

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



---

**OVERVIEW AND  
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
ANNUAL REPORT  
2015 - 2016**

---

## Foreword from the Chair

This has been a progressive year for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. We have built on the positive changes introduced by my predecessor Cllr Ray Shakespeare-Smith by developing our approach to ensure we are able to meet the needs of members, the public, the Executive and the organisation as a whole.

### Key Activities

We have:

- asked each Executive Member to attend on a rolling basis to speak to the achievements, risks, challenges and opportunities of their portfolios;
- revised and updated our protocol for task and finish groups to make the process more flexible and member led;
- put more emphasis on the overview aspect of the Committee's work during the meetings and task and finish groups;
- held six scheduled meetings and a 'called-in' meeting to scrutinise the proposed development of North Herts Leisure Centre.

### Task & Finish Groups

As well as our meetings, the committee organises task and finish groups each year to look at services in more depth. Opportunities were taken during committee meetings, while the ideas were fresh, to suggest possible topics for more detailed scrutiny.

We continued with our approach of holding short, focussed task and finish groups by holding them over two or three evenings. We will continue to trial new and different ways of coordinating them to ensure we get the best input and outputs from our members

Two reviews have been completed and another should be completed by the summer. This year's topics were:

- Commercialisation of Council Services
- the Quality of the Council's Reports;
- the Council's approach to handling larger projects

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. Nine different members have taken part in task and finish groups this year.

Next year will continue to build on the progress made this year while continuing to find ways to develop its effectiveness further.

I would like to thank my predecessor Ray Shakespeare-Smith for his example, my vice-chair Steve Hemingway for his support and the Committee's members and those members who have sat on task and finish groups.

I would like to thank the Cabinet for their participation, the Council's officers who have assisted and supported our work this year and particularly Brendan Sullivan, Hilary Dineen and David Scholes who have all played a significant role in helping me grow into the Chairmanship.

Councillor Cathryn Henry  
Chair, 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 full 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 can scrutinise 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 enables the Committee to ask Cabinet or Council to reconsider it. This year the Committee called in Cabinet's decision to extend North Herts Leisure Centre and, linked to this, extend the Letchworth Leisure Contract which it has awarded to Stevenage Leisure Ltd. The Committee discussed the decision at a meeting on 8 July 2015 and decided not to refer the issue back to Cabinet.

2.4 The Committee gave a higher priority to taking an overview of the Council's work this year by holding Executive Members accountable for the performance of the Council in their area of responsibility. The Committee has embarked on a rolling programme of inviting Executive Members to present an overview of the key achievements, risks and challenges in their portfolios. Six Executive Members attended the Committee's regular meetings for this purpose this year:

- Cllr Peter Burt – Waste Management, Recycling and Environment;
- Cllr Julian Cunningham – Policy, Transport and Green Issues;
- Cllr David Levett – Planning and Enterprise;
- Cllr Jane Gray – Leisure;
- Cllr Tony Hunter – Community Engagement and Rural Affairs;
- Cllr Lynda Needham – Leader of the Council.

2.5 The Committee is also the Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee for North Hertfordshire which is required to meet at least once a year. The Committee was grateful to Chief Inspector Julie Wheatley and Sergeant Alan Clarke of Hertfordshire

Constabulary who attended the Committee in December to explain the work of the police and answer questions.

2.6 The Committee continued to take a close interest in safeguarding matters again 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 in respect of the role of district councillors in safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

2.7 In total, the Committee has considered 49 items in its meetings this year. It has made 18 recommendations on 9 topics to Cabinet. 15 of the Committee's recommendations were supported, and 3 were rejected. A full list of the topics considered by the Committee can be found in Annex A to this report.

2.8 One written question was asked by a member during the year about cuts in the Council's grants. The Council received a written response which it discussed at its meeting on 22 March 2016.

### **3. Task and Finish Groups in 2015/16**

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.

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. Two task and finish groups took place in 2015/16, with a further review due for completion in the summer. These are summarised below.

#### **3.3 Commercialisation of Council Services**

3.3.1 This review took place between February and August 2015 and included a visit to Colchester Borough Council to meet its Chief Executive Adrian Pritchard. Its remit was to examine the feasibility and desirability of commercialising some of the Council's services or undertaking new commercial services. Its recommendations were:

Recommendation 1: The Council should appoint a senior commercial manager to lead and coordinate its commercial activities; and to identify and develop new commercial opportunities.

Recommendation 2: The Council should appoint a high level commercial board comprised of councillors, officers and others with commercial experience. The board can advise the Cabinet about the feasibility of commercial opportunities and review the performance of existing ones.

Recommendation 3: The Council should pursue income generation opportunities where it has the skills, experience and resources to do so. These should be compatible with the Council's strategic objectives, and at a level of risk which would not threaten the Council's core services in the event of an enterprise's failure.

Recommendation 4: The Council should explore the possibilities of property investment as a means of generating revenue.

Recommendation 5: The Council should use the expertise of its strategic partners to help manage its property portfolio.

Recommendation 6: The Council should review its assets register to understand whether any of them could be used for property development or other commercial purposes.

Recommendation 7: Commercial activities should bear the true cost - but no more than that – of any support they receive from the Council.

Recommendation 8: The Council should review its training programmes for senior leaders and other key staff to include more commercial training, networking and mentoring activities.

Recommendation 9: The Council should have a scheme that recognises officers who make useful commercialisation proposals or make significant contributions to their success.

3.3.2 Cabinet considered its recommendations on 10 November 2015 and resolved:

- That the Council should continue to pursue income generation opportunities where it has the skills, experience and resources to do so. These should be compatible with the Council's Strategic Objectives and at a level of risk which would not threaten the Council's core services in the event of an enterprise's failure;
- That the Council should review its assets to understand whether any of them could be used for commercial purposes, including property development;
- That a Project Board be established, to advise the Cabinet on the best method for this Council to deliver the opportunities identified in Resolutions (2) and (3) above and further consider the recommendations identified in the Task and Finish Group report on Commercialisation of Council Services; and
- That the Project Board will present its recommendations to Cabinet at its regular meeting in June 2016.

### 3.4 The Quality of Council Reports

3.4.1 The review took place between December 2015 and February 2016. Its remit was to improve the quality of the Council's reports by making them shorter, clearer, jargon-free and more focussed on key areas. Its recommendations were:

Recommendation 1: The Council should review its report template and consider adopting the features of the alternative report template (in Annex 1 to the task and finish group report).

Recommendation 2: Reports should clearly state their purpose.

Recommendation 3: Reports should include timelines showing financial and timetable changes for projects.

Recommendation 4: The Council should be mindful of the burden of producing reports and consider doing so only when decisions are required. Reports should not be used to brief members unless there is a compelling reason for it.

Recommendation 5: The Council should introduce a document management system to enable proper tracking, management and storage of documents.

Recommendation 6: There is a need for training to encourage both plainer English and for officers to better understand the purpose of reports.

Recommendation 7: The Council should trial the introduction of paperless reports with a view to introducing paperless reports for all 49 councillors.

3.4.2 Cabinet will consider the report at its meeting in June 2016.

### 3.5 The Council's Approach to Managing Larger Projects

3.5.1 The Task and Finish Group on the Council's Approach to Managing Larger Projects should take place from May to July and a report should be ready for the Committee's meeting in September 2016.

### 3.6 A New Protocol for Task and Finish Groups

3.6.1 This year the Committee decided to take a more flexible and member led approach to running task and finish groups and updated its protocol to reflect this. The changes included:

- a more flexible approach to chairing task and finish groups;
- the Chair of the task and finish group finalising the scope;
- the process being led by members rather than by a lead officer;
- always hearing outside evidence where possible;
- better pre-briefing of task and finish group members beforehand so they are better informed and meetings are more productive; and
- new arrangements for task and finish group reports' progression to Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet.

## **4. Scrutiny in 2016/17**

4.1 The Committee will continue to focus on both overview and scrutiny during its Committee meetings, and concentrate on scrutiny in its task and finish groups. It will continue to invite Executive Members to speak to their portfolios at the Committee's meetings.

4.2 The Committee will monitor the new Protocol for Task and Finish Groups to make sure it meets the needs of the Committee, the Council and the community in North Hertfordshire.

4.3 The Committee has chosen a number of possible task and finish groups for 2016/17 which it will prioritise at its meeting in June. These include:

- The Council's Performance Indicators;
- Recharges and Value for Money;
- The Urban/Rural Divide;
- The Council's Management of Risk;
- Consultation with the Community.

## **5. Public Participation**

- 5.1 The scrutiny process is open to involvement by local people and the Committee encourages public participation.
- 5.2 Seven 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 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](mailto:brendan.sullivan@north-herts.gov.uk)

### **MEMBERSHIP OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2015 – 2016**

Cllr Cathryn Henry (Chairman)	Cllr Alan Bardett (substitute)
Cllr Steve Hemingway (Vice-chair)	Cllr John Bishop (substitute)
Cllr Clare Billing	Cllr John Booth (substitute)
Cllr Bill Davidson	Cllr Steve Jarvis (substitute)
Cllr Jean Green	Cllr Ian Mantle (substitute)
Cllr Sal Jarvis	Cllr Alan Millard (substitute)
Cllr David Leal-Bennett	Cllr Adrian Smith (substitute)
Cllr Ben Lewis	Cllr Michael Weeks (substitute)
Cllr Sandra Lunn	
Cllr Paul Marment	
Cllr Gerald Morris	
Cllr Michael Muir	
Cllr Janine Paterson	
Cllr Frank Radcliffe	
Cllr Mike Rice	
Cllr Deborah Segalini	

**DETAILED LIST OF TOPICS CONSIDERED BY THE COMMITTEE IN 2015/16**

09 June 2015	<p>Presentation by the Portfolio Holder for Waste, Recycling and Environment</p> <p>Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) Update</p> <p>Performance Indicator Monitoring – Year End 2014/15</p> <p>Monitoring Report on Projects in the Priorities for the District 2014/15</p> <p>Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3Cs) Full Year Update – 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015</p> <p>Strategic Outline Case for Waste and Street Cleaning Services for North And East Hertfordshire District Councils</p> <p>The Future of Task and Finish Groups</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>
08 July 2015	<p>Call-In of Cabinet Decision on 16 June 2015 – Letchworth Leisure Management Contract and Development of North Herts Leisure Centre</p>
21 July 2015	<p>Presentation by the Portfolio Holder for Policy, Transport and Green Issues</p> <p>Corporate Plan 2016 to 2021</p> <p>The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 – Implementation</p> <p>The Future of Task and Finish Groups</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>
22 Sept 2015	<p>Presentation by the Executive Member for Planning and Enterprise</p> <p>Economic Development Strategy</p> <p>Task and Finish Group Report on the Commercialisation of Council Services</p> <p>Update on Employment Partnerships Task and Finish Group Report</p> <p>Consultation Strategy 2016 - 2020</p> <p>Annual Safeguarding Performance Update for April 14 – March 15 and DBS Checks for Councillors</p> <p>Performance Indicators – First Quarter 2015/16</p> <p>RIPA Update and Annual Review</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>
08 Dec 2015	<p>Presentation by Hertfordshire Constabulary</p> <p>Presentation by the Executive Member for Leisure</p> <p>Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act Update and Use of Social Networking Sites in Investigations Update</p> <p>Performance Indicator Monitoring Report – 2nd Quarter 2015/16</p> <p>Mid Year Monitoring Report on Key Projects for 2015/16</p> <p>Outcomes of Task and Finish Groups</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>



19 Jan 2016	<p>Presentation by the Executive Member For Community Engagement and Rural Affairs</p> <p>Comments, Compliments and Complaints (3Cs) Half Year Update – 1 April 2015 To 30 September 2015.</p> <p>Protocol for Task And Finish Groups</p> <p>Resolutions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p>
22 Mar 2016	<p>Presentation by Cllr Lynda Needham , Leader of the Council</p> <p>RIPA</p> <p>3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter Performance Indicators</p> <p>Key Projects 2016/17</p> <p>The District Wide Survey</p> <p>Task and Finish Group Report on the Quality of Council Reports</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report</p> <p>Protocol for Task and Finish Groups</p> <p>Outcome of Overview and Scrutiny Committee Resolutions</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme</p> <p>Community Centre Leases and Audit Outcomes</p>