



South
Cambridgeshire
District Council

Overview and Scrutiny at South Cambridgeshire District Council

Annual Report 2007/08

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Introduction



Cllr Liz Hezell

Chairman Scrutiny and
Overview Committee



Cllr Roger Hall

Chairman Policy
Development Scrutiny
Committee

2007/08 has been a busy year for the scrutiny committees, as it has for the whole council, in working towards council-wide improvements. During the year we introduced a second smaller scrutiny committee to increase our capacity for forward-looking policy development. This committee contributed to the development of policies on equalities and recycling; it also scrutinised financial growth bids and plans to pilot a community land trust.

However, having two committees has led to some overlap in their remit. Also the second committee had only five Members but it would be hard to sustain two committees of around twelve Members, both meeting monthly. So the Council has decided to revert to one scrutiny committee in 2008/09.

A more successful innovation has been to hold meetings of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee outside office hours and in community or village halls around the District. This has enabled residents and parish partners to raise local concerns with Cabinet Members and officers direct. One such meeting led to the formation of a task & finish group to review the new housing development at Arbury Park.

The committee's largest project was an assessment of the bus services in the District, which informed the County Council's passenger transport review. Their Head of Passenger Transport Services attended and heard from passengers first hand. Read on to find out more about these achievements; and our hopes and plans for 2008/09.

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 introduced further powers for scrutiny committees, in the sphere of crime and disorder; these are expected to be introduced during 2008/09.

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 also strengthened scrutiny powers, again for introduction in 2008/09, including a new Call for Action, allowing any councillor to take issues to a scrutiny committee. Perhaps the most important change is the increase in the number of service providers who will now have a duty to cooperate with scrutiny committees, and take account of their recommendations. However, many external organisations have already embraced scrutiny.

The aim of scrutiny committees is to provide an open and transparent forum in which to ensure that policies and services are meeting 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 members 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

During 2007/08 the Council had two scrutiny committees: the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and the Policy Development Committee.

The Policy Development Committee's primary role was to act as a critical friend to the Council's forward planning and policy decisions.

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee was also a critical friend but concentrating on scrutinising existing services and performance; and it had the power of call-in.

The committees' work fell into five broad areas:

Pre-decision scrutiny:

- considering issues about to come before the Cabinet 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 could relate to any local service, whether provided by the Council or not and could be led by a time-limited task and finish group. Such a group could include any non-Cabinet councillor; it could 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.

Performance Scrutiny:

- monitoring service and financial performance to ensure the Council is meeting, or exceeding, its targets and objectives.

Call-in:

- the Chairman or any 5 councillors can, in certain circumstances, request 'call-in' of a decision which the Cabinet has 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?

Both committees set their own work programmes. The topics come from many sources:

- Residents*
- Local petitions
- Annual residents' survey
- Councillors
- Cabinet Members
- The Council's Forward Plan of key decisions
- Local Strategic Partnership members
- Officers
- Customer Complaints system*

* Committees would not scrutinise individual cases as there are other ways to resolve these; but they would consider any underlying trend or policy where there are 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.

There are always more potential topics for scrutiny than there is time for and so Members use a scoring system to assess the extent to which 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

Health Scrutiny

The Council also contributes to the scrutiny of health services in the county. Councillor R Martlew is a member of Cambridgeshire County Council's Health & Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee. His substitute is Councillor M Mason.

Overview And Scrutiny Achievements 2007-08

I. Scrutiny and Overview Committee

Chairman: Councillor Mrs Liz Heazell

Vice-Chairman: Councillor Mike Mason

Councillors:

Cllr Anthony Berent

Cllr Mrs Lorraine Morgan (from November 2007)

Cllr Miss Jaime Dipple

Cllr Charles Nightingale

Cllr Roger Hall (until October 2007)

Cllr Tony Orgee

Cllr James Hockney

Cllr James Quinlan

Cllr Robin Martlew

Cllr Mrs Bunty Waters

Cllr David Morgan

I.1 2007/08 saw the completion of a large piece of work reviewing the bus services that connect the District's villages with places of employment, leisure activities or retail facilities. Carrying out this review contributed to the Council's corporate objective to seek a quality of life for residents which is supportable in the long term and will encourage and enable residents and businesses to live and work more sustainably.

I.2 It found that although Cambridge is the county town and site of the hospital, and tax and benefits offices, a great many residents cannot access it easily, and some not at all. The committee reported the following findings to Cambridgeshire County Council's Head of Passenger Transport:

- Many villages, even some very small ones, have an excellent service because they happen to be on a main route into a large town
- Eleven villages have no suitable service to commute to full time employment or training in any of the area's main towns.
- Four villages have no bus service at all, and many others a very limited service, meaning that elderly and disabled residents cannot enjoy the benefits of the free bus pass system to which they nevertheless contribute via income tax and council tax.
- Although some residents can access full time employment by bus, in many cases this is not in Cambridge.
- Some weekly shopping trip bus services allow only a short time at the destination; and no time to include a dental appointment, CAB visit etc. With village shops closing and post offices under threat, this point will become even more important.
- Many residents of South Cambridgeshire have no bus access in the evening to leisure or cultural activities in nearby towns, or even a nearby village college.
- Finally, there are issues regarding reliability, which has deterred residents from relying on the bus as a means of accessing full time employment. Experience of unreliability undermines residents' confidence in the bus service and usage is therefore limited.

1.3 All these points were put to the County Council's Head of Passenger Transport Services at a meeting of the committee in Caldecote Village Hall on 20 March. Local residents also gave him first hand accounts of the impact of bus services on their quality of life. He described the County Council's new method for evaluating subsidised services, and innovative schemes for replacing timetabled buses with demand-led transport. The committee expects to return to this issue in 2008/09.

1.4 Following the committee's work in 2006/07 on potential post office closures, it kept a watching brief via a cross-county group. Through this it developed a briefing note for Members in February. It also plans to host a meeting for this Council and parish colleagues in mid July to consider the 2008 tranche of proposed closures that will be announced on 8 July.

1.5 Another significant piece of work concerned the Council's planning process. The committee made four recommendations to improve parish representation at the meetings where planning decisions are delegated to the portfolio holder:

- at least 4 working days' notice should be provided,
- the relevant parish clerk should be formally notified
- details of the meeting should be posted on the Council's Intranet.
- if the ward member was unable to attend, a suitable replacement should be permitted to attend, such as a member of the parish council.

All but the last recommendation were accepted. The Planning Committee agreed to continue to restrict attendance to the chair and vice chair of the Planning Committee and the local ward councillor. However, in the absence of the local ward councillor, the onus would be on the councillor or parish council to name a substitute district councillor to attend instead.

1.6 The Committee chose to move its meetings to early evening and to hold them 'off-site'. Meetings were held at village premises in the parishes of Impington, Caldecote, Comberton, Foxton, and Swavesey. This contributed to the Council's vision to 'use innovative means to bring it closer to people'. Feedback received from those attending the meetings shows that the committee has made a positive contribution to the Council's reputation for communicating with residents.

1.7 Local residents used the meetings to raise issues of local concern with Cabinet members and officers direct; these included planning processes, licensing, village design statements and the closure of rural post offices.

1.8 Another set of questions, raised by Impington parish councillors, prompted the committee to set up a task and finish group to delve more thoroughly into issues regarding large residential developments such as at Arbury Park. To date this group, chaired by Cllr Tony Orgee, has met Cabinet members, developers, builders, social landlords, health partners and officers from the planning, environmental health, building control and community development sections of the Council.

The work of this task & finish group has been praised by Arbury Park's master developer and registered social landlords' consortium. The work will extend into 2008/09. Meanwhile, the group made an interim report in April setting out a number of recommendations which will provide a basis for further work, and for discussion with residents.

The intention is that the final report will help the Council to produce a checklist to use when planning future developments.

I.9 Plans to review the Council's Contact Centre were put on hold pending completion of a Cabinet review of the service. This was subsequently scrutinised by the Policy Development Committee.

I.10 A review of the Council's use of 'planning gain' opportunities was planned but became unnecessary because the committee's interest in the topic prompted officers to provide a briefing for all councillors. This was held in February 2008.

I.11 Toward the end of 2007/08 the committee was asked by the Community Services portfolio holder to review the grants process. The committee is likely to set up a task & finish group in 2008/09.

I.12 The committee scrutinised the budget at meetings in December and February. These meetings were preceded by well-received training sessions run by the training arm of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). This training enabled Members to understand some of the complexities of the budget and to ask some searching questions.

However, the committee recognised that scrutiny in December and February is too late to have any real influence; they therefore resolved to begin scrutiny of next year's budget process in the summer of 2008.

They also gained agreement to their request that future budget reports be accompanied by a glossary of terms.

Monitoring

I.13 The committee continued to send named monitors to public meetings held by the portfolio holders, as follows:

Housing Options	-	Cllr AN Berent
Community Services	-	Cllr JA Dipple
Growth and Sustainable Communities		Cllr AG Orgee
Housing and Environmental Services		Cllrs MJ Mason & JA Hockney
Planning Services	-	Cllr CR Nightingale
Resources	-	Cllr RB Martlew
Staffing and Communications	-	Cllr Mrs BE Waters

I.14 These monitors act as a bridge between the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and the Cabinet, promoting constructive dialogue and supporting effective scrutiny that adds value to the work of the Cabinet.

During 2007/08 the committee developed a role description for the monitors, which was endorsed by Council; it has now been added to the online toolkit. The role of monitors has also been included in the Council's constitution.

Call-in

I.15 The call-in procedure was used once during 2007/08, regarding a decision by the Cabinet to disband its advisory groups. Although the committee did eventually support the decision, the call-in meeting provided a forum for the Leader to share his reasoning and evidence more fully than at the time of making the decision.

2. Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

Chairman: Councillor Roger Hall

Cllr John Batchelor

Cllr Tom Bygott

Cllr Neil Scarr

Cllr Tim Wotherspoon

2.1 This committee was created during 2007/08 to address a perceived need to step up the scrutiny and development of policy.

2.2 At the outset the committee set the focus for its first year on three issues: affordable housing, equalities and economic development. These issues relate to the Council's priorities respectively to: increase the supply of affordable housing; improve customer service; and achieve successful, sustainable new communities.

2.3 Under the heading of affordable housing, the committee considered Community Land Trusts (CLT). This is a mechanism whereby local residents and businesses participate in and take responsibility for planning and delivering affordable housing for members of the community to rent or buy. The committee endorsed CLT and recommended supporting a pilot at Duxford. The Cabinet had not considered this issue before but has now asked officers to draw up a proposal for consideration.

2.4 On the issue of equalities, the committee examined whether the Council was demonstrating a commitment to equalities that met Level I of the Equalities Standard. The committee was satisfied that it had, and the Cabinet agreed. Subsequently the committee oversaw a stakeholder workshop, which will contribute to the development of a revised Equalities Policy, intended for presentation to full Council in July 2008.

2.5 Economic Development remains a high priority for the Council. However, the timing for appointing an economic development officer has meant that this piece of work has been deferred until early 2008/09.

2.6 The committee also scrutinised the Council's policy regarding the recycling of plastic. Councillors interviewed the portfolio holder for over an hour, testing the evidence for the proposal to introduce a kerbside collection scheme. The committee was unable to agree unanimously but, on the casting vote of the chairman, the committee recommended the introduction of kerbside collection of plastic bottles. This was agreed by the Cabinet on 18 February 2008.

2.7 At the request of the portfolio holder, the committee considered the Council's use of performance management. They examined the proposal to introduce a new software system for improving the monitoring of performance information; and endorsed the proposed choice of system. The committee recommended that, if the County Council were to choose the same system, officers should explore any option for joint procurement.

The County Council did subsequently choose the same system but on such different terms that it was not possible to pursue joint procurement. However, some economies will be possible through combined training, for example, and the County Council hosting and maintaining the software.

2.8 Still focusing on performance management, the committee scrutinised a proposed new suite of 'heartbeat' performance indicators and a new balanced scorecard called 'Corporate Health Card'.

2.9 The committee considered the District's Sustainable Community Strategy and recommended to the LSP that the priority for action: "reducing harm caused by alcohol", be amended to include substance misuse. The LSP Board accepted this recommendation.

2.10 The committee agreed to a request by the Staffing and Communications portfolio holder to scrutinise a report on the performance of the Contact Centre before it was considered by the Cabinet in April.

The committee agreed that the introduction of the Contact Centre had allowed the Council to offer an improved service, which received fewer complaints from residents. However, they recommended investigating the use of "mystery shopping" as a means of assessing the performance of the Contact Centre.

2.11 Finally, the committee scrutinised and endorsed the Council's Corporate Plan.

Evaluating Overview And Scrutiny

3.1 The 2006/07 annual scrutiny report identified areas in which we planned to make improvements. Also, some improvements were agreed with our external inspectors. Progress in these areas is shown below.

Develop a way of tracking recommendations to monitor the committee's effectiveness	Work programme reports now track progress at each meeting	☺
Meet in the evening and away from the Council offices	Five evening scrutiny meetings were held in village locations during 2007/08 and attracted members of the public	☺
Focus on performance of services, services to the community and community involvement	The scrutiny committees have looked, for example, at planning services, equalities and recycling; and off-site meetings have increased community involvement	☺
Develop criteria for selecting scrutiny topics	Criteria agreed in September are now used at each meeting	☺
Publicise scrutiny activities	Details have appeared in every South Cambridgeshire magazine and in the local press	☺
Develop role descriptions for all concerned with the Scrutiny process	Role descriptions were agreed by Council on 30 January 2008	☺
Plan the questions and desired outcome in advance of committee meetings	Pre-meeting question-planning sessions were resumed during 2007/08 and have provided an added benefit in developing new Members' confidence	☺
Seek alternative ways of engaging the public in the committees' work	Members of the public have used off-site meetings to engage with scrutiny work; one resident was co-opted onto a task & finish group	☺

3.2 Towards the end of 2007/08, councillors involved in scrutiny met to evaluate their performance based on a framework developed by the Centre for Public Scrutiny. They asked:

- Does scrutiny have an impact?
- How well does scrutiny communicate with and involve the public, partners, etc?
- Is the style of working open, effective, efficient, unbiased and innovative?

3.3 Their discussion was informed by feedback gained from the Cabinet and senior officers beforehand. The Scrutiny & Overview Committee identified the following aspects of their work as having gone well in 2007/08:

- Becoming more relevant to the work of the Council
- Becoming less political and more analytical
- Good support from officers
- External meetings reveal issues that would not be discovered any other way
- Small groups effectively working in detail on issues
- Scrutiny of externally provided services e.g. buses
- Portfolio holder monitoring system

The Policy Development Committee identified the following as having gone well in 2007/08:

- Good relationship with Cabinet
- The small number on the committee ensured business moved quickly but reduced the robustness of any challenge
- Pre-decision scrutiny has helped, according to survey
- Tested evidence on kerbside collection of plastic bottles
- Raised Community Land Trust issue
- Enabled Member input on Equality and Diversity

3.4 The committees also identified areas for improvement during 2008/09. The Scrutiny and Overview Committee identified the need to improve:

- The separation of politics from scrutiny
- The process for identifying scrutiny topics
- The extent to which recommendations influence Cabinet
- The balance between residents' question-time and the committee's other business
- Communication of what scrutiny does – to dispel misunderstandings and increase involvement
- Participation of all committee Members
- Use of portfolio holder monitoring
- Explore different ways to find out people's concerns
- innovative training methods that fit with busy lives
- greater use of evidence (witnesses, data, consultation)

The Policy Development Committee identified:

- Attendance
- Committee size - increased number would provide wider expertise and more robust challenge
- Others' understanding of the committee's remit
- Clarity of role(s) - re-naming of committee(s)

Members were also interested in the suggestion made via the survey, to have a clear senior lead officer who took on responsibility for communication between scrutiny committees and Cabinet. They also discussed whether a Cabinet Member might take on this responsibility.

3.5 External evaluation of the scrutiny process was provided by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). Two peer Members attended the February meetings of the committees and then provided feedback to the chairs.

They recommended that both committees should consider how to make meetings less formal, whilst retaining the need for a Member-led agenda, respected chairing, effective questioning techniques and an inclusive room layout.

They also suggested more communication between the scrutiny chairmen and portfolio holders prior to meetings, to improve the efficiency of the meeting itself.

3.6 Additionally, the committees' effectiveness has been measured by tracking their recommendations. In 2007/08 twelve recommendations were made, and eleven were accepted.

3.7 Finally, a considered evaluation of the scrutiny arrangements concluded that there was some overlap in remit, and that it would be difficult to sustain two committees of around twelve Members, both meeting monthly. The Council therefore decided to revert to one scrutiny committee in 2008/09.

Training and development

3.8 During 2007/08 the scrutiny committee members received professional development to equip them for their role. This has been in the form of short courses, bulletins about good practice, visits to other authorities, webcast viewing and mentoring.

3.9 The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) provided two tailor-made sessions for Cabinet and scrutiny members, and personal mentoring for one of the scrutiny chairmen. They will return in June to provide two facilitated sessions with the Cabinet and scrutiny chair(s) to develop a 'scrutiny vision' for 2008/09. They have been asked to develop some action-learning proposals.

3.10 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) provided two training events on budget scrutiny; they will return in 2008/09 to support a structured and timely approach to budget scrutiny.

3.11 One of the scrutiny chairs attended two events arranged by the Centre for Public Scrutiny event - one to observe and learn from governmental select committees; the other to focus on the relationship between party politics and scrutiny.

3.12 Officers also provided a short presentation at full Council, setting out some of the implications for scrutiny of new legislation.

3.13 Other plans for 2008/09 include attendance at a conference run by the new Cambridgeshire Scrutiny Network, to look at the role of district councils in scrutiny of the county's Local Area Agreement.

3.14 Also, places have been reserved at the Centre for Public Scrutiny's annual conference, at which Members will be able to reflect on national developments, and share examples of good practice with other scrutiny members.

What Are Our Plans For 2008/09?

4.1 The coming year will be a busy one for scrutiny, not least because of the increased responsibilities introduced in recent legislation. These include the right to scrutinise a wide variety of providers of local public services, who will now have a duty to cooperate and take notice of recommendations. There will also be the new Councillor Call for Action, allowing any councillor to refer an issue to scrutiny.

4.2 We will achieve this by supplementing scrutiny committee work with task and finish groups. This will enable us to get to the heart of issues, make well-evidenced recommendations and draw on the expertise of a greater number of Members.

4.3 We will develop a plan of action to address the areas that we want to improve, as listed at **3.4** above and for this we will draw on the views of the Cabinet, the advice of external mentors and trainers, and the experience of other councils.

4.4 We would like to establish regular meetings with the Cabinet and senior officers to develop the role of critical friend and to coordinate our programme planning.

4.5 We intend to hold a workshop style session at the start of 2008/09 to develop our scrutiny work programme. We are already compiling a list of potential topics drawn from a number of internal and external sources.

4.6 Additionally, there are some ongoing pieces of work, such as:

- Arbury Park review
- Post Office closures
- Bus services

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, contact the **Scrutiny Development Officer** on 01954 713451 or email: scrutiny@scambs.gov.uk

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