



South Cambridgeshire District Council

Scrutiny and Overview Annual Report 2020/21

What is Scrutiny and Overview?

The aim of the Council's scrutiny and overview function is to provide an open and transparent forum in which to investigate whether South Cambridgeshire District Council's policies and services are meeting the needs of local people.

Scrutiny and overview committees do not have any decision-making powers, but they do have the power to influence and make evidence-based recommendations to decision-takers. Such recommendations could be informed via performance monitoring, best practice, expert advice, or liaison with stakeholders, partners, service users or members of the public. Scrutiny and overview committees are often described as a Council's 'critical friend'.

Scrutiny and overview committees can also challenge executive decisions taken by Cabinet, individual Lead Cabinet Members and Chief Officers on a key decision. The Chair of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee or any five councillors can, in certain circumstances, 'call-in' a decision that has been made but not yet implemented in accordance with the Council's Scrutiny and Overview Committee Procedure Rules. The committee is then able to interview the relevant member of Cabinet or officers, examine the evidence and suggest improvements to the decision, or refer it to Full Council for further consideration.

Effective scrutiny provides an additional, independent resource for reviewing decisions and policies without being divisive or confrontational. Councillors on scrutiny and overview committees are in a unique position to influence policy and contribute to the decision-making process.

When working well, scrutiny and overview can help to:

- get to the heart of issues
- develop new ideas
- engage and provide a voice for service users
- improve decision-making
- strengthen accountability
- contribute to policy development
- monitor and improve services

Scrutiny and Overview at South Cambridgeshire District Council

The committee's role is to hold Executive decision takers to account.

The following Councillors served on the committee for the 2020/21 municipal year:

Scrutiny and Overview Committee

- Chair: Councillor Grenville Chamberlain
- Vice-Chair: Councillor Judith Rippeth
- Anna Bradnam
- Dr Martin Cahn
- Nigel Cathcart
- Sarah Cheung Johnson
- Graham Cone
- Dr Claire Daunton
- Dr Douglas de Lacey
- Peter Fane
- Jose Hales
- Geoff Harvey
- Steve Hunt
- Dr Richard Williams

The following Councillors were available as substitutes during the year:

- Henry Batchelor
- Gavin Clayton
- Clare Delderfield
- Sue Ellington
- Mark Howell
- Alex Malyon
- Deborah Roberts
- Dr Ian Sollom
- Bunty Waters
- Heather Williams
- Eileen Wilson

How does the Scrutiny and Overview Committee decide what to scrutinise?

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee sets its own work programmes. Topic suggestions can be gained from numerous sources, including: -

- individual councillors
- local petitions
- partner organisations
- officers
- residents
- the Council's Forward Plan of key and non key decisions

Programme planning is reviewed on an ongoing basis by the committee's Chair and Vice Chair with the Scrutiny and Governance Adviser. A Scrutiny and Cabinet triangulation meeting is held every six months between the committee's Chair and Vice Chair with the Leader and Deputy Leaders of the Council, the Council's Chief Executive and Chief Operating Officer. The purpose of these meetings is to jointly scope future areas for scrutiny to develop, but without compromising scrutiny's independence and authority.

The committee's work programme is considered as a standing item at every committee meeting alongside the Council's Forward Plan of Key and non-Key decisions. Additional items for consideration will usually be added during the year as and when they arise, which can be a mixture of one-off topics and items that may require more in-depth review.

A work programme prioritisation tool is used which enables the committee to assess those items that have been suggested or put forward and ascertain whether they should be included in the work programme, as well as determine their level of priority.

Items included in the work programme usually go through an initial scoping process to consider the rationale behind the committee looking into the particular issue, the purpose or objective of scrutiny involvement and a methodology or approach that will be followed for the piece of work.

Scrutiny Reviews

Scrutiny Reviews provide opportunities to consider specific issues in more detail, sometimes outside of formal meetings involving a small group of councillors with experience, expertise or an interest in the subject being reviewed. The committee will ultimately agree whether a scrutiny review on a particular issue will be undertaken. Any initial requests for scrutiny reviews will go through a scoping process to outline terms of reference for the review and identify how the piece of work should be conducted. Reviews could be undertaken through one of the following options:

Scrutiny Review by the Full Committee

A scrutiny review by the full committee could take place when all councillors on the committee express an interest in scrutinising a specific issue. These meetings would normally be held in public with the review culminating in formal recommendations to a decision taker.

Scrutiny Review by a Task and Finish Group

Task and finish groups are typically established when significant research and evidence gathering is necessary to assist in the production of a comprehensive report substantiating a set of recommendations to decision takers. An appropriate timetable would be agreed at the commencement of the scrutiny review, with most task and finish groups aiming to have completed their reviews by six months. These meetings are usually not held in public.

Scrutiny Review by an Informal Working Group

Informal working groups with relevant officers, Portfolio Holders or external parties are an effective means of undertaking scrutiny reviews that do not require significant research or evidence and can be completed in a much shorter timescale. Formal recommendations can still come out of a review carried out by informal working groups, but a comprehensive report is usually unnecessary. The informal format of these meetings would mean that they are not held in public.

Scrutiny Review by a Focus Group

A focus group could carry out a scrutiny review on any issue that requires an urgent response. It would take the shape of a significant fact-finding exercise, taking up one or two full days in an intensive session with very little research required and report its outcomes to relevant officers or decision takers.

Work of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee during 2020/21

The Council has adopted a pre-decision scrutiny model. This means that the Scrutiny and Overview Committee considers items before a decision is made by Cabinet, providing an important means to influence decisions and improve them. Recognising that it cannot look at everything, the committee focusses on reviewing items where it considers it can add value by doing so.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee continued to meet remotely throughout the 2020-2021 municipal year and reviewed the following items:

- Potential property investments: The committee continued to keep a close eye on the Council's investments through the review of potential property investments.
- The North East Cambridge Area Action Plan (June 2020): the committee discussed this in detail before the NECAAP went out to public consultation. The committee made a wide range of comments highlighting areas of concern and importance.
- The Resident Involvement Strategy 2020-2023 (June 2020): the committee considered and commented on this before it went to consultation with tenants. The committee made suggestions regarding the process for electing tenant representatives to the Housing Board and suggested a review of the strategy took place after 12 months.
- Impact of homeworking on the Council (July 2020): following the national lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the committee requested a report on the impact of homeworking on the Council.
- Shared Services Annual Reports and Partnership Renewal Agreement (July 2020): The committee considered the annual reports for the Waste, Planning, ICT, Building Control and Legal shared services. The committee also considered the Partnership Renewal Agreement for 3C Shared Services.
- Compulsory Purchase Order Policy (October 2020): the committee considered the proposed policy and made suggestions to the wording of the policy so that the Council's options were not limited by it.
- An update on the Cambridge Ice and Leisure Centre (October 2020): the committee considered an updated on the Cambridge Ice and Leisure Centre.
- An update on the delivery of the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (December 2020).

- An update on policing matters in South Cambridgeshire (December 2020): The Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire Constabulary attended the meeting to provide a detailed update on policing matters and answered questions from committee members. Questions related to the impact of recently announced cuts to funding and reduction in Police community support officer numbers, the relocation of the police station from central Cambridge to Milton, parking enforcement, speeding and the Rural Crime Action Team.
- In accordance with the Council's budget and policy framework, the committee reviewed and commented on the Council's financial strategies before their consideration by Cabinet and adoption by the Council in February 2021 (January 2021).

Task and Finish and Working Groups

Anti-Racism Task and Finish Group

This task and finish group was set up by the Scrutiny and Overview committee in July 2020 following a motion passed by Council in the same month. The group was set up to:

- a) Review and examine the SCDC structure to ensure ethnic minorities are not disadvantaged.
- b) Consider BAME access to housing and homelessness welfare support.
- c) Provide input into the Council's equality policy.
- d) Conduct an audit of street names and public monuments for which the Council is responsible and which name individuals or organisations, to review any with racism links.

The group developed nine recommendations which were agreed by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at its meeting in February 2021 and recommended and approved by Cabinet in March 2021.

Covid-19 Response Task and Finish Group

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee set up a task and finish group in December 2020 to review the community response to the Covid-19 pandemic, how good practice could be shared with parishes and how residents could be supported during the pandemic to prevent isolation and loneliness.

On behalf of the group, two newsletters were produced providing advice to residents on how to keep well and sharing tips and ideas on how to combat isolation and loneliness through the winter months. The task and finish group also met with community representatives from across South Cambridgeshire, to discuss the considerable amount of work that had been done by community groups to support their communities.

The group developed two recommendations which were agreed by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee in February 2021 and agreed by Cabinet in March 2021.

Scrutiny Improvement Review

In December 2020, the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) was commissioned to undertake an independent review of the Council's Scrutiny function. The CfGS is the leading national body promoting and supporting excellence in governance and scrutiny. This review commenced in January 2020 and the final report and recommendations were considered by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at its meeting in July 2020. A member workshop took place in September 2020 to consider the findings of the review. The review presented a number of recommendations for consideration as potential areas of improvement and these are being implemented by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

Call-in

Call-in is usually a last resort when other means of influencing decision-making have failed. Any Call-in is considered by the Scrutiny and Overview Committee. This procedure was used once in 2020/21.

The committee considered the Call-in of a Cabinet decision taken in June 2020 regarding the approval of a property investment. Following consideration of the decision taken by Cabinet and the referral of the Call-in, the committee decided not to refer the matter back to Cabinet or to Council for consideration, and that the decision could be implemented immediately.

Contact us

If you would like to know more about the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at South Cambridgeshire District Council please contact the Democratic Services Team democratic.services@scamb.gov.uk