

Overview and Scrutiny Issues

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

Children and Young People Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Since the last report to Council, the Committee has completed its stage 2 review of safeguarding services. Whilst stage 1 concentrated on policies and procedures and the perspectives of senior managers, stage 2 concentrated on looking at the quality of the services provided and the situation “on the ground”. A large number of action points were agreed and are currently with the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and other interested parties for their responses.

All Members will be aware of the recent Ofsted inspection. An important part of the preparatory work for this was the submission to Cabinet of two papers on improvements in, and a vision for, children’s social care. The Committee looked at both of these documents in advance of the Cabinet meetings and passed views to the Cabinet on specific points. Ofsted’s findings are awaited with interest and will clearly influence the nature of the Committee’s scrutiny role in the future.

The Committee has been monitoring the proposals to close the Council’s children’s homes and reallocate resources to other types of provision. It set up a Task and Finish Group to undertake the detailed scrutiny and made a number of observations to the Cabinet Member. It will continue its work once the homes have closed, to ensure that the funds made available are reallocated as intended and to confirm the impact of the changes on services provided for children in care.

The Committee has had to deal with a number of important social care matters recently but has taken care not to overlook educational issues. The Committee had a very useful session looking at how Pupil Premiums are formulated and then allocated to schools, and it will shortly be discussing the impact on the County Council of schools deciding to adopt Academy status. Individual members have also visited a number of apprenticeship schemes – the Committee recognises the great importance of these at a time when youth unemployment is running at a high level.

With all the matters the Committee deals with, we have reiterated to the Cabinet Members and Directorate Management Team that Members find it beneficial, in making a meaningful contribution, to have sufficient opportunity for pre scrutiny of major areas of policy change.

Community and Older People Policy And Scrutiny Committee

Meals on Wheels: The Committee has concluded and published its review of the Meals on Wheels Service and presented the Cabinet Member(s) with seven recommendations. The Committee will consider the review again in January 2012.

Healthwatch: The Committee was tasked with recommending a model for the Healthwatch Pathfinder which commences in Essex in January 2012.

Transformation: The Committee has received reports on both the Adult Social Care and the Libraries Target Operating Models. The Libraries TOM returned to Committee this month, with the Adult Social Care TOM to return before the end of the year.

Adult Safeguarding: Is a standing item on the Committee, with the ESAB Annual Report, and quarterly updates received.

Mental Health Partnerships: Both the North and South Essex Mental Health Partnership Trusts are attending Committee to present their annual reports to Members in November.

Extra Care Sheltered Housing: The Committee will be taking more evidence on Extra Care Sheltered Housing during the autumn/winter with a view to publishing a report in Spring 2012.

Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG): Following the review of Occupational Therapy Services (OTS) the Committee will shortly commence a separate scrutiny review of the DFG process seeking evidence from District and Borough Councils. Rochford District Council has contacted the Committee as they are undertaking their own investigation into OTS.

Complaints and Representations: A review of the handling of complaints and representations in Adult, Health and Community Wellbeing following Committee recommendations is returning to the Committee shortly.

Economic Development, Environment and Highways Policy and Scrutiny Committee

Over the Summer the Government published two Consultation documents that we felt, as a Committee, that we wished to influence the Council's formal responses.

The Department for Transport published proposals that included increasing charges at the Dartford-Thurrock River Crossing. While we are all probably familiar with the Crossing, the Committee set up a Task and Finish Group that visited the Operations Centre at Dartford to learn not only more about the issues behind the Consultation but the operational issues that are faced in the daily management and operation of the Crossing. This method of approach proved to be extremely valuable, because we were able to base our findings and conclusions upon first hand observation and evidence rather than relying on debate within the setting of a meeting here at County Hall. Congestion is a key problem at the Crossing that cannot be resolved by merely removing the charges and barriers. The Government's proposals are another step towards addressing congestion in the short term taking into account the need to balance traffic flow and the safety of traffic. For the longer term the Consultation has provided an opportunity to urge the Government to secure additional capacity in the Lower Thames area.

The Department for Communities and Local Government has published a consultation on the Draft National Planning Policy Framework that has attracted a lot

of media attention. Following a briefing on its content the Committee has set up a Task and Finish Group to scrutinise the Council's proposed response.

The Committee has also considered the Council's own consultation on proposals to increase fares for the Chelmsford Park and Ride Scheme this October. Again a Task and Finish Group undertook this review and reached the conclusion that to meet the projected extra support costs for Park and Ride operations in Chelmsford, the proposed fare increase should be generally supported. However, the Committee has also chosen to urge the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation to consider in more depth the introduction of charging 5 to 16 year olds a reduced fare of £1; and the removal of the concessionary fare arrangements bringing senior citizen fares into line with the adult charging regimes at the two Chelmsford Park and Ride sites.

Another important piece of work that is being undertaken by a Task and Finish Group is focussed upon Corporate Carbon Reduction and Energy Efficiency. The Group has had an opportunity to comment upon the Draft Corporate Carbon Strategy and is pleased that it is being submitted to the October Cabinet meeting for approval. The Strategy will form the actual framework for energy management and, once approved, the next stage will be the development of action plans for its implementation. It is hoped that it will be at that stage that the Group will play a more meaningful role in the way that action plans are taken forward for instance it may invite Cabinet Members to demonstrate how the Strategy will be implemented across their portfolios, and how they are co-ordinating their activities.

Aside from undertaking "new" reviews, there is another important stage in the scrutiny process whereby the Committee will monitor what has been achieved from past scrutiny reviews. At our last meeting the Committee signed off a scrutiny report on Two Wheeler Road Safety setting out the action taken in response to the original recommendations of the former Safer and Stronger Communities Policy and Scrutiny Committee.

Another current example where the Committee is monitoring the outcomes of its previous work is on the Essex Legacy from the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. As part of this ongoing investigation some Members have visited the Hadleigh Olympic Mountain Bike Venue and Basildon Sporting Village, and were impressed with the way that these projects are being taken forward.

Copies of the full Scrutiny Reports that the Committee has produced are available on the Council's website, and copies are placed in the Members' Quiet Room as soon as they have been completed for publication.

There are a number of other reviews that are already underway, which include:

- Highways Strategic Transformation Contract
- Highways Winter Service Information
- Local Transport Plan

Finally as a part of this particular report it is important to stress that the new Committee is still in the initial stages of developing its Forward Look. We will be trying not only to identify those issues from our broad remit that we believe we should be focussing upon because we can positively influence outcomes, but also to develop more effective ways of working and balancing 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

Since the Annual Report to Council in June 2011, the Committee has held two meetings, in July and September.

At its meeting in July, the Committee continued its review into the Transformation Programme and received a presentation from Councillor Louis, Cabinet Member for Procurement, Property and Major Projects, in relation to the property strategy, and from Jenny Owen, Deputy Chief Executive, who provided an update on the New Ways of Working Initiatives. The Committee also considered the 2011/12 Financial Review as at the First Quarter Stage.

The September meeting was utilised by the Committee to plan its future work programme.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee receives details of a number of small scale changes taking place in all parts of the County. Although these do not count as “substantial variations” as defined in health scrutiny legislation (and therefore do not require detailed consideration), they are all important to the local service users involved. The Committee is pleased that these changes are bringing about improved standards of provision, increasing the level of clinical expertise and/or improving the quality of the premises available. Councillors are always informed at the time of any changes proposed in their electoral division.

The major issue discussed recently was the “Building for Excellence” project at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow. The Hospital Trust Chairman and Chief Executive discussed with Members the operational and financial challenges the Trust faces over the next three years (and possibly beyond). This was a very constructive debate and made clear the difficult decisions that Trust Boards are having to make, when income levels are potentially reducing by a third over the next three years.

The Chairman of the Committee continues to chair the East of England Regional Health Chairs Forum, which comprises the chairmen of the 11 HOSCs in the region. Essex also undertakes the support work for the Forum. Much health work is now regionally based, particularly with commissioning of specialist services for rare illnesses, where expertise needs to be centred on just one or two Hospitals in the region. Essex is therefore in an important position to influence regional health policy.

2. Scrutiny issues

Populating Committees

Committee Chairmen have been concerned to ensure that members are best matched to the Committees of their choice and that members are participating fully in the work of the Committees. Memberships have been reviewed in the light of the latest by-election and figures on political proportionality are reported earlier in the Agenda for this meeting. Every effort is made to meet members' preferences for Committees but it is not possible to satisfy everyone. With this in mind, Members are reminded of the following points:

- any Member can attend a meeting of a Policy and Scrutiny Committee;
- any Member can ask a Chairman in advance to speak on a particular issue at the Chairman's discretion;
- If the Chairman agrees that a Member can attend and speak, then the attendance would qualify as an approved duty.
- Members who attend out of interest as a member of the public can claim for two meetings per month within the allowance scheme;
- Members not on the Committee membership and invited to attend the meeting should sit with the Committee for their particular item;
- Members who are not a Member of the Committee can be invited by the Chairman to become a Member of a Task and Finish Group where they have a particular interest or expertise;
- Substitute Members are encouraged to attend as many meetings as possible to ensure continuity. All such attendances would count as an approved duty.

Where it is felt that members are not engaged with the work of a particular committee they may be asked to step down in favour of another member wishing to sit on that committee.

Political Proportionality

The proposals for political proportionality show an increase in the numbers on the Economic Development, Environment and Highways Policy and Scrutiny Committee from 16 to 18. This will require a change to Article 9 of the Constitution dealt with in the Council Issues Report. This is a one-off change reflecting the experience since the Committee was established earlier in the year and the fact that it covers the responsibilities of five Cabinet Members and therefore requires a greater range of members to deal with the range and extent of its workload.

Planning and Undertaking Reviews

Because of the similarities between the work of scrutiny and audit, the Chairmen of Committees had an interesting session with senior officers from Internal Audit on how they plan and undertake a review to see how the Committees can improve on their practices.

John Aldridge
Chairman of the Scrutiny Board