

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2019 - 2020

Introduction by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Chair's Introduction to be supplied

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 and effectively in order to scrutinise topics 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. Methods of Scrutiny

2.1 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 Executive 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.

3. Meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

3.1 There were six meetings scheduled to take place in 2019/20. Unfortunately, the schedule was disrupted due to the snap General Election and the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2 Four of the scheduled meetings this year took place 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 and reviewing other issues which the Committee has decided would benefit from closer scrutiny.

3.3 One special meeting was held on 23 October 2019 to consider the report following the Review of Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum (see Section 9).

3.4 The meeting scheduled to take place in December 2019 was cancelled due to the snap General Election.

- 3.5 The meeting scheduled to take place on 17 March 2020 was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however Members of the Committee were consulted on reports due to be considered by Cabinet using email. Although this was not a formal or legal voting system, it gave Members the opportunity to advise Cabinet of their thoughts regarding these reports prior to any decisions.

4. Call-In

- 4.1 The call in process allows the Chair, or five members of the Council, to call in a decision which is the responsibility of the Executive, which has been made but not implemented. The Committee can ask the decision maker to reconsider the decision or can refer it to Council.

- 4.2 There have been no items called in this year.

5. Presentations by Executive Members

- 5.1 The Committee has continued with its decision not to invite Executive Members to speak on their portfolios on a rolling basis and to instead invite them only to address specific issues or to present reports that were of interest to the Committee.

- 5.2 Executive Member attendance is welcomed at meetings and they are encouraged to take part in the meeting where appropriate.

- 5.3 The Committee are grateful to the following Executive Members for making presentations and attending meetings this year:

- Councillor Ian Albert;
- Councillor Judi Billing;
- Councillor Paul Clark;
- Councillor Keith Hoskins;
- Councillor Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg;
- Councillor Martin Stears-Hanscomb

6. Crime & Disorder Scrutiny

- 6.1 The Committee is also the Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee for North Hertfordshire which is required to meet at least once a year.

- 6.2 The Committee chose this year to consider the effects of knife crime and county lines in North Hertfordshire and was grateful to Chief Inspector Sally Phillips of Hertfordshire Constabulary who attended the Committee in January to talk about this aspect supported by the Community Protection Manager.

7. Safeguarding

- 7.1 The Committee continued to take a close interest in safeguarding matters and received its annual update on the Council's safeguarding performance in September 2019.

- 7.2 The Committee took an active role in encouraging Members to undertake relevant Safeguarding training. However, notes that there has been a varied level of completion of this training.

8. Statistics

- 8.1 In total, the Committee has considered, 23 items in its scheduled meetings this year, with a further 2 items considered using the email system during the Covid-19 pandemic. It has made 7 recommendations on 6 topics to Cabinet. At every meeting the Committee also considered the resolutions previously made and the work programme.
- 8.2 The Committee also made 8 recommendations to Cabinet at the special meeting held on 23 October 2019. This was in addition to the 16 recommendations made following the Review of Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum.
- 8.3 No written questions were submitted this year.

9. Task and Finish Groups in 2019/20

- 9.1 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.
- 9.2 One Task and Finish Group, the Review of Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum Project took place in 2019/20.
- 9.3 It was agreed that an Independent Chair would be appointed to lead this review, and following a selection procedure, Mr John Richardson was appointed to the position.
- 9.4 This was a detailed review that took place over several months, considering 14 written statements from witnesses and hearing verbal evidence from 15 people over three days of public examination.
- 9.5 The Panel submitted a detailed report with 16 recommendations to a special meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 23 October 2019 which was subsequently referred on to Cabinet together with an additional 8 recommendations from the Committee. All of these recommendations were accepted by Cabinet.
- 9.6 The Committee would like to thank the Independent Chairman and the Panel Members for their hard work and diligence during this difficult review.

Mr John Richardson (Independent Chairman);
Councillor Sam Collins;
Councillor Ian Moody;
Councillor Helen Oliver;
Councillor Valentine Shanley.

10. Future Task and Finish Groups

10.1 The Committee has prioritised the following topics for 2020/21:

- The Waste contract – Tender and Contract;
- The Waste Contract – Community Engagement.

10.2 Preparations for these Task and Finish Groups are underway but have been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

11. Public Participation

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

11.2 Approximately 28 members of the public attended the Committee's scheduled meetings this year.

11.3 There was an average of 18 members of the public at each of the three meetings of the Review of Hitchin Town Hall and District Museum.

11.4 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.

12. Peer Review 2020

12.1 A peer review took place in January 2020.

12.2 An area that the Peer Review were requested to consider was conducting effective scrutiny, in particular:

- How the Chair / Vice Chair function works and should work
- How effective is the Committee at managing its own work programme
- The Scrutiny support function and relationship to the Chair/ Vice Chair/ rest of Committee and how it should work
- Best practice for working with the administration and officers, ensuring a positive and constructive critical friend relationship
- Ensuring the committee has clear working practices which it sticks to
- How much scrutiny does it undertake of outside agencies/ bodies and can/ should this be undertaken differently
- Clarity of decision making.

12.3 Their initial findings included:

- Executive Members should lead and be accountable for decisions;
- Meetings should be focused with fewer agenda items;
- Membership of the O&S committee is perceived to be too large;
- All scrutiny members to complete formal scrutiny training;
- Use the task and finish programme to support early involvement with policy making;
- Review finish time and location of the meeting;

- Clarify the governance arrangements between O&S and Cabinet Panels;
- Ensure forward work plan includes scrutiny of external partners and contractors.

12.4 The Committee will need to consider how to incorporate these recommendations into their work over the coming year.

13. Further Information and Membership

13.1 Further information about the work of scrutiny and contact details can be found at:

<https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/home/council-and-democracy/overview-and-scrutiny>

13.2 Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2019/20:

Members of the Committee

Councillor David Levett (Chair)
 Councillor Kate Aspinwall (Vice-Chair)
 Councillor Val Bryant
 Councillor Sam Collins
 Councillor George Davies
 Councillor Terry Hone
 Councillor Tony Hunter
 Councillor Jim McNally
 Councillor Gerald Morris
 Councillor Lisa Nash
 Councillor Sue Ngwala
 Councillor Helen Oliver
 Councillor Adem Ruggiero-Cakir
 Councillor Carol Stanier
 Councillor Claire Strong
 Councillor Tom Tyson

Substitutes

Councillor Ruth Brown
 Councillor Bill Davidson
 Councillor Morgan Derbyshire
 Councillor Simon Harwood
 Councillor Ian Mantle
 Councillor Sam North
 Councillor Kay Tart