

Scrutiny Committee

Chairman's Annual Report - 2007

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Introduction



Introduction by Councillor Pauline Bradberry

Chairman of East Northamptonshire Council's Scrutiny Committee

“ I am pleased to present the Scrutiny Committee's sixth annual report, which identifies the work of the Committee in the last year.

I would like to thank all members of the Committee for their committed and enthusiastic contribution to its work during a busy year which included three major reviews. Many people have contributed to the success of Scrutiny in East Northamptonshire, including external organisations, members of the public and Council Officers; my thanks go to all of them.

The Committee looks forward to the continuing progress of our scrutiny arrangements in the year to come. ”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pauline Bradberry', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

How the Committee Operates

The Scrutiny Committee is a standing committee of the Council and its role is to undertake, manage and co-ordinate the overview and scrutiny process - a responsibility created by the Local Government Act 2000.

The Scrutiny Committee's Terms of Reference are set out in Article 7 of the Council's Constitution¹. The scrutiny process is described in detail in the Scrutiny Procedure Rules. Part 4.4 of the Constitution empowers the Committee to operate in its own right and/or set up time limited working parties to review or scrutinise decisions and to support the work of the Council and its policy committees.

On 1 March 2007, in approving the recommendations of the Constitution Review Group, the Council abolished the Performance Committee and transferred responsibility for the performance management framework (monitoring statutory and local performance indicators, setting performance standards and targets and making recommendations for performance improvement) to the Scrutiny Committee with membership increased from 10 to 15 members (see page 3).

East Northamptonshire Council continues to operate Committee arrangements. Although the scrutiny process is arguably more relevant in a Council operating Executive arrangements, where decisions are taken by a small group of Councillors forming a 'Cabinet', our Scrutiny Committee still fulfils a valuable role.

Primarily this is because the Scrutiny Committee has the necessary time, resources and freedom from routine

committee business to undertake in-depth investigations and can report and make recommendations to the Council as a result. Scrutiny Committee Members have a significant role in developing new policy through their in depth investigations and the recommendations arising from them.

The Committee also has power to "call-in" a decision made by a policy committee. The Scrutiny Committee cannot reverse a policy committee's decision but can recommend that the committee reconsiders the decision or that the matter be referred to the full Council. The Committee can also act in a confirming or supportive way – when it agrees with a particular approach.

The Local Government Act 2000 makes a clear distinction between Councillors who make policy decisions and those whose role is to challenge and scrutinise those decisions. For this to be effective, Scrutiny Committee Members must remain independent and develop an effective questioning approach. To provide this separation of roles, none of the Members of the Scrutiny Committee serves on the Council's policy committee.

The Committee takes this opportunity to draw to Councillors' attention the potential for a conflict of interests where Scrutiny Committee Members also represent the Council on external bodies and decisions made by, or Council activities involving, these external bodies may be 'called-in' for scrutiny purposes.

¹ www.east-northamptonshire.gov.uk/Constitution

Membership

At 1 January 2007 (10 Members)

Michelle Goring	Rupert Reichhold (Vice-Chairman)
Sylvia Hobbs	Les Rolfe
Sue Homer	Philip Stearn (Chairman)
Marian Hollomon	Pam Whiting
Ron Pinnock	Clive Wood

From 16 May 2007 (15 Members)

David Bateman	Barbara Jenney
Peter Bedford	Gill Mercer (Vice-Chairman)
Pauline Bradberry (Chairman)	Marian Hollomon
Tony Boto	Ron Pinnock
Michael Finch	Rupert Reichhold
Richard Gell	Ron Silver
Glenvil Greenwood-Smith	Clive Wood
Sue Homer	

Halfway through the year, the Committee membership changed radically, both as a result of the District Council elections in May 2007 and the Council's decision to increase membership of the Committee from 10 to 15 members (see page 2).

Former Scrutiny Committee members, Michelle Goring, Sylvia Hobbs, and Les Rolfe had not sought re-election in May 2007. Councillors Philip Stearn (formerly Chairman of the Committee) and Pam Whiting, who were re-elected, moved to other Committees.

The Committee takes this opportunity to place on record its thanks to its former members for their contribution

to the Committee's work, particularly Councillor Philip Stearn, who chaired the Committee from May 2003 to May 2007 and led the successful development of the Council's scrutiny arrangements during this time.

As the Scrutiny Committee operates differently from traditional local government committees, the "learning curve" was significant for the new Committee members, but especially challenging for the newly elected councillors who had a new workload and responsibilities as elected representatives as well as the scrutiny function to familiarise themselves with.

Scrutiny Achievements

We held six full meetings during the year and a summary of the issues we considered and our resolutions and recommendations is set out below.

Care and Repair

On 21 February we agreed to review the working arrangements between the Council, Spire Homes and the Care and Repair agency and the overall operation of the Care and Repair service. We set up a Review Team comprising the then Chairman of the Committee, Councillor Philip Stearn, together with Councillors Sylvia Hobbs, Ron Pinnock, Rupert Reichhold and Les Rolfe.

In June we appointed Councillors Sue Homer, Barbara Jenney, Gill Mercer, Marian Hollomon, Ron Pinnock and Rupert Reichhold to continue the work of this Review.

We endorsed the final report and recommendations of the Review Team at our meeting on 18 December and made recommendations to the Policy and Resources Committee. A more detailed account of the Review is given on page 8.

The Provision of Community Transport within the District

Following its consideration of a request for financial support from the

Nene & Ouse Community Transport Scheme, the Policy and Resources Committee, on 18 June, asked us to review the provision of community transport, within the District.

With this in mind, on 20 June, we set up a Review Team comprising the Chairman of the Committee, together with Councillors David Bateman, Mike Finch and Richard Gell.

We approved the final report of the Review Team at our meeting on 18 December and recommended that the Council approve the report and recommendations. A more detailed account of the Review is given on page 7.

Review of the Delivery of the Capital Programme

At our meeting on 20 June, we appointed Councillors Peter Bedford, Pauline Bradberry, Glenvil Greenwood-Smith, Sue Homer, Ron Pinnock and Rupert Reichhold to continue the work of the Capital Programme Review Team originally set up by the Committee in September 2006 (see paragraph 12.1 to 12.5 of the Committee's Annual Report for 2006).

We approved the final report of the Review Team at our meeting on 28 November and agreed that the recommendations contained in the report be submitted to the Finance Sub-Committee for consideration. A more detailed account of the Review is given on page 7.

Performance Management

In June, to prepare the Committee for its new responsibilities for performance management (see page 2) we received a presentation from the Council's Head of Policy and Community Development and the Policy Officer, together with a demonstration of the Council's new "Performance Plus" system. We also set up a Performance Panel, comprising Councillors Peter Bedford, Tony Boto, Pauline Bradberry, Glenvil Greenwood-Smith, Gill Mercer, Marian Hollomon and Ron Silver, to receive and consider performance information.

Section 106 Arrangements (Management of Planning Obligations)

As part of our ongoing monitoring of this area of work, following our detailed review of the subject in 2003/04 and in the light of a recent Ombudsman case, we received an update on 20 June on the current position in relation to Section 106 agreements. We recommended that the Policy and Resources Committee consider providing additional corporate resources for the effective monitoring of s.106 agreements, including subsequent payment collection arrangements.

At its meeting on 16 July 2007, the Policy and Resources Committee acted on our recommendation by creating an additional, part time post, for an initial period of 1 year, to provide for the effective monitoring of section 106 agreements.

Member Training

At our meeting on 20 June, the Monitoring Officer gave an introduction to the overview and scrutiny process and we arranged to have further training on this subject. 11 Members attended a training session on 30 July to familiarise themselves with the procedure for "calling-in" decisions made by the policy committee and to learn more about the review process, generally.

East Northamptonshire Youth Council

At our meeting on 20 June, we agreed to have an informal meeting with representatives of the East Northamptonshire Youth Council and the Council's Youth Champion. The meeting was held on 22 October. The "speed dating" approach we adopted at the meeting helped to promote a relaxed and informal atmosphere and the young people's frank and knowledgeable conversation helped us to understand their concerns and the challenges they face.

The Children and Young People's Services Co-ordinator

On 28 November, we received a report, supported by a presentation, demonstrating how the work of the Children and Young People's Services Co-ordinator was contributing to a better quality of life for children and young people across East Northamptonshire. We acknowledged the contribution that the post holder had made to the work of the Council and the community, which fully justified the Committee's original recommendation to create the post, following its Youth Review in 2005 (see paragraphs 15.1 to 15.9 of the Committee's Annual Report 2005).

Review of Service Plans

We received a detailed presentation from the Head of Planning Services in February about the wide range of activities his teams provide and recognised the significant impact that the service has on local communities, from the built environment, to conservation, housing and economic activity.

We recognise the need for us to challenge the relationship between individual service activities and the Council's priorities and the allocation of resources.

A more detailed account of the 3 in-depth reviews carried out by the Committee follows on pages 7 and 8.

Scrutiny Reviews

Capital Programme Review

As reported in our 2006 Annual Report (paragraphs 12.1 to 12.5) we have carried out a comprehensive review focusing on the reasons for significant underspends in the capital programme, seeking to identify improvements in the process for planning capital expenditure.

The Review Team took evidence from the Council's Head of Resources, who is responsible for the construction of the programme, and from the Chief Finance Officer. Discussions were also held with the external auditor, KPMG, to identify improvements in the capital planning process.

After initial evidence taking, it became clear that a number of improvements could be made in the processes for preparing the capital programme to ensure that the Council did not "over promise" what it could achieve and deliver and, in turn, that many factors influence what money would be spent within any financial year. The Review Team focused on improvements that could be made in the process to ensure that the capital programme was a true reflection of what could be delivered and spent

We approved the Review Team's final report in November and made a number of detailed recommendations to the Finance Sub-Committee for consideration.

Community Transport Review

At our meeting on 18 December, we received the final report of this review into the provision of community transport within the district of East Northamptonshire (the district).

With the help of the operators, funding bodies and other stakeholders, the review examined the operations closely and looked at the potential impacts that could be realised following indications that funding sources are to change. A visit was made to a neighbouring County Council to discuss its approach to funding community transport.

The review established that, although the social value of community transport was strong, with high levels of satisfaction being expressed by users of the three local voluntary schemes, there was unnecessary duplication of activity across the District, particularly in terms of administration. In view of this, the team developed a series of options in terms of future support both for the voluntary car schemes and for the mini-bus scheme run by Nene & Ouse Community Transport.

We noted that the main issues for the Council, in terms of its support for community transport in the future, concerned finance and resources and we recognised that the recommended options for the funding of community transport would require extensive work to pull together realistic appraisals of funding required in the medium and long term.

This work is now being undertaken by the Council's Officers to enable the Policy and Resources Committee to consider the financial implications.

Care and Repair Review

We have carried out an in-depth review of the working arrangements of the Care and Repair Service in East Northamptonshire.

The main work of the review was carried out by the Review Team appointed by the Scrutiny Committee on 20 June, comprising Councillors Gill Mercer, Sue Homer*, Barbara Jenney, Marian Hollomon, Ron Pinnock and Rupert Reichhold and supported by a dedicated Project Support Officer.

Information and advice was contributed principally by officers of East Northamptonshire Council, other Councils, external agencies and users of the service. Visits were made to the premises of Spire Homes and to Guildford Borough Council (a Best Practice authority). Further evidence was gathered by telephone, at officer meetings or as a result of written responses.

On 18 December we considered the final report of the review, which set out a framework for the kind of Care and Repair service which, the Review Team believed, the Council should seek to achieve locally.

During the review, the Team recognised that a comprehensive service could not be secured without the close co-operation of other agencies. In acknowledging that more work needed to be done to establish service demand and overall costs of any enhanced arrangements, the Team considered that this would best be undertaken by an Officer Project Group, with progress reports being made back to the Scrutiny Committee.

We endorsed the Review Team's work and the Policy and Resources Committee endorsed our recommendations for this further work to be carried out.

** (In the event, Councillor Homer was unable to take part in this review.)*

We will continue to receive regular update reports to enable us to monitor progress with the implementation of the recommendations of these reviews.

Other Aspects of Scrutiny

Fourth Option Special Interest Group (FOSIG)

In March 2005, the Local Government Association approved the creation of FOSIG – the *Fourth Option Special Interest Group*. This gave a voice to those local authorities who, like East Northamptonshire Council, have chosen to make “alternative arrangements” by stream-lining their committee structures, rather than adopt a Cabinet or Executive management structure.

The Council is currently represented on FOSIG by the former Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Philip Stearn.

Requests for “Call-In” under Scrutiny Procedure Rule 14.3

No decisions were “called in” by members of the Scrutiny Committee during the year.

Evidence Gathering

During the year we have considered evidence in a variety of formats including formal reports, written and oral evidence, special meetings and interviews. Members continue to welcome the opportunity to become directly involved in setting the Committee’s agenda and work programme. We find the different approach to council business rewarding and want to look at new ways of extending the range of inquiries and methods we use in future.

We particularly enjoyed the “speed dating” format of the meeting with Youth Councillors and have also appreciated the different formats used by the Council’s officers in describing their team’s work for us. We would like

to see the public become more involved in the work of the Committee, particularly in providing evidence of community needs or aspirations.

We continue to publicise our work in the local media and the Council’s community newspaper, *Nene Valley News*, to help raise the profile of the Committee’s work and, where appropriate, we call for evidence from the general public and special interest groups to encourage greater public involvement in our work.

Influencing Policy Development

Members believe that Scrutiny Committee activity has made a significant impact on service improvement and policy development locally and will continue to do so as the current Committee grows in experience and confidence.

The Role of Scrutiny in the Committee System

We believe that all Members of the Council need to be aware of the way in which the “call-in” procedure operates and it is important that this continues to form part of induction training for all newly elected Members.

The work we have undertaken to date demonstrates that the Committee has the necessary time and resources to carry out in-depth inquiries. We encourage the policy Committee to make use of scrutiny investigations to look at issues of concern.

Support for Scrutiny

Members are satisfied with the independence of the Committee and the support provided by Officers to date.

Work programme for 2008

During 2008 we look forward to considering matters of concern to local communities, looking in depth at more of the Council's services and receiving regular reports from the Performance Panel.

We will seek to structure our work programme in a way that ensures that priority is given to reviewing poorer performing services or those which have benefited from increased resources, to ensure services are providing value for money.

We look to the Performance Panel to enable us to become more involved in the scrutiny of services where performance is less than satisfactory.

We continue to monitor our training needs and our work programme and set target dates for follow-up reports from Officers on earlier studies, where appropriate.

Conclusion

The sixth year of operation for the Scrutiny Committee has been a period of consolidation and continued learning. We believe that, during the year, the new Committee has continued to make a significant contribution to the work of East Northamptonshire Council and we look forward to building on this during the year ahead.

Councillor Pauline Bradberry
Chairman
On behalf of the Scrutiny Committee

February 2008