

Scrutiny Committee

Chairman's Annual Report - 2008

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Introduction



Introduction by Councillor Phillip Stearn

Chairman of East Northamptonshire Council's Scrutiny Committee



I am pleased to present the Scrutiny Committee's seventh 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. Many people have contributed to the success of Scrutiny in East Northamptonshire, including external organisations 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 be 'P Stearn', written on a light-colored, slightly textured background.

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, Part 4.4 of which 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.

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

This is because the Council's 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 that has been 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 those Councillors who make policy decisions and others whose role is to challenge and scrutinise those decisions. For this to be effective, Members of the Scrutiny Committee must retain their independence and need to develop an effective questioning approach. To provide this separation of roles, none of the Members of the Scrutiny Committee serves on the Council's primary policy committee, the Policy and Resources 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 2008

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	

From 7 May 2008

David Bateman	Gill Mercer (Vice-Chairman)
Peter Bedford	Brian Northall
Tony Boto	Ron Pinnock
Richard Gell	Phillip Stearn (Chairman)
Glenvil Greenwood Smith	Pam Whiting
Marian Hollomon	Clive Wood
Sue Homer	Colin Wright
Barbara Jenney	

Scrutiny Meetings

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

Reviews of Service Plans

This year, we have continued the important process of gaining a better understanding and appreciation of the work of the Council's Service teams.

At the June meeting we received a presentation from the Head of ICT Services and his team leaders on their work which covers systems development, technical support for ICT systems and software applications

used throughout the Council, Geographical Information Systems, support for system users and the administration of the telephony system. Details of the team structure and future developments were provided and, in particular, information was supplied about the new ICT Partnership with the Borough Council of Wellingborough.

At the September meeting the Head of Environmental Services and his four team leaders gave a detailed presentation on the work of their service area. The Commercial Health team illustrated how it is improving food safety and health and safety through training, sampling, investigations and enforcement. Campaigns to improve public health, such as the Schools' Hand Wash Challenge and Smoke Free Northants, had been particularly successful. The

work of the Environmental Protection team monitoring and investigating nuisance complaints, working closely with other agencies to protect the wider environment, dealing with emergency incidents, and dealing with contaminated land were explained. Details of the support the Private Sector Housing team gives to the community by administering housing grants, protecting tenants, advising landlords, improving energy efficiency and adapting properties were also provided. The success of the Waste Management team in ensuring regular waste collection, administering recycling schemes, keeping streets clean and issuing enforcement against fly tipping, dog fouling and littering was highlighted before the Community Safety Manager explained how the Community Safety team is working in partnership with other agencies, such as Northamptonshire Police, to reduce crime, anti-social behaviour, graffiti, and substance misuse.

At the December meeting the Head of Planning Services presented the work of his service area. The presentation covered the team structure and the work of the different teams, which include Development Control, Planning Policy, Conservation, Building Control, Land Charges and Administration, Housing Strategy and Economic Development. He outlined the service's priorities, which are to make the area more prosperous and healthier through projects such as the regeneration of Rushden and increasing delivery of affordable housing, to ensure development is sustainable, to deliver a high quality service, and to ensure the good reputation of his service area is maintained. He concluded with a scenario which illustrated how the team could make a difference in 'real-life' customer situations.

Area Based Initiatives (ABI)

The Committee was pleased to hear about the successes of the approach taken by the Council and its partners in implementing the first Area Based Initiative - the Highfield Improvement Project in Rushden. As an entirely new area of activity for the Council, implementing the Highfield Improvement Project was a continuous and valuable learning process for staff and Councillors alike and for its partners; it has also given new skills and confidence to the residents of the Highfields community.

The Highfield Improvement Project (HIP) started in 2005. The Highfield area comprised part of the Rushden Pemberton Ward and was the district's most deprived Super Output Area based on the 2004 and 2007 Indices of Multiple Deprivation produced by the Office for National Statistics. The project began with consultation with local residents to identify the issues that mattered most to them and where improvements needed to be made. An action plan was developed and a Highfield Improvements Project Community Association (HIPCA) was formed to get local residents involved. A management group, which included representatives of the partner organisations and representatives of the HIPCA committee, was also set up to monitor progress with the Highfield Improvement Project and plan long-term activities.

Representatives from the Groundwork North Northamptonshire Association, Northamptonshire Police, Rockingham Forest Housing and Cultural Community partnerships who had all been actively involved in the Highfield Improvement Project gave evidence to the Committee to support our discussions.

We noted that, given the success of the HIP, the Policy and Resources Committee had approved the continuation and expansion of the ABI programme. This will involve undertaking two more ABIs over the next 3 years in Irthlingborough's John Pyel ward and the Rushden Hayden ward.

Local Environment Quality (LEQ) Survey for East Northamptonshire

We received a report on the results of a local environmental quality survey carried out in East Northamptonshire by Environmental Campaigns (ENCAMS) on behalf of DEFRA during 2007/08. This covered issues such as litter, detritus, graffiti, flyposting, condition of highways and street furniture, and the condition and management of litter bins.

The Committee questioned the Waste Manager on a number of aspects of the report, and asked about responsibility for cleaning hedgerows and roadside litter and the steps being taken to deal with cigarette butts, particularly in Rushden High Street where a targeted campaign was planned (and subsequently proved very successful).

We noted that there was a system in place to monitor the performance of the cleansing contractors and recognised the need for education and awareness sessions for Councillors, customers and the public generally to raise awareness of the issues. We believe Town and Parish Councils need to be involved in monitoring street cleanliness.

We emphasised the need to establish effective officer links with County Council officers to identify "hotspots" on private land and in relation to take-away food shops and noted the problems caused by householders

putting out waste too early in the morning.

We recommended that, to supplement the educational initiatives currently underway or planned, awareness sessions be introduced for District Councillors, to enhance understanding of the measures being taken by the officers, and to identify target areas for resources. The Committee will review actions following the training.

Fire Service Integrated Risk Management Planning (IRMP)

The Committee received a presentation about the Northamptonshire Fire and Rescue Service's IRMP. This outlined the Fire and Rescue Service strategy and objectives for 2009-2012 and the performance of the Northamptonshire Fire Service in recent years. We took the opportunity to thank the Fire Service for its effective partnership working and in particular its involvement in the Area Based Initiatives and Young Firefighters schemes in East Northamptonshire.

Development Control Service Improvement Plan

In December the Committee reviewed the progress in implementing the Development Control Improvement Plan. We were pleased to note that satisfaction surveys were planned for 2009 in order to assess Members' and customers' experience of the Development Control service. In discussion, the importance of training and awareness of the planning process for all Members was highlighted. We hope that this will be covered by the A4E Members'

Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours project, as an aspect of core knowledge that would benefit all Members.

Homelessness Levels and Affordable Housing Development

At our December meeting the Housing Strategy Manager reported to us on homelessness in the district and, in particular, the impact of family breakdown, and the potential for Housing Association development of affordable housing units across the district.

We were pleased to see a reduction in the number of people accepted as homeless as a result of ongoing prevention activity by the Housing Options Team and noted that the Housing Team was also looking at homelessness shelters for 'rough sleepers'.

Despite the economic downturn, the number of mortgage repossessions had not then risen significantly and only a slight rise was anticipated. We hope that recently announced Government plans may help prevent a steep increase in repossessions, with initiatives such as a housing rescue scheme currently being piloted, which allow for Housing Associations to step in and buy a property, enabling the owner to continue to live in the property as a tenant.

Performance Panel

The Scrutiny Committee has established a Performance Panel to monitor the Council's performance against statutory national and local performance indicators.

Membership

At 1 January 2008		From 7 May 2008	
Peter Bedford	Marian Hollomon	Glennil Greenwood-Smith (Chairman)	Phillip Stearn
Tony Boto	Gill Mercer (Chairman)	Barbara Jenney	Pam Whiting
Pauline Bradberry	Ron Silver	Gill Mercer	
Glennil Greenwood-Smith			

Work undertaken by the Panel

The Panel met in February to establish its Terms of Reference and has held three further meetings this year to consider quarterly performance reports. The Panel also considers end of year performance and targets, focussing on over and under performing statutory national and local performance indicators.

All the Council's performance data is collected and monitored using a software system known as Performance Plus. The Chairman of the Performance Panel attended training for officers on the performance management framework, the use of the Performance Plus system and data collection. The training enabled a better understanding of the performance framework and the key issues around data inputting to meet the requirements of the Panel.

Other Aspects of Scrutiny

Fourth Option Special Interest Group (FOSIG)

I currently represent the Council on the Local Government Association's Fourth Option Special Interest Group. This group gives a voice to local authorities, like East Northamptonshire Council, which have chosen to make "alternative arrangements" by retaining their committee structures, rather than adopt a Cabinet or Executive management structure.

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

Requests for "Call-In" under Scrutiny Procedure Rule 14.3

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

The Role of Scrutiny in the Committee System

Members believe that Scrutiny Committee activity can make 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 Committee has the necessary time and resources to carry out in-depth inquiries. We encourage the policy Committees to make use of scrutiny investigations to look at issues of concern.

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.

Work programme for 2009

During 2009, the difficult economic situation means there will be increased pressure on limited resources and the Council has an even greater need to demonstrate value for money in the future. We will seek to structure our work programme in a way that ensures 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 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 continue to monitor our training needs and our work programme and set target dates for follow-up reports from Officers on earlier studies, where that's appropriate. We will begin the year with consideration of own information needs as Councillors, and our experience of IT support, focusing on how Councillors use IT – particularly the web site and our intranet – to access information.

Conclusion

The seventh year of operation for the Scrutiny Committee has been a period of consolidation and continued learning. Whilst there have not been any significant reviews this year, we believe that, during the year, the 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 Phillip Stearn
Chairman
On behalf of the Scrutiny Committee

February 2009