

Overview and Scrutiny Issues

1. A Snapshot of some of the Scrutiny Work currently being undertaken

Children and Young People Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Over recent months the Committee has had a mix of public and private meetings. Sometimes the nature of the issues the Committee needs to scrutinise or review, particularly in relation to the safeguarding and the general welfare of children, means that it can have more productive discussions in a private setting. This only happens when there is a clear and defined need to do so.

The Committee has a very wide remit and it has tried to cut down on the number of items it looks at, concentrating on one major item per meeting, with a second shorter discussion on another issue on occasions. The Forward Look for the remainder of 2012 will see the Committee continue to work in a similar manner.

The four major items looked at since the last report was made to the Council have been:

- The creation of Academy Schools across the County and the impact this has had on services provided by the Council (as the local education authority). As Members will be aware from the general presentation made by the Cabinet Member in late March, Academies can buy in services from whoever they wish, and the Council has to attempt to sell its services in a competitive market. The Committee will be following up on this issue later in 2012.
- Residential Boarding Education within the County and the role it could play in the package of measures made available for children in care.
- Youth Service provision and the changes made in the last 18 months. This period has seen dramatic changes and a move from a universal to a more targeted service, as well as a major fall in the level of resources available. The Committee also then commented on the proposed establishment of Youth Strategy Groups.
- Considering a call-in from Councillor Higgins in relation to the Essex Formula for Funding Schools - in particular the calculation of school budget shares for 2012/13 and financial protection for schools that were adversely affected by the changes to the Formula.

The Committee has made major changes to the way in which it scrutinises safeguarding. It has merged its activities with those of the Community and Older Peoples Policy and Scrutiny Committee and has created a Families Safeguarding Sub-Committee, with equal membership from both Committees. All safeguarding matters will be referred to this Sub-Committee in the first instance, which should lead to a more streamlined and logical approach to this aspect of the scrutiny function.

Community and Older People Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Direct Payments/Personal Budgets: A Task and Finish Group has been looking at Personal Budgets (Direct Payments) following a report to the Audit Committee. The Final Report and Recommendations will be considered at the Committee's meeting in May.

Carers Strategy: A Task and Finish Group is involved in the development of a new Carers Strategy for the Authority.

Disabled Facilities Grants: Following the recommendations from the Occupational Therapy Service Review last year the Committee has been scrutinising the Disabled Facilities Grant processes, taking evidence from officers of this Authority, officers and Cabinet Members from District/Borough Councils and the Home Improvement Agencies. Recommendations and a Final Report will be received at the Committee's meeting in May.

Public Health Transitions: The Committee scrutinised the proposed arrangements for the transition of Public Health into the Authority.

Absence Management: On behalf of the Executive Scrutiny Committee the Community and Older People Policy and Scrutiny Committee has established a Task and Finish Group to review the management of absence across all Directorates.

Economic Development, Environment and Highways Policy and Scrutiny Committee

In January the Committee received a briefing on the progress of the Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy for Essex, its key features, the new Residual Waste Treatment Contract, and the delivery of waste services after April 2012. As the implementation of the Strategy moves forward the Committee intends to investigate some aspects of its delivery in more detail.

In February the Committee approved its final Scrutiny Report on the relationship with statutory undertakers in the way works are undertaken in the highway. The Committee learned that there is a highly regulated framework for the management and control of road works. Indeed the sheer volume of individual road works carried out each year underpins the need for an objective approach to the way that their management is implemented. Although road works may only contribute to around 10% of road congestion, the public perceive them as a major contributor to congestion due to their high visibility. The Committee has forwarded several recommendations to the Cabinet to improve the quality of information provided to the public about road works. It has also been mindful that highways issues form an integral part of a councillor's postbag, and the review has highlighted the need for County Councillors to have a better understanding of the way that road works, both those undertaken by the utility companies and the Highways Authority itself, are managed in Essex. Consequently the Committee has proposed that there should be specific reference to the management of road works as part of the Member Induction Programme following County Council elections.

In 2009 the Committee produced a scrutiny report on the Essex Legacy from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and it has now completed a monitoring exercise on the progress made since that time. The latest review has been very interesting and concluded that the County Council is fully engaged in promoting benefits from London hosting the Games. At this time it is difficult to assess fully the benefits that may accrue in practice over the longer term. However, there may be some merit in a scrutiny committee undertaking a post Games scrutiny review in the future to examine the lessons learned from the approach that was adopted by the Council.

At our meeting in May the Committee will formally consider the adoption of scrutiny reports that have been completed recently on A Board Policy on publicly maintainable highway, draft School Crossing Patrol Service Policy, and draft Corporate Emissions Strategy, as well as monitoring the responses of the Cabinet to recommendations that have been reached on some reviews completed over the past eighteen months. At present the main focus of the Committee's activity is upon progressing reviews on Future of Recycling Centres in Essex, Country Parks, and Financial Inclusion.

Executive Scrutiny Committee

Budget Process: The Committee has scrutinised the quarterly outturns; and received a presentation from Councillor David Finch on the budget process for 2012/13. Councillor Finch has committed to continue to update the Committee on the forthcoming budget process for 2013/14.

Performance Management: The Committee has considered the new arrangements for reporting performance, and continues to receive updates.

Corporate HR: The Committee reviewed Corporate HR covering issues such as My Performance, Performance and Rewards, Learning and Development and Redundancy. This Scrutiny review is now closed.

External Communications: The Committee agreed to establish a Task and Finish Group to review External Communications.

Corporate Plan: The Committee provided its input into the process.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Recent Committee meetings have concentrated particularly on scrutinising one major item per meeting in detail. Members have also visited Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow and will be visiting Colchester General Hospital shortly. These visits provide a valuable opportunity to see current clinical practice in operation, to see the range of facilities a major hospital now offers, and to speak with front line staff as well as senior managers.

Three items have been looked at in detail:

- **Stroke Services.** A Care Quality Commission (CQC) report in 2011 made a number of adverse comments about the standards of such services in many parts of Essex. The Committee pursued the issue at the time and invited senior officers from the PCT clusters to return recently to comment on the progress made. This was generally reassuring, but some issues will need to be looked at again before the Committee is content that all the CQC's concerns have been addressed.
- **Project HOPE.** This is the name given to the proposed major review of mental health provision in north Essex. The Committee very much supports the principles behind the Project, which continue to move forward the social inclusion and recovery model to replace the traditional, and somewhat outdated, institutional model.
- **Maternity services.** A cutback in availability for Essex mothers using services in Barking, Havering and Redbridge (following an adverse inspection report), coupled with an increasing birth rate, has led to great demand being placed on maternity services across the County. The Committee has spoken with representatives from the PCT clusters, hospitals and Barking, Havering and Redbridge to consider how current shortfalls can be alleviated. The Committee supports the action being taken to prepare a pan Essex Strategic Capacity Plan, but regrets that it has become necessary to ration services at some hospitals, limiting the amount of patient choice.

Finally, the Chairman of the Committee has chaired a further meeting of the Regional Health Chairs Forum, which discussed the structure and role of the East of England Ambulance Trust with Board Members and senior managers of the Trust. This followed up on a similar session held two years ago, and changes made since then were considered. In particular, a number of improvements in quality related activities, which had been put in train at that time, had been successful.

2. Scrutiny issues

The Scrutiny Function

Whilst it is acknowledged that the Council is more open and transparent than in previous years, more still needs to be done in the Council's approach to Scrutiny. Going forward, emphasis will be given to focusing more on Policy Development rather than post-decision scrutiny; making the best use of the resources available to scrutiny; and improving the preparation for meetings and engagement of Members. The scrutiny function has improved in the last two years, but it will need to improve further to meet new challenges in the future, particularly relating to commissioning and other changes in legislation.

John Aldridge
Chairman of the Scrutiny Board