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**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE  
ANNUAL REPORT  
2011 - 2012**

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March 2012

## **Foreword from the Chairman**

This has been a positive year for overview and scrutiny. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has made some important structural changes this year to enhance its efficiency which has allowed the committee to cover more ground more quickly while using fewer resources. It has also involved a wider range of members, fifteen in all, in its task and finish groups.

The Committee is entitled to review and scrutinise the decisions and functions of the Council and the Cabinet; and make reports or recommendations on matters affecting the authority's area and inhabitants. It had seven scheduled meetings this year.

As well as its scheduled meetings, the committee establishes a number of task and finish groups each year to look at topics in more depth. Four reviews were completed in 2011/12. Once a review is complete, a report is prepared which is considered by the Committee and is then sent to the Cabinet for consideration.

The first change the committee decided to make was that its task and finish groups should each be held on a single day wherever possible. Three of its inquiries – those looking at the implementation of the council's parking strategy, its project boards, and its communication and consultation with members - were of this type. The fourth, the review of street cleansing, was a more traditional type, but it was also time limited and took place over two meetings spanning ten weeks.

The committee chose to invite contributors to task and finish groups to attend the committee meetings where those reports are discussed; and invited them back when progress on reports was being reviewed.

The committee has resolved to continue with its reforms in the next civic year. It has already chosen four topics for next year to enable better timetabling of reviews. It intends to carry out a joint scrutiny review with neighbouring councils. It will adopt a protocol to clarify the processes of the committee to assist officers and members alike.

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 chair Michael Paterson, the members of the Committee and those members who have sat on the task & finish groups this year.

### **MEMBERSHIP OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2011 - 2012**

Cllr Raymond Shakespeare-Smith (Chair)	Cllr Paul Marment
Cllr Michael Paterson (Vice Chair)	Cllr Alan Millard
Cllr Alison Ashley	Cllr Lawrence Oliver
Cllr Alan Bardett	Cllr Mike Rice
Cllr David Billing	
Cllr John Bishop	Cllr David Chambers (substitute)
Cllr John Booth	Cllr Lisa Courts (substitute)
Cllr Bill Davidson	Cllr Jean Green (substitute)
Cllr Richard Harman	Cllr Lorna Kercher (substitute)
Cllr Cathryn Henry	Cllr Gerald Morris (substitute)
Cllr Steve Jarvis	Cllr Michael Muir (substitute)
Cllr David Kearns	Cllr Elliot Needham (substitute)

**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 full committee held seven scheduled meetings last year. It considered a range of topics including key decisions going to Cabinet as well as 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; and
- by calling in decisions which are of great concern to members or to the public.

2.3 The call in process is rarely used. It allows the Committee to call in a decision of Cabinet or Council which has been made but not implemented and, if it chooses to do so, ask Cabinet or Council to reconsider it. In October, the Committee decided to call in Cabinet's decision to adopt and implement the Community Halls Strategy.

2.4 In total, the Committee has scrutinised ..xx...topics this years and made ....xx..recommendations on ...xx... items to Cabinet. ...xx...recommendations were accepted and ...xx.... were noted. A full list of the committee's topics can be found in appendix A to this report:

2.5 ...xx.....questions have been asked by members during the year on the following topics:

- The appointment of the supervising architect for the North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility project
- The timing of the closure of Hitchin Town Hall during main contract works for the North Hertfordshire Museum and Community Facility project
- The Council's capital receipts and spending
- The Council's housing allocations policy
- The movement of heavy goods vehicles in Hitchin's industrial area

2.6 Portfolio Holders have continued to attend Committee meetings to present areas of their work, highlight their achievements and challenges and discuss how the Committee can assist them in developing policies. As in previous years, the Committee values their support and contribution. The portfolio holders who attended this year were:

- Cllr Bernard Lovewell – Portfolio Holder for Housing and Environmental Health
- Cllr Terry Hone – Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and IT
- Cllr Lynda Needham – Leader of the Council
- Cllr Claire Strong – Portfolio Holder for Policy
- Cllr Tom Brindley - Portfolio Holder for Planning, Transport and Economic Development
- Cllr Ian Knighton - Portfolio Holder for Leisure

### **3. Task and Finish Groups in 2011/12**

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. The task and finish group take written and oral evidence, quiz witnesses 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 full overview and scrutiny Committee before being sent to Cabinet. Four task and finish groups met in 2011/12, twice as many as the year before.

#### **3.2 Review of the Implementation of the Parking Strategy 2010-19**

3.2.1 The group met on 20 May 2011 and reviewed the implementation of the strategy. A key focus for the group were the area-wide reviews. At the time the group was established the first review in Baldock had commenced and the next town scheduled for review was Hitchin.

3.2.2 The group considered that overall the parking strategy was robust and was being implemented well; and endorsed the approach taken with the Baldock area wide review. The group made eleven recommendations:

- (i). That work on shared service options for the implementation of the car parking strategy be continued, in particular regarding TRO notices and enforcement
- (ii). That the holistic area based approach, when tailored to fit local circumstances and incorporate several options, for Area Parking Reviews be endorsed and should continue
- (iii). That an appropriate review process is included within Area Parking Reviews to allow amendment of zones following initial implementation
- (iv). That alternative funding streams be pursued as a means to support the implementation of the car parking strategy
- (v). That NHDC support through the appropriate channels those seeking to persuade Central Government to reduce and relax the publicity requirement for publishing Notices in the press relating to Traffic Regulation Orders due to the cost
- (vi). That information/literature for the general public is produced jointly with HCC in order to further explain the process of Road Traffic Orders and the roles and powers of the County and District Councils
- (vii). That the Portfolio Holder be supported with regard to the possible sale of on street car parking permits to other parties (e.g. commuters), whilst ensuring that these do not have a detrimental impact upon the controlled residents parking zones in conjunction with Policy 18 and Policy 22
- (viii). That the Portfolio Holder be supported with regard to the aim to enforce against inappropriate parking of cars and light vans on footways and verges subject to a business case
- (ix). That enforcement action to prevent the parking of Heavy Goods Vehicles on footways and verges under Section 19 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 be supported
- (x). That the forthcoming Supplementary Planning Document, Vehicle Parking Provision for New Developments, be included as part of the review process for policies following the implementation of the 'Localism Act'
- (xi). That solutions be explored and implemented as soon as practicable to provide at appropriate locations real-time information for motorists about spaces available in off-street car parks subject to adequate budget provision

3.2.3 Cabinet accepted the reports conclusions and said its recommendations would be taken forward, subject to the availability of capital funding in a number of cases, and the outcome of the area wide reviews of parking.

### **3.3 Review of Project Boards**

3.3.1 The remit of the Task and Finish Group on Project Boards was to understand the arrangements and rationale for project boards in NHDC; review the effectiveness and consistency of their processes; review performance and progress reporting arrangements; and suggest improvements where necessary.

3.3.2 The group met on 15 September 2011 and identified a number of areas which could benefit from improvement and clarification and it made eight recommendations:

(i) Communication from project boards with members and outside stakeholders should be improved by following the Council's project management protocol on communications. The project manager should discuss with stakeholders their communication needs and act accordingly.

(ii) Two types of project were recognised – those which are internal to NHDC in terms of their lack of obvious direct effect on service users, and those which are public facing and focus on issues of interest or concern to service users. For the internal type of project, the current composition of project boards is acceptable. However, for public facing projects, the terms of reference and composition of project boards should have greater member and stakeholder involvement, for example with area specific projects the project board should include a local member as well as the relevant portfolio holder.

(iii) Decisions from project board meetings and updates on project milestones should be recorded and made accessible to members through the members' information service (MIS).

(iv) There should be better scrutiny of project boards and of the setting up and outcomes of significant projects. Exception reports should be sent to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on general projects; and to area committees on area specific projects. Dates of scheduled meetings of project boards should be published so members can monitor progress more easily.

(v) The project assurance officer should have a more active role and input to the project board so that project risks and issues about progress are highlighted and dealt with in a timely manner.

(vi) There should be a debriefing session at the end of each project so that any lessons to be learnt can be identified. These should be recorded in the project closure report; and all the lessons from projects to date should be collated into a single document and actively shared corporately.

(vii) Project boards in NHDC are advisory bodies only and they should be re-named so their role is clear to members and the public. We suggest they be re-named project advisory boards.

(viii) The gap in members' understanding of project boards should be addressed through an information note in MIS; and by including the topic in the new members' induction programme.

3.3.3 [Comment: Cabinet will re-consider the project boards report in March and its decision will be recorded here.]

### **3.4 Review of Communication and Consultation with Members**

3.4.1 The task and finish group met on 20 October 2011. Its purpose was to review the effectiveness of NHDC's existing consultation and communication arrangements with elected members. The review aimed to recommend ways in which the existing arrangements could be improved and made more consistent across and between

services areas; identify areas of best practice along with any shortcomings; and ensure members received better quality, and more timely information.

3.4.2 The group identified a number of areas for improvement which would improve the quality of service the council provides to both members and the public. They made ten recommendations:

- (I) The council's communication strategy should be redrafted to ensure staff are made aware of the importance of keeping elected members informed about developments and of dealing with members' queries in a timely and effective way.
- (II) Local members should always be informed about local events beforehand, and a single communication with all members may be the easiest way of doing this. If only local members are to be informed, this may mean including all the members in a town or members representing adjacent wards.
- (III) The Council's sometimes defensive communications culture should be re-examined so that ideas and criticisms from all quarters can be evaluated objectively; and members can receive a full, frank and timely response to their inquiries.
- (IV) The member/officer protocol should be redrafted to provide a clear statement of what members and officers should expect from each other, taking into account the recommendations of this task and finish group.
- (V) The council should put in place a system for monitoring response times to inquiries by e mail and by letter across the council (to both councillors and members of the public) so managers can make sure that its service standards are being met, and take corrective action when they are not.
- (VI) The problems with the upgraded telephone system which has caused answerphone messages to be deleted should be corrected urgently.
- (VII) There should be a central contact point for members to help them identify and contact the correct person for their inquiry: and that should be the council's Democratic Services Department.
- (VIII) There should be a single reference point on the intranet which officers can use to obtain members' contact details and their preferred method of contact.
- (IX) The Council should explore whether access to NHDC e mails accounts could be improved when members were using other e mail accounts; and if they could reply with an NHDC address from their personal accounts.
- (X) The Council should explore whether it would be sufficient to operate its members' dispatch service once a week rather than twice.

3.4.3 [Comment: Cabinet will consider the report in March and its decision will be recorded here.]

### **3.5 Review of Street Cleansing**

3.5.1 The purpose of this task and finish group was to review the effectiveness of NHDC's street cleansing and enforcement arrangements and suggest improved processes where necessary.

3.5.2 The group met twice between December 2011 and February 2012.

3.5.3 A report setting out its conclusions and recommendations will be considered by the overview and scrutiny committee and the Cabinet in the summer.

## **4. Scrutiny in 2012/13**

4.1 The Committee has chosen a number of topics to scrutinise in 2012/13:

- housing policy;
- neighbourhood policing;
- implementation of the Council's green issues policy; and
- the impact of budget alignment in respect of grant funding.

4.2 It is also possible there will be a joint scrutiny of the Cambridgeshire Local Enterprise Partnership organised by Cambridgeshire County Council.

## **5. Public Participation**

5.1 The scrutiny process is open to involvement by local people and the Committee encourages public participation. Ways 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

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

- Write to: 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)

**DETAILED LIST OF TOPICS CONSIDERED BY THE COMMITTEE IN 2011/12**

- Quarterly updates on the use of powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act
- Quarterly updates on the Council's performance against performance indicators
- Task and Finish Group Report on Teenagers' Facilities in North Herts (work completed in 2010/11)
- Task and Finish Group Report on Shared Services (work completed in 2010/11)
- Local Development Framework – Design Supplementary Planning Document
- Task and Finish Group Report on Parking Strategy
- Follow up from Performance Workshops setting revised Performance Indicators for 2011/12
- Year End Performance Indicators
- Year End Report on the Corporate Plan
- Report on Comments, Compliments and Complaints to the Council
- Supplementary Planning Document - Vehicle Parking at New Developments
- Performance Indicator Monitoring Report
- Priorities for the District 2011/12 Monitoring
- Community Halls Strategy (called in item)
- Cemetery Capacity within North Herts
- Task and Finish Group Report – Project Boards
- Local Enterprise Partnership
- Update on shared services
- Recommendation from Herts County Council Scrutiny Committee's Task and Finish Groups on Safeguarding Children
- Update on Health and Social Care Act
- Local Development Framework Core Strategy – Housing Growth Targets Consultation
- Update on task and finish group report on the implementation of the car parking strategy
- Update on progress with services for teenagers in North Herts from Youth Services
- Task and Finish Group Report – Communication and Consultation with Members
- Office Accommodation
- Police Authority presentation on new police and crime commissioner arrangements
- Overview & Scrutiny Committee Annual Report