



Scrutiny Report

2003 - 2004



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Introduction

November 2003 - April 2004



*Derek Bishop
Head of Scrutiny*

This is the second collective report of the Scrutiny Committees since the new political management arrangements were implemented in November 2001. The first gave an account of their activities from then until November 2003. This report covers a relatively short period; November 2003 to April 2004, so that future reports can be aligned more closely to the Council year. It is not intended to give a detailed account of all the Committees' activities but to give a flavour of what has been undertaken over this period. With the exception of the Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee, there have been changes to the Councillors who are Chairing the Committees and the reports from each of the Committees have therefore been written by the former Chair/Chairwoman/Chairman.

There are 5 Scrutiny Committees; Community Safety, Corporate Governance, Environment, Learning & Culture and Social & Health Care, all of which largely mirror the portfolio areas of the Leader of

the Council, Deputy Leader of the Council and the 7 other Executive Members. There is also a Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the District Councils in the County. Since last November, the Council has undertaken a review of the structure of the scrutiny function and decided that whilst there should be no change to the number or current structure of scrutiny committees, the number of Councillors on them should be reduced from 15 to 10 (except for the Learning & Culture Scrutiny Committee with 12 and Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee with 10 Councillors respectively). The previous arrangement whereby the Chairing of the Committees would be by a member of the Opposition Group on the Council, was also changed so that the Chairing of the Committees will now be on a proportional basis between the three political groups on the Council. This reflected the fact that the Council has now formally recognised a Shadow Opposition Executive. There have also been some minor changes to the responsibilities of the some of the Scrutiny Committees to reflect adjustments to Executive Lead Member responsibilities. Councillors hope that a combination of all of these changes will continue to improve the efficient and effective operation of the Committees and will help them more easily to develop new and innovative ways of working.

Since last November, there has also been a change in the legal status of the Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee, which has become a formal joint committee in partnership with our district councils. It has 3 sub-committees covering the north and south of the County and Oxford city, to facilitate the consideration of local health issues. This is the outcome of vigorous efforts on the part of Councillors and officers, the county and the district councils

to develop arrangements that can both give a Countywide strategic overview and address very local concerns. We believe that this way of undertaking health scrutiny is breaking new ground nationally and is an excellent example of effective partnership working. A detailed Constitution has now been agreed and adopted and the Joint Committee has met formally for the first time in April.

The last scrutiny report commented that, in the very early months of operation, the Audit Commission's Corporate Performance Assessment had taken place and had reported critically on how effectively the scrutiny role was being carried out. Since then, a Scrutiny Development Action Plan has been developed to provide a clear way forward for the scrutiny function and this has been incorporated into Raising our Performance 2, the County Council's Organisational Improvement Plan 2003-2005. Significant progress is being made towards achieving this and the changes to the scrutiny committees outlined above will go some way towards facilitating these. Indeed, in a recent Audit Inspection carried out by the Audit Commission the Council is praised for having "made good progress over the last year in moving towards effective scrutiny" and outlines that much good practice was observed but that there are still areas as identified in the Scrutiny Development Action Plan which need to be addressed.

We have continued to learn and develop. Councillors and officers have been keen to promote the role and purpose of scrutiny wherever possible. A deeper understanding and hence a consolidation is continuing to take place by members and officers alike of the different ways in which scrutiny can take place to ensure that the function is effective and has a real impact

on the quality of life of the people in Oxfordshire. We continue to recognise how crucial it is to develop members and officers skills in order to effectively carry out our scrutiny responsibilities. Training and development days have continued to be provided in order that they can be equipped with the necessary new skills to develop some of our key processes and procedures. Many of our training and development activities have been focussed around specific issues arising from individual reviews.

Following the success of last year's Scrutiny Conference we are in the process of planning another one, to be held on 23 July. The theme for the conference this year will be engaging with the public. We are very lucky to have secured Jane Martin, Director of the Centre for Public Scrutiny to address the conference on the developing the role of scrutiny. Workshops will include those on engaging the community and the media, and on public involvement via the voluntary sector. The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art have also been invited back following their very successful workshop given at last year's conference.

In order that they may deliver effective scrutiny, councillors on the scrutiny committees require a good overview of the issues that affect the County, the Council and its services. Briefings and seminars have helped to raise awareness of the opportunities to examine topics of interest to Councillors. In undertaking our work, we have benefited from a supportive Executive who wish to see Scrutiny succeed and add value to the overall work of the Council. Councillors and officers have worked hard to improve communications between the scrutiny function, the Executive and the Directorates. Although tensions inevitably exist between the various scrutiny roles,

particularly in providing a challenge to and a check on the power of the Executive, we hope that we carry out this role as a "critical friend" rather than as an adversarial opponent.

We are fortunate in having a dedicated budget for scrutiny activities, and staff to support them. This has been an enormous help to the scrutiny committees when carrying out their work programmes and in the production of some well-researched, evidence-based pieces of work.

In summary some of our significant achievements since November have been:

- The completion, publication and submission to the Executive of significant evidence-based reviews with the majority of recommendations being accepted;
- Six reviews undertaken last year have also been revisited to assess how far the recommendations had been implemented and if there were some issues still outstanding that required addressing;
- Continuing to develop an outward facing culture that focuses on outcomes and impacts;
- Scrutiny articles in the "Oxfordshire" magazine and a Health Scrutiny newsletter; and better use of the media to publicise our scrutiny reviews, in order to generate more public interest in our work;
- We have been recognised nationally by the Centre for Public Scrutiny as developing good practice and the profile of the Council raised nationally; and
- Our partnership with the district councils and the joint development of a

working Constitution, Protocols and Work Programme for Health Scrutiny in Oxfordshire for use by the new Joint Committee.

We recognise that despite our significant progress there are still areas which we need to develop further and to improve upon. Over the coming year we will:

- Undertake a comprehensive evaluation by the scrutiny committees of their previous 12 months work, to encourage self reflection and learning from experience as part of rolling work programmes forward;
- Continue to work through and implement the Scrutiny Development Action Plan as set out in Raising our Performance 2;
- Continue to provide Council officers with opportunities to enhance their understanding of scrutiny;
- Further our efforts to involve and engage with local people; make greater use of the public to provide us with information as part of our scrutiny reviews and in other activities in our work programmes; make better use of the Council's web-site and other electronic forms of communication; and create a more "community friendly" scrutiny agenda;
- Continue to encourage members to continue developing their forensic skills to question and challenge more effectively in order to probe beneath the surface; and
- Continue to extend the range of scrutiny review techniques through further experimentation.

We hope that this report gives a good overview of our work.

*Derek Bishop
Head of Scrutiny*

Community Safety



*Cllr Sandra Mold
Former Chair*



*Cllr Ray Jelf
Present Chair*

The Committee has continued to have a busy and varied schedule throughout 2004 and has enjoyed a number of very positive outcomes. Its principal remit has changed slightly since the first annual scrutiny report and is now to review and scrutinise the following areas:

- Drug & Alcohol Awareness
- Community Safety
- Fire Service
- Consumer Protection
- Emergency Planning
- Registration Services
- Magistrates' Courts
- Coroner's Service
- Travellers

An early success for the Committee was its completion of the review on Drugs and Alcohol Abuse entitled 'Not Just a Quick Fix'. An action plan has now been drawn up and implementation of the recommendations is progressing well.

Following severe flooding in Oxfordshire last year, the Committee carried out a review in partnership with Oxford City Council into flooding. The review recommendations were approved by the Oxford City Council Executive Board in November last year and work is being undertaken to develop improved flood plans for the area.

A draft review report on domestic violence was presented to the May meeting by the Lead Member Review Group. The review was set up to assess whether the services provided for this area are working effectively together; to look at whether local people are getting acceptable results for all their efforts; to identify local needs; to assess the degree of compliance with legislation and guidance and to evaluate alternative practices where possible. The Review Group hope that the review will help Oxfordshire County Council and other agencies improve outcomes and the quality of service to service-users.

A new review on Mainstreaming Youth Offending into Children's Services commenced in March. Its objectives are to establish where there are blocks and deficiencies in realising a truly joined up approach; establish if a preventative service could be better developed to reduce the quantity of youth offending and the damage it does to both the young people themselves and the community; and to identify what else should be done to improve school engagement and raise levels of employment (as these are the key risk factors for offending).

As part of its monitoring role the Committee looked at several key strategic plans of the Council including the Oxfordshire Plan and the Food Law Enforcement Service Plan. The Committee has also received presentations from the appropriate

Directors of Oxfordshire Ambulance NHS Trust on the plan for modernising the location of ambulance depots and staff facilities to improve the effectiveness of services provided and the working lives of staff across Oxfordshire.

The Committee has also started to look at new ways of working and community engagement. In March the Committee left its traditional County Hall venue to meet at the Fire & Rescue Headquarters in Kidlington. The meeting provided an

opportunity for members of the public to have their say on community policing issues. The Chief Constable, Peter Neyroud was invited to attend to answer questions and outline the Thames Valley Police's three-year policing strategy.

The Committee continues to make strides in its development of effective Scrutiny, though I recognise that despite our significant progress there are still areas which we need to develop further and improve upon.

*Cllr Sandra Mold
Chair Community Safety Scrutiny Committee*

Corporate Governance



*Cllr Ken Harper
Chair*

1. Mode of Operation

The Committee covered a whole range of tasks working both as full committee and in review groups. As a full committee we operated mainly in select committee mode, probing and questioning executive members (mainly the Leader of the Council and the Deputy Leader) and officers and making recommendations to the Executive. In review mode the work is more collegiate and inclusive and directed at achieving a policy improvement or better way of working in cross cutting areas of the Council's activity.

We tried very hard to get "upstream" of the Executive, i.e. to consider reports and make recommendations before they had reviewed an officer's proposal. We were successful in doing this with the Chief Executive's "Raising our Performance 2" policy document and the Executive took on board most of our comments at their initial discussion of the issue.

2. Key issues addressed in 2003/4 included

- The Human Resources and Performance Management proposed new organisation structure. As a result of two sessions, the officers agreed only to appoint a Head of HR at the initial stage and to commission consultants to report on a suitable structure going forward. The CGSC then further interviewed the Director for Resources and Consultants after publication of the report.
- Base budget bids - property and telephony. As part of a wish to examine the base budget rather than the year on year changes, we instituted a comprehensive monitoring process of the build up of these two areas and at successive meetings probed and interrogated officers with a view to recommending ways forward to achieve change and service improvement.
- For the second year running the committee met additionally in January to question the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council on revenue budget and future capital programme. This was to inform the Executive of opinions on the draft budget and before the full Council debated it in the February meeting. As such it forms a key indicator of whether there are tensions in the budget strategy adopted by the Executive. In future this January meeting will be diarised in advance giving Corporate Governance seven scheduled meetings a year in comparison with the other committees' six.
- Strategic Drivers for the whole Council as defined by the Leader to CGSC on 17 July 2003. CGSC set out to

challenge the Leader, Deputy Leader and the CCMT through questioning that their actions were on course to deliver these objectives and the so called 10 plus 3 specific policy aspirations of the Council and also the Public Service Agreement targets agreed with Central Government.

3. Reviews

Work was completed or continues in the following reviews:

- Local Area Structures - South Oxfordshire local area forum pilot;
- Social Inclusion;
- Delivering on the council's 12 PSA agreement targets by 31/3/07;
- Do partnerships deliver? - Developing key external relationships;
- Job evaluation.

As a full scrutiny committee we also examined key areas of our corporate capacity and key cross cutting policy issues such as:

- Reducing the level of council tax increases as set out in the medium term plan;
- Ensuring the Council is active in promoting the environmental, economic and social well being of its residents;
- Monitoring the work of the Oxfordshire Community Strategy;
- Endorsing the Treasury Management Strategy;
- Monthly monitoring of the financial report.

4. Obituary

In November we lost a keen and probing member with the sad death of Councillor Brian Law. Councillor Law's extensive business background was a great asset to the committee when questioning officers on resource implications of proposals, and with his untimely death the committee lost a diligent and energetic member.

5. Related activity

Reflecting the role of Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee in supporting members the Chair and Deputy Chairman of Corporate Governance and the Deputy Leader of the Council, together with the democratic support manager, constitute a councillor reference group which met periodically during the year to look at the support to members in the performance of their duties. As a result of this group, support for members particularly in IT and for attending conferences and seminars was improved during the year as was general communications. Some initiatives such as role descriptions for councillors with special responsibility were taken back from the reference group to CGSC for consideration and comment before Council consideration.

6. Challenges for the year ahead

This is the final year of this Councils' 4-year term. It will be important to leave a legacy of improvement both in terms of policy and process for the next Council to take forward. Ongoing reviews will need to be completed by the calendar year end. The challenge of engaging better the public in our work needs to be tackled, and the drive to get upstream of the Executive needs to be

continued. I also think it useful to get a database of members interests to help formulate review teams that can tap the wealth of talent and experience that the 61 elected members able to serve scrutiny possess.

7. Thanks

As Chair, I was greatly helped by Councillor Charles Shouler, Deputy Chairman, in the running of the meetings and by both Charles and Councillor Bob Johnson, spokesperson for the third political group in the agenda setting process. Agenda management remains a key challenge for the scrutiny process.

*Cllr Ken Harper
Chair Corporate Governance Scrutiny Committee*

Environment



*Cllr Leslie Sibley
Former Chair*



*Cllr CH Shouler
Present Chair*

Over the past year, the Committee has continued to develop its role in Scrutiny. The Committee has focused on improving its policy development role, by questioning members of the Executive, together with relevant officers, with a view to advising the Executive or undertaking possible scrutiny action.

Last year, the Committee started to look at new ways of working. In response to local concerns it met at the Civic Centre in Didcot in July in order to gather evidence from representatives of South Oxfordshire District Council, Didcot Town Council, Didcot Development Agency, the Chamber of Commerce, residents and local businesses with regard to the implementation of a major road scheme. The object of the new venture was to improve the way the County Council let and manage contracts in the future.

A review report was then produced within two months which outlined the Committee's findings and made recommendations to the Executive regarding future contract management. The recommendations were welcomed by the Executive and new ways of working have been implemented in the

Environment & Economy Directorate as a result. These outcomes will serve as a blue print for other schemes around the County and had already been used on the recent road works on Abingdon Road, with improved communications to commuters and local residents, including informative signage and phased, married traffic lights.

Another early success was the Committee's review into the quality of highway repairs and drainage which was set up to address the public's concern over the condition of Oxfordshire's highways. The review recommendations which were accepted by the Executive included ensuring highways maintenance divisions, to fix potholes using a high quality method, first time, all of the time; improving the monitoring of repair work by including within the contract an agreement to specify how exactly the monitoring of works will be improved; addressing the need to improve feedback to the public; and addressing the need to improve quality of road works, especially reinstatements carried out by utility companies. The review also encouraged inter-agency working in partnership with the District Councils and an overhaul of the service's customer focus to include the development of a communications strategy.

The Committee is also currently finalising a major review into Corporate Environmental Policy and Energy Saving. The Review was set up to achieve significant improvements in the performance of the Council against the relevant Audit Commission and other performance indicators; to highlight issues that should feature in the new corporate policy which would take into account new threats to the environment such as climate change; and to assess how, as a corporate body, the Council can reduce its adverse effect on the environment.

We have now embarked on two further reviews as part of our work programme for the ensuing year:

- Inland Waterways - is enough work being done on promoting and preserving them (especially for freight)/is partnership working effective?; and
- Air Pollution - how do County policies impact on this/how is the issue considered by strategists and planners/are we helping to achieve targets?

The review on Air Pollution will be carried out in partnership with Oxford City Council. It will address, amongst other things, community concerns, concerns by City Council Councillors and officers about 'joined-up' difficulties arising from differing legislative streams, (e.g. DEFRA and air quality verses Department for Transport) in non-unitary authorities and levels of

Nitrogen Dioxide currently exceeding government objectives limits and pose a potential danger to health. The review group are keen to establish what can be done through the powers of community well-being, if otherwise fettered by legislative restrictions.

It has now been over a year since that the Committee first presented a review to the Executive for approval. The Committee has now embarked on a process to evaluate and review where directorates have got to in implementing review recommendations throughout the services.

I believe the Committee has undertaken many successful scrutiny activities this year as outlined in the report, most notably, the new and innovative way of working on the DMH2 review. The Committee looks forward to achieving success with the future reviews of Inland Waterways and Air Pollution.

*Cllr Leslie Sibley
Chair Environment Scrutiny Committee*

Health



*Cllr Lesley Legge
Chair*

Excitingly, during the year the Health Overview & Scrutiny has formally become the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee with agreed constitution, protocols and management systems. Oxfordshire is one of very few authorities to have done this and we are delighted that all the district councils in Oxfordshire have agreed to work in partnership in this important area. The Joint Committee is made up of 7 County and 5 District Councillors and has the option to co-opt 3 representatives from the community. There are also 3 sub committees for the north, south and Oxford City which include representatives of neighbouring local government authorities to help us to look at health issues that cut across the county boundaries.

The task of scrutinising health services in the community is wide ranging. The first review, in the form of a shorter Inquiry, was undertaken with a small panel of members to look into specialist nursing care in Oxfordshire's special schools and its recommendations were presented in April to the Committee. These

recommendations have been well received by all parties and include a request that Oxford City Primary Care Trust conduct an investigation into what is the most efficient use of this resource and that this area be considered as a suitable pilot for a lead commissioning approach or pooled budget expenditure. This Inquiry is typical of many of the areas that the Committee has looked at in that it has involved a review of both NHS and local authority services.

Members of our committee routinely attend Primary Care Trust and other NHS Trust Board meetings giving us an important means of information sharing. The committee officers and I have also met regularly with our partners in Public Health staff, Patient and Public Involvement support staff, the informal Thames Valley Overview and Scrutiny Group and other related health bodies to ensure that the committee is well informed on issues that affect health in the community of Oxfordshire.

A third seminar was held in February to begin to prepare the forward looking work programme for the coming year. This seminar included partners from the NHS, other authorities, the voluntary service and representatives from the Patient & Public Involvement Forums. The Committee then discussed all the ideas that people suggested and subsequently condensed them into a work programme for the year ahead. The issues that gained the most 'votes' and which were consequently prioritised as suitable for tackling first were:

- Access to non-acute mental health services
- The care and treatment of stroke patients
- Hospital acquired infection and its impact upon length of stay

The Committee is also looking at the possibility of reviewing:

- Health promotion in schools
- NHS Dentistry in Oxfordshire

Ideas for work in other areas have been passed on to the Sub-Committees and to the Patient & Public Involvement Forums.

Much of our time has been spent in responding to both formal consultations and other changes in NHS services in Oxfordshire. For example, Treatment

Centres, the Ambulance Service Estates Strategy, the Psychology Therapies Review, Minor Injuries provision and we will be keeping a close eye on Oxfordshire's facilities for community hospitals.

The Committee has had to take in and understand a daunting amount of information within a very short timescale and now we are beginning to feel as though we are settling down to work as a team. It is an interesting and rewarding area of work to be involved in and, like my colleagues, I am looking forward to developing it further in the year ahead.

*Lesley Legge
Chair of Joint Oxfordshire Health Overview
& Scrutiny Committee*

Learning & Culture



*Cllr Robert Evans
Former Chair*



*Cllr Margaret Ferriman
Present Chair*

Scrutiny Review Programme

This year the Committee has conducted reviews on the Community Use of Schools and Faith Education completing a programme of 5 substantial reviews in 2 years. The Community Use of Schools has broad ranging recommendations for making fuller use of our school buildings and facilities by local communities in out of school hours. Faith education is a controversial area where stakeholders and individuals have strong views. The review group has been painstakingly even handed in examining evidence and engaging ethnic and religious communities in the County. Their report stresses the value of inclusion rather than separation and shows how our schools can teach young people to respect all faiths and cultures whilst practising their own beliefs in a tolerant environment. It is an excellent guide to the debates that will follow in the coming months.

The Executive has responded to the Committee's previous Review on the Recruitment and Retention of Teachers and Support Staff. Work is well advanced

to address teacher shortages in the County and to gain a fuller picture of why teachers leave. A key focus of the review was to suggest strategies that would encourage teachers to advance their careers within the County's schools. Our first review on SEN practices and procedures has continued to make its impact on the Council's thinking. It has clearly informed the collaborative approaches that have now established an Advisory Panel on SEN with scrutiny representation and a coherent County policy on inclusion.

Scrutiny Investigations

Two working parties have been established to scrutinise in detail aspects of the Educational Development Plan and the Cultural Strategy throughout the year with the officers who are directly responsible for delivering these plans. This followed a proposal I made last year for a pattern of ongoing scrutiny by a small group of Committee members rather than a one off discussion by the whole Committee. In similar vein, a small group is currently researching and preparing a scrutiny session with the Learning and Skills Council on its Strategic Review of 14-19 provision in Oxfordshire. We hope to have a productive Committee dialogue with its representatives in September.

Challenging the Executive

We continued to question the preparations made by the Executive for the implementation of a Six- Term Year from September 2004. The Committee agreed with the principle of this change but considered that a 2005 introduction would have been less rushed and confusing for all concerned.

The Committee considered the Executive's decision, following a call-in of the decision, that seemed to favour a 'two school'

solution for the future of secondary education in the Wantage and Grove area rather than a single large comprehensive. The Committee examined concerns that educational arguments had not been fully put and that both sides of the argument had not been presented.

Monitoring

The Committee considered reports on the conclusion of the first phase of the City Schools Reorganisation. There are still issues to be scrutinised regarding City school catchments and the stresses placed on staff in new school arrangements. It is also anticipated that the Committee will wish to return, in appropriate time, to examine the extent to which this major change fulfils its primary aim of raising educational standards. We continued to monitor the OFSTED reports received on the County's schools noting the increasing success in turning around and reducing schools with serious weaknesses as well as encouraging improvements in the management and leadership of our schools which has a corresponding effect on pupil standards.

We also considered in some detail new plans and procedures for Early Years Development and Adult and Community Learning. In Early Years education we were reassured at the robustness of introducing major changes in the single point of entry at age 5, the provision of half time places for every 4 year old child and the local partnerships forged between primary, nursery schools and the private and voluntary sectors. We are also monitoring the manner in which adult education is rapidly changing to meet local needs and Learning and Skills Council demands with a county-wide governance

system replacing local community education centres and stronger local partnerships with the Library Service and a range of other public and voluntary providers.

Visits

Opportunities for scrutiny groups to go 'out and about' in the county are valuable. There were two productive visits to School Partnerships in Bicester and Abingdon. The next visit is to the Cherwell Partnership of schools in the City in June. I have also taken up invitations to events as Committee Chair seeing them as useful opportunities to raise the Committee's profile to a wider audience.

Organisational Issues and Committee Changes

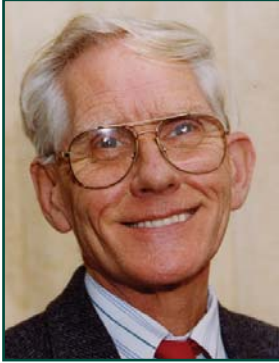
A presentation from the Director, Keith Bartley, on the key national drivers and pressures on learning and culture was invaluable in assisting the Committee to set its agenda for the year.

All Scrutiny Committees have reduced their membership and are striving to control their agenda and length of meetings. This is a particular issue for this Committee which addresses the largest portfolio of the Council's business. We worked more effectively in small working groups and reviews but these make heavy demands on time and commitment of both councillors and co-opted members.

I have enjoyed the challenge and involvement of leading this Committee for two years and wish Councillor Margaret Ferriman every success in taking over. I would also like to thank those who are no longer involved with the Committee for their contributions and commitment.

*Cllr Robert Evans
Chair of Learning & Culture Scrutiny Committee*

Social & Health Care



*Cllr Ted Cooper
Former Chair*



*Cllr Jean Fooks
Present Chair*

The main areas for review and scrutiny correlate principally with those functions which are led by the Executive Members for Children & Young People and for Community Care & Health. These are:

children & family services
youth service
youth justice
care for older people
adult care
disability support
community care

The Committee has continued to focus on its policy development role and challenging the Executive, paying close attention to a wide range of areas within its remit. Members of the Committee have been active in offering comment on key strategic documents, such as the Oxfordshire Plan and the Early Years Development Plan, as well as on number of Best Value reviews. We have also worked closely with

members from other scrutiny committees where items have been cross-cutting, to make sure that scrutiny working is truly joined-up.

As part of its challenge role, the Committee has questioned members of the Executive, together with relevant officers, with a view to advising the Executive or undertaking possible scrutiny action. For example, Members recently questioned the Head of Partnership and Planning in the Social & Health Care Directorate on the integration of mental health services with particular concern around provision in rural areas. At their next meeting, the Committee will also question officers on new adoption legislation, which came into place in October 2003, some elements of which are still undergoing consultation.

The proposed budget for Social & Health Care was examined in detail by the Committee as part of the budget setting cycle, and key items were prioritised for the Executive's consideration. The Committee regularly follows up what action the Executive have taken subsequent to their advice. This ensures that the Committee is up to date with the effectiveness of their Scrutiny activity.

In July 2003, the Executive considered this Committee's first completed Scrutiny Review: Geographical Equity for Older People's Day Services. The Executive noted the report's recommendations and instructed the Director for Social & Health Care, in consultation with other Directors, to report back to the Executive with an Action Plan. A progress report was submitted to the Executive nine months later, who noted the work undertaken to date. This included:

- giving the Older People's Champion a briefing with the Director;

- scheduling the delayed Day Services Strategy for publication in April 2004;
- holding a reception for Voluntary Organisations in March 2004 as a response to the Report's recommendation for the Council to play a strategic role in supporting volunteering; and
- agreeing to improve the availability of information on services for older people.

We have now embarked on two more Scrutiny Reviews: -

- Older People: Needs Assessment and Provision with particular reference to minority ethnic groups; and
- The Cost of Agency Care Workers.

The Review into the Cost of Agency Care Workers is investigating the costs of using independent social care providers, looking at both the home support sector and other areas of service provision where the independent sector is employed. The Review aims are to understand the structure of the market in social care, to satisfy the Committee that there are clear lines of control and accountability around social care provision and to establish whether there are additional management problems, which arise from the use of independent social care providers. As part of the Review, all Members of the Committee were invited to participate in training workshops focussing on budget scrutiny, financial processes, and social care systems, which will assist members with their scrutiny of key areas of the budget for the Social & Health Care Directorate.

Work is also underway on the Review into Older People: Needs Assessment and Provision with particular reference to minority ethnic groups, which is investigating the issues behind the low number of elderly people from minority ethnic groups whose needs are assessed for care. This Review is actively engaging members of the diverse local ethnic minority groups and has heard about the experiences of older people in the community. The Review aims to make recommendations that will ensure easy and swift access to a needs assessment for all older people.

To ensure that Members are kept fully informed of important issues, several presentations and seminars have been arranged. For example, the Committee were invited to a seminar on Very Sheltered Housing, to give them an opportunity to understand the service in more detail and to examine its potential application with other partner organisations beyond the Homes for Older People (HOPS) programme. These seminars help to keep Members up to date, whilst ensuring that monitoring or items solely for information do not take up valuable time in the Committees.

In conclusion, I feel that the Committee is moving towards a more rigorous involvement in the scrutiny process, and is starting to develop different ways of working. However, there is still a considerable way to go on the learning curve, and I hope that the next year will build on our success to date.

*Cllr Ted Cooper
Chair of Social & Health Care Scrutiny Committee*



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