

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE
ANNUAL REPORT
2014 - 2015

Foreword from the Chairman

This has been a positive year for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee building on the changes and achievements of previous years. The Committee wishes to make further changes next year to make sure scrutiny responds to the changing needs of members and the public.

The Committee:

- is entitled to review and scrutinise the decisions and functions of the Council and the Cabinet;
- holds the Executive to account;
- is the Crime and Disorder Committee for North Hertfordshire;
- can make reports or recommendations on matters affecting the authority's area and inhabitants;
- had six regular meetings this year along with a special meeting on Hitchin Town Hall;
- has seen 18 members of the public attend this year;

As well as its Committee meetings, the Committee establishes task and finish groups each year to look at topics in more depth. The Committee continued with its approach of holding short, focussed task and finish groups by holding them over two evenings. Pressure on members' time has made it difficult to complete the task and finish group programme this year and the Committee intends to address this issue next year.

- One review from the last civic year was completed and three more reviews were commissioned in 2014/15;
- This year's topics were:
 - parking in North Hertfordshire;
 - the options for the commercialisation of services in North Hertfordshire;
 - the quality of the Council's reports to committees.
- Two reviews have been completed, while the other two should be completed by early summer.
- Once a review is complete, a report is prepared which is considered by the Committee and is then sent to Cabinet for its consideration and response.
- 10 different members have taken part in its task and finish groups this year.

I would like to thank the Cabinet for their continued co-operation and support, along with the Council's officers who have assisted and supported our work this year. I would also like to thank my vice-chairman Cathryn Henry, along with the members of the Committee and those members who have sat on the task & finish groups this year.

Councillor Ray Shakespeare-Smith
Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1. Overview and Scrutiny in North Hertfordshire District Council

1.1 The depth and breadth of the Council's work means that the Scrutiny Committee has to use its resources efficiently in order to scrutinise as many topics as possible in the time available. It does so by:

- considering a number of issues during its committee meetings and making recommendations to Cabinet;
- appointing dedicated task and finish groups which can examine issues in depth and make recommendations to improve services.

2. Meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

2.1 The Committee held six scheduled meetings last year. It considered a range of topics including scrutinising key decisions going to Cabinet, checking whether the Council has met its performance indicators as well as reviewing other issues which the Committee has decided would benefit from closer scrutiny.

2.2 The Committee scrutinises issues in a number of ways:

- by considering reports from, and questioning officers about different aspects of the Council's business;
- by submitting written questions which require a written answer, and which members can follow up by asking supplementary questions in Committee;
- by interviewing and questioning Cabinet members about their portfolios;
- by calling in decisions which are of great concern to members or to the public;
- by inviting representatives from outside bodies to talk about topics of interest to the public in North Hertfordshire.

2.3 The call in process allows the Committee, or five members of the Council, to call in a decision of Cabinet or Council which has been made but not implemented; and allows the Committee to ask Cabinet or Council to reconsider it. No items were called in this year.

2.4 The Committee did hold a special meeting on 18 December to consider the Development Agreement between the Council and Hitchin Town Hall Ltd. As well as the members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, five members of Cabinet attended – Cllrs Needham, Burt, Cunningham, Hunter and Levett – along with seven other councillors and seven members of the public.

2.5 The Committee has taken a close interest in safeguarding matters this year. As well as receiving an annual update on the Council's safeguarding performance, the Committee reviewed the Council's policy on Disclosure and Barring Service (formerly CRB) checks, and held a dedicated briefing session to look at the role of district councillors in safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

2.6 In total, the Committee has considered 43 items in its meetings this year. It has made 19 recommendations on 5 topics to Cabinet. 17 of the Committee's recommendations were supported and 2 were referred to Area Committees for consideration as part of the consultation on the Grants Policy Review. A full list of the topics considered by the Committee can be found in Annex A to this report.

2.7 No written questions were asked by members during the year.

2.8 As well as attending the special meeting on Hitchin Town hall, the Leader of the Council, Cllr Lynda Needham, attended the Committee on 17 March 2015 to review the civic year 2014/15, and to outline the Council's plans for 2015/16.

2.9 Four Portfolio Holders attended the Committee's regular meetings this year to present areas of their work, highlight progress and challenges in their areas and hear the Committee's discussions on topics within their portfolios. As in previous years, the Committee values their support and contribution. The portfolio holders who attended the Committee's regular meetings were:

- Cllr Tony Hunter, Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement & Rural Affairs;
- Cllr David Levett, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Enterprise;
- Cllr Julian Cunningham, Portfolio Holder for Policy, Transport and Green Issues;
- Cllr Bernard Lovewell, Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health, who attended the Committee three times this year.

2.10 The Committee was also grateful to Chief Inspector Julie Wheatley and Sergeant Simon Turner of Hertfordshire Constabulary who attended the Committee to explain the work of the police and answer questions. The Committee had a very useful meeting and was pleased to hear the Chief Inspector say that community engagement will be one of her top priorities.

3. Task and Finish Groups in 2014/15

3.1 Task and finish groups are an opportunity for members to scrutinise a topic in much more depth than is possible in a single Committee meeting. Each group usually consists of five members, and can appoint external members who have particular areas of expertise which can assist the group's inquiries. Pressure on members' time has made it difficult to complete the task and finish group programme this year and the Committee intends to address this issue next year.

3.2 The task and finish groups take written and oral evidence, quiz witnesses, conduct surveys and consider a good deal of other evidence through literature review. A report is produced at the end which makes a number of recommendations for improvements. This is considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee before being sent to Cabinet. One task and finish group took place at the end of the last civic year and its report and progress to Cabinet was completed in 2014/15. Three further task and finish groups were commissioned in 2014/15. These are summarised below.

3.3 Scrutiny of Employment Partnerships in North Hertfordshire

3.3.1 The review took place on two evenings on 3 April and 7 May 2014 and made the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: the Council should seek opportunities to give unemployed people work experience, apprenticeships and traineeships within the Council and within community organisations.

Recommendation 2: When assessing planning applications for larger projects, when letting contracts to supply Council services, and when allocating grant funding the Council should consider setting developers, contractors and grant recipients a minimum level of local employment as a condition of approval.

Recommendation 3: The Council should develop a programme which offers interviews with both members and officers to unemployed people to improve their interview techniques and their chances of getting a job.

Recommendation 4: The Council should consider all of its options for employing an economic development officer, including outsourcing the role to North Herts College or other partners; and members should have an input into economic development matters through a members' working group.

Recommendation 5: The Council should consider instituting community awards to celebrate employment successes for North Herts such as apprentice of the year.

Recommendation 6: The Council should enhance its understanding of economic trends and activity in the district and share this information with members and partners.

Recommendation 7: The Council should be aware of and promote the employment opportunities the expansion of Luton airport will bring for North Herts.

Recommendation 8: The Council should consider establishing a North Herts Economic Forum; and aim to have a greater officer and member presence at existing economic fora.

Recommendation 9: The Council should encourage the Hertfordshire LEP to emulate the success of the Cambridgeshire LEP in working with the voluntary sector.

Recommendation 10: The Council should act as a broker and facilitator between the private sector and voluntary and other community organisations.

Recommendation 11: The Council should consider creating an Enterprise Grant Scheme of the type run by Bassetlaw District Council, which provides grants for capital expenditure of up to £1,500, or £2,500 for businesses seeking to locate, re-locate or expand within North Hertfordshire.

Recommendation 12: These recommendations should be implemented within 12 months of the reports consideration by Cabinet.

3.3.2 Cabinet considered the report on 23 September 2014. Cabinet:

- accepted Recommendations 1, 6 and 12;
- accepted Recommendation 2 with the proviso that further work be carried out on this recommendation;
- rejected Recommendations 3, 5, 7 and 11; and
- noted that Recommendations 4, 8, 9 and 10 are to be encompassed in the emerging NHDC Economic Development Strategy.

3.4 Review of Parking in North Hertfordshire

3.4.1 The review took place on two evenings on 4 November and 9 December 2014 and made the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: The Council should review its policies to ensure adequate provision of parking for town centre residents.

Recommendation 2. The Council should consider outsourcing the management and maintenance of its car parks, or sharing the costs with another authority, provided there is a good business case for doing so.

Recommendation 3. The Council should consider acquiring land in order to provide new car parks when there is a need and a good business case for doing so.

Recommendation 4: The Council should keep the problem of verge parking under review.

Recommendation 5. The Council's Parking Strategy should contain a section on parking for rail commuters.

Recommendation 6. The Council should review the opening hours of its car parks.

Recommendation 7. In order to do so, the Council should gather sufficient data about the usage of car parks, particularly at times when there is no charging, so it can make an informed decision about opening hours.

Recommendation 8. The Council should talk to its local MPs to see if they can facilitate a dialogue with Network Rail and the train operating companies about provision of more parking around stations in North Herts.

Recommendation 9. The Council should review its policy on season tickets, including ways of boosting their sales. This could include better publicity; making sure the process of buying them is as straightforward as possible; using alternative outlets such as shops; and allowing season tickets to be transferable in some circumstances.

3.4.2 Cabinet considered the report on 24 March 2015. Cabinet supported the report and resolved that the report should be progressed at appropriate times in the future taking into account the comments of the Council's Senior Management Team.

3.5 Review of the Commercialisation of Council Services

3.5.1 This review began on 25 February and its remit was to examine the feasibility and desirability of commercialising some of the Council's services and/or undertaking new commercial services. It will meet again at the end of May and a report will be prepared which will be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet in the summer.

3.6 Review of Council Reports

3.6.1 The review will take place after the elections. Its remit is to improve the quality of the Council's reports by making them shorter, clearer, jargon-free and more focussed on key areas.

4. Scrutiny in 2015/16

4.1 The Committee discussed a number of proposed changes to key areas at its meeting in March. The proposals below will affect the conduct of both meetings and task and finish groups. The Committee will monitor these changes throughout the year and make further changes where necessary. It is anticipated that these changes can be progressed by changing the Committee's working arrangements and will not require any Constitutional changes.

Task and Finish Groups

4.2 The Committee would like members to have a much better understanding of issues before the task and finish group takes place. This will mean earlier briefing of, and discussion of issues with members, and placing more emphasis on outside evidence. The task and finish group will undertake more independent research carried out by both the Scrutiny Officer and the members themselves.

4.3 The Committee intends to address the difficulty that many members have in attending task and finish groups by doing more of the work informally so that briefings and discussions can take place away from meetings allowing the task and finish group to reflect on issues and carry out further research before reaching conclusions and making recommendations.

Committee Meetings

4.4 The Committee also wishes to make some changes to its approach to Committee meetings. This year, even more than in previous years, the Committee has found it difficult to set its agenda due to slippage of items on the Forward Plan. Furthermore it is hard for the Committee to scrutinise a topic in depth and make useful suggestions if it has too many items on its agenda and it considers them late in the process only a week before a Cabinet decision is due.

4.5 Therefore the Committee plans to consider fewer items on its agendas but to look at topics in more detail. It also intends to look at topics earlier in their journey to Cabinet so that the Committee can make a more useful contribution to the policy development process.

4.6 The Committee will also fulfil its basic function of holding the Executive to account by inviting Portfolio Holders to attend the Committee to speak to topics in the first instance rather than officers, although officers will obviously attend too to give Portfolio Holders support.

5. Public Participation

5.1 The scrutiny process is open to involvement by local people and the Committee encourages public participation. The Committee made public participation and community engagement a priority this year. It used *Twitter* and the Scrutiny webpage to publicise its meetings.

5.2 18 members of the public attended the Committee's meetings this year. Some of the ways for the public to get involved include suggesting a topic for investigation as a task and finish group; providing evidence to or at a meeting; and being co-opted on to a topic group. The Committee is keen to see more public participation both in its task and finish groups and in its committee meetings.

5.3 For further details about the work of scrutiny, please contact the Scrutiny Officer using any of the methods below:

- Write to: Scrutiny Officer, NHDC, Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City, SG6 3JF
- Tel: 01462 474612
- Email: brendan.sullivan@north-herts.gov.uk

MEMBERSHIP OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2014 – 2015

Cllr Ray Shakespeare-Smith (Chairman)
Cllr Cathryn Henry (Vice-chair)
Cllr Bill Davidson
Cllr Jean Green
Cllr John Harris
Cllr Steve Hemingway
Cllr Sal Jarvis
Cllr David Kearns
Cllr David Leal-Bennett
Cllr Ben Lewis
Cllr Sandra Lunn
Cllr Gerald Morris
Cllr Michael Muir
Cllr Frank Radcliffe
Cllr Mike Rice
Cllr Deborah Segalini

Cllr Alan Bardett (substitute)
Cllr John Bishop (substitute)
Cllr John Booth (substitute)
Cllr Steve Jarvis (substitute)
Cllr Ian Mantle (substitute)
Cllr Alan Millard (substitute)
Cllr Adrian Smith (substitute)
Cllr Michael Weeks (substitute)

DETAILED LIST OF TOPICS CONSIDERED BY THE COMMITTEE IN 2014/15

17 June 2014	<p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) Update</p> <p>Performance Indicator Monitoring Report – April 2013 to March 2014</p> <p>Year End Monitoring Report on Projects in the Priorities for the District 2013/14</p> <p>Corporate Business Planning Timetable 2015/16</p> <p>Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3cs) Full Year Update - 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014</p> <p>Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>
29 July 2014	<p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Annual Safeguarding Performance Update for April 13 – March 14</p> <p>Grants Policy Review</p> <p>Task and Finish Group Report on Employment Partnerships in North Herts</p> <p>Health Scrutiny</p> <p>Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p> <p>Safeguarding Children And Vulnerable Adults – The Role of the District Councillor*</p>
16 Sept 2014	<p>Presentation by the Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement and Rural Affairs</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Asset Disposal Strategy and Community Asset Transfer Policy/Framework</p> <p>RIPA Update and Annual Review</p> <p>Performance Indicator Monitoring Report – First Quarter 2014</p> <p>DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) Checks for NHDC Councillors – Policy Position</p> <p>Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>
09 Dec 2014	<p>RIPA - Quarterly Update</p> <p>The Community Trigger – Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Performance Indicator Monitoring Report - Second Quarter 2014</p> <p>Mid Year Monitoring Report on Projects in the Priorities for the District 2014/15</p> <p>Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p> <p>Update on Negotiations for New Leases for Three Community Centres</p>
18 Dec 2014	<p>Development Agreement: North Hertfordshire District Council & Hitchin Town Hall Ltd</p>

20 Jan 2015	<p>Information Note: Task and Finish Group on the NHDC Website – Update</p> <p>Information Note: Task and Finish Group on Citrix – Update</p> <p>Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3cs) Half Year Update – 01 April 2014 To 30 September 2014</p> <p>Implementation of the New Common Housing Allocation Scheme – Update</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>
17 Mar 2015	<p>Presentation by the Leader of the Council</p> <p>RIPA Update and Annual Review</p> <p>Key Projects for 2015/16</p> <p>Performance Indicator Monitoring Report - Third Quarter 2014 - 2015</p> <p>Task and Finish Group Report on Parking</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>

*Committee briefing item separate from regular agenda