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South Cambridgeshire District Council

Overview and Scrutiny

Annual Report 2009/10

Draft to Scrutiny and Overview Committee
meeting of 1 April 2010

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CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD

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Councillor John Batchelor
Chairman
Scrutiny and Overview Committee

picture here

Councillor James Hockney
Vice-Chairman
Scrutiny and Overview Committee

During 2009/10 the Scrutiny and Overview Committee has continued to add value to the work of the Council, and help to improve local services for the residents of South Cambridgeshire.

We started the year with news of winning a national award for our 2008 review of Arbury Park, now Orchard Park. Judges described this as “an excellent piece of work ... with an impact on the Primary Care Trust, County Council, developers and many others”. They also commended our imaginative use of limited resources.

During the year this success led to our being asked by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to help support scrutineers at a Lincolnshire district council in on their own improvement journey. A small delegation of councillors and officers visited us and an ongoing link was forged, from which both councils will benefit.

One of our most significant projects in 2009/10 was completed by the small cross-party task and finish group set up last year to review the Council’s financial and budget-setting processes. This group examined the Council’s value for money record, and worked with members of the public to improve the ways in which we communicate and consult about Council finances.

Another task and finish group looked at the way the Council works with partners to provide services for children and young people. It conducted some excellent research with children and young people themselves. The findings led to ten recommendations for improving issues such as transport for children and young people, effective and timely consultation, and working more efficiently and effectively with partners.

At our regular committee meetings we continued to provide robust scrutiny and challenge on issues such as the budget; choice based lettings; equality and diversity; implications of retaining the housing stock; and several aspects of partnership working. We also met individual members of the Cabinet at each meeting to hear about the challenges ahead and explore any ways in which scrutiny could contribute.

Finally, this report contains examples of several tangible outcomes as a direct or indirect result of our work. I hope you will enjoy reading this report and finding out more about our achievements this year, and our plans for 2010/11.

Cllr John Batchelor
Chairman of Scrutiny and Overview Committee

What is Scrutiny?

The Local Government Act 2000 says that councils must have at least one committee that has the power to review or scrutinise decisions or actions which affect the authority's area or its residents. The intention was that this committee would work in a similar way to parliamentary select committees.

The Police and Justice Act 2006 and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 gave further powers and duties to scrutiny committees, such as the duty to scrutinise crime and disorder at least once a year, and the right of any councillor to bring an otherwise intractable ward issue to the committee.

The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 added the power to hold the Council's most senior officers to account; and the responsibility to ensure petitions are dealt with correctly.

The Local Authorities (Overview and Scrutiny) Bill published in December 2009 aims to strengthen and broaden the powers of overview and scrutiny committees to hold other service providers to account.

A large number of service providers already have a duty to cooperate with scrutiny committees, and take account of their recommendations. However, many other organisations voluntarily embrace scrutiny, without the need for legislation. For example, developers and utility companies readily supported our 2008 review of Orchard Park.

The aim of scrutiny committees is to provide an open and transparent forum in which to examine whether policies and services meet the Council's priorities and the needs of local people. They cannot make decisions or policies themselves, but they have the power of influence; they make evidence-based recommendations that are informed by stakeholder and public opinions, performance information, examples of best practice and expert advice.

Complementing the work of the Council

Effective scrutiny provides an additional, independent resource for reviewing council decisions and policies without being divisive or confrontational. Scrutiny councillors are in a unique position to influence policy, contribute to decisions and champion local issues of concern.

When working well, overview and scrutiny can help to

- raise the quality of local debate
- improve decision-making
- get to the heart of complex issues
- engage the local community and key stakeholders
- strengthen accountability
- develop new ideas
- support policy development
- monitor and improve performance

Scrutiny at South Cambridgeshire District Council

The Council has one scrutiny committee, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, which has twelve members drawn from the political groups in the same proportion as on the Council as a whole.

Another strand of scrutiny is delivered by members of the committee who act as scrutiny monitors at Portfolio Holders' decision-making meetings which are held in public. Here scrutiny members can develop greater knowledge in an area of the Council's work and therefore offer well-informed and timely challenge and influence.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee's work falls into five broad areas:

Pre-decision scrutiny:

- considering an issue about to come before the Council, Cabinet or Portfolio Holder and providing a forum for cross-council debate based on a wide range of evidence.

Policy or Performance Reviews:

- a detailed inquiry into a topic, drilling down to the basics and producing a report with evidence-based recommendations for improvement. This can relate to any local service, whether provided by the Council or not and is usually led by a time-limited task and finish group. Such a group can include any non-Cabinet councillor; it can also co-opt residents or members of partner organisations.

One-Off Reviews:

- a single-meeting review of a topic, usually inviting Cabinet members, officers or external agencies to come and speak to them about a service or policy area before making recommendations for improvement, if applicable.

Performance Scrutiny:

- monitoring financial and service performance to ensure the Council is meeting, or exceeding, its targets and objectives. This is primarily delivered by scrutiny monitors at Portfolio Holders' meetings.

Call-in:

- the Chairman of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee or any 5 councillors can, in certain circumstances, 'call-in' a decision which has been made but not yet implemented. The Committee can then interview the relevant Cabinet member(s) or officers and suggest improvements to the decision, or refer it to the full Council.

How do the committees decide what to scrutinise?

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee sets its own work programme and the topic suggestions come from many sources:

- Residents' survey
- Cabinet Members' forward plans
- Customer Complaints system*
- Councillors
- Local petitions
- Local Strategic Partnership members
- Officers

- Residents*
- Portfolio monitors
- The Council's Forward Plan of key decisions
- The Audit Commission's assessment of SCDC at <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk>

* Committees do not scrutinise individual cases as there are other ways to resolve these; but they would consider any underlying trend or policy where there might be a number of similar cases.

Programme planning takes place at the start of the civic year although additional topics can also be added during the year as they arise. These will be a mixture of one-off topics and some more in-depth reviews.

When selecting topics for scrutiny, councillors use a scoring system to assess whether they are:

- Of significant local public concern
- Relevant to the Council's corporate objectives
- Capable of being influenced and
- Not being scrutinised by another body

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ACHIEVEMENTS 2009/10

1. Scrutiny and Overview Committee

Chairman: Councillor John Batchelor
Vice-Chairman: Councillor James Hockney

Councillors:
Val Barrett
Jaime Dipple (until end June 09)
Janice Guest
Roger Hall
Liz Heazell
Mervyn Loynes
Mike Mason
Deborah Roberts
Julia Squier (from September 09)
Bridget Smith
Bunty Waters

The following councillors attended as substitutes during the year:

Richard Barrett
Trisha Bear
Douglas de Lacey
David Morgan
Charles Nightingale
Peter Topping

The following additional councillors joined task and finish groups:

Richard Barrett
Nigel Cathcart
Cicely Murfitt
Hazel Smith
Richard Summerfield

Task and Finish Group Reviews

- 1.1 A cross-party task and finish group was established in June 2008 with the following terms of reference:

To investigate and make recommendations for improving the Council's financial management and budget setting processes, and to recommend improvements to future scrutiny of the budget and integrated business reports

- 1.2 This group presented an interim report to the Cabinet in March 2009 and was commended on a useful piece of work. Cabinet accepted all but one of the eleven recommendations at the time. A decision about the eleventh one was deferred until the new Executive Director was in post, when it too was accepted and added to the Cabinet's action plan.

- 1.3 The review group monitored the action plan during 2009/10 and was pleased to note at the end of the civic year that all the actions were complete or on target.
- 1.4 The group had also questioned the Council's practice of presenting the budget in two parts; the staffing and overheads element before Christmas and the whole budget after Christmas. They did not make a recommendation on this before the new Executive Director was in post. But following his appointment, they were pleased to note that the 2010/11 budget was presented in a single report, in February 2010.
- 1.5 The group's second phase of work looked at the Council's record on value for money and the ways in which the Council communicates and consults with residents regarding the Council's finances. This work was supported by some research carried out with a residents' focus group.
- 1.6 On value for money, they found that South Cambridgeshire's council tax is 12th lowest of all 201 district councils in the country, while the vast majority of the Council's services perform well above average. Nevertheless, residents responding to the 2008 Place Survey seemed to be unaware of this good value for money record. Findings from the focus group suggested that residents assess value for money at a much more local level, not district-wide.
- 1.7 The group recommended that more work be done to communicate value for money messages, so that residents had a truer picture of the Council's achievements on their behalf.
- 1.8 The task and finish group found that the approach to benchmarking and value for money testing was excellent in some parts of the Council and recommended that this good practice be rolled out across the Council.
- 1.9 Regarding consultation, the group had made several recommendations in its interim report, which contributed to a marked increase in the response rate to the 2009/10 consultation.
- 1.10 However, work with the focus group suggested that not all residents are aware that the council tax is divided between the three layers of local government, as well as the police and fire service. The task and finish group therefore recommended that the Council explores a mechanism for working with those other bodies to carry out joint consultation.
- 1.11 In summary, the task and finish group achieved several useful outcomes which strengthen the budget setting and financial control processes
- An agreed corporate cycle now informs budget-, consultation-, service- and scrutiny-planning
 - There is a closer working relationship between the accountancy team and cost centre managers which has led to improved financial control
 - A procedure is in place for controlling budget variances of more than +/- 5% and more than +/- £2,500
 - The constitution has been amended so that a budget roll-over is permitted only where the budget-holder can show that the current year's budget has been fully committed and that there were no other sources of funding

- The new management competencies framework provides targeted financial management training if a need is identified through a manager's performance and development review
 - Integrated business monitoring reports now show budget information alongside relevant performance information, enabling more accurate analysis of spending and outcomes
 - There have been improvements to the Council's website and council tax leaflet, enabling residents to more easily understand council finances: a simpler summary of accounts is also planned
 - There was a marked increase in the number of residents responding to the budget consultation; consultation with businesses has also improved
 - Work has begun on how to communicate the Council's 'value for money' record to residents
 - Members have received a refresher session on financial scrutiny which informed scrutiny of the 2010/11 budget
 - From 2010 Members will be able to attend an annual workshop for understanding and scrutinising the emerging budget and service plans
 - Feedback from the residents focus group has been used to radically improve the 2010 council tax leaflet, and will further influence next year's design.
- 1.12 The task and finish group's final report was presented to the Cabinet in April 2010. This made three more recommendations to: improve communication regarding value for money; improve the use of benchmarking; and look at ways to work with partners when consulting about council tax.
- 1.13 We will monitor the outcome of these recommendations during 2010/11.
- 1.14 A second task and finish group started work in December 2009 with the following terms of reference:
- To review how effectively the Council works with partners to meet the needs of children and young people and recommend areas for improvement.*
- 1.15 This group wanted to discover whether the Council's partnership work could be used more efficiently or effectively to serve our children and young people. Could SCDC influence the strategic direction of the partnerships? Should we be sending different people to some partnerships, or even stop attending some altogether? Are there gaps and duplications? How well do we share outcomes and learning? Above all, which partnerships are making a difference in areas that really matter to children and young people themselves.
- 1.16 Inevitably, while intending to focus on services for children and young people, the review generated recommendations that would apply to any of our partnerships, whatever their focus or client group.
- 1.17 The task and finish group started by interviewing children and young people from across the District, to find out what really matters to them. The feedback was remarkably consistent.
- 1.18 Most participants valued the rural nature and community spirit of their village, the quality of their school, the youth cafés and the feeling of belonging. With regard to improvements, they wanted: things to do, places to go and affordable, accessible public transport to get there.

- 1.19 The task and finish group then set about finding out how effectively the Council can influence and improve such services through the partnerships supported by SCDC, as well as other services designed to help and support children and young people. Using a paper survey and face to face meetings, they gathered the views and experiences of officers and members with experience of serving children and young people via partnership working.
- 1.20 The task and finish group presented a report to the Cabinet in April 2010. This made ten recommendations addressing issues such as transport for children and young people, effective consultation, and a more efficient approach to partnership working.
- 1.21 We will monitor the outcome of these recommendations during 2010/11.
- 1.22 Apart from these two projects, the Committee has also sought to add value on several other issues facing the Council, as follows.

Partnership Working

- 1.23 Partnership working is increasingly important for all public service providers and therefore the scrutiny and overview committee sought to add value to the Council's work in this area. In addition to the task and finish group looking at services provided in partnership for children and young people, we looked at the work of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP), the health service and the local strategic partnership (LSP). We also scrutinised the case for providing our revenues and benefits service in partnership with Uttlesford District Council.
- 1.24 During 2008/09 the Audit Commission had criticised the CDRP's poor performance in reducing crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour; and so we invited the chairman of the CDRP to describe how this would be addressed. We will continue to support the CDRP's improvement over the coming twelve months by monitoring its performance and spending.
- 1.25 The LSP had conducted a self assessment using the Audit Commission's improvement tool *Working Better Together?* and we scrutinised their findings. We expressed concern regarding the amount of funds which remained unspent from the Local Public Service Agreement Reward Grant; we heard that it had taken longer than expected to get the funding but most projects had now begun.
- 1.26 We also examined the case for merging the LSP with that of Cambridge City. We agreed that this would lead to greater efficiency, but expressed our concerns regarding the need to protect the rural voice and regarding the governance arrangements. The merger was agreed in February 2010. It was agreed that time will be set aside at all joint meetings for presentation of parish plans, and that chairmanship will alternate between the two authorities. Local partnerships will have clear reporting arrangements to the new Board; and this Board will be subject to scrutiny by each local authority's overview and scrutiny arrangement.
- 1.27 We had a very informative presentation from Cambridgeshire Community Services regarding the health and social care services that they provide in partnership with the District and County councils. This body is accountable to the

Cambridgeshire Primary Care Trust and we were pleased to hear that it has a good working relationship with South Cambridgeshire District Council.

- 1.28 Following a request from the Finance Portfolio Holder, we examined the case for entering into a partnership with Uttlesford District Council to jointly provide our revenues and benefits service. A number of concerns were explored, which influenced Cabinet recommendations ahead of the issue being debated at the Council meeting on 25 February 2010. One concern regarding the decision process was the subject of a later call-in, as described below.

Budget

- 1.29 The Committee scrutinised the end of year position of the 2008/09 budget and we were pleased to note that the underspend was only 1.36% for the General Fund, 0.52% for the Housing Revenue Account and 2.54% for capital expenditure, which was within target.
- 1.30 We also examined the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in November. Due to the ongoing economic downturn, this included provision for wide-ranging spending cuts and some redundancies. Our role was to scrutinise the viability of the MTFS, and its effect on the Council's agreed aims and objectives. This was reviewed again at the time of the annual budget-setting.
- 1.31 Scrutiny of the 2010/11 budget in February was preceded by an all-Member workshop facilitated by an external trainer. This session provided us with an expert's assessment of the budget and reassured us about some aspects. It also generated a number of questions which we followed up at the meeting.
- 1.32 Our subsequent statement to the Cabinet expressed a number of concerns regarding proposed spending cuts. Specifically we questioned the effect on service levels in the New Communities section and the ability to deliver ICT developments. We also asked for more clarity about where the identified £2m savings would specifically fall.

Planning Delegation Meetings

- 1.33 The Committee examined the Council's process for determining those planning applications that are delegated to officers. Under this process, the Planning Committee Chairman held monthly 'Delegation Meetings' with officers to discuss the more complicated applications. The aim was to provide for a much higher degree of local involvement through the local member than was or is the case elsewhere throughout the country. However, feedback at our June meeting showed that this system was not thought by parish councils to be sufficiently transparent nor giving them sufficient opportunity to influence decisions.
- 1.34 Parish council representatives also stated that the rule that developments of fewer than ten dwellings could be delegated, worked against smaller villages, where smaller developments could have a considerable impact.
- 1.35 Following further consultation, the planning portfolio holder resolved to develop a revised procedure and then abolish the Chairman's Delegation Meetings. This will be subject to review after twelve months in operation. We are pleased to have provided the forum for developing this service improvement.

Implications of retaining the housing stock

- 1.36 When tenants voted in Spring 2009 to remain with South Cambridgeshire District Council, rather than transfer to a registered social landlord, the Committee scrutinised the financial and resource implications for the Council. The public consultation had warned that the Council would be unable to maintain the same level of spending and the portfolio holder had already set out some of the expected service cuts.
- 1.37 In response to a question from the Committee, the portfolio holder said that there were no plans to join the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH) although this had not been ruled out for the future.
- 1.38 We also challenged the methodology used for the stock condition survey, and therefore its accuracy; but the portfolio holder said that the maintenance plan had been agreed by tenants and Members. There may be scope to return to these issues in 2010/11.

Economic Downturn

- 1.39 One of the most serious issues faced by the Council during 2009/10 was the ongoing impact of the nationwide economic downturn. Early in 2009 the Cabinet had decided that the most effective way of supporting the District was by helping local businesses and thereby helping to protect people's jobs. They had agreed an action plan and allocated a sum of £150,000.
- 1.40 The committee continued to monitor progress against the action plan during 2009/10 and made suggestions for improvement. For example, we asked that more publicity be given to the Hardship Rate Relief for businesses and so this was publicised via the press, council staff and a newsletter to businesses. At its meeting in January 2010, the Cabinet heard that there had been a marked increase in the number of applications for Hardship Rate Relief and supported continued promotion of this support.

Equalities Standard for Local Government

- 1.41 During 2009/10 the Committee provided some challenge in the Council's process of self evaluation against the Equalities Standard for Local Government. We supported the decision to self declare at Level 2, but suggested that the Council should add a seventh strand of potential disadvantage: rurality. This is now starting to be included in the Council's equality and diversity work.

Other issues scrutinised in 2009/10

- 1.42 Other issues examined by the committee included the Performance Improvement Strategy, Choice Based Lettings and the draft Youth Participation Strategy.

Public Questions

- 1.43 Public questions led to our scrutiny of the planning delegation process (above). Residents and parish council partners also raised other issues as follows.

- 1.44 The Leader of the Council was asked what would happen to the redundant recycling boxes for plastics following the introduction of another wheeled bin. He explained that another council had expressed an interest in collecting and buying them. Alternatively, the boxes would remain in residents' possession as it would not make economic sense to collect them. Since then, the other council has withdrawn their interest and so residents will retain the boxes.
- 1.45 The Leader was challenged by a resident about potential cuts to the village warden service. He explained that the national and local financial situation left the Council facing inevitable spending cuts but no firm decision had been made. Any decision would take effect from April 2011. The resident pointed out that village wardens saved public money overall by ensuring that residents could remain in their own homes, rather than in residential or nursing care.

Monitoring portfolios

- 1.46 South Cambridgeshire District Council has been praised for its innovative practice of holding meetings in public for each portfolio holder to discuss and agree decisions within their service areas. These meetings also receive quarterly reports on spending and service delivery and aim to increase their policy development work. The scrutiny committee sends at least one monitor to each meeting, as follows:

Environmental Services	Cllr Deborah Roberts
Housing	Cllr Liz Heazell Cllr Janice Guest (until November 2009) Cllr Val Barrett (from November 2009)
Leader	Cllr John Batchelor
New Communities	Cllr Roger Hall
Planning	Cllr Val Barrett
Policy, Improvement, Communications - became Policy & Performance portfolio from 15 January 2010	Cllr James Hockney
Staffing, Finance and Deputy Leader	Cllr Mervyn Loynes Cllr Roger Hall
Sustainability, Procurement and Efficiency - became Northstowe portfolio from 15 January 2010	Cllr Mike Mason Cllr Bridget Smith

- 1.47 These monitors act as a bridge between the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and the Cabinet, promoting constructive dialogue and timely scrutiny that adds value to the work of the Cabinet. A trainer from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) provided an excellent training session during the year to refresh monitors' skills and share good practice. We plan to further develop our expertise during 2010/11.
- 1.48 Our input has sometimes been hampered by the postponement or cancellation of some meetings at short notice. However, there is now a process whereby the Leader or his Deputy will step in for an absent portfolio holder.

- 1.49 Examples of scrutiny input at portfolio meetings included:
- a. Sale of a site in Fulbourn: the portfolio holder agreed with the monitors' preference for affordable housing but was later overruled by the Cabinet.
 - b. Community clean up campaign: the portfolio holder agreed with the monitor's view that residents saw this as a district council function and parish councils might not wish to participate, but there would be benefit in working with social landlords. The portfolio holder also supported the idea of offering incentives to promote good citizenship and a sense of ownership.
 - c. Customer Service Excellence project: the monitors discussed and supported this new project.
 - d. Complaints Handling: the portfolio holder agreed to hold a short session for Members to hear about the updated policy.
 - e. Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan: the monitor challenged the robustness of the selection criteria, consultation process and links with the Section 106 process.
- 1.50 Following feedback from a monitor, we agreed that the Committee needed to examine the ongoing performance of the Council's housing service, and spending decisions following the retention of the housing stock.
- 1.51 We also agreed with a monitor's suggestion to check for progress on the Customer Service Excellence project during 2010/11.

Call-in

- 1.52 The call-in procedure was used twice during 2009/10. The first was to examine a decision by the Policy and Performance Portfolio Holder aimed at strengthening the security of councillors' email accounts.
- 1.53 The committee heard that a Government Code of Connection (CoCo) was about to be introduced so that all councils could share information securely. The overwhelming majority of councils had already complied with the CoCo instruction. One element of it was the need for greater email security when accessing emails off site, and the cessation of auto-forwarding emails to non-Council email addresses.
- 1.54 The Policy and Performance Portfolio Holder had therefore decided that councillors would need to use the secure system for accessing Council email accounts and that no auto-forwarding to personal addresses would be allowed.
- 1.55 The Committee agreed with the portfolio holder's decision but said that more warning should have been given to Members about the issues involved, as the CoCo had been published over one year previously.
- 1.56 The Committee also recommended that the portfolio holder arrange for some additional training for councillors, who had not been given adequate information about the new system. Training was then offered to all Members at the next Council meeting.

- 1.57 The second call-in related to the decision making process around negotiations for merging the Council's revenues and benefits service with that of Uttlesford District Council. We had no concerns about the decision itself, only the process.
- 1.58 We interviewed the Leader and Finance Portfolio Holder to examine whether the Cabinet had: considered available options and given reasons for their decision; undertaken due consultation; been open, helpful and consistent; and made their aims and desired outcomes clear.
- 1.59 Since the decision itself was not disputed, we agreed not to refer it back to the Cabinet. With regard to the process, we found that the decision had been made with due consultation and that the aims and desired outcomes had been clear. We also agreed that the Cabinet had considered the available options and given reasons for their decision.
- 1.60 However, we were not all satisfied that the decision making process had been open and transparent.

Monitoring previous reviews and recommendations

- 1.61 At each meeting the Committee receives ongoing progress reports on previous recommendations and we have been pleased to find that the vast majority have been accepted and actioned in a timely way.
- 1.62 In November we revisited our review of Orchard Park (formerly Arbury Park) and received progress reports from both the County and District councils. Local residents also attended and the chairman of Impington Parish Council asked several questions regarding more recent public transport issues in the locality. Whilst some issues remain as 'work in progress' we were satisfied that our report and recommendations were delivering improvements at Orchard Park, and will inform future housing developments.

Off-site meetings

- 1.63 Once again we considered whether to continue holding our meetings at 'off-site' venues wherever possible, such as village colleges or halls. We have done so for more than two years and this accords with the Council's aim for greater public involvement in democracy.
- 1.64 Feedback received from those attending the meetings shows that people felt welcome and able to ask questions, and they appreciated the Committee's efforts to reach out to them.
- 1.65 However, the number of residents attending our meetings has remained low. This may in part be due to the 5.30pm start. Effective publicity is also a challenge; even those who attended had not noticed the articles in their parish magazine and local newspaper, nor posters near to the meeting venue.
- 1.66 More importantly, the evidence suggests that people will only come if the subject matter interests them. For example, the best attended meeting of the year examined the Council's planning delegation system; it was held at South Cambridgeshire Hall and residents attended from several villages around the District.

- 1.67 We decided to continue holding meetings off-site during the summer, with other meetings being at South Cambridgeshire Hall unless the agenda warrants otherwise. We are also re-examining our decision to hold meetings at 5.30pm. There is some merit in returning at least some meetings to 2pm; a decision will be made **in time for the first meeting of 2010/11**.

Health Scrutiny

The Council contributes to the scrutiny of health services in the county. Councillor Roger Hall is a member of Cambridgeshire County Council's Health & Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee, and Cllr Bridget Smith is his named substitute.

Councillor Hall took part in a working group which examined and responded to NHS Cambridgeshire's proposed service specification for alcohol treatment services. He also acts as one of the Committee's liaison councillors with Addenbrooke's Hospital and NHS Cambridgeshire.

Joint Accountability Committee

The work of Cambridgeshire Together, the county's Local Area Agreement Board (LAA), is scrutinised by a joint committee comprising members of the county and district councils. Cllr Liz Heazell represents this Council and is the vice chairman; her substitute is Cllr James Hockney.

The County Council is rightly proud of establishing, ahead of national guidance, this method of holding the LAA to account. However, there are still some issues to resolve. For example, the committee is still developing a process for ensuring that the Board responds to and takes account of recommendations. Also, resourcing is only sufficient for the formal committee sessions, rather than additional task and finish groups, which are generally accepted as the most effective vehicle for meaningful scrutiny.

During 2009/10 JAC focused on the LAA's plans to tackle the effects of the recession, particularly in supporting the voluntary and business sectors. They recommended that the LAA should explore opportunities to promote financial inclusion, such as through expansion of credit union facilities. This was endorsed by the LAA Board.

JAC also provided challenge to the LAA's performance arrangements, recommending that the Board should review and prioritise its resources on critical issues, as resources appeared to be spread too thinly. Such a review is now underway. JAC also gained the LAA's agreement to providing each council's performance figures separately in future, so that anomalies can be identified and examined.

Finally, JAC scrutinised progress in reducing carbon emissions and in delivering housing targets - highlighting a number of changes required to boost performance.

EVALUATING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

2.1 In the 2008/09 annual scrutiny report we set out the areas in which we wanted to make improvements this year. Our progress is shown below.

Publicity of meetings and communication with residents and stakeholders	Meetings are now advertised via posters, press and parish magazine articles. Committee members publicise meetings locally by word of mouth. There have been articles in the press, parish magazines and <i>South Cambs magazine</i>	☺
Public attendance at meetings	Around 20 residents and parish council representatives attended our meetings in 2009/10. This was disappointing in view of our increased publicity and holding most meetings off-site. We recognise that turnout depends on there being a topic of high local interest.	☹
Participation by other non-executive councillors	Five councillors joined our task and finish groups and another four attended meetings as substitutes. This is a small increase on last year.	☺
Making witnesses feel welcome and yet improving the effectiveness of our questioning	A liaison meeting with the chairman of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership has established a basis for cordial and constructive challenge. Feedback from portfolio holders and senior officers is that the Committee has increased in effectiveness.	☺
Selecting topics for scrutiny that are more relevant to residents living near the meeting venue; enabling residents to help set the agenda	Residents have helped to identify local issues, as at paragraphs 1.43 to 1.45. Other suggestions have been received in response to press articles.	☺
Contribution to scrutiny via portfolio holders' meetings	Paragraph 1.49 lists several issues on which monitors have contributed via portfolio holders' meetings	☺

2.2 The committee has a number of ways of monitoring its own effectiveness and performance. Primarily, we annually survey portfolio holders and senior officers regarding our effectiveness and style of working. This year they said that:

- our questions are generally well thought out and constructive
- the Committee is well chaired, open and inclusive
- we are becoming less politically biased
- portfolio monitors are useful because they read and know about the issues

- 2.3 They also gave us some constructive suggestions about areas for improvement, for example:
- more work is needed regarding political bias
 - meeting etiquette should include thanking those who attend
 - discussions could be more interactive
- 2.4 We also received feedback from residents, visitors from East Lindsey District Council, the Improvement and Development Agency and others. They made several suggestions for improvement such as:
- residents would appreciate knowing who everyone is
 - all the committee members should participate in discussions
 - the committee should make clear recommendations
- 2.5 We were pleased to find that the Audit Commission's organisational report said that the "Scrutiny Committee has improved, and is contributing to better decision making".
- 2.6 Another measure of our effectiveness is the percentage of our recommendations that are accepted. In 2009/10 more than 90% were accepted, which is on a par with last year.
- 2.7 Towards the end of 2009/10, we held a short workshop to evaluate our performance based on a framework developed by the Centre for Public Scrutiny. We asked ourselves:
- Does our work have impact?
 - How well do we communicate with and involve the public, partners, etc?
 - Is the style of working open, effective, efficient, unbiased, innovative?
- 2.8 Our discussion was informed by the feedback and information above. We identified the following aspects of our work as having gone well in 2009/10
- effective chairing
 - more skilful questioning
 - a less party-political approach
 - productive task and finish group reviews
- 2.9 We also identified some areas for further improvement:
- Ensure a realistic agenda length for each meeting
 - Focus on outcomes and explicit recommendations
 - Encourage greater participation by all committee members
 - Ensure adequate preparation time and question-planning
 - Increase officers' and Members' understanding of scrutiny
 - Continue to build a constructive relationship with the Cabinet
 - Introduce ourselves to visitors, perhaps with a photo-list of who's who
- 2.10 We will develop a plan of action to address the areas for improvement, and for this we will draw on the support of the Cabinet, the advice of external trainers, and the experience of other councils.

Training and development

- 2.11 During 2009/10 Committee members received both in-house and externally provided training to improve our scrutiny skills. This was in the form of short courses, conferences, bulletins about good practice and observation visits.
- 2.12 A trainer from the IDeA helped us to refresh and improve our general scrutiny skills and our effectiveness as monitors at portfolio holder meetings. Feedback from this event showed that Members found it very useful.
- 2.13 We ran a cross-county session for scrutiny chairmen to which we sent three members. This was provided by the IDeA and a peer councillor. Again the feedback was all positive.
- 2.14 Several members attended training sessions provided by the County Council, and another attended a session at Broxbourne Borough Council regarding the scrutiny of partnerships.
- 2.15 As last year, one of our members attended a parliamentary seminar to observe the select committee system at Westminster. This provided an insight into scrutiny at the highest level, and suggested some lessons for district council scrutiny.
- 2.16 One of the committee and our scrutiny officer attended a call-for-action meeting at Bury St Edmunds to observe this new power in action. Both reported that it had provided very useful learning.
- 2.17 We took the lead in arranging a second conference under the auspices of the Cambridgeshire Scrutiny Network, to look at partnership-related topics for county-wide scrutiny. The event also updated councillors and officers on the latest scrutiny powers, such as Call for Action and scrutiny of crime and disorder issues.
- 2.18 Finally, in February we invited back a financial scrutiny expert to run an all-Member workshop based on the 2010/11 budget. He helped us to build on the theory he had shared in the past and apply it to a real budget. The workshop gave us the confidence and understanding to formulate questions for the scrutiny meeting that followed.
- 2.19 In the coming year we would like to further develop our questioning skills.

Networking

- 2.20 We continue to benefit from an officer-led scrutiny network in Cambridgeshire. During 2009/10 this enabled officers to share the learning from various training sessions, as well as good practice and experience.
- 2.21 They also produced a new protocol to guide the way the county and district councils work together. This responds to the Police and Justice Act

2006 and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 which have widened our ability to scrutinise each other's services.

- 2.22 The network also organised the conference for officers and councillors mentioned above.
- 2.23 Officers are now working to set up a scrutiny network for the whole of the Eastern Region. This initiative has attracted widespread support and an extranet has now been created, for exchanging work programmes, examples of best practice, training resources and offers of help. The first meeting is now being planned.

WHAT ARE OUR PLANS FOR 2010/11?

- 3.1 The profile of Scrutiny is growing nationally and much is expected from us in terms of community engagement; scrutiny of and with partners; scrutiny of crime and disorder issues, responding to petitions and informing and being informed by the Corporate Area Assessment process.
- 3.2 We have begun to develop a programme of work which we will finalise at our first meeting in 2010/11. Topics already identified for possible inclusion are:
- Annual review of the Community Transport Strategy as it relates to children and young people
 - Community Infrastructure Levy
 - Complaints Handling
 - Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership performance
 - Economic Development Strategy
 - Participation of children and young people in planning of Northstowe
 - Performance Improvement Strategy's Action Plan
 - Progress at Orchard Park
 - Progress on the Customer Service Excellence project
 - Value for Money framework for housing services
- 3.3 We will also continue to monitor progress following the reports of the task and finish groups looking at Finance and Services for Children and Young People via Partnerships.
- 3.4 Other topic suggestions will be considered at our meeting in June 2010.

How to get involved

The process of scrutiny is strengthened by involving partners, residents, service users and so on. They bring expertise, local knowledge, fresh ideas and an element of external challenge.

If you would like to know more, please ring the Scrutiny Development Officer, Jackie Sayers on 01954 713451 or email scrutiny@scambs.gov.uk