

The Annual Report of Overview & Scrutiny in Watford Borough Council 2008/09



OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT

– 2008/09

I. Introduction & Overview

Both of the scrutiny committees and the Budget Panel have successfully completed their work programmes and achieved outcomes which have contributed to the work of the Council.

Responses to the annual survey were mainly positive and support the view that this is an improving process although there is still room for improvement.

Towards the end of 2007/08 members began discussions on the implications of the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Police and Justice Act 2006 as they relate to scrutiny. Indications at that time were that the current two committee structure was in need of revision to accommodate the provisions of the Acts and the neighbourhood working agenda. However, following wider consultation, it was agreed that any changes would wait pending guidance from the Government. Guidance on the Police & Justice Act was published in April 2009 and changes to the operation of Call-in & Performance committee have been agreed to accommodate its requirements. Guidance on the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act is still awaited.

An important part of scrutiny development is to work continually on improving process and communications. For the last three years Chairs and Vice Chairs group have met periodically over the year to discuss matters of common interest, consider reports and agree procedural changes, or to make recommendations to others for change.

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We have undertaken a project jointly with the County Council and Stevenage Borough Council. We believe that this is the first piece of scrutiny work in the County of this type. The project was deemed a success by all of those who participated and it produced a number of recommendations for a range of stakeholders.

Scrutiny chairs and vice chairs have met three times with the Mayor and members of the Cabinet in 2008/09. At the meetings members discussed scrutiny plans and the relationship between scrutiny and the executive as well as the arrangements for meeting the requirements for scrutiny of the Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnership. Three further meetings have been diarised for 2009/10.

We have continued to build on the I&DeA review conducted in January 2006. Recommendations in the I&DeA report will be incorporated into the 2009/10 work programme and more development sessions are planned for members in the new municipal year.



2. Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

Membership:

Councillors Derbyshire (Chair)

Councillor McLeod (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Counter, Forest, Greenslade, Hines-Randall, Mann, Qureshi and Taj.

2.1 The Committee's work programme for 2008/09

The Policy Development Scrutiny Committee typically looks at two to three topics per year in depth. The topics are selected by the Committee at an early meeting from a shortlist nominated by committee members, the executive and through consultation with others inside and outside the Council.

The committee met on twelve occasions between June 2008 and April 2009. At its first meeting in June it considered a shortlist of review topics developed through the consultation process. After discussion the following topics were chosen in order of preference:

- (i) Public pride
- (ii) Services for older people
- (iii) Obesity (joint scrutiny with HCC and Stevenage)

The committee also concluded its 2007/08 review of Art & Sport Development by agreeing a final draft report and referring it to Cabinet for consideration.

2.2 Public Pride

The purpose of this review was to identify and highlight the things about Watford of which the community can be justifiably proud and the things where improvement would enhance the feeling of pride residents have in the place where they live.

The review concluded that there is an overwhelming weight of evidence saying that Watford is viewed by its residents as a good place in which to live and work. Factors important in underpinning this perception include the appearance of the town, public safety and the range of amenities and services available to residents and visitors. The committee highlighted the cleanliness and appearance of streets and public spaces as a key factor in determining how much pride people have in the place where they live. It noted a survey by the Keep Britain Tidy campaign that over 70% of Watford people believe that the overall quality standard of the town's environment is good or satisfactory – the best results in Herefordshire. It noted that organisations other than the Council have a responsibility for maintaining good environmental standards and concluded that there is a need for public education and co-operative working between the Council, the commercial sector and voluntary/community groups in striving for improvements.

Another area where people have pride is the range and the high standard of cultural, educational and recreational amenities provided in the town, both in the public and voluntary/community sectors. The re-development of West Herts. College and the plans for re-invigorating the top of the town centre as a cultural quarter, particularly the Colosseum, will enhance further this source of public pride and the town's overall image.

The Audentior Awards and its evening celebratory event are highly valued as an outstanding community event, generating a source of pride not only in the recipients themselves but also to the organisations to which the recipients belong. There is however a feeling that insufficient celebration is made of Watford people who achieve distinction at the national or international level.

Watford's regional and national profile does not match the importance of the town as a regional commercial and shopping centre, as well as a key national and regional transport hub. The committee is encouraged that this issue is being addressed by One Watford.

The review made ten recommendations to Cabinet, the outcomes and impact of the recommendations will be reviewed by the Committee during 2009/10.

2.3 Services for Older People

Services and access to services for older people is a local and a national priority. Clearly, providers of services need to take into account the collective needs of specific groups but there is also a need to plan for the future. This is because we have an ageing population, nationally in the next 25 years the over 65 age group will increase from 16 to 22 percent of the population.

Government policy is targeted at keeping older people independent. With over eighty per cent of over fifty year olds in Hertfordshire being home owners and most older people preferring to live in their homes as long as possible, the emphasis of services should be on supporting older people to live independently.

The committee considered examples of good practice highlighted by national government studies and local government study papers. It met with groups representing older people who use public services as well as groups representing providers of services for older people gaining invaluable insight into some of the difficulties older people have in sourcing the services that are right for their needs, and the difficulties they have accessing these services.



The committee concluded that there is a need for the Council to engage specifically with this significant sector of the population. At the moment there is no regular consultative arrangement for the council to meet older people and groups representing them. It is important that there is support for the older person's voluntary sector, helping to develop support structures and networks for people such as neighbourhood care alliances, to complement and support institutional partnerships.

There is a need for a printed booklet/directory for older people in Watford, regularly updated, listing all the services available from the multiplicity of providers, with details of how to access them. The Council needs to engage with the County Council regarding the Community Agent Scheme and the First Contact Signposting Scheme to ensure that these initiatives fit in with local needs and are integrated with the Council's own activities in this policy area.

The committee made a set of 14 recommendations to Cabinet which at the time of writing this report have yet to be considered.

2.4 Obesity

The obesity project was carried out in topic (task) group format under the auspices of the County Council's joint health scrutiny committee although it was jointly led and supported by Stevenage and Watford Councils.

The National Health Service is the principal agency to lead on tackling obesity but it is widely accepted that to halt the increasing rates of obesity a multi agency approach including the health service, local government, sports councils, leisure providers, schools, and other voluntary and private sector providers will be required.

The group focused on establishing levels of obesity in the two authorities, the steps which are in place to address this issue, the impact socio economic, gender and ethnicity have on obesity and the barriers to accessing healthy lifestyles. The group also investigated how well the relevant agencies work together on this public health issue.

The group found that the cost of obesity is a major burden for the NHS. In Hertfordshire the cost to the two PCT's was £265 million in 2007, with estimates of this reaching £294 million by 2015. Hertfordshire's levels of adult obesity at 24.6% is now running higher than the national average for England at 23.6%, with Stevenage at 25.9% and Watford at 23.7%.

Watford's figures for childhood obesity have increased for overweight and obese children for all categories between 2006/07 and 2007/08 with one exception, figures for the percentage of overweight children in reception had decreased from 14.6% in 2006/07 to 11.1% in 2007/08. No particular explanation was offered for this decrease against a backdrop of increases in the other categories and age ranges. For reception age children obesity had increased from 10.2% to 11.9% from 2006/07 to 2007/08, for Year 6 children the increase was from 14.7% to 17.1% and for overweight children 14.7% to 15.3%.

The group found that Hertfordshire has an increasingly challenging public health issue with rising levels of overweight and obese adults and children. There is broad understanding and agreement as to what the causes and remedies are for halting obesity, but simply the solution is that a person's calorific intake needs to be decreased and their exercise increased to result in weight loss. As well as lifestyle choices and socio economic circumstances there are also deep seated psychological reasons why some people overeat and these need to be addressed if the underlying causes of obesity are to change.

Children and parents recognise healthy and unhealthy food and the importance of exercise. Encouraging families to change habits is challenging, but can be addressed by effective joint working amongst all partners to slow, halt and ultimately reverse obesity.

The topic group made recommendations to all the partners engaged in tackling obesity totalling 18 in all. The main recommendations addressed to district councils were about giving obesity greater focus locally and working together with partners to reduce the levels of obesity across all age ranges. The topic group would also like to see partners working with families (parents/carers and children) to promote increased physical activity levels and healthy eating, focusing on skills and awareness on issues such as shopping, cooking, sports and exercise based around the family. The report highlighted specific examples of good practice which councils could follow.

2.5 Obesity - comment on process

The obesity project was the first piece of scrutiny work undertaken jointly with another council, members and officers who participated in the review deemed the exercise overall as being a success, especially in its outcome. However, there were some logistical issues which will need to be considered if the exercise is to be repeated.

The main positive aspects of joint working are sharing of knowledge and experience leading to better outcomes and possible economies of staff time across authorities. The main negative aspects are problems for members and officers in getting to meetings in different parts of the County and operational and constitutional differences between authorities.

It is expected that joint working will continue although through a different/developed model than that used for the obesity work. The County Council will be taking the lead.

2.6 Chair's/Vice Chair's Perspective

It is through the scrutiny role that back-bench councillors can most affect the development and implementation of Council policy. It gives back-bench members the opportunity to review policies being pursued by the Executive and also to look at areas where there may be a need to develop new policies. This process can involve both healthy and constructive challenge of the Executive, as well as giving an opportunity for back-benchers to contribute new thinking and ideas. Scrutiny reviews also are also an opportunity for councillors on the Committee to engage with the community by inviting include relevant community representatives to take part in evidence gathering sessions and discussions.

The work is both challenging and rewarding for the elected members involved. I believe the quality and effectiveness of the Committee's work is reflected in the reports it has produced during the year. My thanks are due to the support I have received throughout the year from fellow committee members and supporting council officers.

Councillor George Derbyshire

Chairman, Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

As a committee we decided to limit ourselves to several topics this year, to facilitate a more comprehensive coverage and thorough investigation into our chosen subjects. This allowed time to engage with community groups for these topics that a very real sense of baselining and a setting of realistic targets could be achieved and obtained.

The Public Pride investigation highlighted the fact that the people of Watford and visitors to our town want to contribute and get involved but because of the limited time that people have, they tend to have "special interest" involvement only. This meant that unless there was a perceived problem, there was no comment. It is difficult to get people to acknowledge that something was being done right unless there was a reason for them to take the time to comment in the first place.



The Services for Older People was a timely set piece of work that will impact and raise awareness throughout the borough. The public consultation for this topic was especially helpful and I would like to thank all the voluntary groups who took time out to speak with us.

We would also like to thank all the people that took time out of their busy schedules to attend our meetings and help participate in finding out what was working in our policies and helping to find out where changes to our policies could improve services.

There is a lot of good work being done within our borough and hopefully, this was reflected in our work.

Councillor Kelly McLeod

Vice Chair, Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

3. Call-in & Performance Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Councillor Dhindsa (Chair)

Councillor Rackett (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Baddeley, Grimston, McLeod, Poole, L Scudder, Smillie and Watkin.

3.1 The Committee's work programme for 2008/09

The Call-In & Performance Scrutiny Committee met on seven occasions during 2008/09. The committee changed its approach to its work programme this year following deliberation by its members who concluded that agendas were too large preventing adequate discussion of issues. The new format was to examine only one major and one minor topic per meeting leaving space for issues which may crop up from time to time over the year. The review topics included in the programme were selected by the Committee at its first meeting from a shortlist of topics nominated by members following consultation.

Two meetings this year were devoted to the examination of the work of external organisations, these were youth services and traffic congestion in Watford. This is in recognition of the increasing importance of partnerships and the Council's involvement with external organisations which provide public services. It is expected that the scrutiny of external organisations will further increase in future years.

3.2 Work summary

3.2.1 Committee Meetings

The committee examined in depth the performance of five service areas:

(i) Waste management costs and cost comparisons

Members considered a consultant's report "Investigation for the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership into the cost of waste collection (BVPI 86)". The report was commissioned in part because Watford has performed poorly against BVPI measures and was in the bottom quartile of authorities and part because within Hertfordshire, Watford has the highest collection cost.

The report's findings were inconclusive because it had been difficult to obtain accurate and comparable information from other Hertfordshire authorities. This was because other authorities compiled costs in different ways and included different elements of costs making comparisons impossible.

The committee will continue to monitor waste costs and recycling performance next year and will consider if value for money can be determined by other methods.



(ii) Traffic congestion in Watford.

The committee reviewed problems caused by traffic congestion and the potential for improvement given current plans and strategies. The investigation included congestion levels, parking policies, impact on the town's economy and traffic management plans.

A number of external organisations were invited to give evidence to the committee, there were five groups of guests representing:

- bus and coach operators
- taxi and hackney carriages
- Hertfordshire Highways
- the Police
- and Watford Borough Council.

Regarding bus services, traffic congestion is a major problem for bus companies resulting in longer bus journeys and less frequent services. Congestion increases operating costs and consequently bus fares, it causes bus timetables for existing services to become unpredictable. Congestion raises stress levels of staff which results in absenteeism and high turnover, these in turn affect services and service frequency. The net effect will be to deter people from using buses.

The committee was told that many bus travel problems in Watford are related to traffic light phasing and the volume of traffic compared to the capacity of the roads. Current journey times compared with those in 1998 show significant increases, an example is the Luton to Watford service which took 80 minutes in 1998 but now takes 125 minutes. The ring road is a particular source of problems, caused in part by traffic light phasing, part by junction blocking and part by town centre parking.

From a highways perspective, a re-organisation plan will be implemented at the beginning of the new financial year to look at traffic congestion around Watford. This will consider traffic flow and the capacity of the road network. There is a need to manage road works better and to focus on updating the urban traffic controls around the town centre.

The County Council has invested time and money to improve the town's sign posts and other plans will be made to look at real time technology based improvements. A commissioned study group will look at key traffic hotspots in Watford by the end of the financial year, the study will help Hertfordshire Highways to prioritise traffic congestion.

From the Watford Borough Council's perspective, the Council's vision will be seriously affected if traffic congestion is not tackled. It is pursuing its own initiatives aimed at reducing congestion, car sharing schemes are an example of this. All underused car parks should be employed to help ease parking problems in the town centre and a shuttle bus service will run from the hospital to the town centre to offer staff an alternative transport link other than their cars to get to work.

Regarding the Police, the Hertfordshire Constabulary Traffic Division plays a supportive role with Hertfordshire Highways by offering advice and guidance on policing matters. It is the view of the Police that the causes of traffic congestion will take some time to overcome, however, new measures should be put in place to reduce the effects of congestion, such as influencing parents to use different means of transport for school transport.

The Committee noted the facts presented by guests and the actions being taken to reduce congestion. It was however concerned about the continued increase in congestion and about prospects for improvement in the short to medium term.

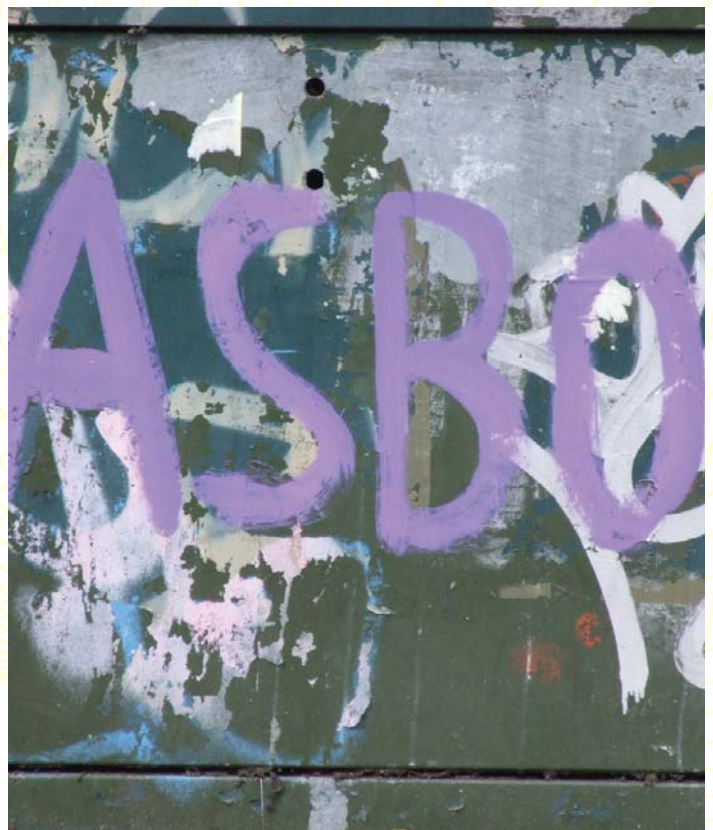
(iii) Youth crime and anti social behaviour.

The committee followed up its work in 2006 and 2007 when it looked at community safety generally (2006) and the specific issue of substance misuse and associated problems (2007). People invited included representatives from the Police, Community Safety and the County Council's Youth Service.

Youth crime and anti-social behaviour are major areas of public concern. Shoplifting appears to be the most prolific offence carried out by young people although the number of crimes overall committed by them has significantly reduced. The only area in Watford to see an increase in youth offending crime over the past five years is Watford Central. Watford's anti- social behaviour incidents are down by 4.6% compared with the other districts in Hertfordshire.

The committee was encouraged to see a decrease in the number of incidents that had occurred in Watford and agreed to monitor progress, it also called for a breakdown of the number of crimes by ethnic origin in future reports.

The Government has introduced a range of powers such as Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs) and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) which, when rigorously applied, could be very effective in reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. The number of ASBO's issued has reduced generally over the last four years with Watford being one of the best performing areas. In terms of the future, there will be an opportunity for the Youth Offending Teams (YOT's) to have a key role in working alongside youths, meetings will also be held monthly with the Anti-Social Behaviour Action Group (ASBAG) to discuss the hot spot areas that needed addressing.



Graffiti is also a cause for concern amongst many residents. Initiatives are planned both to catch offenders and to deter would-be offenders, an example is the YISP (Youth Inclusion and Support Panel) which is looking at the behaviour of youths and is considering ways in which to reduce the incidence of graffiti. YISP is an early intervention and crime prevention service aimed at young children and their families.

The committee heard about the work of Youth Connexions which provides a service for young people between the ages of 13-19 or up to the age of 25 for those with learning difficulties. Youth Connexions creates a constructive environment through sport and other activities and provides support and information for youths to achieve their potential. There are several teams of professional workers who will identify youths at risk and put together plans to positively resolve their issues.

The committee commended the work of the three agencies, their achievements and joint initiatives aimed at reducing crime and anti social behaviour. The committee will continue to monitor progress through reports and statistics.

(iv) Housing issues – allocations, equalities and complaints

The committee looked at the current performance of housing allocations, plans in place in the current year and the likelihood of targets being met and plans for next year which will bring further improvement. The committee heard evidence from the Housing Trust and the voluntary sector as well as the Council's own service providers.

The Council's housing service is much smaller following the transfer of the housing stock to Watford Community Housing Trust, it includes the Housing Needs Team, Homelessness Prevention and Advice, Strategy and Enabling and through the Council's restructure, Private Sector Housing. The Council is still required to manage the Housing Register, which currently has 3,500 applications.

At the time of the meeting there are 64 households in temporary accommodation representing a reduction in both numbers and the length of stay since the last scrutiny of the service. The service has gained a high level of grant funding from the Government, has increased its partnership working and has new housing and homelessness strategies.



During 2008/09 there have been six complaints to date none of which have been upheld.

The council has a statutory duty to homeless households. As part of the work on homelessness officers have developed prevention measures to limit cases before they reach the stage of becoming statutory situations. In 2007/08, 215 cases were prevented from being homeless, from April 2008 to December 2008, 208 cases were prevented. The number of cases can only be included in the performance statistics when they are supported by robust casework. Prevention measures are also in place for mortgage repossessions, parental evictions, domestic violence, ex-offenders and private sector tenants.

The Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme guarantees landlords up to two months rent, since the scheme started 165 households have been helped.

Housing Needs covers statutory homelessness and the Housing Register; when someone presents themselves to the Council as homeless the Council has a duty to provide temporary accommodation. The Council works with various partners including Hightown Praetorian Community Housing Association, Herts. Young Homeless Group, the Sunflower Project and the Watford Community Housing Trust.

The Housing Register includes people who want to move from a housing association property in the Borough and those people who want to move to Watford. Between April 2007 and April 2008, the list has increased by 1,000, the increase this year is 500 with fewer people taken off the list than the number of people joining it. The Council nominates applicants to the Housing Associations as properties become available, the Council also helps applicants to look at other housing options available including mutual exchanges, private sector housing or low cost home ownership.

Choice Based Lettings is to be introduced providing tenants more opportunity to cross boundaries. The Council will be working with St Albans, Welwyn Hatfield, Three Rivers and Hertsmere Councils, the group is called Herts Choice Housing. The advantage of the scheme is that it will be more transparent and there should be fewer refusals.

The re-let target for void properties is 30 days, in December the average re-let time was 68 days but is hoped that this figure could be reduced, the Trust is working with the Council to address this issue.

The biggest issue facing Housing Associations is a lack of properties, demand outstrips supply. There is not enough general social housing and little land available in Watford for building. Through planning agreements, 30% of properties on housing development sites are required for affordable housing although these still need to be funded.

The committee will continue to monitor housing performance and examine CBL in the next municipal year.

(v) Youth Services – performance since transfer of responsibility to the County Council.

This was a major review of youth service performance involving the County Council, Youth Connexions, the District Children's Trust Partnership (DCTP) and youth advocates.

The Committee heard about Youth Connexions and the work of the '11 – 19 Sub Group'. The purpose of the group is to ensure effective delivery of the 'Every Child Matters' agenda through information, advice and guidance. The group plans to enlarge and enhance current opportunities and to work in partnership with the voluntary sector and to support other youth agencies.

Watford Youth Connexions is continuing to develop its services, achievements to date include developing the Youth Offer, producing an informative brochure for the 11 – 19 age group and increasing partnership work. Venues for activities have been varied to include some mobile and some in static locations. Results have included improved outcomes for both young people and local communities.

Transport is a significant concern to young people in the local area and Watford Youth Advocates are in the process of making a short film to highlight the problem, addressing the problems of cost, safety and the accessibility of local transport systems. Young people have been directly involved in all aspects of production of the film which has drawn on the talents of a group of 16 to 19 year olds to cover all aspects of production.

Pro Action is a county-wide membership-based organisation, its aim is to encourage young people to participate in volunteer activities and to support voluntary agencies. Apart from the lack of a Youth Team Leader, the organisation is now fully staffed and that there has been a 100% increase in the key measures achieved.



'Channel Mogo' is a web-site for, and developed by, young people to provide advice and information specifically for young people. The site is inter-active, it has a discussion board and it is hoped that young people will access the site as an aid to self-development.

The Youth Connexions team currently faces a number of challenges, these include extending the range of activities, how best to use the resources available and the delivery of services during the current economic down-turn. This includes the difficulty of keeping young people in education when the need for additional income has become a problem for many families.

There is a scheme in the DCTP's plan to identify issues relating to crime and drugs in Watford, this is currently on target. It has help from 15 young people who are volunteers and it is hoped that it will lead to their employment.

The Youth Council is active in Watford, it organises a range of activities each week. It is intending to develop an action plan in partnership with the DCTP.

Regarding changes within the last year and noticeable gaps in services available, both advocates agreed that there had been improvements. There is more live music for young people on a Friday night with a greater range of styles.

Regarding service development, the decision making process is undertaken by two groups and there is a rigorous planning cycle. In September or October the DCTP consults with young people who are asked to complete survey stating which services they use and which services they would like access. The Trust attempts to target particularly minority groups and those with learning difficulties. A directory is in the process of being compiled for inclusion on Channel Mogo which will list voluntary provision available at weekends such as Cuffley and Hudnall Park Outdoor Centres.

On the subject of youth unemployment, the service monitors young people up to 19 years old, there is a facility to have a breakdown of numbers into categories such as Council wards and ethnicity.

There is a problem of there being no Youth Team Leader for the last 12 months although there are two support workers who maintain youth services. There has been a problem recruiting staff of the calibre required for the post as there has with the position of Play Development Manager.

There is sufficient funding to tackle immediate needs such as the Friday/Saturday night projects although Connexions is looking for further sources of funding and the possibility of finding additional partners. There is also the hope that Connexions will be able to help young people with the challenges inherent in the current recession.

The committee concluded that there have been improvements in the service and that projects already started have had a positive impact. It requested that a paper be submitted to a future meeting to include updates on achievements against targets, service costs, staff recruitment, hard to reach groups and transport issues.

3.2.2 Task groups

The committee established one task group during the year to examine in depth the progress of the 2005 St Albans Road study and the consequential action plan.

The task group concluded that despite being identified as a priority for the Council and a priority in the Planning & Development Service Plan, the overall project appears to have lost momentum as it has progressed, possibly being overtaken by other higher priority work.

Overall, there is doubt that the measures taken to date have been effective in addressing the original intentions of the plan. However, the committee believes that further action will improve the area and contribute to regeneration.

A set of recommendations were made for the consideration of the portfolio holder.

3.2.3 Other work

Members heard about the new performance framework which replaced the Best Value performance indicators this year. The new framework includes a set of national PI's for district councils and initial proposals for local PI's.

The Committee received its first quarterly report using the new figures in February and posed a number of questions for officers to report back on a later meeting.

3.2.4 Call-in

There were no decisions called-in during 2008/09.

3.3 Comment on process

The Committee reduced the number of items considered at each meeting this year in order to allow guests more time to present their subjects and for members to have a fuller discussion of issues. This was an improvement on the 2007/08 system but improvements can still be made, especially in reaching recommendations for improving outcomes. To this end members will spend more time preparing for their meetings next year; they will focus on the outcomes of reviews and will round off meetings by agreeing conclusions and actions.

3.4 Changes due in 2009/10

The Council has agreed that the committee will take on the role next year of discharging the responsibility for crime and disorder matters as required by the Police and Justice Act 2006.

The provisions of the Act were commenced on 30 April 2009 and have put in place arrangements to ensure that every local authority will have a committee (the "crime and disorder committee") with power to:

- review or scrutinise the decisions made, or other action taken, in connection with the discharge by the responsible authorities of their crime and disorder functions; and
- make reports or recommendations to the local authority with respect to the discharge of those functions.

The committee will discuss the implications of this new responsibility and how it will discharge its obligations at its first meeting in 2009/10.

3.5

Chair's & Vice Chair's perspective

From the report you can see we have covered a great deal of work during the past year. There is still much to be done, which I hope the members of the Call-In & Performance Committee will continue to work with me on.

My thanks go out to members of the committee and task group members during the year of 2008/09. I personally felt that we worked well as a team. My special thanks to Steve Racket (Vice-Chair) for his on-going support and commitment; Mike Thomas for his hard work on the administration aspects of the committee's work. Thanks must also go to Cabinet members for their attendance to answer difficult and thought provoking questions. Also, I would like to thank members of staff, external agencies and members of the community for attending our meetings when requested.

Some of the planned work within this report is still outstanding. This was discussed at our first meeting for 2009/10 and will be included in the new work plan. This year we will also be looking at the new role of discharging the responsibility for crime and disorder matters as required by the Police and Justice Act 2006. We plan to establish a task group this year comprising of four members to work on crime and disorder matters.

I am a strong believer in obtaining the views and ideas of all members of the committee in order to make the work plan realistic and achievable. I will continue to work in an accommodating and inclusive manner to improve the work and output of the committee.

Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa

Chair of Call-in and Performance Scrutiny Committee.

4. The Budget Panel

Membership

Councillor Mortimer (Chair)

Councillor Bell (Vice-Chair)

Councillors E Burtenshaw, Derbyshire, Greenslade, Martins and Poole

4.1 The panel's work programme for 2008/09

The panel met on five occasions during 2008/09, apart from the Council's budget proposals for 2009/10 the panel also looked at value for money and cost comparisons of certain services with other Hertfordshire districts.

At its five meetings the panel:

- looked at the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)
- reviewed high and low spending priorities for the 2008/09 budget process
- considered the level of tax and service profile of Watford compared with other Hertfordshire district councils
- passed comment on the 2009/10 budget - savings and growth proposals
- considered the outcome of public consultation on the 2009/10 budget
- scrutinised the final budget proposals.

4.2 Review meeting

(i) With regard to 2008/09

At the end of the 2008/09 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 Panel is improving in performance helped by the continuity of membership and training. Members need to move the process further along by taking a larger role in leading the work and exerting greater challenge.

Work carried out in 2008/09 has been according to plan. The panel has provided useful input into Cabinet's budget discussions.

Value for money work was inconclusive but is an important area which should be followed up with a different approach next year. A VfM test should be applied by the Panel to all growth items put forward in next year's budget.

Budget monitoring was not fully followed up as intended, more work needs to be carried out in 2009/10 starting earlier in the year. More information is required and a different layout/format should be considered.

Shared Services is an emerging area which may benefit for the panel's attention.

Training was valuable although it will take time for the full benefits to filter through. It should continue next year and another attempt should be made to encourage other members along.

(ii) With regard to 2009/10

The panel will include the following in its extended meetings programme.

- Core work –
 - (a) examination of the proposed 2010/11 budget concentrating on savings and growth items and the level of council tax
 - (b) updates to the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- Shared services work between Watford and Three Rivers (financial integration) subject to a report from the HoSF.
- Value for Money – a revised approach concentrating on the Planning department. Growth items put forward in the 2010/11 budget will have a VfM test applied.
- Fees and charges – policy review and application with an in depth look at a selected area, possibilities are Planning and Commercial Waste.
- Budget monitoring – starting earlier with more information (include the Finance Digest) and in a new format (noting the suggestion put forward).

In terms of process –

- Formal training sessions prior to each meeting covering –
 - Fees and charges
 - Asset management
 - Value for money (but covered in reports)
 - Financial management and budget setting (covered part in overview).

4.3 Chair's/Vice Chair's perspective

As chairman of the Budget Panel, I felt more confident for having had a year's experience, helped by a very professional team of members and officers. Janice Maule gave the Committee her down to earth comments with a delivery which beguiled the panel while indicating the grasp of her subject. Her departure is to be regretted but I am sure that Bernard Clarke, our European representative, will carry on the good work with a new perspective and wisdom derived from his time at Hackney. His Merton Borough VFM toolkit will test to the limit the brain cells of the Panel! I regret that Nigel Kennedy will be moving on. He made the very best of managing the Council's investments during a very difficult time. To him Iceland represents a supermarket rather than a financial black-hole and he has locked in investments which will benefit the Council with interest rates which will make many other councils green with envy.

I am bemused at the lack of interest in pre-panel training. Here we have a golden opportunity to learn of the intricacies and mysteries of local government finance (which is the root of all our hopes, aspirations and, indeed, frustrations) and, with a couple of exceptions, professional presentations have been stood up by members other than those on the panel.

We were not very good at investigating Value for Money, nor were we successful at comparing some of our services with those of other similar organisations. We hope to redress this problem this next year.

I am sorry to lose Ellie Burtenshaw from the Budget Panel but am comforted by having a Vice Chairman who, I am confident, takes his role seriously – not often called upon, but ever ready in such an event.

Councillor Andrew Mortimer

Chair of the Budget Panel

I was pleased that we were able to have a programme of training during the year looking at key aspects of the Budget process organised by the former Finance director.

It was disappointing that there was not a good turnout from non-budget panel members to the training sessions, especially as it is important that all Councillors should have an understanding of the budget process.

While we did review the spending priorities of the administration and budget monitoring, we didn't question Officers or the Executive member earlier and regularly enough, especially as the economic outlook changed.

Value for money and comparisons of services with our peer authorities was looked at, but I hope we can have another more detailed look at these.

Councillor Nigel Bell

Vice Chair of the Budget Panel

5. Initiatives and development work

In 2008/09 the following development work was undertaken or started.

(i) Scrutiny survey

The Partnerships & Performance Section annually undertakes a survey of the people and organisations that have had business with scrutiny during the preceding year. This is the fifth year the survey has been undertaken.

The purpose of the survey is:

- to explore views generally on how scrutiny works in Watford Borough Council
- to ask all members – those in cabinet, scrutiny and other non-executives – their views on the performance and operation of scrutiny
- to ask senior officers and witnesses their views on the performance and operation of scrutiny
- to seek views on opportunities for improvement
- to inform the scrutiny development plan and programme for the forthcoming year
- to inform the member development plan for the forthcoming year
- to set down a benchmark to assess progress and improvement over time.

In response to comments about the survey last year we have changed the format and the range of answer choices available to people responding. This means that we cannot make direct comparisons with all answers given previous years although we can determine the number/percentage of people who think that scrutiny has improved or not improved.

Despite the changes, return rates continue to be low and we will be looking at ways of reshaping the survey to improve the number of people responding. Dependent upon staff time, this may include seeking specific views on a meeting by meeting basis (qualitative) and confining the annual survey to a gathering of overall impressions (quantitative). The committees will discuss options at an early meeting in 2009/10.

Survey results

PERFORMANCE

Q1. Based on your experience, do you think the overall performance of scrutiny at Watford is:

	Total Score	% respondents	Total weighted	% rating
Poor	1	4%	1	81%
Adequate	1	4%	2	
Fair	9	52%	27	
Good	7	39%	28	

Q2. Compared to 2007/8, do you think that scrutiny has improved?

	Total Score	% respondents	Total weighted	% rating
Yes	12	67%	36	76%
No	1	6%	1	
About the same	2	11%	4	
No experience	3	17%	-	

Q3. Thinking about your attendance at scrutiny committees, do you think you had ample opportunity to answer questions fully and get your point across?

	Total Score	% respondents
Yes	14	88%
No	2	13%

Q4. Quality of questions put to you by members of the committee; do you think overall that questions have been informed and probing?

	Total Score	% respondents
Yes	13	81%
No	3	19%

OPERATION AND PROCESS

Q1. Based on you experience, do you think the overall operation of scrutiny at Watford is -

	Total Score	% respondents	Total weighted	% rating
Poor	0	0%	0	87%
Adequate	2	11%	4	
Fair	5	28%	15	
Good	11	61%	40	

Q2. Compared to 2007/8 do you think that scrutiny has improved?

	Total Score	% respondents	Total weighted	% rating
Yes	10	56%	30	70%
No	0	0%	0	
About the same	4	22%	8	
No experience	4	22%	-	

Q3. Can you suggest any process of procedural changes that might improve the operation of scrutiny and the experience of people attending -

Responses included:

- We need to get more people from the community to attend the meetings.
- Try and keep a regular base of committee membership and add odd one so the other member can help teach them.
- Time limits on agenda items. That tends to focus the mind on the business at hand, and stops participants wandering off the subject.
- I would perhaps be better if councillors drafted a number of questions before hand as well as the open questioning.
- Ensuring that sufficient time is set aside specifically to discuss conclusions and agree recommendations. Performance committee could focus more specifically on challenging poor performance, reviewing best practice and making and reviewing recommendations.
- Recommendations should be reviewed regularly for implementation.
- Get relevant Watford officer for the topic issue to attend the meeting to hear comments and help interpret them.
- I do feel that the brief/information sent in advance of scrutiny is much better than it used to be allowing one to be better prepared for questions that may come up... but there is always room for a little further improvement.
- Offering a flow chart to and/or map of how and where the panel fit into overall structure of the council and a brief summary of their role and responsibilities.
- The chair of call-in might be better briefed.
- The committee members should be given the opportunity to voice their expectations of visitors and also what the visitors want to see achieved.
- Possibly better briefing to attendees before the meeting but not a major one.
- Keep meetings focused possible better discipline with timing of agenda? More interest shown by some members!

Q4. How would you describe the information available to you about the conduct and format of scrutiny meetings?

	Total Score	% respondents	Total weighted	% rating
Poor	0	0%	0	87%
Adequate	2	13%	4	
Fair	4	25%	12	
Good	10	63%	40	

Q5. Could you suggest any changes of additions to content of information that might be taken to improve your understanding of scrutiny meetings

Responses included:

- I welcome the opportunity to be allowed to present out work at this meeting. I felt it did allow a greater understanding of the depth of the work we undertake and the lengths we will go to, to achieve our stated aims. I found the experience gratifying.
- I think the representation on one Call-in and Performance from the ruling group should be reduced to 4 i.e. just one more than the opposition or even 3 i.e. equal numbers.
- Follow up timetables for subjects, objectives set and met detailed.
- It would be helpful to have some follow up longer term i.e. what difference has attendance made?
- I attended meeting on 4 December 2008 which concentrated on bus services and had a presentation by Arriva. Watford Council have decided to cease joint funding of bus services with HCC from part way in 2009/10. This may be connected with the outcome of this scrutiny but to us at HCC about whether this connection is correct. It will certainly do nothing to help with traffic congestion which is one aspect the committee were investigating but we understand your desire to save money. If the scrutiny were not part of this decision then perhaps it should scrutinise it in its 2009/10 programme.

The weightings in the tables have been worked out on the basis of the following equations:

Rating	Score
Poor	1
Adequate	2
Fair	3
Good	4

Rating	Score
Yes	3
No	1
About the Same	2
No Experience	-

The percentage rating was calculated by totalling up the points from the responses given and representing that as a proportion of the total points available that could have been attained.

Conclusions

Most responses indicated that the scrutiny process is improving. But many witnesses indicated that there is for them a lack of structure, and lack of organisation at meetings. The reasons offered range from members having insufficient knowledge on a subject, to a lack of preparation for meetings. Delegates were positive about the welcoming nature of the committees and the interest shown in their views. They did feel however that lack of time management sometimes resulted in discussions drifting into irrelevant tangents, and a failure to arrive at a definite set of conclusions and outcomes at the end of meetings and the end of a scrutiny process.

A detailed report on the survey and its results will be considered by the two committees and the Budget

Panel at meetings early in the year. The report will update progress against the 2006 I&DeA report and will propose a set of actions for improvement.

(ii) Hertfordshire Scrutiny Officers Group

The group meets four or five times a year. Members discuss matters of mutual interest, share information, work on development and how member councils can work together. Emerging from this was the joint health scrutiny exercise led by Watford and Stevenage looking at the issues of obesity. The work produced some good results and has been held up as an example of how inter authority scrutiny can work well.

This year, for the second year running, the group organised a Hertfordshire scrutiny network conference which was attended by four councillors from Watford. The focus of the event was on the impact of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and other emerging legislation.

(iii) Chairs' Group

The aim of the group is to co-ordinate the work of the three committees, to share responsibility for common areas of interest (for example the annual report) and to provide a forum for joint decision making. The group met twice during 2008/09 and continued its ongoing discussions about the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, the Police & Justice Act 2006 and their implications for the shape and responsibilities of scrutiny in Watford.

(iv) Cabinet/scrutiny meetings

The aim of this group is to improve communications and provide a forum for ongoing dialogue between scrutiny and the executive.

This group met three times in 2008/09 the items discussed were:

- scrutiny work plans and programmes (in June)
- the results of the scrutiny survey and scrutiny performance
- scrutiny training for all members
- scrutiny work progress
- handling scrutiny reports and following up adopted recommendations
- guidance emerging on scrutiny matters relevant to the Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Police & Justice Act 2006

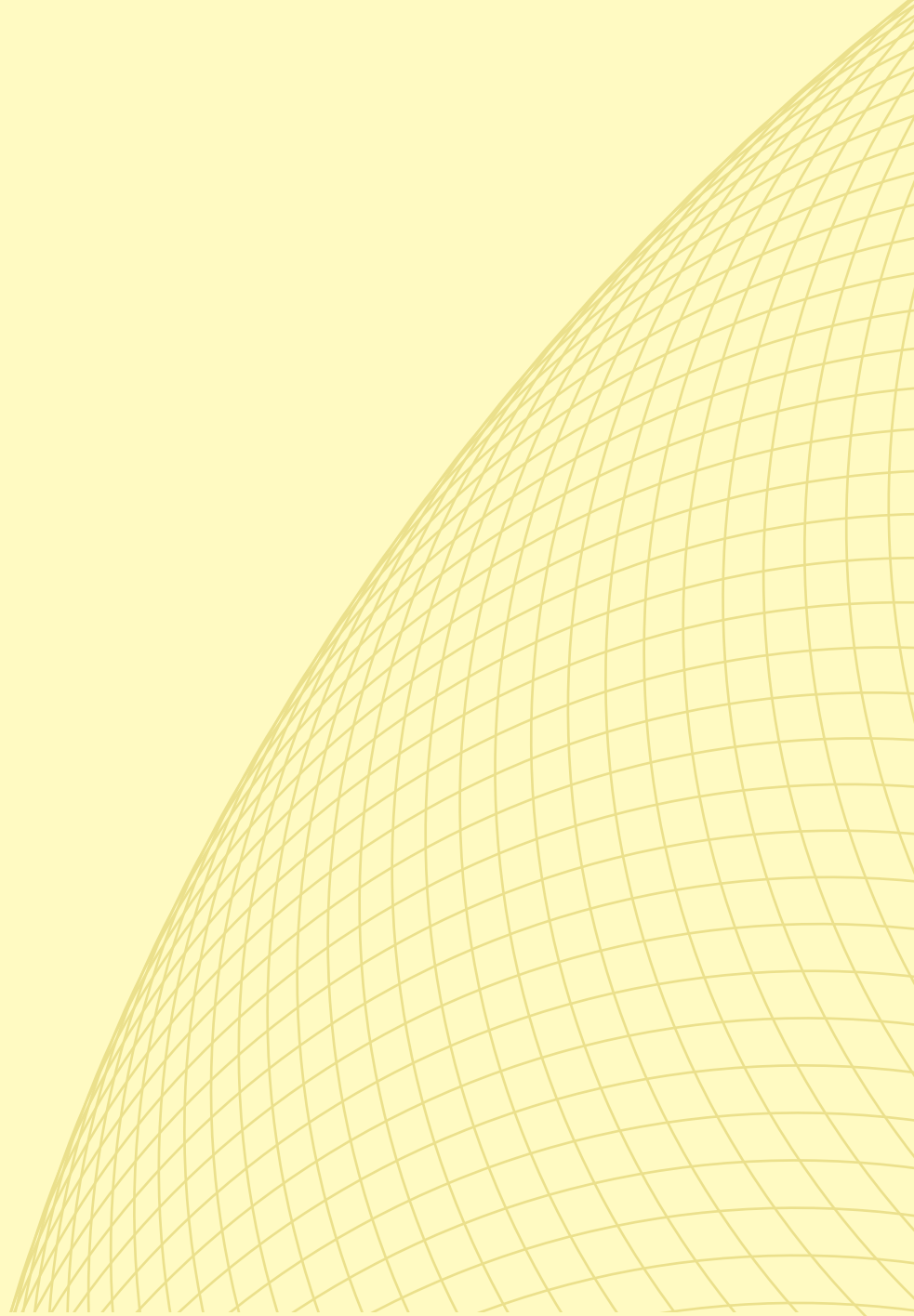
Three meetings are to be programmed in 2009/10.

2008/009 Committee Chairs & Vice Chairs

Councillors George Derbyshire & Kelly McLeod
Chair & Vice Chair of Policy Development Committee

Councillors Jagtar Singh Dhindsa & Steve Rackett
Chair & Vice Chair of Call-in & Performance Committee

Councillors Andrew Mortimer & Nigel Bell
Chair & Vice Chair of Budget Panel



If English is not your first language we can arrange for an interpreter. Please indicate which language you require.

Urdu

اگر انگریزی آپ کی بول چال کی زبان نہیں ہے،
تو ہم آپ کے لیے ایک انٹرپرائٹر (زبانی ترجمہ کار)
کا اہتمام کر سکتے ہیں۔ براہ کرم ہماری ہمیں یہ
بتائیں کہ آپ کی مطلوبہ زبان کون سی ہے۔

Hindi

यदि इंग्लिश आपकी मुख्य भाषा
नहीं है तो हम एक इंटरप्रीटर
(दुभाषिए) का प्रबंध कर सकते
हैं। कृपया अपनी जरूरत की
भाषा बताएँ।

Gujarati

જો ઈંગ્લિશ તમારી માતૃભાષા ન હોય
તો અમે તમારા માટે દુભાષિયાની
વ્યવસ્થા કરી શકીશું. તમે કઈ ભાષામાં
વાત કરવા માંગશો તે ભાષાનું નામ
દર્શાવવા વિનંતી.

Bengali

ইংরেজি আপনার মাতৃভাষা না হলে,
আমরা আপনার জন্য একজন
দোভাষী (ইন্টারপ্রিটার) এর ব্যবস্থা
করতে পারবো। দয়া করে বলে
দিন, কোন্ ভাষার দোভাষী বা
ইন্টারপ্রিটার আপনার দরকার।

Polish: Watford Borough Council ch tnie dostarczy uszne tłumaczenie dla Ciebie