Mental Health Partnership Trust to explore the help and provision given to mental health patients to prevent them engaging in criminal activity.
- 3) The Fire and Rescue Services who have a part in working with young people to turn them away from crime.

Outcome

The Panel on considering the evidence taken over the since last July deliberated and issued a final report in April.

A FINAL REPORT IS TO BE ISSUED IN APRIL 2007.

3. LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP (LSP)

The Panel was set up to consider the following:

To consider the set up and operation of the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership and formulate recommendations on its future in light of the government consultation paper 'Local Strategic Partnerships: Shaping their Future' and the Local Government White Paper expected in November 2006.

The Task and Finish Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor Mrs M Sartin (Chairman)

Councillor Mrs P Smith (Vice Chairman)

Councillors Mrs S Clapp, Mrs A Cooper, J Demetriou, Mrs J Lea, A Lee, Mrs J H Whitehouse and J M Whitehouse.

The Lead Officer was John Scott, Joint Chief Executive, Community Services.

The Panel expressed a wish to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the District's LSP and measures to secure greater community involvement and publicity for its work.

The Government consultation paper sought to pass responsibility for the LSP to the Council's Cabinet and create a greater role for members and scrutiny in their work to increase democratic accountability.

Presentations Received/ Consultation undertaken

In investigating these issues, the Panel heard from the Principal of the Epping Forest College in his capacity as the Chairman of the local LSP and the Life Long Learning Action Group. They interviewed some of the Action Group chairs, appreciating that their groups had added real value to important projects through partnership working.

They considered the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and received a presentation on the six – monthly 'refresh' from the Head of Community Planning and Regeneration for Essex County Council. They considered the performance management framework, funding and Member involvement in the agreement. They reviewed the Councils achievements against the five local LAA priorities and feed back comments to secure them.

In December 2006, a sub – group of the Panel met to draw some conclusions and formulate recommendations for their final report. They agreed proposals to encourage greater member involvement, a stronger role for scrutiny, and increased funding for the partnership. The report also proposed that the Chairman of the Partnership should continue to be appointed by the whole Partnership on personal merit. Their full reports was considered by the OSC in March 2007.

The Panel spoke to officers from Parking Associates Ltd and also the EFDC Parking Manager who advised on the current state of the car parks and what options were open to them in the future.

Outcome

In December 2006, a sub – group of the Panel met to draw some conclusions and formulate the content and recommendations for their final report. They agreed in principle proposals to encourage greater member involvement, a stronger role for scrutiny, and increased funding for the partnership. The report also expressed views on the part the Council should play in the process.

4. SERVICES FOR OLDER AND DISABLED PERSONS

The Panel was set up to consider the following:

- 1. To consider the services offered by EFDC to older people and disabled people (of all ages).*
- 2. To consider the services offered by the voluntary sector to older people and disabled people in the district.*

The Task and Finish Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor Mrs S Perry (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse (Vice Chairman)
Councillors D Bateman, Mrs A Cooper, Mrs A Grigg, P House, D Kelly P Turpin and K Wright.

The Panel co-opted Kay Ellis as a member. Kay is a member of the Joint Management Team for Older People.

The Lead Officer was John Scott, Joint Chief Executive, Community Services.

Presentations Received/ Consultation undertaken

The Panel received presentations from and consulted with:

- 1) Members of the Joint Management Team for Older People, this team consisted of members from different organisations such as Adult Social Care, the District Council (Housing), Voluntary Action Epping Forest, the then Epping Forest Primary Care Trust, a Champion/User Consultant Geriatrician and the Mental Health Trust.
- 2) The Panel also received reports on services provided by the District Council covering such diverse aspects as Social Clubs for Older People, reviewing the Council's

Handy Person Scheme, the Council's response to Disability Equality Duty and Concessionary Travel.

The Panel also undertook some visits either on their own or in small groups:

- i) some members visited a Sheltered Housing Forum and took the opportunity to ask questions and discuss matters of concern.
- ii) Some members attended the Parsonage Court Day Club to find out first hand their problems and the views of those who attended the club.
- iii) They attended a meeting of the Older Peoples Advisory Group, which covered a wide range of topics affecting older people in the District.
- iv) The Chairman of the Panel visited Robert Daniels Court to view their facilities and speak to the residents.
- v) A number of sheltered Schemes were also visited and the residents concerns noted.

Outcome

The Panel made a final report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee summarising their findings, commenting on the provisions provided and making several recommendations to the Council on how they could assist the older persons and disabled in the district.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is awaiting with interest the Council's formal response to the disability and equality duty.

For more information see the Final report produced by the Task and Finish Panel.

5. TOWN CENTRE AND CAR PARKS TASK AND FINISH PANEL

The Panel was set up to consider the following:

Town Centres:

- (i) the type of town centres that should be encourage in Epping Forest*
- (ii) the key factors affecting the vitality of each of our town centres*
- (iii) the steps required to assist and encourage the economies and growth of our town centres*

Car Parking:

- (iv) The development of the new car parking enforcement contract;*
- (v) Free parking on Saturdays;*
- (vi) The development and future use of car parks*

Anti-social behaviour in car parks;

- (vii) the extent of anti-social behaviour in car parks and the action taken to date;*
- (viii) the various technical solutions available should closure of car parks be a necessary solution.*

The Task and Finish Panel consisted of the following members:

Councillor M Colling (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs R Gadsby (Vice Chairman)
Councillors K Angold-Stephens, Mrs P Brooks, J Demetriou, P Gode, P Macmillan, Mrs P Richardson, D Stallan, M Woollard and K Wright

The Lead Officer was John Gilbert, Head of Environmental Services.

Presentations Received/ Consultation undertaken

- 1) Free Saturday Car Parking

The Panel looked at proposals to provide Free Saturday Car Parking in the Council's long stay and combined car parks, which is a key committee of our Cabinet colleagues. They supported the recommendations in principle but requested that the regime be kept under operational review. The Cabinet accepted this advise. The OSC subsequently called in the decision to make sure the financial arrangements were sound (as highlighted in the section on the Committee) and, as a result, have asked the Portfolio Holder to formulate suitable arrangements to enable them to effectively review the regime. He is due to report his proposals to this March OSC.

2) EFDC Parking Contract

The Panel held two meetings to explore proposals for the renewal of the Council's car parking contract. They heard from consultants and considered a report of their findings based on their knowledge of best value and practice. The Panel formulated recommendations to balance the need for both a cost effective and high quality new service. Their proposals have since been endorsed by Cabinet.

(c) Development Potential of Council car parks

As requested by the Cabinet in April 2006, the Panel investigated the development potential of a number of Council owned car parks. They heard from the Council's consultants Bidwells and asked them to investigate further proposals for the development of two of the sites and stressed the need for this to provide an element of public parking to support the growth of our local economy.

The Panel still has to look at measures available and the latest guidance on dealing with the problem of anti-social behaviour in car parks. But will continue with this important piece of work in the new-year.

Outcome

The Panel endorsed the idea of free Saturday car parking for certain council run car parks in the district, and this has now been acted upon. They also got an assurance that this will be reviewed in twelve months time.

Having made the above recommendation to cabinet the Panel has asked the parent Overview and Scrutiny Committee to extend their timeframe into the new municipal year as they consider town centres and anti-social behaviour in car parks.

6. TRAVELLER ISSUES (continued from last year)

The Task and Finish Panel consisted of the following members:

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

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

Summary

This Panel continued from last year into June of 2006. It was set up in May 2005 to look at arrangements for dealing with unauthorised development on traveller's sites in the District and arrangements for tolerated sites and policy issues.

The Panel undertook a tour of the District viewing existing and ex traveller sites, tolerated sites and occasional stopping sites to gather first hand evidence. The Panel engaged in a discussion with residents to obtain their views and attended a seminar on Travellers to consider the latest guidance. The Panel had produced an initial report in September 2005 recommending steps to secure and clear the Paynes Lane site at Nazeing.

The Panel looked at three tolerated sites in the District and reviewed whether the approach for such sites should be changed and also wider policy issues regarding traveller needs.

Outcome

The Panel agreed that these issues required detailed consideration in the light of recent government guidance and a longer-term commitment by members to address this issue. As a result it had concluded that the matter be referred to the Environmental and Planning Services Standing Panel who were able to give the longer term issues their consideration.

CONCLUSION

This is the second year of the new scrutiny system at Epping Forest District Council, and a year where scrutiny has been asked to look at all sorts of various and diverse subjects, ranging from Housing to Car Parking; from Leisure and Nature Reserves to Finance and Budgets; taking in the Constitution and Environmental and Planning items, Crime and Disorder, Older Persons, Disable Persons, Town Centres and the Local Strategic Partnership, Epping Forest College, the Essex Police Merger with Bedford and Hertfordshire and the draft Council Plan for 2006-10, along the way. And of course, there was the important matter of scrutinising the Cabinet's work.

This not only kept our members very busy during the year but also gave them a deeper insight into the everyday workings of the council and a sense of ownership of the Council's decisions. The resource of Overview and Scrutiny for this council is proving itself to be very valuable in enabling decisions, strategies and policies to be examined in detail before they are implemented, saving time and effort by having to call-in decisions once they are taken. This enables a more informal and I think a more effective form of scrutiny to take place prior to the decisions being taken.

There were two call-ins this year, neither was supported by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the original decisions stood. It was pleasing to see that these were made on points of principle rather than political point scoring.

The Standing Panels have once again proved their worth by concentrating on one service or a particular aspect of the council in depth and keeping a continuing eye on cyclical and annual issues.

The Task and Finish Panels had a mixed success this year, two of the five panels could not complete their allotted tasks within the time frame set at the beginning of the year and will continue into the new year. However, that does mean that three Task and Finish Panels have successfully fulfilled their terms of reference and have submitted final reports to the parent Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Perhaps this shows the limits of the amount of work our O&S system can cope with and perhaps a more modest work programme should be sought in the New Year.

It was pleasing to note that the Overview and Scrutiny panels were not just contained within the Council Offices, they have been more community focused and have gone out to meet and talk to the public.

There have been a good number of positive outcomes that are demonstrated in this report that prove the undeniable success of scrutiny for the Epping Forest District.

If you have any comments or feedback on the contents of this report (whether you are a member of the public, a councillor or an officer of the council) please let Adrian Hendry, in Research and Democratic Services know, by emailing him on: ahendry@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

John Scott
Joint Chief Executive (Community Services)