

The Annual Report of Overview & Scrutiny in Watford Borough Council 2006/07

A Report of the Committee Chairs

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT – 2006/7

1. Introduction & Overview

Both of the committees and the Budget Panel have successfully completed their work programmes and achieved results which have contributed to the work of the Council. Scrutiny development has continued although some of the items in the plan for the year have not progressed as far as expected; these are discussed later in this report.

Overall, indications show that scrutiny has continued to improve and progress in 2006/07. This can be seen in better outcomes from committee work, better engagement both inside and outside the Council and positive statements from people asked to contribute to the 2007 Scrutiny Survey. However, it is recognised that both process and outputs can be improved further in 2007/08 and this will be addressed in the forward plan.

Discussion among scrutiny members, other interested members and officers indicates that the current two committee structure is right for Watford. The structure allows adequate examination of all aspects of the Council's operations, provides a sensible separation of forward thinking (policy) and reflection (performance) whilst recognising the reality of finite support resources. The Budget Panel is considered to have worked well by all people concerned with its operation and it is proposed to continue it as part of Scrutiny in 2007/08. One structural change from previous years was the use of a time limited sub-group of Call-in & Performance Committee to look at members' performance. This method of working was also determined to have been a success and members have discussed using further sub-groups in 2007/08.

We have continued to work on improving process and communications. The chairs and vice chairs of the two Committees and the Panel (Scrutiny Development Group) met on two occasions in 2006/07. The Group discusses matters of common interest, considers reports and agrees procedural changes (or makes recommendations to others for change). It is proposed that the group continue in 2007/08. Scrutiny chairs and vice chairs have met twice with the Mayor and members of the Cabinet in 2006/07. At the meetings members discussed scrutiny plans and the relationship between scrutiny and the executive. Three further meetings have been diarised for 2007/8.

Some progress has been made to build on the I&DeA review conducted in January 2006. Recommendations in the I&DeA report will be incorporated into the 2007/08 work programme and development sessions are planned for members early in the new municipal year.

2. Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

Membership:

Councillors Derbyshire (Chair)

Councillor P Mortimer (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Greenslade, Khan, Mahmood, McGovern and Mrs Punter.

Two vacancies have existed on this Committee over the year.

The Committee's Work Programme for 2006/07

The Policy Development Scrutiny Committee typically looks at two to three topics a year in depth. The topics are selected by the Committee at an early meeting from a shortlist of nominated topics.

The committee met on twelve occasions between June 2006 and March 2007. At its first meeting in June the Committee completed its work on community cohesion and considered a list of review topics which had been the subject of consultation with the executive and community groups. The following is a summary of the main work topics agreed by the Committee.

Community & Social Cohesion Review

This topic was agreed for review in 2005/06 because of members' concerns for cohesion in the town in the wake of the July 2005 bombings in London. The review continued into 2006/07. The focus of the review had a bias towards looking at community relationships in terms of ethnicity and religion, but the Committee extended the scope to include social issues relating to age and disability. The Committee also decided to include social cohesion in the scope by looking at fairness in the allocation of resources and implications for housing, education, social care, leisure, regeneration and health.

The Committee made eight recommendations on ways to improve community cohesion and to monitor progress. The recommendations were considered by Cabinet at its meeting in September, all eight recommendations were agreed. The Committee will track progress of the recommendations during 2007/08.

The Future of the Colosseum

The decision to undertake this policy review was taken because members considered the Colosseum to be a major Council asset and felt that the question marks over its future use and management needed resolving. Members were also conscious that there was significant public interest in the future of the Colosseum following the failure of the venue's contract operator two years ago and its reversion to in-house Council operation on a limited basis.

The review concluded that there is overwhelming support amongst community stakeholders, interested residents, the music profession and national broadcasting, film and recording industries for the retention of the Colosseum

as a public-performance venue, music rehearsal and film/recording venue, exhibition and conference venue, and social event venue.

The Committee made recommendations calling for the Colosseum to be returned to fully operational status with a regular programme of public performances catering for all sectors of Watford's public. The Committee also made recommendations about the future management of the venue, issues of revenue support from the Council and the name of the venue.

Three composite recommendations were considered by the Cabinet at its meeting in February and all three were agreed. The Committee will receive a formal response from the Cabinet at an early meeting in 2007/08 and will track progress of the recommendations during the year.

Sustainable Development

The Committee set out to determine the factors influencing future building development in Watford, particularly those having a bearing on the long-term sustainability of the living environment of the town's residents. It looked at policies for the use of previously developed land (Brownfield sites) and for new building as well as policies for the protection from development of land designated as greenbelt. The capacity of Watford to absorb more house building and the environmental issues of creating more houses were addressed. The Committee looked how the surrounding ecology is affected by development, whether there are any short-term or long-term effects and if so what can be done to reduce or eliminate these threats.

It also sought answers to the following questions:

Do schools and health care services have capacity to cope with population growth and the movement of people?

What are the social issues of population growth and movement?

How will water companies deal with the increasing demand from new developments in the short and long term?

At the time of writing this report members were still considering their recommendations. A report to Cabinet is expected in July.

Progress on 2005/06 Reviews

During 2006/07 the Committee has received an update report on its transport review. Some actions agreed following the review are in progress and others are set out to be done as part of an action plan.

The Committee will continue to track progress of the recommendations during 2007/08.

Chair's Perspective

Topic selection is key to the work of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee. The committee consults widely, both inside and outside the Council, for suggestions on policy topics to be reviewed during the year. This consultation results in a long list of suggested topics which the committee evaluates against criteria which include relevance to the work of the Council, public perception of the importance of the topic to them, and the likelihood of the review leading to outcomes which could make a positive difference to the lives of the Watford community.

Policy review must be evidence based. The quality of the research evidence prepared for the committee by its officer is high and makes a significant contribution to the work of the committee. Significant committee time in public sessions was spent on taking oral evidence from witnesses with relevant contributions to make to the debate. The committee also undertook outside visits to study real examples of good practice in other councils and organisation in the policy areas under review. The approach ensures that the conclusions reached by the committee and its recommendations are well founded and rational.

3. Call-in & Performance Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Councillor Rackett (Chair)

Councillor A Mortimer (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Baddeley, Dhindsa, Jenkins, Leslie, Martins, Poole and Watkin.

The Committee's Work Programme for 2006/07

The Call-In & Performance Scrutiny Committee has looked at one service theme in depth per meeting; each theme has covered two to three topics. The services for inclusion in the programme were selected by the Committee at its first meeting from a shortlist of nominated topics. The Committee has managed its work programme over the year, reviewing it periodically and adding issues as appropriate.

This process was different from 2005/06 in that members agreed not to look routinely at BVPI reports in committee but to concentrate on areas which might benefit from the Committee's attention.

Work Summary

i) Committee Meetings

The committee met on eight occasions between July 2006 and March 2007. One meeting was to hear a call-in and one a special meeting to consider the Comprehensive Performance Assessment draft self assessment paper.

Work over the year can be summarised as follows:

The Committee examined in depth the performance of six service areas or themes –

Environmental Services

Enforcement relating to:

- Planning
- Environmental Services.

The Committee looked Environmental Services performance in the context of the Audit Commission's inspection report. The Committee noted the comments and recommendations and asked to see the action plan and a progress report in the New Year.

Sustainability relating to:

- Street Cleansing
- Performance against recycling and composting targets
- Waste Management
- Energy Conservation.

The Committee commended improvements in a number of areas since its last review of these services but noted problems with littering and fly tipping. It agreed to continue to monitor performance over the year ahead.

The Committee highlighted the issue of waste and recycling collection costs and asked to see cost comparisons with other Hertfordshire District council. A report was called for at the February meeting.

Communities & Community Safety relating to:

- Policing
- Community and Locality Action Plans
- Emergency Planning
- The Community Plan

The Committee heard evidence from the police and the Community Safety Partnership and looked at strategic priorities for community safety improvements.

Regarding the Community Plan, the Committee discussed the responsibilities of the respective partners and called for progress reports at regular intervals.

Housing relating to:

- Homelessness
- Social housing provision and demand

The committee looked at the Council's responsibilities for housing after the housing stock and housing management are transferred out. Members discussed the main problem areas which are homelessness and use of temporary accommodation. The Committee agreed to monitor performance and called for a further report next year.

Parking relating to:

- Parking Enforcement
- The issue and regulation of Blue Badges.

The Committee noted the current performance of parking services and discussed the policy of enforcement and whether it achieves the desired results.

Regarding Blue Badges, the Committee received only a written report and called for more information and answers to questions from the County Council. The Chair will write to the County Council expressing members' concerns.

Customer Services and Customer Relations relating to:

- The Customer Services Centre (CSC)
- Complaints and complaints management

Before the committee meeting members visited the CSC to see at first hand how it operates and how staff members manage callers face to face and over the telephone.

Members were impressed by the performance of the CSC but expressed concerns about the handling of calls referred on to departments by the CSC.

The Committee discussed equalities monitoring both of callers to the CSC and of people making complaints. It concluded that figures presented indicate some disparity of complaints handling for different ethnic groups but that samples are too small to draw any meaningful conclusions. A further report with better data was called for next year.

Call-in

There was one executive decision called in during 2005/06, this was to review the decision on the disposal of a property and to question where the benefit from the disposal should be allocated. Following a discussion of the issues the committee agreed to uphold the decision.

Special Meeting

The Committee held a special meeting in February to look at consider the Comprehensive Performance Assessment draft self assessment paper. Members reviewed the content and made suggestions for inclusion in the final draft.

ii) Projects

At the request of Cabinet, the Committee established a sub-group to look at Members' Performance. The sub-group produced a set of recommendations, endorsed by the Committee and forwarded to Cabinet for consideration.

At its meeting in January cabinet agreed that:

- a) performance scheme for ward councillors be developed based on the following principles –
 - A Role Profile. The Members' Charter Group to be asked to produce a role profile that can be used by councillors and tailored to individual circumstances.
 - A selection from a set of performance measures tailored by councillors to individual circumstances. The Members' Charter Group to be asked to agree a final list.
 - An obligatory training scheme for councillors chairing member level bodies and sitting on scrutiny committees to be undertaken within a specified timescale.
 - A six monthly self assessment of performance using a range of measures selected from those agreed by the Members' Charter Group.

- Members to produce regular reports to which the public have access including through the Council's website.
- b) Following a trial period on the above scheme, the scheme to be extended to cover specific councillor's jobs such as committee chairs and scrutiny members.
- c) Future induction training for new members to cover the issues of a member's role and performance.

iii) Visits

The Committee made a visit to Bedford Borough Council to look at how they do scrutiny and see a scrutiny committee in action. Bedford is in our CIPFA Nearest Neighbours Selection Model, it has 26 wards represented by 54 councillors and an elected Mayor.

Because Bedford is noted for a good performing scrutiny operation, the Committee organised a visit to see a committee meeting and to discuss with officers and members Bedford's approach.

Following the visit members considered their findings and comparisons between Watford and Bedford. A number of points for improvement were highlighted around process and work management and these will be considered for inclusion in next year's work.

Comment on Process

i) Pre-meetings

The Committee's work management process in 2006/07 has included a meeting of committee members approximately one week before the formal Committee meeting. The purpose of these pre-meetings is to:

- to review outcomes of the previous meeting.
- to discuss development issues.
- to consider the agenda for the forthcoming meetings, agree how each item will be managed and agree what an appropriate outcome would be.

Members' views on the value of pre-meetings are mixed but there is sufficient support to propose continuation in 2007/08.

ii) A Hands-on Approach

Members found the visit to the CSC both informative and helpful in the Committee meeting. It is suggested that members should do more scrutiny using this approach and opportunities will be sought within the 2007/08 work programme.

iii) Management of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPI's)

The 2005/06 Annual Report challenged the value of looking routinely at the full set of BVPI's in Committee meetings. Consequently, for 2006/07, the Committee altered its approach to one where members individually looked at the BVPI's and brought specific issues and questions to pre-meetings. This has allowed more time in Committee to focus on problem areas.

4. The Budget Panel

Membership

Councillor Mrs Punter (Chair)
Councillor Racket (Vice-Chair)
Councillors E Burtenshaw, Derbyshire, Greenslade, Poole and O'Hanlon

Process and method

The operation of a Budget panel was different in 2006/07 from that of 2005/06. The change was agreed by members because delays were expected in the timetable for service planning and its link to budgets. This would have made the 2005/06 approach incompatible with the Budget Panel's meetings programme.

Work Summary

The Panel met on five occasions during 2006/07, the focus of all meetings was on the Council's budget proposals for 2007/08.

At its five meetings the Panel:

- looked at the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)
- considered a paper on the Council's approach to value for money
- looked at the following aspects of the MTFP in detail –
 - financial implications of a yes or not vote in the housing stock transfer ballot
 - energy conservation
 - grants
 - backlog of maintenance
- looked at the draft and final budget report and passed comments on it back to Cabinet.

Review Meeting

At the end of the 2006/07 process the Panel and officers concerned with the work reviewed how the Panel had operated and the value of its output.

The review concluded that:

- Budget scrutiny around the MTFP combining examination of policy, strategy and links to savings and growth is the right approach for Watford.
- In terms of its work programme for 2007/08, the Budget Panel should select a few key areas for scrutiny and agree a set of selection criteria to determine which areas.
- The four areas from the MTFP looked at by the Panel in 2006/07 should be reviewed in 2007/08.
- More challenge is needed in the process overall.
- A more expansive approach is needed, perhaps looking for comparative costs and service provision in other authorities within Watford's "nearest neighbours" CIPFA groupings.

- Six formal meetings of the Panel is the right number but next year's Panel members should be advised to consider working in sub-groups to enable in-depth examination.
- Next year's Panel needs to consider how it will look at budget proposals working around the tight timetable for reports.

Chair's Perspective

At its first meeting the Panel looked at options for its work programme and at how it would operate over the year ahead. Members agreed to examine four topics from the Medium Term Financial Plan and also to concentrate on a strategic overview of the budget rather than looking in detail at how much money was to be allocated to specific services.

The work on the MTFP produced some useful outcomes but these could have been better if all relevant information had been available to the Panel. Some reports were superficial and still looked like work in progress. I suggest that the 2007/08 Panel pick up the four items considered this year and develop the outcomes.

I also believe that outcomes would have been better had the Panel the benefit of a Cabinet member in attendance at all its meetings. With no Cabinet member available to answer members' questions, responses were either deferred to a future meeting or left unanswered.

Looking again at process, Cabinet members and officers need to be aware that Budget Panel members don't have the benefit of insight into the development of budgets over the year. Consequently, when the draft budget report is produced in December, the Panel members have not more than a few days to consider all its content and implications. In these circumstances feed back on the report will always be limited and consequently the Council should consider ways of involving the Panel earlier in the year as this may result in better quality scrutiny.

5. Initiatives and Development Work

In 2006/07 the following development work was undertaken or started.

(i) Scrutiny Survey

The level of response to the survey this year was disappointingly low and significantly down on the previous two years. The main reason for the low response was the fall in the number of scrutiny committee members replying from 9 in 2006 to only three in 2007.

Across all groups, 62% of respondents described the operation of scrutiny at Watford as being only adequate or poor, a marginal improvement over last year which produced a 68 % score and over 2005 which produced a 75% score. Witnesses appearing before committees (both officers and people from outside the Council) and scrutiny members had a far more positive view of scrutiny than other groups surveyed. Other members (cabinet and senior officers) had a fairly neutral view. Encouragingly, only one person responding described scrutiny as poor and all respondents expressed a view that scrutiny had improved in 2007.

Reasons given for views that scrutiny is only adequate were wide ranging but common themes across all groups are:

- not challenging enough - challenge needs to be strengthened
- performance is variable – members need to improve knowledge of subjects and questioning skills
- scrutiny produces few clear results and outcomes from its work
- communication between scrutiny and the executive and officers still needs improving.

Suggestions for improvement follow reasons why scrutiny is poor:

- member training to improve challenge and questioning skills
- have better selection of scrutiny topics
- improve performance and outputs
- introduce systems to improve communications.

A set of actions aimed at effecting improvements has been proposed for Cabinet, senior officers and scrutiny committees. These are set out in a full report on the survey to be considered by members and officers at meetings early in the new municipal year.

(ii) Hertfordshire Scrutiny Officers Group

The Group meets approximately 4-5 times a year. Members discuss matters of mutual interest, share information, work on development and how member councils can work together.

In 2006/07 the following matters have been included on the agendas of meetings:

- the Hertfordshire Observatory
- development of joint protocols
- PCT restructure and impact on health scrutiny
- sharing work programmes
- joint training events for members and officers
- development of a scrutiny “tool kit” – facilitated by the Centre for Public Scrutiny
- scrutinising LAA’s
- the Local Government Bill and its implications for scrutiny
- swapping experts

Regarding the “swapping experts” item, Watford has since joined with East Herts. Council in an experiment to see how the process might work in practice. The idea is that officers from participating council’s will act as independent experts for other authorities; a typical input for the expert would be -

- to attend an initial planning/scoping meeting with the scrutiny officer (could be by phone or in person)
- to exchange notes of the meeting and ideas for the scope of the work in prospect
- to carry out small amount of data/research work
- to provide any useful contact details
- to attend one Member meeting.

In the first part of the experiment conducted recently the Customer Services Manager for East Herts. acted as an independent expert for Watford’s scrutiny review of its CSC and complaints management system. In June of 2007, as a reciprocal arrangement, an officer from Watford will assist East Herts. in its review of youth services. The results of the experiment will be evaluated after this second exercise is complete.

(iii) Chairs’ Group

The Chairs’ group met twice during 2006/07. At the two meetings members reviewed and agreed actions arising from –

- I&DeA report and recommendations
- 2006 Scrutiny Survey
- 2006 Annual Report.

The Group finalised the Scrutiny work programmes for 2006/07 for recommendation to committees and considered and agreed scrutiny performance measures for 2006/07.

The Group considered and agreed member development needs and looked at member development methods and plans.

A lack of time prevented further meetings later in the year but it is proposed to programme four meetings of the Group in 2007/08.

(iv) Cabinet/scrutiny meetings.

This group met only once in 2006/07 (January) the items discussed were:

- the budget scrutiny process
- information sharing between the Executive and Scrutiny
- a protocol for relationships between the Executive and Scrutiny
- future meetings and agenda content.

Three meetings are to be programmed in 2007/08.

(v) Work by the I&DeA

In January 2006 the I&DeA was commissioned to carry out a “Health Check” on scrutiny at Watford. The main part of the work was carried out at the end of March with on site interviews with officers, members and people from outside the Council having business with scrutiny during the preceding year.

The results were discussed with members at the July scrutiny committee meetings and a draft set of actions proposed.

One major outcome was to commission further scrutiny member training and development. This has been organised with the I&DeA and will be delivered in June of 2007.

(vi) Equalities Impact Assessment

An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIT) has been prepared covering the work of scrutiny. A report on the impact assessment was made to the Corporate Equalities Steering Group.

6. Work plan and programme for 2007/08.

It is considered to be good practice to consult widely on scrutiny forward plans and work programmes. Although response to consultation last year was poor it is proposed to consult again this year.

Each Committee will be asked to agree its work programme at the first meeting of the new year and report its intention to the first available meeting of Council.

Councillor George Derbyshire
Chair of Policy Development Committee

Councillor Steve Rackett
Chair of Call-in & Performance Committee

Councillor Sally Punter
Chair of Budget Panel