

Scrutiny Annual Report

2010 – 2011



Introduction

I am pleased to present the Annual Scrutiny Report for 2010- 2011. The report highlights some of the work undertaken by scrutiny over the last year.

The report is not intended to be comprehensive, rather to highlight areas of good practice, where scrutiny has made a difference to the work of the council and the people of Oxfordshire.

Scrutiny councillors have an opportunity to make a real difference: to change decisions; to listen to vulnerable groups and ensure their voices are heard; to advocate for communities; and to hold officers and cabinet to account. But there is also a softer element to scrutiny, one where the results are more difficult to point to, but where perhaps the impact is greater. Scrutiny councillors often work collaboratively with officers and partners to develop policy; to identify and solve issues before they become problems and to shape the forward direction of the council to meet the needs of our communities. This report highlights just some of the many opportunities scrutiny councillors have taken to challenge and influence the work of the council for the better.

Councillor Melinda Tilley,
Chairman of the Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee 2010/11

World Class Economy

“The past year has seen the formation of the new local enterprise partnership for Oxfordshire. It is the key partnership to set the long term vision for Oxfordshire's economy and drive forward innovation and wealth creation in the county. Strategy and Partnerships scrutiny has taken a keen interest in the enterprise partnership as it has developed over the past year and will continue to track its progress in providing a strategic link between business and the public sector including the universities.

It is still early days for the enterprise partnership but Strategy and Partnerships are particularly keen to see that it is successful where past partnerships have struggled to show their impact. In particular the Committee anticipates a number of positive impacts from the enterprise partnership including its ability to bring together the different sectors, to strengthen the local economy and to work to address the issue of skills needs in the County”.

Councillor Melinda Tilley, Chairman of the Strategy and Partnerships Committee

Future proofing our economy

Whilst Oxfordshire has one of the strongest economies in the South East, it is still important that we continue to look ahead and ensure that the decisions we make now will help us manage future growth. Oxfordshire’s workforce are key to our economic success and looking forward we must ensure the skills and opportunities created by our businesses match the skills and aspirations of our residents. The Strategy and Partnerships Committee championed this issue of skills development when scrutinising the work of the Local Economic Partnership. The Committee supported the development of an evidence based skills needs assessment that engages employers more effectively and will continue to hold the partnership to account for the delivery of this assessment and action plan.

To ensure that Oxfordshire has a skilled workforce ready to meet the needs of businesses, we must also ensure that young people reach their academic potential. The Children Services scrutiny working party on pupil attainment made a number of important observations in the areas of school federations, partnerships, sharing best practice, teacher training and governor development and information. The observations were accepted by the directorate and all were incorporated into practice.

“We were very pleased - but not complacent- at the findings of the recent OFSTED Inspection. We will be looking at Attainment for Looked After Children, especially in Maths and English and Personal Educational Plans (PEPs). Looking forward, the focus for Children’s Scrutiny Committee will be on Admissions Policy for Special Schools and the mounting pressures on Safeguarding. We are also studying the briefings ahead of the select committee enquiry into KS1 attainment in July and are determined that it will result in tangible outcomes.”

Councillor Ann Bonner, Chairman of the Children’s Scrutiny Committee

Listening and advocating

Scrutiny plays a vital role in the work of the council by listening and giving a voice to those who are seldom heard. The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee has had a key role in listening to young people who are not in employment, education or training (more widely known as NEETs). By providing a forum for their views and experiences the committee was able to ensure that their experiences were reflected in council policies and practices. The Committee continues to hold the cabinet and officers to account to their commitment to ensuring that every young person gets the help they need to gain and maintain employment.

The Growth and Infrastructure Committee has taken a lead on ensuring that the views of local people and the business community have been central to plans to address traffic congestion. Over the past year the Scrutiny Committee for Growth and Infrastructure continued to take a close interest in the development of the Local Transport Plan 3 which included significant input from the Committee's Working Group dedicated to looking at this issue. The working group has supported policy development and given constructive feedback on the proposals which resulted in the strategy being agreed and signed off. The Working Group was credited with adding significant value to the strategy.

Healthy and Thriving Communities

"The NHS, both locally and nationally, is always changing. It is vitally important that the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee should work with the NHS, the County Council, the voluntary sector and other agencies and act as a critical friend to ensure that services are provided in the best interests of local people as well as the NHS. It is also part of the HOSC's role to ensure that all proposals for change and development of services are transparent and that those who would be affected are consulted fully".

Councillor Peter Skolar, Chairman of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Healthy Communities

Sometimes the role of 'critical friend' means that scrutiny committees are in a position when they are strongly challenging the work of both internal and external partners. When changes were proposed to the Silver Star High Risk Maternity Unit at the John Radcliffe Hospital the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee expressed concern at the lack of notice, particularly as this had given rise to fears that the unit would close. Members asked the Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals Trust for details of the future plans for the unit and a timetable for proposed changes. Following the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee involvement the Oxford Radcliffe Hospital Trust decided not to make any changes to the unit.

In August 2010 the County Council/NHS Pooled Budget Joint Management Group had decided to end a contract for short term Intermediate Care beds at Watlington Care Home. The County Council and the Primary Care Trust had received a number of objections to the decision. So the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the issue and members decided that, although the beds were provided by the County Council, they were in an NHS setting and medical care was provided by Community Health Oxfordshire. Therefore, it was an NHS service and any plans for closure would be subject to the same rules which state that any substantial service change would require full public consultation. In response to this decision, the Joint Management Group decided to suspend the decision to end the contract, pending a review of the Joint Intermediate Care Strategy.

As well as challenge, scrutiny has a key role to play in developing policy. Adult Services Scrutiny Committee has contributed to the development of Autism / Asperger's Strategy. The Committee benefited from hearing directly from a range of stakeholders, including people with an autistic disorder and their carers, and voluntary and public sector professionals working in both health and social care. The Committee highlighted the importance of the strategy to improve services and of working collaboratively to meet the needs of people living with autism in Oxfordshire and made a recommendation to Cabinet to that effect.

Adult Services scrutiny has been involved in the *Keeping People Well project* to re-commission day services provided by voluntary and community organisations for adults with mental health problems. Members of the HOSC were keen to ensure that, following the commissioning process, service level outcomes would demonstrate equity of access and improved service levels. A HOSC member sat on the commissioning group as an observer to ensure that the process was transparent and that appropriate consultation took place. The new service is now being implemented.

Partners' input in scrutiny committees' work is especially valued by the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee which receives regular briefings and updates from Oxfordshire LINK network. LINK has enabled the Committee to have insight into the experiences of people who use Council services that may not otherwise have been heard from.

Independent lives

“Adult Services Scrutiny Committee has been able to contribute valuable input into the development of adult social care policy which seeks to move away from placing people in long term residential care and to make better use of domiciliary care so that people can be supported for longer in their own homes. The Committee has been very supportive of the idea that residential care should be viewed as a last resort so that people can stay independent, living as part of their community and live healthier lives for longer but still have their needs met and be kept safe.”

Councillor Don Seale, Chairman of the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee

The move to Self-directed support which forms part of the Transforming Adult Social Care Programme (TASC) reflects this move towards promoting independence. The transformation work has been a major focus for Adult Services Scrutiny Committee over the last 12 months. The Committee is closely in touch with the developments and monitors the implementation of the programme with detailed updates at every meeting. Alongside this Adult Scrutiny's TASC Taskforce has focussed on detailed and complex areas such as the development of the Resource Allocation System (RAS), safeguarding issues and the use of brokers to enable people to use their personal budgets effectively.

Safe communities

There are many elements to building healthy and strong communities. We know that a healthy community is one where people are safe and feel that they are safe. The Safer and Stronger Committee has a duty to scrutinise the work of the Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership; to ensure that they are working to address areas of concern. The committee works to ensure that the priorities expressed by our communities were being addressed by the police and partnership through ongoing scrutiny of their work.

The Children's Services Committee is also concerned with communities being safe and a priority topic reviewed this year was the Anti-Bullying Strategy. The committee made a number of recommendations relating to partnership working with the police and others, the improvement of guidance for schools governors and parents and links with school councils. All of these recommendations have been included in the anti-bullying strategy.

The Safer and Stronger Scrutiny Committee's remit extends to Fire and Rescue and the critical role they play in keeping Oxfordshire safe. The Fire Service undertook a long term national programme involving significant changes to their call receipt and control room function. The committee requested regular reports on the implementation of the project. The Fire Service have said that the prolonged interest and constructive challenge from the scrutiny committee helped sustain Control Room morale under difficult circumstances, and helped to ensure that when the project was terminated by central government that Oxfordshire was in a strong position to provide a strengthened Control Room function.

The committee also constructively challenged the Fire and Rescue Service Integrated Risk Management Action Plan and the Annual Response Standards Report. The comments and feedback given are highly valued by senior Fire and Rescue Services Managers and allow future Service Delivery to be tailored to meet public expectations.

Environment and Climate Change

Reducing emissions and increasing energy efficiency

One of the key challenges facing the Council has been the need for a reduction in emissions and increased energy efficiency for Oxfordshire.

The Growth and Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee has played an important role in promoting the council's strategic objective of 'Environment and Climate Change' through its scrutiny of the carbon management strategy. The Committee has been closely involved in the evolving strategy with regular updates to inform discussion and detailed questioning during question and answer sessions.

"The Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee plays a key role in monitoring progress with projects that aim to reduce carbon emissions across the County. The current financial climate means that increasing energy efficiency across Council activities is a very important and pressing issue. In particular the Committee has had significant input to developing the County's approach to reducing carbon emissions from schools and ensuring our assets are energy efficient. "

Councillor David Nimmo-Smith, Chairman of the Growth and Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee

Minerals and Waste Development Framework

The Growth and Infrastructure Committee have played a key role in developing the Minerals and Waste Development Framework. The Committee listened to the concerns of residents around access and routing arrangements to sites and held the Cabinet to account to ensure that these concerns had been considered and where possible, addressed. The Committee secured agreement that when implementing the Framework consideration would be given to the impact the routing of traffic can have on communities and the difficulties of enforcing routing agreements.

Severe weather

The severe weather in recent years has led to several periods of interruption to work and businesses. The Growth and Infrastructure committee recognised many communities were unsure how best to respond to heavy snow fall and that this lack of clarity was stopping people from helping themselves and their communities. The Committee considered how to promote better what people can do for themselves and developed resources giving information and advice to communities about how to respond to periods of severe snow. The information was circulated to District and Parish Councils and proved to be very useful to communities during the snowfall in December.

Better Public Services

“All Services are being asked to do “more with less“ funding, and for communities to do more to help themselves. The Safer and Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee tries to act as a focal point to ensure a balanced and fair approach is maintained, and that the impact is beneficial to services and communities alike. We will also continue to ensure the highest standards are maintained in services that protect and serve the public. Communities should be allowed to lead the way in providing local solutions to local issues, and we will continue to support them in doing so”.

Councillor Lawrie Stratford, Chairman of the Safer and Stronger Scrutiny

Keeping Council Tax low

The last year has seen the local government financial landscape change significantly which poses many challenges for us. Scrutiny Committees have used their role as ‘critical friend’ to ensure that the Council is effectively managing the tightening budgets and keeping to the commitment to keep council tax increases low. In December all Scrutiny Committees met on a single day for detailed consideration of the 2011/12 – 2014/15 Directorate business strategies and budget proposals. This new approach to service and resource planning enabled committees to consider the cross cutting impact of proposals and make recommendations to Cabinet.

Customer service

The business strategy programme is a key stream of work which Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee have been involved in from the early stages. Improving customer service is a key challenge for the council and the committee has taken a keen interest in the development and roll out of the customer service centre and maintains an overview of how the centre is performing and the drive to further enhance online services.

Localism

Striving for better public services is a focus for all of us and each of the scrutiny committees plays its part in ensuring that the Council continues to offer not only excellent public services but also that these services are designed to meet local needs. This has been a central issue for the Strategy and Partnerships Scrutiny Committee which has been keeping a close eye on the Localism Bill as it makes its passage through Parliament.

The Localism Bill potentially presents a number of significant changes for local government. Strategy and Partnerships Committee have had a number of briefings on the bill and debated how the proposals will affect Oxfordshire and the particular challenges that may be faced in implementing the new law when it comes into force. Particular areas identified for further consideration are around governance and neighbourhood planning.

Big Society

The council has always been committed to supporting communities to do things for themselves through community led planning. Over the past year scrutiny has worked closely with officers as momentum has gathered pace around Big Society. Strategy and Partnerships have focused on the overall approach to the Big Society highlighting the differences between rural and urban communities with the lack of town and parish councils in urban areas adding to complexity; and the importance of the role played by small and medium enterprises in communities.

In July the Safer and Stronger Communities Committee held a select committee style enquiry with a range of panellists asking them to consider some of the barriers that people may experience which act as a disincentive to community involvement and self help. The session generated useful evidence and feedback from a range of partners in the voluntary and community sector that informed the development of the approach to Big Society.