



South
Cambridgeshire
District Council

Scrutiny and Overview at South Cambridgeshire District Council



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Foreword

The Coalition Government has committed itself to freeing local councils from central control and to giving local communities a greater influence in decision-making on matters that affect them. As part of this process, much of the external inspection and performance reporting required by the previous government has been abolished, as have ring-fenced budgets. But with this new freedom comes the challenge to find new ways to demonstrate value for money and accountability.

We already publish performance data, reports of peer reviews, council decisions and financial information. We consult about major policy decisions; and we undergo regular and rigorous audits.

Perhaps more than ever, we need our Scrutiny and Overview Committee to help us use all this information to plan for the challenges ahead. We need them as a critical friend, to make recommendations about how the Council can become ever more efficient and responsive to local needs.

The committee could also have an increasing role in supporting scrutiny of other local service providers such as utilities, emergency services and the NHS. They are well placed to support 'armchair auditors' and petitioners as decision-making becomes more decentralised.



Of course no-one likes to be scrutinised, or have their decisions challenged; but if it is done in the spirit of critical friendship, and focuses on better outcomes, then the Council and other service providers will welcome their input. This booklet sets out the role of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and I hope it will encourage everyone to support the work ahead.

Cllr Ray Manning
Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council



Cllr James Hockney Chairman



Cllr Bridget Smith Vice-Chairman

The role of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee (SOC) is to act as a local watchdog for the people of South Cambridgeshire, looking at how to improve local services, whether or not they are provided by the council. Our aim is to help ensure that policies and services are based on best practice, the needs of those affected and the resources available.

Working as a committee or in short-life sub groups, non-cabinet councillors use their knowledge and skills to examine a wide range of local issues and make recommendations for improvement. The committee can also challenge decisions made by cabinet members, or help to influence policies.

All this helps to meet the council's commitment to openness and accountability, as well as ensuring the best possible local services for the people of South Cambridgeshire.

We involve local people, technical experts, exemplars and partners to establish what works well, what options are available and what improvements are possible. And given councils' new and anticipated freedoms regarding governance, the role of scrutiny is expected to grow.

Supporting the whole council in improving local services will continue. Helping the council to demonstrate accountability and a willingness to be challenged, will become even more important. We hope that a wide range of elected members, residents and partners will continue to come forward and contribute to our work.



There is one overview and scrutiny committee at South Cambridgeshire District Council. It is chaired by Cllr James Hockney; the vice-chair is Cllr Bridget Smith.

The committee consists of 13 non-Cabinet members and is appointed on a proportional basis - with political groups represented in the same proportion as on the whole Council. It does not have any decision-making powers, but monitors the performance of the Leader and Cabinet and scrutinises services and policies throughout the district, whether or not South Cambridgeshire District Council provides them.

Recent issues scrutinised by the committee include:

- Community safety
- Customer service
- Economic development
- Equality and Diversity
- Financial management
- Shared services
- Waste management
- Youth engagement



Sub groups are set up to work on specific issues and make recommendations to the main committee. These include Members who are not on the main committee, but have an interest or expertise in the topic under review.

Recent reviews have looked at:

- Arbury Park (now Orchard Park)
- Customer contact
- Financial management
- Performance management
- Planning services
- Services provided through partnerships for children and young people
- Value for money in the Housing Service

A growing role for scrutiny

The Government's localism agenda has put an end to the audits and inspections provided by bodies such as the Audit Commission. Instead, it now rests with local people to challenge local service providers about their performance, policies, spending decisions, value for money and attention to issues that concern them.

An emerging role for the scrutiny committee will be to provide a forum for looking into issues raised by these new 'armchair auditors'; providing a helping hand in navigating bureaucracy and holding decision-makers to account.

How does the committee decide what to scrutinise?

The Committee develops a list of possible topics for scrutiny by referring to:

- the Council's strategic objectives and priorities;
- community strategy objectives;
- the Council's improvement plan(s);
- performance information
- issues and concerns raised by local people, partners or councillors

Then the annual work programme is developed by picking issues which are:

- Of greatest local concern
- Linked to the council's vision and priorities
- Capable of being influenced by the committee
- Not being scrutinised by another body

How scrutiny and overview meetings are run

Scrutiny committee meetings aim to be less formal than council meetings may have been historically - but there is still a chair, agenda and rules about what can be done.



The chair's role is to facilitate debate rather than presiding and controlling. The chair sets the scene; tries to put witnesses at their ease; ensures that jargon is avoided and technical terms are explained; and guides progress through the agenda. Meetings can be held in the Council's offices or at other venues as appropriate. Members sit around a table and not necessarily in party political groupings; this helps to develop a collaborative approach to scrutiny.

Sub groups are even less formal and usually have no minutes, just notes on action points, which are available from the scrutiny officer on request. Other people can be co-opted onto a sub group, such as voluntary sector representatives, service users, or other experts.

The scrutiny committee and sub groups can call officers, decision-makers and other witnesses to answer questions and give evidence about the issues under scrutiny. They can also invite experts to provide extra technical information that will help them to make well-founded recommendations.

Meetings are usually open to the public and press except where confidential information is being discussed. The chair has the discretion to invite open discussion with members of the public.

“Those who support a proposition and those who oppose it often find an alliance in scrutiny. The latter want to expose the problems and the former want to ensure there are none. You can't say it often enough: good government needs good scrutiny.”

Baroness Hamwee, House of Lords spokesperson for Regional and Local Government.
September 2010

Implementation and Review



The scrutiny committee's recommendations are forwarded to the Cabinet or Council for consideration; they are presented by the chair of the committee and the sub group chair if applicable. Implementation of recommendations that are accepted by the Cabinet or Council will then be their responsibility, except where they are directed at other bodies or external agencies. The scrutiny committee monitors progress made on its recommendations at each committee meeting and via its annual report.



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:

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