

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



DRAFT

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE
ANNUAL REPORT
2016 - 2017**

Foreword from the Chair

To be completed after the Committee has reviewed its work in 2016/17

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1. Overview and Scrutiny in North Hertfordshire District Council

- 1.1 The depth and breadth of the Council's work means that the Overview and 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;
- 1.2 This year, the Committee has put more emphasis on its overview function while still continuing its scrutiny role. Its Committee meetings sought to take a more strategic view of the Council's work while still examining the Executive's major decisions.

2. Meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 2.1 There were six scheduled meetings this year at which the Committee 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 Chair of the Committee, or five members of the Council, to call in a decision of the Executive which has been made but not implemented. The Committee can ask the Executive to reconsider it or can refer it to Council. This year the Committee called in Cabinet's decision to change its Green Space Management Strategy. The Committee discussed the decision at a meeting on 15 February 2017 and decided not to refer the issue back to Cabinet.

- 2.4 As part of the Committee's overview function, the Committee continued its rolling programme of inviting Executive Members to speak to their portfolios. The Committee is grateful to this year's attendees who were:
- Bernard Lovewell - Housing and Environmental Health
 - Cllr Terry Hone – Deputy Leader, Finance and IT
 - Cllr Tony Hunter – Community Engagement and Rural Affairs;
 - Cllr Julian Cunningham – Policy, Transport and Green Issues;
 - Cllr Jane Gray – Leisure;
 - 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 the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Hertfordshire David Lloyd and Chief Inspector Julie Wheatley of Hertfordshire Constabulary who attended the Committee in December to talk about Hertfordshire's Policing Plan and the work of the police in the district.
- 2.6 The Committee continued to take a close interest in safeguarding matters and received its annual update on the Council's safeguarding performance in July 2016.
- 2.7 *In total, the Committee has considereditems in its meetings this year. It has madeXX.....recommendations onXX.....topics to Cabinet. ...XX..... of the Committee's recommendations were supported,X.... were rejected andXX..... were noted.***
- 2.8 No written questions were asked by members during the year.

3. Task and Finish Groups in 2016/17

- 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. They recommend improvements to the Council's performance which are then considered by Cabinet.
- 3.2 Two task and finish groups took place in 2016/17 which is fewer than was hoped. This was due in part to one TFG having a relatively large scope and which required five meetings to conclude its business. There were difficulties too in arranging meetings due to member and officer unavailability.
- 3.3 In future, task and finish groups will start on a fixed date to minimise problems with diary clashes.

3.3 Performance Indicators TFG

- 3.3.1 This TFG was conducted urgently at the request of the Executive Member for Policy, Transport and Green Issues. It took place immediately before the Committee's meeting on July 19 2016 with the whole Committee invited so that proportionality was maintained. Its final membership was Cllrs Ian Albert (Chair), Cathryn Henry, Steve Jarvis and Steve Hemingway.

- 3.3.2 The TFG noted that most PIs are concerned either with the day to day work of the Council which is already closely monitored by officers; or with matters which are outside the Council's control. It would be better for the Committee to concentrate on areas it can influence and areas of concern.
- 3.3.3 The TFG decided to receive exception reports only on performance indicators, that is when indicators' status is at red. It can then ask the responsible officer to attend the Committee and provide an explanation.
- 3.3.4 On projects, TFG considered the Committee should also receive exception reports and updates on projects a month before each Committee meeting. It would be helpful if the reports were more quantitative, focussing on whether the project is on time or on budget.
- 3.3.5 The TFG decided there was no need to hold a Member Workshop to set targets. Executive Members are the right people to do this in discussion with Senior Officers.
- 3.3.6 When Executive Members make their annual presentation to the Committee, this should include a list of performance indicators in their area and a report on whether they have been met. This will be the time for the Committee to review and challenge the indicators which have been set.
- 3.3.7 Its recommendations to the Committee on its own handling of PIs were:
- The Committee should receive only Exception Reports on PIs; and these should be available a month before Committee meetings.
 - Project updates should be received in the same timescale.
 - The Chair of OSC and Group Leaders should review reports and ask officers to attend on particular issues.
- 3.3.8 Its recommendations to Cabinet, which were accepted, were:
- The Member workshop to set PIs should be discontinued.
 - Executive members should set targets with senior officers.
 - The Committee should review PIs for each Executive Member Annually.

3.4 The Council's Management of Larger Projects

- 3.4.1 This TFG's remit was to review the effectiveness of the Council's management of its larger projects.
- 3.4.2 It considered a range of projects between September 2016 and February 2017 and will report to the Committee and Cabinet in June 2016.

4. Task and Finish Groups from 2015/16

- 4.1 Cabinet's response to two task and finish groups was not reported to Council in the last Annual Report.

4.2 Commercialisation of Council Services

- 4.2.1 The remit of this review was to examine the feasibility and desirability of commercialising some of the Council's services or undertaking new commercial services. Cabinet considered its recommendations in November 2015 and decided to establish a Project Board to advise Cabinet to consider further the recommendations and report back to Cabinet in June 2016. It has yet to do so.

4.3 The Quality of Council Reports

- 4.3.1 The aim of this review 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.

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.

- 4.3.2 Cabinet considered the report at its meeting in June 2016 and:
- accepted recommendations 2, 3, 5 and 6;
 - accepted recommendation 1 to review the Council's report template but did not undertake to adopt the features of the template annexed to the TFG report;
 - accepted recommendation 4 with the caveat that there are circumstances, such as when it is a legal requirement, when it is appropriate to use Council reports to brief members;
 - accepted recommendation 7 with the caveat that Members still retain an option to receive paper copies of reports.

4.4 Future Task and Finish Groups

- 4.4.1 The Committee has prioritised the following topics for 2017/18:
- Consultation;
 - Impact of the Grants Policy Review;
 - Section 106 Funding.

- 4.4.2 The Committee decided that the following topics be kept in reserve:
 The Urban/Rural Divide;
 The value for money of NHDC's Document Centre;
 Balancing cost savings against possible environmental impacts.
- 4.4.3 The Committee has undertaken to look at the Hitchin Town Hall and Museum project once it has finished.

4.5 Protocol for Task and Finish Groups

- 4.5.1 Last 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 new Protocol begins with eight principles for task and finish groups, followed by the revised Protocol itself. 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;
 - more comprehensive 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.
- 4.5.2 The Committee will review the Protocol's effectiveness during the next civic year.

5. Scrutiny in 2016/17

5.1 *To be completed after the Committee's meeting on 21 March.....*

6. Public Participation

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

6.2 *.....20 (so far).....members of the public attended the Committee's meetings this year. A further four have attended and contributed to its task and finish groups on one or more occasion.*

6.3 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.

6.4 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 2016 – 2017

Members of the Committee

Cllr Cathryn Henry (Chair)
Cllr Steve Hemingway (Vice-chair)
Cllr Ian Albert
Cllr Clare Billing
Cllr Bill Davidson
Cllr Steve Deakin-Davies
Cllr Elizabeth Dennis
Cllr Jean Green
Cllr Steve Jarvis
Cllr Ben Lewis
Cllr Paul Marment
Cllr Gerald Morris
Cllr Michael Muir
Cllr Janine Paterson
Cllr Frank Radcliffe
Cllr Valentine Shanley

Substitutes

Cllr John Bishop
Cllr Paul Clark
Cllr Simon Harwood
Cllr Lorna Kercher
Cllr Alan Millard
Cllr Mike Rice
Cllr Adrian Smith
Cllr Michael Weeks