

Overview and Scrutiny Issues

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

Children and Young People Policy and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee has commenced stage 3 of its review of safeguarding services. This will reflect the position that Essex has moved forward from a rating of inadequate to one of adequate following the last Ofsted inspection. The Committee will be concentrating on “where do we go from here” and help ensure that the Council does not fall back from the progress already made but continues to drive progress forward.

The Committee has held a lengthy discussion on the future role of children’s centres across the County. Their role is changing significantly, moving from a universal service to providing targeted work with children and families who really need the level of expertise a centre can provide. The Committee welcomes this change and will continue to monitor progress from time to time.

The third major area covered since the last report has been a review of work either undertaken or proposed to be undertaken to combat bullying. This was very helpful, enabling a number of strands of work to be pulled together. Bullying continues to be the number one concern of young people and the Committee will be assisting the Young Essex Assembly in its review of what additional help and support to combat bullying is required.

Community and Older People Policy and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee received an update on the Target Operating Model (TOM) for Libraries, and was introduced to the TOM for Adult Community Learning. Further updates, together with an update on the Adult Social Care TOM will be received in the New Year.

The North and South Essex Mental Health Partnership Trusts presented their Annual Reports to Committee. The Committee has made two recommendations to the Cabinet Member following these presentations.

The Committee has commenced its scrutiny of the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) following the recommendations made in the Meals on Wheels Service Review. Representatives of districts/boroughs attended Committee as witnesses to answer questions about the DFG process.

Economic Development, Environment and Highways Policy and Scrutiny Committee

It is pleasing to confirm that the Cabinet has responded favourably to a majority of recommendations made in respect of Government Consultations on proposals for the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing and the Draft National Planning Policy Framework.

At the end of October the Council announced that Ringway Jacobs Limited had been selected as its integrated service provider to assist in the delivery of highways services across Essex. The Committee has received briefings on the proposed new contract, and the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation has agreed the formation of an informal advisory board that will include scrutiny committee representation.

In November the Committee considered several petitions with around 5,000 signatories that had been submitted to the last full Council meeting, together with a call in, on the decision to close the Recycling Centres for Household Waste at Mill Lane, High Ongar and Colchester Road, St Osyth. The Committee decided to recommend to the Cabinet Member that he withdraw his decision to close the two Recycling Centres, pending the outcome of the Committee's forthcoming scrutiny review of the Recycling Centres for Household Waste Service.

Earlier this year the Committee had already identified in its Forward Look that it wished to undertake a scrutiny review on the Future of Recycling Centres in Essex, and it will now take this matter forward as one of three new reviews. The other two reviews will be Country Parks and Financial Inclusion.

In our last report we referred to the fact that the Committee was seeking to develop more effective ways of undertaking the way that its Forward Look is compiled, and projects undertaken. We have had a workshop to focus on these matters, and propose to concentrate upon a fewer number of reviews at any one time that will be undertaken by task and finish groups. An important influence upon the choice of reviews will be the Committee's ability to affect positively the outcomes of Council activity. Nevertheless it is recognised that the Committee will have to continue to balance the pressure of scrutiny and policy reviews with other unplanned work that may arise from time to time such as call-ins and petitions.

Executive Scrutiny Committee

The Committee continues to receive updates on the Transformation programme. It will concentrate upon Shared Services and the future plans for commissioned services in the New Year.

The Committee has scrutinised the quarterly outturns; and received a presentation from Councillor David Finch on the budget process for 2012/13.

The Committee considered the new arrangements for reporting performance, and will receive a further update in January.

The Committee will continue to consider the absence data and management in service areas. A corporate review of absence management will be presented to the Committee in January 2012.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

In September the Committee met with representatives of Princess Alexandra Hospital to discuss that Hospital's "Building for Excellence" project. This set out a number of operational and financial challenges the Hospital faces over the next three years. As a follow up, the Committee is using its December meeting date to visit the Hospital and speak face-to-face with managers and front line staff. This will not only update Members on the project but also provide an opportunity to look at a range of current hospital practices and improve Members' overall knowledge of health provision.

The Committee has also considered details of the first of a number of changes that will be taking place within Emergency and Elective Vascular Surgical services across the east of England. This particular change involves services in north east Essex and east Suffolk and the Committee was delighted to endorse the proposals put forward jointly by clinicians at Colchester and Ipswich Hospitals. These suggestions are likely to have a significant impact on how clinicians in other parts of the region work up their proposals. The Committee will be considering proposals for other parts of Essex in due course.

Finally, the Chairman of the Committee has chaired a further meeting of the Regional Health Chairs Forum, which looked at the future locations and organisational structures of a number of highly specialist services.

2. Scrutiny issues

Review of the Scrutiny Function

The Scrutiny Board has identified a number of concerns around the effectiveness of the Scrutiny function and the workloads of the Committees. It is also aware of the need to consider in the longer term the impact of new legislation and what Scrutiny will look like in a commissioning organisation. It has asked the Monitoring Officer and the Head of Scrutiny to come back to it with proposals on how to respond to these shorter and longer term aims.

The Essex Scrutiny Network

A further meeting of the Essex-wide Member Scrutiny Network is scheduled to take place in the New Year. The intention will be to progress some of the ideas raised at the last meeting on how to achieve greater co-operation across the scrutiny function. There are already signs that bringing scrutiny members together is leading to the sharing of ideas between authorities.

John Aldridge
Chairman of the Scrutiny Board