

Scrutiny Annual Report

2011 – 2012

Foreword

The reviewing and previewing role of scrutiny was described last year by the County Solicitor & Monitoring Officer when he was invited to come up with a definition.

In general terms, the purpose of the scrutiny function is to monitor the actions of the Cabinet, and other committees, and to call them to account. It is also part of scrutiny's purpose to inform policy development, for instance by undertaking wider reviews of policy and performance either on the initiative of a scrutiny committee or at the request of the Cabinet. The scrutiny function can also involve scrutiny of other public bodies' policy and performance, for example the health service.

Scrutiny committees also have a role in effecting and/or considering a call-in of a decision by Cabinet or a member of it... and may also invite people other than Council members and officers to address them.

The scrutiny function therefore fulfils an important part of the Council's democratic decision-making process and of gauging the impact and effectiveness of the Council's services.

Over the course of 2011-12, scrutiny has amply demonstrated the role described above. The work of the Council's six committees in scrutinising and, where necessary, challenging Cabinet decisions and policy implementation ultimately ensures that the interests of the service-user are protected.

The case studies in this Annual Report provide a snapshot of this process during the last 12 months. It has been a successful year and has demonstrated the importance of joined-up team-work.

Cllr Nick Carter
Chairman
Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee

Introduction

This Scrutiny Annual Report provides an overview of the work of the council's six scrutiny committees over the course of 2011/12. The Committees are:

- Adult Services Scrutiny Committee
- Children's Services Scrutiny Committee
- Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee
- Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee
- Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee
- Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee (HOSC)

The report is structured to reflect the Council's corporate objectives and links to the business strategies. In the face of budget pressures, the role of scrutiny has become increasingly pertinent in ensuring that the needs of service users are at the forefront of Council policy. Where previously, scrutiny's role was largely retrospective, we have sought to align scrutiny meetings so that they enable key policy proposals to be considered as part of the decision-making process. Scrutiny has a central role in assessing whether or not the Council is meeting the targets set out in the Business Strategy and ensuring savings are being delivered in the most effective manner.

World-Class Economy

Our objective is to ensure that Oxfordshire's economy is world class. This comprises a number of key service-focused streams, including: developing infrastructure to support growth and business, including technology and transport; improving educational attainment and linking skills with demand; and developing relationships with the private and academic sectors to promote effective growth. The following case studies highlight the role of scrutiny in these priorities.

Infrastructure Framework

The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, the Strategic Planning & Infrastructure Partnership and the Districts have confirmed their commitment to producing a Strategic Infrastructure Framework for Oxfordshire. The framework will incorporate strategic investment needs and planning in order to support sustainable economic growth. During 2011/12 the Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee considered the development of this framework across Oxfordshire. It addressed aspects such as the need to work closely with communities and with commercial partners to ensure the best use of infrastructure funding. The Committee supported proposals to include councillors in the process of developing relationships with local partners to the framework. This has resulted in a number of Committee members working closely with officers on developing the framework.

Key Stage 1 Attainment

The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee was concerned about educational attainment for Key Stage 1 students across Oxfordshire. They invited relevant officers and visitors to a "select committee" review in order better to understand the attainment levels and to develop solutions. Thirteen recommendations were made, of which all were incorporated in the recently completed Education Strategy. These included:

- Effective school leadership
- Strong school governance
- Excellent standards of teaching
- Implementation and monitoring
- Strong external support and challenge

Apprenticeships

The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee had held a seminar on apprenticeships and young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) in the spring of 2010. The Committee has continued to work on this, bringing officers back for an update in 2011 when economic conditions continued to be a challenge. A second seminar in June 2012 is due to revisit the issue of NEETs, improved apprenticeship take-up and wider engagement with the local scientific community. Specific issues are that employers in the county routinely have to recruit from outside the area, aspects of the curriculum need addressing, there must be a focus on science and on

high-tech apprenticeships, and gender differences must be addressed. The seminar is due to focus on the Council's role as an intermediary between schools, colleges, apprentice services and the business community in order to broker a full discussion of the challenges and opportunities.

Local Transport Plan

The purpose of Oxfordshire's Local Transport Plan 2011-2030 is to focus on attracting and supporting economic investment and growth, deliver transport infrastructure, tackle congestion and improve quality of life for residents. It supports the Oxfordshire Sustainable Community Strategy, Oxfordshire 2030. The Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee formed a working group to assess the development of the Local Transport Plan, and made a number of recommendations relating to HGV routes, Kidlington train station and ensuring value for money. The working group also reviewed the outcomes of the consultation which informed the finalisation of the Transport Plan. The group continues to meet quarterly to guide the LTP3, so that it is regularly reviewed and updated.

Early Intervention Hubs

The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee has focused on monitoring the new 'hub' arrangements for children's services. Each hub is a 'one-stop shop' for integrated services and a joined-up process which provides high-quality early intervention and specialist services to children, young people and families with complex needs. The Committee has engaged with issues and discussions, thereby assessing the services integrated in the new hubs. Scrutiny's role is to monitor the effectiveness of the transition in order to evaluate whether needs are being addressed. This assessment will culminate in a review in 2012, as part of the scrutiny work programme.

"The year has seen significant changes within Children's Services nationally and locally that challenge existing practices and the interests of our children. Education is an essential part of developing a healthy economic and social future for our county. It is therefore crucial, in light of these changes, that Council and Scrutiny function to ensure the interests of all children are recognised and defended in an efficient and pragmatic way. The examples above convey the exercise of this function in a creative and thoughtful manner."

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

Healthy and Thriving Communities

The County Council's objective is to build healthy and thriving communities by working with existing voluntary and community organisations, improving access to health care and services for all – with a focus on prevention – by concentrating on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, and by responding to demographic change. The following examples show where scrutiny has represented the service-user to achieve these priorities.

Mental Health Services

In 2011 the Primary Care Trust (PCT) announced plans to re-tender day services provided by voluntary and community organisations for adults who have mental health problems. The plan was to focus on well-being and recovery services with all patients having a long-term plan, subject to regular review. The Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) supported the principle but was concerned that some existing local services might not survive. It was agreed that the HOSC would have an observer on the body preparing the service specifications and undertaking the tendering process. The outcome of the process was an increased spread of services across the county. Fewer places would be concentrated in the City, but more services would be available locally, thus reducing the need for people to come into Oxford.

Military Partnership Working

During 2011/12, the Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee took an interest in the Council's partnership with the military. In September, members heard from Council officers and MoD colleagues about the success of a number of projects that were part of the Council's military covenant work. This led the Committee to visit the Bicester Garrison and learn more about the challenges facing military personnel and their families and how the Council is working with military staff to improve the quality of life for this community. The Committee will continue to monitor the military partnership, particularly in relation to the significant developments of Bicester Garrison and Graven Hill.

Regulatory Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA)

Authorisation is required before a local authority commences covert surveillance or obtains information by the use of informants or officers acting undercover. RIPA provides the statutory framework for covert surveillance activities to be lawfully undertaken by a local authority. A revised code of practice issued under the Act came into force in April 2010, specifying that elected members should review the authority's use of the Act and set the policy at least once a year. The Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee undertakes this function, ensuring periodic reviews and giving close consideration to the annual report on the Council's RIPA procedures. In this way it contributes to the authority's excellent performance in this area, as evidenced by an inspection carried out in May 2011.

“The Safer & Stronger Scrutiny Committee has, perhaps, the widest range of County Council activities of all the scrutiny committees: fire & rescue, consumer protection, crime & disorder reduction, community safety, gypsies & travellers, drugs & alcohol awareness, adult learning, libraries, museums, arts, archives, registration services and coroner’s services just for starters. This provides a very varied scrutiny program. However each of these service areas face similar challenges, particularly in areas of reducing financial resources, which inevitably leads to examining a range of solutions including more collaborative arrangements with partners, users, and volunteers. Within Scrutiny we shall continue to support our services to deliver excellent services and high standards of performance, whilst maintaining value for money. This is best achieved by understanding what our communities aspirations and concerns are; and then working with Officers, Cabinet and Partners to develop and deliver appropriate services to address them. “

Councillor Lawrie Stratford, Chairman of the Safer & Stronger Scrutiny Committee

Community Hospitals

Plans to build new community hospitals in Bicester and Henley have led to local concern over the nature of services to be provided, the number of beds, and timescales for delivery of the facilities. The HOSC has monitored the work of the PCT in order to assess progress, and has required NHS managers to explain the latest position and why delays have occurred. September 2012 has now been agreed for the signing of contracts, to enable the building to be completed by September 2013. The Committee will continue to drive and monitor progress by holding the PCT to account.

Children’s Congenital Heart Services

The NHS is reducing the number of large centres for heart surgery on babies and young children, and is moving towards more specialised services to enable clinicians to treat more cases and develop greater expertise. In 2011 it launched a nationwide consultation on these proposals, which the HOSC has been involved in scrutinising. The proposals would have seen the closure of the children’s heart unit at Oxford’s John Radcliffe Hospital (JR) with the possibility of children and their parents having to travel to Bristol, Birmingham or London instead. The Committee heard from a local stakeholder group, Young Hearts, and the provider about their views of the proposals. This resulted in support for a counter-proposal by the JR and local parents for surgery to be undertaken at Southampton with after-care taking place at the JR. This latter proposal has been favoured nationally.

“The consultation proposals for children’s congenital heart services were a cause of great concern to the committee and the community as they potentially represented a reduction in service locally. Participation of the wide range of experts and the local interest group, Young Hearts, and presentation of the issues enabled the committee to fully understand this complex issue; the advantages and disadvantages for Oxfordshire of the national review of paediatric cardiac surgical services. With this input the health scrutiny committee was well placed to present a robust consultation response urging the NHS to build on the strong network between Oxford and Southampton in providing children’s congenital heart services.”

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

Southern Cross Care Group

The Social & Community Services directorate’s monitoring systems and crisis response capability were put to the test in summer 2011, by the collapse of the Southern Cross Care Group. The Group ran five care homes in Oxfordshire, and the crisis presented a possible safeguarding risk to service-users. At an update in October 2011, the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee was assured that the transition to alternative providers had been handled smoothly, resulting in minimal disruption to the level of care for service-users. The Committee was confident that the financial health of external providers would continue to be routinely assessed. The collapse of Southern Cross highlighted the need for consistent joined-up monitoring across the full range of commissioned services. The restructured joint commissioning service aims to provide this. To ensure that best practice is continued and extended, the Committee formed a sub-group which will provide a steer on the development of the Quality Assurance service.

Closure of the Health Trainer Service

The Primary Care Trust proposed to close the Health Trainer Service, which advised hard-to-reach individuals on health matters. The PCT considered that it was not reaching enough people and that other options were available to help them. Staff and patients, however, argued against the closure, and the HOSC had to consider whether to force a consultation. The service would have needed to improve by about 3,000% to be remotely cost-effective, and the HOSC decided the public interest would not be best served by continuing it. All of the services that trainers advised their clients to use would still be accessible to patients, and the money saved by discontinuing the training facility would be re-invested in alternative services.

Community Safety Partnerships

The plans of the Districts’ Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnership for 2011-2012 shared a common framework across the county and were aligned with the goals and priorities of Oxfordshire 2030. The Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee asked for actions on reducing recidivism rates to be more prominent in

the plans, and requested an update on the progress of implementing the MANTRA programme to stop hate crime in Oxfordshire.

Delayed Transfers of Care

In September 2011 the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee and the HOSC held a joint meeting to discuss long-term under-performance in relation to delayed transfers of care. The meeting was attended by senior officers from the Oxford University Hospitals, Primary Care Trust and Oxford Health, and was led by Dr Steven Richards of the recently formed Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Consortium. The meeting assessed the steps being taken to ensure joined-up working across health and social care and requested regular updates on the proposed changes. The problem of delayed transfers is being addressed through the “Acceptable Care for Everyone” programme. The chairman of the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee sits on the Programme Assurance group to ensure that the Committee’s views are represented throughout the programme’s development.

Environment and Climate change

This objective focuses on maintaining the quality of Oxfordshire's natural and built environment, which includes managing waste and promoting recycling, reducing emissions in the face of climate change, and protecting our countryside. The following case studies show how scrutiny has been involved.

"The Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee has fed comment into Council policy for a number of significant issues over the last year. The Scrutiny Committee continues to challenge the Cabinet – are the County Council policies improving the quality of life for the residents of, and visitors to, Oxfordshire? We are mapping out the future of the County.

The Minerals & Gravels policy has been approved by Council. The Scrutiny Committee – and its Working Group – has considered the issues of where excavation localities are allocated, and how the land is subsequently restored. This has a far reaching effect on the County landscape, and sites must be sensitive to their surrounding environment. Tied into this has been a full review of the Countryside Services, who have restructured during the last year. We are a County of growth, but this has to be balanced with being the most rural County in the South East of England, with 3 AONB's within our boundaries. Our commons, open spaces and the extensive network of footpaths must continue to be protected, well maintained and available for all to enjoy.

There are a number of on-going reviews, such as Community Transport, the Local Transport Plan, recycling of waste and energy reduction of Council buildings & schools. All part of ensuring that finances are identified and correctly allocated, to give the residents real choices and value for money."

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

Minerals and Waste Development Framework

The Minerals & Waste Core Strategy sets out the objectives, spatial strategy, core policies and implementation framework for the supply of minerals and the management of waste in Oxfordshire. In October 2010, the Cabinet agreed a set of guiding principles for the minerals strategy and an interim preferred strategy for mineral working. These agreed principles were called in for consideration by the Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee in February 2011. Primarily this was due to insufficient consideration being given to the issue of sustainability. The proposed levels of gravel extraction in the north of the county in light of the majority of demand coming from the south is considered by residents to put unsustainable strain on the transport routes and local communities and they should thus be administered from pits in their local vicinity. This was supported by secondary issues, which together merited reconsideration of the spatial strategy approach, such as spreading the onus, aftercare and infrastructure.

Energy Savings

With a new tax on energy consumption and escalating energy prices, the Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee was keen to ensure the Council was reducing energy consumption in its buildings, street lighting and schools. The Committee assessed the objectives in the Schools Carbon Reduction Strategy and the Environment & Economy Business Strategy, alongside progress against forecasted energy and carbon targets. In particular, the Committee highlighted a number of opportunities to promote energy efficiency, including the role that Councillors can play in their local communities and schools.

Efficient Public Services

This broad objective covers maintaining a customer focus whilst delivering the savings targets and implementing the Business Strategy. The following case studies highlight the role of scrutiny in these priorities.

Property and Facilities External Services Contract

The Property and Facilities service drew up proposals to re-tender a single provider contract. The Cabinet's decision to include school meals in the procurement exercise was called in for examination by the Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee. A special Committee meeting in February 2012 provided comments ahead of a further Cabinet decision on the quality of the service that might be included in the new contract. These comments were considered by the Cabinet when deciding whether to progress with the procurement of school meals. The Committee was keen to ensure that quality would be maintained and developed.

"The Adult Services Scrutiny Committee plays a crucial role in holding cabinet to account and providing cross party challenge on policy development. The wide range of professional and personal interests among the members of the Adult Services committee has led to some robust and valuable debate over the past year on a variety of key policy areas; from the adult Services proposed budget to complex negotiations over changes to the Oxfordshire Care Partnership contract, to the development of a set of shared principles to ensure quality in commissioned services."

Councillor Don Seale, Chairman of the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee

Home Support Service

The Cabinet's decision to commission the home support service in May 2011 concerned the Adult Services Scrutiny Committee for two reasons. Firstly, the Committee questioned whether the decision had been made with sufficient attention to alternative models of provision. The second area of concern was whether the monitoring arrangements for home support providers were sufficient to ensure both value for money and adequate protection of service-users. The Committee voted against a call-in, but resolved to pay close attention to the development of the service and monitoring arrangements. A paper in December 2011 outlined progress towards the goals set out in the original proposals.

Long-term Debt Policy

Concerns over the Council's long-term debt policy were expressed by the Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee following a report in July which attributed an increase in debt to the borrowing required to fund the capital programme. The report set out the reasons for the Council's long-term debt portfolio, the current policy and

borrowing, and the implications of keeping or amending the current policy. The Committee debated the associated risks and decided a members' seminar should discuss the policy further. This briefing became part of the members' budget briefing in autumn 2011 and will help scrutiny committees to continue examining service and resource plans.

Libraries

The Council's need to make savings led it to consider the future of its library service in late 2010. Additional funding from central government enabled the Council to reconsider its financial position and the Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee played a key role in examining the development of alternative proposals for the library service. It provided an important opportunity for members of the public and groups supporting libraries across the county to voice their concerns. The proposals agreed by the Cabinet in December 2011, following a scrutiny meeting with contributions from the public, meant that all 43 public libraries remained open, with increased proportions of staff in 'community' and 'community plus' libraries. The Committee continues to keep a watching brief, supporting the service in its plans to fine-tune proposals to local circumstances.

Pension Fund Committee

The Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee has the functions of the Pension Fund Committee within its remit. In order to help with this duty, the scrutiny committee held a question and answer session with the Chairman of the Pension Fund Committee and Assistant Head of Oxfordshire Customer Services - Financial Services. The aim was to understand the management of the fund and key issues affecting it. In the light of the national focus on the future of local government pensions, the scrutiny committee's role has become more significant. The Committee returned to the subject in March 2012 to explore the proposed national changes to the local government pension scheme.

Museums

The Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee closely followed the transition of the Cogges Manor Farm Museum in Witney from a Council service to an independent trust. The Committee paid particular attention to appointments for the critical positions of Director and Operations Manager and took an interest in the development of a wider Oxfordshire Museums Strategy, involving the university museums, prior to its adoption in spring 2012.

Looking Forward – Scrutiny in 2012/13

2011/12 has been an exciting and productive year across the six Scrutiny Committees. The Scrutiny function has been utilised to champion the needs of the service user and is key to Council decision making. Significant challenges have been approached with enthusiasm and creativity but more importantly, through engagement with stakeholders and service users. The success in better aligning Scrutiny with Council decision making further supports the democratic process and bridges the gap between decision making and the needs of the service user.

During the coming year, scrutiny will continue to address the issues most significant to the direction and work of the Council. Given the structural and financial changes, it is critical that all facets of the Council are forward-looking in order to anticipate and respond most effectively to the challenges ahead.

Budget and Savings

All scrutiny committees have been keeping track of how services are achieving their efficiency targets and managing their resources effectively. The Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny Committee continues to look at services' budgets and the progress made against savings targets. In particular, scrutiny seeks reassurance about front-line service delivery. This has recently included the potential impact on the Road Safety Team (which was transferred from Environment & Economy to the Fire & Rescue Service) and the recruitment and retention of retained fire-fighters. The latter issue will come back to scrutiny to support a fuller review of the Council's approach to a retained fire service. The Committee has also been clear in its request for services to look for income-generating opportunities, highlighting existing best practice such as in the Registration Service.

Business Strategy

The Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee has taken an active role in monitoring delivery of the Council's Business Strategy. The Committee receives regular financial monitoring reports, which enable it to probe the Council's financial position and delivery of priorities. The Committee also receives progress reports on key projects, such as the implementation of the ICT strategy which was developed in response to significant budget problems in the past. The ICT strategy is now performing well. The Committee will continue to receive regular reports on progress against the Council's Corporate Plan, enabling it to see how key priorities are being addressed and how the Council is responding to the Localism Act and the Local Government Resource Review (LGRR).

The LGRR proposes to localise business rates by reforming the current Formula Grant funding system for local authorities, enabling councils to keep a share of the growth in national non-domestic rates in their area above a baseline. The Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee identified the LGRR as a priority for its future

programme and has requested a members' briefing on the subject. Scrutiny of this significant change for the future of local government will be a key part of the Committee's programme in 2012/13.

The Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee has raised a number of concerns about the Council's Business Strategy and variations to the Medium-Term Financial Plan which will require monitoring. The strategy has been broadly supported, but specific concerns were addressed to the Director for Environment & Economy and the Cabinet Member for Growth & Infrastructure. These included aspects of the Countryside Service, Growing Places Fund, Area Stewardship, Solar PV's and general infrastructure projects.

Members' Communication Protocol

In order to ensure that the Council communicates effectively with members, the Constitution contains a Protocol on Members' Rights and Responsibilities, in which the relevant principles and expectations are set out. The Strategy & Partnerships Scrutiny Committee is monitoring how the protocol is being observed and receives reports from the Head of Law & Governance. The Committee has raised some specific issues and made recommendations on how to improve communication. It will continue to ensure that member/officer relationships are working effectively.

Health and Well Being Changes

The Government has realised the value of the HOSC's overview of health, wellbeing and the NHS. The Committee's independence from the Health & Wellbeing Board (H&WB) will be enshrined in legislation so that its scrutiny role is not compromised. It will retain its composition as a partnership between County, City and District Councils. Other committees along with HOSC will now scrutinise public health which is becoming a new County Council function from April 2013. A major part of this new role is holding the H&WB Board to account, along with organisations such as clinical commissioning groups and NHS foundation trusts, for their responsibility to deliver improvements in healthcare. This responsibility lies jointly with H&WB Board, HOSC and the new Director of Public Health. These should be used in a co-ordinated manner to bring about focussed change where it is most needed.

"2011/12 has been an exciting year in the world of health reform. Considerable national debate of the Health Bill concluded with the passing of the Act in March. The Health Scrutiny committee has been closely involved as local proposals for the organisation of health services including GP commissioning and the Health and Well Being Board have taken shape. The committee is pleased to see the increased role for GPs in the commissioning of local services and how positively the new agenda is being taken forward between partners in Oxfordshire. The key questions for scrutiny to keep challenging are: are the right services being commissioned and delivered for local people? and is bureaucracy being minimised? We will also be getting involved in scrutinising public health and its services which will be moving into the county council in the coming year."

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