



South  
Cambridgeshire  
District Council

# Overview and Scrutiny at South Cambridgeshire District Council

## Annual Report 2008/09



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## Contents

Chairman's Foreword	-	1
What is Scrutiny?	-	2
Scrutiny at South Cambridgeshire District Council		3
How do the committees decide what to scrutinise?		4
Overview and Scrutiny Achievements 2008/09		5
Evaluating Overview And Scrutiny	-	9
Training and Development	-	11
Plans for 2009/10	-	12

## Chairman's Foreword



**Councillor John Batchelor**

Chairman Scrutiny and  
Overview Committee



**Cllr James Hockney**

Vice-Chairman Scrutiny  
and Overview Committee

2008/09 has been a productive year for the Council's Scrutiny and Overview Committee. Our most significant project was an eight-month review of the residential development at Arbury Park, now named Orchard Park. The report was well-received as a useful document to inform future developments. It also eased some immediate problems such as school admissions and road signs, and led to the formation of the Orchard Park Action Group where ward councillors can now pursue ongoing concerns. The Cabinet accepted all the recommendations in principle although the national economic downturn may mean that some cannot be progressed immediately. Recommendations to the County Council and other partners were also accepted.

Another small cross-party task and finish group carried out a review of the Council's financial and budget-setting processes. Their interim report to Cabinet in March was well received; further work will follow in 2009/10.

At our regular committee meetings during the year we have provided robust scrutiny and challenge on issues including the annual budget, Christmas opening hours, community engagement, community safety, the complaints process, neighbourhood panels and the implications of the Pitt Review on flooding. Most of our meetings have been held in village colleges and community centres with the aim of involving local residents.

I hope you will enjoy reading this report and finding out more about our achievements this year, and our plans for 2009/10.

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 have given further powers to scrutiny committees and these will be enacted during 2009.

Perhaps the most important change will be 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 organisations already embrace scrutiny, without the need for legislation. For example, the County Council, developers and utility companies readily supported our review of Arbury (now Orchard) Park.

The aim of scrutiny committees is to provide an open and transparent forum in which to help ensure that 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 councilors 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 through members of the committee who act as scrutiny monitors at Portfolio Holders' decision-making meetings. Here scrutiny members can develop greater knowledge in an area of the council's work and therefore offer well-informed 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 Cabinet or Portfolio Holder and providing a forum for cross-council debate based on a wide range of evidence. An example this year would be the Community Engagement Strategy.

### **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. An example this year would be the Arbury Park Review.

### **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. An example this year would be our review of the implications of the Government's Pitt Review, which made several recommendations following the floods of 2007.

### **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; but an example from the main Committee would be our performance review of the introduction of the kerbside collection of plastics.

### **Call-in:**

- the Chairman of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee or any 5 councillors can, in certain circumstances, 'call-in' 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. A recent example is detailed later in this report.

### **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.

## 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\*
- Scrutiny monitors
- The Council's Forward Plan of key decisions

\* 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

### Health Scrutiny

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

Cllr Hall reports back to the Scrutiny and Overview Committee periodically.

### Joint Accountability Committee

The work of the county's Local Area Agreement (LAA) Board, Cambridgeshire Together, is scrutinised by a joint committee comprising members of the County and District Councils. Cllr Liz Hezell represents this Council and is currently chairman. Her nominated substitute is Cllr James Hockney.

The County Council is rightly proud of establishing this method of holding the LAA to account, in advance of national guidance. However, there are still some issues to resolve regarding the governance, resourcing and frequency of meetings.

# Overview And Scrutiny Achievements 2008-09

## I. Scrutiny and Overview Committee

**Chairman:** Councillor John Batchelor

**Vice-Chairman:** Councillor James Hockney

### **Councillors:**

Cllr Val Barrett

Cllr Mervyn Loynes

Cllr Neil Davies (until July 2008)

Cllr Mike Mason

Cllr Jaime Dipple

Cllr Deborah Roberts (from July 2008)

Cllr Janice Guest (from November 2008)

Cllr Bridget Smith

Cllr Roger Hall

Cllr Peter Topping (until November 2008)

Cllr Liz Heazell

Cllr Bunty Waters

## Task and Finish Groups

- I.1** 2008/09 saw the completion of an eight-month piece of work reviewing the residential development at Orchard Park (then called Arbury Park) to the north of Cambridge.
- I.2** The final report found that many aspects of the development were examples of good practice, such as the street-naming process, the wide-ranging nature of the planning gain (S106) agreement and the significant provision of good quality affordable housing through a consortium of registered social landlords.
- I.3** Some issues were identified and resolved during the review, such as school admissions, moving-in delays due to faulty fire doors, and progress on a design guide for the development.
- I.4** With regard to lessons that could be learned for future developments, the report made a number of recommendations for this Council, the County Council and the many partners who work together to create new housing developments.
- I.5** The recommendations were all accepted and the Scrutiny and Overview Committee is monitoring progress on the agreed actions periodically.
- I.6** The review also led to the formation of an action group for ward councillors to pursue ongoing issues, such as with regard to the community centre.
- I.7** Another 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*

- 1.8** This group gathered evidence from our benchmarking families regarding financial scrutiny. They examined various examples of good practice in communication and public consultation. They looked at the Council's financial management processes, especially regarding the issue of budget under-spending. And they ran three well-received training sessions for councillors, directly addressing a need that emerged regarding councillors 'financial literacy'.
- 1.9** During the course of the review the Council received an improved 'Use of Resources' overall score of 3 (performing well); it had previously been an overall 2 (adequate performance). The group's findings would support this as no major weaknesses were identified. However, the group did make a number of recommendations for small improvements, which aim to contribute to the Council maintaining an overall score of 3 under the new, harder assessment criteria next time.
- 1.10** The group presented an interim report to the Cabinet in March and were commended on a useful piece of work. All but one of the eleven recommendations were accepted. The review group will now monitor the outcomes of that report.
- 1.11** The group intends to reconvene following the appointment of a new Executive Director later in the year. That second phase of work will investigate:
- communication and consultation with residents and partners
  - more effective engagement with the business community
  - patterns of under-spending to inform future training
  - training and engagement of councillors in the budget process
  - how well the financial planning process serves stakeholders and supports other budget-related activities.

### **Scrutiny within regular committee meetings**

- 1.12** Apart from the two projects completed by task and finish groups, the Committee has also sought to add value on several other issues.
- 1.13** Perhaps the most notable would be the Committee's robust challenge of the Council's budget process at meetings in December and February. The effect of our training during the year paid off and the level of our debate was noticeably more strategic and knowledgeable. We recommended a reduction to the Cabinet's proposed increase to Council Tax by 4.9%, believing this to be likely to attract Government capping.
- 1.14** At the ensuing meeting of full Council the increase was reduced to 4.5%. Whilst the Cabinet cited other reasons for the reduction, we nevertheless feel able to claim some influence.
- 1.15** The committee looked at plans for a new community engagement strategy in October 2008 and March 2009. Amongst our suggestions was the need to involve young people in a more imaginative way, and for a more effective relationship with parish councils. Our own practice of holding off-site meetings is seen as a positive contribution to community engagement. The strategy is still out for consultation and is due to be published this summer.



- I.16** In a similar vein, at another meeting, we examined proposals to expand the remit of Neighbourhood Panels. These currently provide a forum for residents to raise crime and community safety issues directly with the police. We did not see any merit in expanding their role since they already have full agendas. We also felt that parish councils provide a truly local forum for resolving residents concerns and we would not wish to detract from that. Our recommendation was to leave it to each Panel to discuss and agree its own arrangements. The Cabinet agreed.
- I.17** The Police and Justice Act 2006 gives the Council a right and responsibility to scrutinise the area's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP). We received two reports during the year from the CDRP who thanked us for our constructive suggestions regarding their rolling plan.
- I.18** Following the committee's previous work on potential post office closures, we kept a watching brief via a cross-county group. Together we arranged a meeting for members of this Council and parish councils to consider the proposed closure programme announced in July 2008.
- I.19** We also kept a watching brief on bus services, a review we had completed in 2007/08. In December we responded to the County Council's consultation on bus services saying that there should be more services catering for commuters; and that where only one daily service was available, it should allow the user more than one or two hours at the destination.
- I.20** Other topics included the Council's complaints process, and the implications of the Pitt Review on flooding.
- I.21** The Committee chose to continue holding its meetings at 'off-site' premises wherever possible, such as village colleges or halls. This accords with the Council's aim for greater public involvement in democracy. Feedback received from those attending the meetings shows that they felt welcome and able to ask questions. Questions covered issues regarding the proposed sale of council housing, the complaints process, enforcement of tenancy agreements, anti-social behaviour and consultation, particularly on listed buildings policy.
- I.22** However, the number of residents attending these meetings is still low. This may in part be due to the 5.30pm start; but also, residents will only come if the subject matter interests them. Next year we aim to improve the publicity of meetings and encourage more residents to help set the agenda.

## **Monitoring Cabinet Portfolios**

- I.23** South Cambridgeshire District Council has been praised for its innovative practice of holding meetings for each portfolio holder in public to discuss and agree decisions within their service areas. These meetings also receive quarterly reports on spending and service delivery. The scrutiny committee sends at least one monitor to each meeting, as follows:

Environmental Services	-	Cllr Mike Mason
Finance	-	Cllr Roger Hall
Housing and Deputy Leader	-	Cllr Liz Heazell & Cllr Janice Guest
Leader	-	Cllr John Batchelor

New Communities	-	Cllr Bridget Smith
Planning	-	Cllr Roger Hall & Cllr Val Barrett
Policy, Improvement, Communications	-	Cllr James Hockney
Staffing	-	Cllr Mervyn Loynes









- I.24** 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. Monitors had a short in-house training session during the year to refresh skills and share good practice.
- I.25** For 2008/09 the portfolio holders had agreed to a more structured timetable for their meetings. However, several meetings had to be re-scheduled, sometimes at short notice and this sometimes meant that monitors were unavailable to attend.
- I.26** The Leader's expectation is that this will improve next year through better forward planning.

### Call-in

- I.27** The call-in procedure was used once during 2008/09, to examine a decision by the Staffing Portfolio Holder regarding office hours over Christmas and New Year.
- I.28** Whereas in recent years the Council had closed the office between Christmas and New Year and relied solely on the Contact Centre, now the portfolio holder's decision was for the offices to remain open.
- I.29** The Committee heard that the decision had been sparked by residents' dissatisfaction regarding a break in the refuse collection service around Christmastime the previous year.
- I.30** The committee agreed that the refuse collection should be reinstated to meet residents' expectations. However, we found no evidence to support the decision to keep the main office open. We found some gaps in the consultation and that the business case had not been proved.
- I.31** We therefore referred the decision to a meeting of the full Council, suggesting that the decision be delayed until Christmas 2009, to allow time for fuller consultation and evidence-gathering.
- I.32** However, the Council supported the portfolio holder's decision.

## Evaluating Overview And Scrutiny

2.1 The 2007/08 annual scrutiny report identified areas in which we aimed to make improvements. Our progress is shown below.

Better balance between residents' question-time and the committee's other business	Residents questions no longer dominate meetings; however, we would like to encourage a few more questions	
Make greater use of evidence (witnesses, research data, consultation)	Our Orchard Park and Finance task & finish groups based their recommendations on a wealth of evidence from witnesses and research	
Explore different ways to find out people's concerns	We now speak directly with parish clerks and local representatives to invite potential issues for scrutiny; we continue to invite ideas via the press and our website	
Refine the process for identifying scrutiny topics	We used a structured system of criteria to score and agree our 2008/09 work programme	
Communication of what scrutiny does – to dispel misunderstandings and increase involvement	Our annual report, articles in the South Cambs magazine and press, posters and leaflets at meetings are all helping to inform people, but there is much more to do	
Use of portfolio holder monitoring	Several meetings were re-scheduled, and monitors could not attend. But feedback shows that input was valued	
The separation of politics from scrutiny and participation of all committee members	Feedback supports the view that party politics now seem less likely to inhibit members' full engagement in scrutiny	
Establish regular meetings with the Leader, Scrutiny Chairman and Vice-Chairman and senior officers	We now use regular meetings to coordinate programme planning and develop our role as a respected critical friend	

- 2.2** The committee has a number of ways of monitoring its own effectiveness and performance. For example we track recommendations. In 2008/09 we made 50 recommendations, and 48 were accepted.
- 2.3** Additionally, following the Arbury Park review we asked participants for feedback. Whilst some suggested our style was a little over-formal on occasions, all said that they were impressed by the contribution we had made to improving that and future housing developments. One Cabinet member said that it was “an example of scrutiny at its best ... the most valuable contribution that any South Cambs committee has made to successful place-making in our new developments”. This review was short-listed for a Good Scrutiny Award: the result will be known in June 2009.
- 2.4** Towards the end of 2008/09, we held a short workshop to evaluate our performance based on a framework developed by the Centre for Public Scrutiny. We asked ourselves:
- 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?
- 2.5** Our discussion was informed by feedback gained via a survey of the Cabinet and senior officers beforehand. We identified the following aspects of our work as having gone well in 2008/09:
- Our review of Arbury Park showed a marked improvement in our ability to make an impact on service improvement.
  - Our work in monitoring and challenging the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership’s rolling plan led to improvements in their report. This work will also stand us in good stead for meeting our new responsibilities under the Police and Justice Act 2006.
  - We are reaping the results of an improved working relationship with the Leader, who has valued our input on issues such as Neighbourhood Panels.
  - We are developing a reputation for our ability to offer constructive challenge, sometimes influencing ‘behind-the-scenes’ rather than through formal input.
  - Our continued use of off-site venues is promoting an informal atmosphere in which we can focus on local issues
  - Our work programme is becoming more relevant to the SCDC agenda
- 2.6** Whilst it is gratifying to chart these improvements, we also recognise some areas for improvement during 2009/10:
- Communication with residents and stakeholders
  - Contribution to scrutiny via portfolio holders’ meetings
  - Public attendance at meetings
  - Participation by other non-executive councillors
  - Making witnesses feel welcome and yet improving the effectiveness of our questioning

- Selecting topics for scrutiny that are more relevant to residents living near the meeting venue

**2.7** We will develop a plan of action to address the areas that we want to improve, 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**

**3.1** During 2007/08 Committee members received both in-house and externally provided training to equip us for our scrutiny role. This was in the form of short courses, conferences, bulletins about good practice, webcast viewing and mentoring.

**3.2** The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) provided two facilitated sessions with the Cabinet and the Scrutiny Chairman and Vice-Chairman, to develop a 'scrutiny vision' for the future. They helped us to develop an action plan which has proved very useful in charting our progress.

**3.3** Actions included the need to improve our team-working and questioning skills and so the IDeA returned on three more occasions to provide some excellent sessions that are already bearing fruit.

**3.4** Training in finance scrutiny has been described above and we hope to hold refresher sessions in future.

**3.5** One member of the Committee 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. We all received a copy of the course presentation.

**3.6** The scrutiny Chairman and Vice Chairman also attended events arranged by the Centre for Public Scrutiny, such as their annual conference, which provided news of national developments, examples of good practice and an opportunity to meet scrutiny colleagues.

**3.7** Finally, we took the lead in arranging a conference under the auspices of the Cambridgeshire Scrutiny Network, to look at the role of district councils in scrutiny of the county's Local Area Agreement. A second conference is planned for late 2009.

## What Are Our Plans For 2009/10?

- 4.1** The coming year promises to be busier than ever. The profile of Scrutiny is growing nationally and much more is expected from us in terms of community engagement; scrutiny of and with partners; scrutiny of crime and disorder issues, responding to petitions and supporting the new Councillor Call for Action process.
- 4.2** The county-wide scrutiny network is working on a new protocol to guide the way we work together with the County Council. 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.
- 4.3** We have already begun to develop an ambitious programme of work which we will finalise at our first meeting in June. Topics already identified for possible scrutiny next year include: Economic Development, the value for money of kerbside collection of plastic bottles; and further work on the Council's complaints process.
- 4.4** Other suggested topics will be considered at our meeting in June 2009, following some initial research and scoping. These are:
- Choice Based Lettings
  - Democratic participation
  - Do our services meet the needs of older/ younger/ disabled people?
  - Engagement with Parish Councils
  - Housing Futures
  - Portfolio Holders meetings
  - Portfolio Holders' annual work programmes
  - Recycling
  - Value for Money
  - Water Management
- 4.5** We will also continue to monitor progress following the Arbury Park Review and the interim report of the Finance task and finish group.
- 4.6** Our Finance task and finish group will complete the second phase of its work and we expect to set up at least one more task and finish group as this is undoubtedly the most productive method for in-depth scrutiny.

## 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 on **01954 713451** or email [scrutiny@scambs.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@scambs.gov.uk)

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