

The Annual Report of Overview & Scrutiny in the Borough of Watford - 2004/05

A Report of the Committee Chairs

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT – 2004/5

1. Introduction & Overview

In order for scrutiny to work in Watford there needs to be a greater understanding and greater emphasis placed on the process by all involved, both members and officers. Whilst scrutiny did move forward in 2004/2005 there is still a long way to go and positive plans are already in place for 2005/2006 to take scrutiny further forward and at a greater pace.

A survey of scrutiny in Watford occurred in early spring 2005, this highlighted many shortcomings in the current effectiveness and processes of scrutiny. However, just by the fact that this survey established this existing benchmark, a sign was given that the Council can move forward with scrutiny – a similar survey is due to be completed in a year's time to establish if progress has been made.

For scrutiny to prosper it needs both co-ordination from the centre and general cross-party support. In regards to co-ordination from the centre, it must be noted that officer support in 2004/2005 has totally changed and in fact has dramatically reduced. Whilst welcoming the appointment of an experienced scrutiny officer in the autumn of 2004 it must be noted that this officer is part time and is the only officer appointed in a scrutiny position in the Town Hall (there has been a reduction in staff for the scrutiny process over the year).

In order to establish a greater understanding of the scrutiny process by all parties, a sub-group of the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees has been meeting since late autumn 2004 on a monthly basis. An invitation has now been extended to a representative of the political group without an official member of this sub group. The goal of establishing this “all party” scrutiny group is to progress scrutiny within Watford in a manner that does not allow scrutiny to become partisan.

Scrutiny is an empowering process for members giving them a chance to identify priorities, engage in policy development and propose solutions to matters of strong public concern. The two scrutiny committees do not select their topics for in-depth scrutiny in an arbitrary way but rather look at areas where there is a problem in a council service delivery, where something has clearly gone wrong, or at the request of members of the public or community groups who felt that an investigation was needed to deal with problems. The scrutiny process must not be seen as a “talking shop” but it must be a process that is able to influence policymaking, contribute innovative solutions and highlight the need for more effective corporate working.

2. Structure and format of scrutiny

The existence of five scrutiny committees in 2002/2003 – mirroring the Mayor and the portfolio holders – was good in theory but proved to be cumbersome, reactive, and lacked any strategic focus on the organisation. In fact, they became the dreaded talking shops that those who welcomed the scrutiny process feared.

In 2003/2004 the scrutiny committees were reduced to two and this subsequently was carried forward into 2004/2005. Two scrutiny committees gave the scrutiny process more focus although it must be noted that perhaps more emphasis needs to be established in regards to the scrutiny of council policy (plans are in place for this in 2005/2006).

In July 2004, the Council delegated responsibility to the Managing Director for reviewing officer support for scrutiny committees. This review resulted in officer support, other than committee management, moving from Democratic Services to Strategic Services and the establishment of a new post of Scrutiny Research Manager. In April 2005 the amount of officer support time was reduced from one FTE to a half FTE as part of the 2005/06 budgets round.

3. Policy Review & Development Committee

Membership:

Councillors Green (Chair)

Councillor P Mortimer (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Ajab, Brodhurst, Derbyshire, Gordon, Greenslade, Mahmood and Scott

The committee met on seven occasions between July 2004 and March 2005, the following is a summary of its main work topics.

Chair's Perspective

The Policy Review & Development Committee has tackled a number of diverse issues this year. In all cases positive outcomes have been produced and I hope that these will contribute to the Council's operation and improvement to services. The process of scrutinising subjects and arriving at decisions and conclusions has presented some difficulties and work is required in the coming year to improve how we go about our work as a committee.

My report only covers the year 2004/05 but the largest and most important piece of work carried out, the Youth Service Review with particular emphasis on WAYS, was started in 2003/04. All panel members were involved in the review and made useful contributions to producing conclusions. Members got out and about, visiting youth sites and interviewing a range of people involved in youth work. These included internal and external agencies such as HCC, Connexions, police and the YMCA. I believe this positive, hands on,

approach sets an example for future reviews and points the way forward to making scrutiny a member led function.

One particular problem, which delayed progress in completing our work, has been the lack of a dedicated support officer from March to December.

Because the work extended over two years, membership of the committee changed resulting in a need to revisit some work and bring new members up to date. The committee spent two meetings re-evaluating the original findings and agreeing recommendations. The report was finally presented to Cabinet on 11 April and is still to be presented to Hertfordshire County Council for its comments. Despite these difficulties, the new committee was positive about the work of WAYS.

The budget scrutiny process in 2004/05 was carried out differently from previous years, better in some ways but worse in others. We have discussed the problems of this year's process and concluded that scrutiny needs earlier involvement to make the process more effective. It was disappointing that budget figures initially presented to the committee, on which it based its deliberations, were later changed. Had the committee been aware of the later figures, it may have reached a different conclusion on the rate of council tax increase recommended to Cabinet.

In September of 2004 the committee received a presentation on housing stock appraisal options. I have personal concerns about the conclusions to this work, particularly the questionnaire, which in the opinion of some committee members, was not well designed and did not make tenants aware of all options. The committee may have produced a better, more unified result, had there been more time to debate the issues before reference to Cabinet. Alternatively, the matter could have been referred to the Call-in & Performance Committee for its views. This would have widened the debate on what has proven to be a contentious issue and provided an opportunity to forge operational links between the two committees. I would like to suggest this as a learning point for next year, especially the idea of closer working relationships with our colleagues on the Call-in & Performance Committee.

On some general issues:

The introduction of the Scrutiny Development Group this year was a positive step forward. This group has enabled co-ordination of scrutiny work and common issues and discussion of development initiatives. I would like to pick out the consultation work on the 2005/06 programmes via the questionnaire to members and officers as an example of successful joint working.

Relationships with members of the executive are still not clear, the "critical friend" approach is proving difficult to realise and I look forward to the agreement of a protocol which is currently being drafted.

It is my view that the work of the Policy Review & Development Committee has been carried out mainly without the intervention of party politics and I thank members for their unbiased contributions.

Dedicated officer support for the year ahead will be key to achieving further improvements and moving the scrutiny agenda forward. The level of support available has been reduced to a half time officer for 2005/6 but I hope that discussions within the Council will result in additional support, albeit not of a

permanent nature. It is my opinion that, regardless of how effective the current support officer is, it will be impossible to deliver what is an ambitious programme of work in 2005/06 without additional help.

In conclusion, I am very positive about the future developments and would like to thank all the people, from inside and outside the Council, who have made a contribution to the work of the Policy Review & Development Committee during 2004/05. In particular, I would like to mention the two dedicated scrutiny officers, members of the Committee and members of the Youth Panel for their hard work and contributions during a very difficult phase.

Watford Area Youth Service (WAYS) – a scrutiny of the services provided for the young people of Watford.

A panel of members set up by the main committee conducted the review, the members were:

Councillors Green (Chair), Crout, Greenslade, P Mortimer, and Williams.

The purpose of the review was to find out whether the Council is providing a good service for young people, with specific reference to the role of Watford Area Youth Service.

The panel concluded that much good work had been carried out by WAYS and commended officers for the progress made with youth services. However, some areas were noted as requiring further attention, the main points highlighted by the panel were; apparent service gaps, the division of work between the County and the Borough is not clear, there are question marks over the efficiency of co-working between youth work officers of the Borough and the County, costs of services and value for money, the deprivation factor and whether it is properly applied, whether service provision is available to all communities and consultation with non-users.

The Committee made a number of recommendations for improvement to the Cabinet and the County. The Cabinet has responded agreeing the recommendations and a reply from the County is awaited. The Committee will monitor the implementation of recommendations over the year ahead.

Grant Aid Review

The Committee received the final report from the Grant Aid Review Panel, grant aid work started in 2003/04 but was concluded in July 2004/05. The review had scrutinised the process for grant aiding the voluntary and community sector but not the individual organisations that received a grant. The report contained the background to the review, the award process, the Panel's recommendations and examples from other Local Authorities. The committee agreed the report and its ten recommendations and referred it to Cabinet, which welcomed the report as an example of valuable scrutiny work. Cabinet agreed, or agreed with qualifications, the recommendations. It is not clear as to whether the Panel's recommendations have been implemented as agreed, the committee will review progress at its first meeting

of the new year and monitor progress of recommendations over the year ahead.

Budget Scrutiny

The Committee looked at draft budget proposals for 2005/06 over two meetings. The Committee felt that it was difficult to comment on budget proposals without the benefit of earlier insight into how the proposals were developed, it considered that it would have been useful to have been involved in the budget process from an earlier stage. It was felt that a review of the process would be useful to take account of the lessons of 2004/5 and how budget scrutiny was carried out in previous years.

The Committee discussed the level of council tax with regard to the rate of increase and issues of capping. The committee agreed that a target tax increase of 2.9% be recommended to Cabinet. The Committee also agreed that a review of the budget scrutiny process be carried out to determine the best approach for 2005/6

Future options for the Colosseum

By scrutiny standards, this item attracted a significant number of members of the public. Public interest and participation in scrutiny is an area to be addressed in 2005/06.

The Committee considered a consultant's report on the future of the Colosseum and officers explained the main points and options put forward. It was noted that there could be no future for the Colosseum without investment and that this investment was unlikely to come from external sources. The Committee also looked at the initial findings of the public consultation, which showed headline information on the consultation on the options.

The Committee concluded that the closure option be rejected and made a number of other recommendations to Cabinet relating to the level of subsidy, the range of activities and choices between the other three options. The Committee will monitor developments on the future of the Colosseum during 2005/06.

Stock appraisals options

The Scrutiny Committee received a presentation regarding the Options Appraisal process from the Head of Housing, the Operations Manager and two tenant representatives from the Options Appraisal Working Group.

The Committee had an in depth discussion and asked a range of questions about the process, a number of issues were raised which were noted by the portfolio holder and others present. Generally, members felt the process had been correct but had some reservations on the presentation of some of the information. The Committee agreed the details of a report, which was later submitted to Cabinet.

4. Call-in & Performance Committee

Membership

Councillor Williams (Chair)

Councillor Crout (Vice-Chair) up to January

Councillor O'Connell (Vice Chair) from February on

Councillors Ali (up to January only), Baddeley, I Brown, Jenkins, Martins, Poole and Rackett

Work Summary

The committee met on nine occasions between August 2004 and March 2005. Subjects discussed were according to the work programme set at the beginning of the year and can be broken down between regular and one off issues:

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| Regular - | Budget monitoring
Performance Plan monitoring
Racial harassment cases
Waste management and recycling – BVPP progress
Service transformation programme progress |
| One off - | The contract for the management the Colosseum
Development Control performance
Corporate Equalities Plan
Race Equality Scheme
Human Resources presentation
Community Safety Partnership
Corporate Plan |

Chair's Perspective

Over the last year the Call-In and Performance Scrutiny Committee has basically been meeting on a monthly basis. It was pleasing to see at the outset of the 2004/2005 municipal year that out of the nine committee members that six members continued from 2003/2004 and that three members were new – an ideal balance of new and experience members.

The Year started off with the scrutiny of the events leading up to the collapse of the company running the Colosseum. Whilst some members did not initially feel that this matter should have been before us I feel that the process, and the recommendations were well received by the cabinet, and this I understand has led to at least one change in a partnership agreement.

In the autumn the management team of the Development Control Section attended the Call In and Performance Scrutiny Committee. It was the fourth time in fifteen months that Development Control had been before the Committee, and this time it was pleasing to note how well the Performance Indicators had improved over this time.

The Quarterly Performance Indicators come before the Committee periodically, as do the budget monitoring reports, and it's often from these reports that the committee decides to "call-in" relevant departments. In this

regard, over the last year we have had reports from the Head of Human Resources, the Community Safety Team, the Service Transformation Management Team, and the Waste & Recycling Management Team. Along with these reports, the Committee has been presented with a number of Council plans and reports e.g. Equality Plan, Performance Plan, and Annual Report.

It has to be said that the questions from members of the scrutiny committee, on all agenda items, have been very good, and the responses from the officers/witnesses just as good. It is worth noting that many of the Heads of Departments have volunteered themselves (without prompting) to come back before us to provide an update on the progress made in their relevant area after an appropriate period of time.

The work programme for 2004/2005, established by the committee at the outset of the municipal year, was completed, and our minds now need to be focused on establishing a work programme for 2005/2006. Currently, suggestions have included: - Housing Stock Transfer, Community Safety, Building Services, and the Parking Shop. A suggestion has also been made to scrutinise a cabinet/council “key decision” of 2, or 3, years ago to see if the “key decision” has been successful or not – the “key decision” has not yet been chosen.

Contributions from officers and cabinet members were most welcome at the Committee Meetings and we thank them for their attendance, I would also like to thank the members of the Call-In and Performance Scrutiny Committee for all their contributions over 2004/2005 – there was a good “team spirit”, and party politics was kept to a minimum.

Overall – a member of the committee at the end of 2003/2004 stated that as a committee we had progressed scrutiny forward during that year, and I feel that this can be said in 2004/2005. However, the results of the scrutiny survey need to be acknowledged, and more emphasis on scrutiny as a whole needs to occur from all concerned – members & officers. The establishment of the correct staffing resources is key to successful scrutiny and quite frankly one part-timer (experienced or not) is not enough.

There is still some way to go to make scrutiny work in Watford but a number of good plans are underway for 2005/2006.

5. Initiatives and Development Work

In 2004/05 the following development work was undertaken or started.

(i) Scrutiny Survey

A survey was conducted of all members and a selection of officers and external people having business with scrutiny during the year. The purpose of the survey was to explore views generally on how scrutiny works in Watford Council, to seek views on opportunities for improvement, to inform the scrutiny development plan and programme

for the forthcoming year and to set down a benchmark to assess progress and improvement over time.

The picture from the survey is generally one of a poor performing function with a need to improve both in terms of its operation and performance. It is, however, encouraging that a significant number of people across the Council have engaged at this stage and appear keen to see improvements. It is hoped that these people will stay engaged and contribute to scrutiny development over the year to come.

The full Scrutiny Survey report is attached to this report as Appendix C

It is proposed to repeat the survey in 12 months time and compare responses with those gathered in February 2005.

(ii) Scrutiny Development (Chairs) Group

2004/05 membership:

Councillors Green, P Mortimer, O'Connell, Rackett and Williams

This group meets monthly (six occasions during 2004/05) its main purpose is to co-ordinate the work of scrutiny across the two committees, to deal with cross cutting issues and to agree and oversee a development programme.

During its six meetings this year the group has considered and reached agreement on the following matters:

- A development plan for scrutiny.
- The content and purpose of the Scrutiny Survey.
- The analysis, results and outcome of the Scrutiny Survey.
- Construction and content of the Scrutiny Plan for 2005/06.
- Content of the draft work programmes for 2005/06.
- Joint meetings of committees – agenda and outcomes.
- Scrutiny member development – needs and options.
- Resources and their deployment.
- Publicity and public engagement – strategies and plans.
- The content and production of the Annual Report to Council.

It is proposed that the group will continue in 2005/06, terms of reference and a work plan will be agreed with the members once appointments have been made.

(iii) Joint Meeting of Committees

The two committees met together at the end of March; 12 members attended. Matters discussed were:

a) Scrutiny Development Exercise

Members collectively considered a number of questions on how Scrutiny at Watford Borough Council compares with the Centre for Public Scrutiny's view of good practice. There was an extensive discussion and more than 40 points were made ranging from views

on relationships with other members and officers to party politics to ideas to improve scrutiny. A report and proposed action list will be discussed at the first committee meetings of the new year.

- b) Report on the results and conclusions of the scrutiny survey
Members discussed the report and its conclusions and made comments and recommendations for changes. The report was agreed as a basis for development work and as a benchmark to assess scrutiny progress in the year ahead.

The survey will be repeated in February 2006.

- c) Draft Scrutiny Plan and committee Work Programmes for 2005/06
Members went through the Plan and agreed a number of changes to be implemented, or recommended to others for change. The main items were:

- The names of the two committees be changed to –
Policy Development Committee
Performance Committee
- The ability to call-in an executive decision is too limited, the number of members required should be reviewed.
- The number of members required to Call-in an executive decision and the limited opportunity for party political debate at Council meetings, are factors which contribute to party political issues at Scrutiny meetings. The format of Council meetings should be changed to allow more party political argument.
- Members need to commit more time to the work of scrutiny, Committees should have the facility to meet more frequently or make use of sub-groups. The resource implications of this proposal were noted.
- Members asked that their concerns about the lack of resources to support scrutiny be recorded. The Council is urged to consider increasing the level of officer support.
- References to committee chairs should be changed to include vice-chairs.
- A representative of the Green Party be included in the Development Group.
- The Budget Panel, and all other sub-groups established by committees, should be open to all non-executive members and not just members sitting on Scrutiny committees.
- Members agreed other, more minor, changes to wording and emphasis; these are reflected in the revised draft of the plan.

Further joint meetings are planned for 2005/06, these will be a mix of development work and scrutiny of issues of common interest.

- iv) CPA
The inspection, which took place in March and April, included a cursory look at scrutiny arrangements. The final report is awaited but expectations are that the inspectors will be critical of

the performance management work of scrutiny. More specifically, that scrutiny tends to track information received by Cabinet and largely confines itself to reviewing performance information seen by Cabinet. Scrutiny plans for 2005/06 include a revised performance management role and more in depth investigation of issues and problems.

6. Work plan and programme for 2005/06.

Resulting from the development work undertaken in 2004/05 and the issues raised in this report, a plan has been prepared to further develop and guide scrutiny work in 2005/06.

The Plan includes a joint meeting of the two committees early in the new municipal year; an invitation will be extended to the Mayor and Cabinet to present their plans and priorities for the year ahead. A Budget Panel will be established to carry out budget scrutiny, outline plans for its work are set out in the Plan.

The plan and draft programmes are appended to this report for the approval of Council.

Members should note that the programmes are currently in outline with only some initial ideas on detailed content. The final list of topics/subjects for scrutiny will be drawn up in consultation with new chairs and committee members after their appointment by Council.

Attached as Appendix A – Scrutiny Plan for 2005/06

Attached as Appendix B – Draft Scrutiny Committee Work Programmes
2005/06

7. Conclusions.

Over the next year we need to establish our priorities in the scrutiny process, to continue the regular Chair/Vice Chair meetings, get more back-bench councillors involved and engage with the public more (co-option of experts). It is vital that the profile of scrutiny is recognised both internally within the council and externally and particularly to raise the profile of scrutiny with the media. It is also worth noting that our scrutiny arrangements allow us to scrutinise the work of public bodies other than the council and it would be worthwhile if this could occur in 2005/2006.

During 2004/05 scrutiny has had some difficulties to manage and some promising moments but overall progress has been made. We plan to build on the good work of this year during 2005/06 and make a contribution to the operation of the Council and most importantly, services to the people of Watford.

Councillor Maria Green
Chair of Policy Review &
Development Committee

Councillor Tim Williams
Chair of Call-in &
Performance Committee