

## Extract from the Annual Report 2010/11

**2. Policy Development Scrutiny Committee****Membership:**

Councillor McLeod (Chair)

Councillor Watkin (Vice Chair)

Councillors Collett, Counter, Forest, Greenslade, Lovejoy, Meerabux and Taj

**2.1 The Committee's work programme for 2010/11**

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 of proposals from officers, cabinet, backbench members and through consultation with others inside and outside the council.

The committee met on ten occasions between June 2010 and March 2011. At its first meeting in June it considered a shortlist of review topics developed through the consultation process. The following topics were chosen in order of preference:

- (i) Services for the Deceased
- (ii) Affordable Housing
- (iii) Best Practice Town Centre Renewal

A review of parking policies was considered but deferred until later in the year, however, due to a lack of committee time, the review was not taken forward but placed on the provisional work programme for 2011/12.

The committee also concluded its 2009/10 review of the South West Herts. Transport Strategy by agreeing a final draft report and referring it to cabinet for consideration.

**2.2 Services for the Deceased**

This review was carried out by a task group appointed by the main committee. The group was led by Councillor Watkin who was ably assisted by Councillors Counter, Collett and Dhindsa.

The purpose of this review was to investigate the services for the deceased offered by the council. The review was centred on the council's two cemeteries and looked at the current provision of services and the future needs of the borough.

The Committee found that the cemeteries are a valuable asset to the borough and are acknowledged as being well-run and providing an excellent service. They are particularly important for certain faith, belief and community groups. There are however a number of changes to policies which could be made to better accommodate the needs of these different groups.

The service is not financially self-sufficient and the current fees structure should be reviewed to ensure more of the costs are covered, eventually leading to self-sufficiency. In considering how this service will be provided in the future, the council will need to be mindful of environmental concerns as well as the needs of faith groups and ensure accessibility for all residents. With capacity due to run out in 14 years the council will shortly need to start investigating new sites which will be able to accommodate the wider requirements identified in the report.

The report made 10 recommendations to cabinet, the outcomes and impact of the agreed recommendations will be reviewed during 2011/12.

### **2.3 Affordable Housing**

The committee set out to establish the current position of supply and demand, to investigate the barriers to more affordable housing, to look at the current policies being pursued to see if there is scope to provide more affordable housing in the borough and to establish how affordable housing is provided and what improvements could be made.

The committee found that the provision of affordable housing is a growing problem with no easy solutions. The most significant barriers to more affordable housing in Watford are beyond the control of the council; in particular the shortage of land in the borough and the high house prices both regionally and nationally. However, the council does have powers as the local planning authority and it is the council which maintains the housing register.

Affordable housing is an area where consistent monitoring is required, particularly with the forthcoming changes to grants, benefits and planning regulations. Overall, the council operates a joined-up and robust approach to affordable housing and the council officers work well between departments and have good working relationships with outside bodies.

The report made six recommendations to cabinet, the outcomes and impact of the agreed recommendations will be reviewed by the committee during 2011/12.

### **2.4 Best Practice Town Centre Renewal**

The committee set out to provide cabinet with a clear picture of what a successful development looks like based on a range of needs (updating infrastructure which is no longer fit for purpose) necessities (designing in safety for users) and ambitions (achieving a vision which is realistic).

In the event, following some initial research, the committee decided that it was not possible to define a manageable scope and agreed not to pursue the project.

### **2.5 Progress of the Committee's review work recommendations carried out in previous years.**

The committee routinely manages progress of the agreed recommendations of its projects. The intention is to see that the policy in question is effective in achieving the outcomes intended from the work. In 2010/11 the committee received feedback from cabinet on its 2009/10 work and re-examined seven projects carried out between 2005 and 2008. The reports in question are listed in appendix A.

### **2.6 Process and procedural changes**

The committee occasionally indulges in self scrutiny to ensure it is effective in what it does. This year members have closely examined the process of reviewing past reports and as a result have developed a revised procedure to improve the effectiveness of scrutiny through ongoing monitoring of the results of policy review work.

The purpose of policy review work is to assist the executive to improve services and service delivery. The outcome of a review, as defined at the start of each project, is

the key issue to be assessed – essentially, have the improvements intended been achieved?

The revised process was used during the latter half of the year and has proved to be successful in its aims. The process will be commended to the new Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

## 2.7 **Chair's commentary**

When the committee first started to look at the topics selected for the year, we soon realised that the scoping process was vital to producing relevant and timely outcomes.

At the start of the topic of Town Centre Renewal, it was evident that clear outcomes could not be determined without duplicating other work. The Night Time Economy had already been reviewed in 2007/8 and the town centre was changing with the Colosseum and the Charter Place redevelopments. After reviewing initial research, we agreed to halt this scrutiny subject.

This process helped with other work carried out this year. It has enabled us to review past scrutiny reports in a structured and constructive way and ensured our scoping processes have led to focused and achievable pieces of work.

The review of the Economic Development Strategy was an opportunity to feed into this vital policy before it went to cabinet. This also served to highlight the value of scrutiny in reviewing a key strategy document to cabinet and officers. The service which created the document had the full endorsement of the committee before it went to cabinet.

When we moved onto Affordable Housing, we met with Planning officers, Registered Social Landlords, Housing officers and consulted research documents on best practices and changes to national housing policy. The final report will feed into council policy and practices and will have an effect on Watford residents.

The Task Group on Services for the Deceased did a good piece of work on helping set council policy and for setting out potential opportunities in the future. It also helped show the benefits of having a tight time schedule and a focused agenda.

I would like to thank all the committee members, officers and members of outside bodies for their feedback, information, expertise and time.

Councillor Kelly McLeod  
Chair of Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

### **3. Call-in & Performance Scrutiny Committee**

#### **Membership**

Councillor Rackett (Chair)  
Councillor Grimston (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors I Brown, Dhindsa, Greenslade, Hastrick, Leslie, Martins and Poole,

#### **3.1 The Committee's work programme for 2010/11**

The Call-In & Performance Scrutiny Committee met on eight occasions during 2010/11. In 2008/9 the committee adopted a revised approach where in a new format it examined only one major and one minor topic per meeting. The committee continued with the same basic approach in 2010/11 but 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 across the council and with external organisations with an interest in the council's activities.

One meeting this year was devoted to the examination of the work of external organisations; this was the performance of SLM, the council's leisure centre contractor. This is in recognition of the increasing importance of partnerships and the council's involvement with external organisations that provide public services. It is expected that the scrutiny of external organisations will increase in future years.

#### **3.2 Work summary**

##### **3.2.1 Committee meetings**

The committee examined in depth the performance of five areas of activity of the council and its partners:

- (i) Leisure Centres and the Performance of SLM
- (ii) Choice Based Lettings
- (iii) Alcohol Licensing
- (iv) Elections Processes
- (v) Economic Development

Conclusions to the committee's discussions have been drafted into short reports and passed to portfolio holders, or other appropriate people, for information and/or action. The reports make general comments about overall performance, contain some specific recommendations for action and call for ongoing monitoring of areas of concern.

##### **3.2.2 Performance Management**

The Committee has continued its work of reviewing quarterly performance reports (PIs) and commenting on the progress of projects and on performance measures/indicators although the regime has changed this year because of the government's decision to greatly reduce the number of national PIs. A number of areas were noted to be of concern because of under performance or inconsistent performance; these were followed up with services heads.

With regard to next year, underperforming areas will be recommended to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for ongoing monitoring. The Overview & Scrutiny

Committee may also care to review the content of reports and discuss with service heads the possibility of providing a comprehensive set of local PIs.

### 3.2.3 Task groups

The committee established three task groups during the year:

- (i) The Community Safety Partnership Task Group.  
Councillors Martins (Chair) Grimston (Vice Chair) Khan, Lovejoy, McLeod and Mortimer.

The task group met on four occasions and scrutinised the following topics.

- The Community Safety Partnership's 2009/10 performance.  
The task group concluded that the figures were generally heartening and moving in the right direction. Members selected the following areas for further attention –  
The distorting effect that Central Ward had on the figures and the cost of policing this ward.  
Housing ex-offenders.  
Street drinkers and rough sleepers, is there adequate provision in the borough.
- Youth offending – an update on the Group's conclusions from its meeting in November 2009.  
The task group concluded that, overall, the message is positive, youth offending numbers are small and reducing, and this is supported by figures. Issues to monitor next year are the problems of drug related offences and the increase in female offenders.
- Dangerous Dogs – current issues.  
Some specific conclusions were –  
Firmer council action is needed in response to dog on dog incidents, muzzling and leashing should be mandatory after a first offence.  
Ability for council action beyond this is limited other than working with the local community and trying to educate the public about controlling their dogs. All of the legislation available is being used.
- Drug and alcohol abuse – an update on the group's conclusions from its meeting in January 2010.  
The task group received replies from a range of agencies addressing problems highlighted at the January meeting. Members concluded that they were happy with the responses and the actions being taken.
- Crime statistics and related performance.  
Members were concerned about their difficulty in interpreting the presented figures; the violent crime category for example covers a wide range of offences and can include statistics from GBH at one extreme to shouting abuse at the other. If the Police receive a complaint they are obliged to make a record, no matter how trivial, and this will be reported in the crime statistics.

Looking at quarterly figures posted on the website is not always useful and year on year figures can also be distorting. To be most informative current figures should be looked at in conjunction with trends over a number of years. It was agreed that the task group will invite an analyst from the Police to take them through the available information and construct sets of information to meet its needs. It was also agreed that the meeting will be open to all members of the council.

- Stop and search  
The task group recommended that future crime statistic reports contain -
  - a breakdown of the ethnicity of people stopped and searched in Central ward
  - a breakdown of the ethnicity of people stopped and searched in all other wards
  - numbers of people stopped and searched from outside the borough
  - a breakdown of offences in Central ward
  - a breakdown of offences in all other wards
  - crime by type in Central
  - crime by type in all other wards
  
- Neighbourhood Watch.  
Members noted that Neighbourhood Watch now has new parameters; the Police want to ensure that all participants are fully engaged in the new minimum standards. To ensure proper buy-in the approach is steady, the target is to generate one new scheme each quarter. Progress of the role out and impact of the new scheme is to be followed up by the task group.
  
- Relationships between the Police and minority communities.  
The task group concluded that In Watford the Police generally have good relationships with minority groups and work to maintain them. Relationships with the Asian community are fair at present but do fluctuate. The position requires to be monitored.
  
- Policing the Town Centre  
The Task Group concluded:
  - The approach of working towards a family-friendly image is to be commended.
  - The council has limited ability to increase licence fees but this may be changing. A review of charges is recommended if the opportunity arises.
  - Whilst part of the strategy to reduce crime and disorder the taxi marshals' activities give some cause for concern and need to be monitored.
  - Support for doormen is in need of more work.
  - Members of the 2011/12 Community Safety Task Group (or its successor) should make a night time visit to the town centre to observe the problems and solutions at first hand.
  - Unreported crime in the context of crime statistics is of concern to members. It is recommended that the 2011/12 Community Safety Task Group undertakes a review of this issue in conjunction with the review of statistics.

- (ii) To review the council's support for the voluntary sector  
Councillors Johnson (Chair) Dhindsa, Greenslade and Rackett.

The task group concluded the following –

The term 'voluntary sector' is widely applied when describing the range of organisations that apply to the council for grant aid. Applicants include organisations that provide for –

- social needs (such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Age UK),

- community groups (such as the Multi Cultural Community Centre)
- umbrella support (such as the Council for Voluntary Services)
- art and culture (such as the Palace Theatre).

The three 'pots' of grant aid available are designed to provide opportunities for all voluntary sector organisations to seek financial support from the council, regardless of their size or status. The process and procedure for making grant awards is well prescribed and easy to follow. The council provides a good level of information on the process and supports grant applicants in making their bids, as does the Council for Voluntary Services (CVS). However, it appears that some organisations bidding for three year funding have misunderstandings about their status and chances of success. This is an area where the council needs to be clearer. Further, the balance between new and established organisations may be an issue which needs reviewing; there should be more opportunities for new organisations and new projects.

The council should be clearer in the messages it gives to prospective bidders. In its willingness to make grants as available and open as possible the council attracts many organisations which will struggle to achieve any degree of success. The council should be more explicit about the type of organisation or project it wishes to support so as not to raise unrealisable expectations.

Grants budgets are likely to reduce in the foreseeable future. The council is currently working to reduce dependency but more could be done in developing strategies to achieve this.

The CVS should be encouraged and supported in its initiatives to assist voluntary sector organisations to improve their business planning and develop social enterprises.

Members made eight recommendations, six to cabinet and two to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Progress will be followed up in 2011/12.

- (iii) To review the Neighbourhood Forums and their performance since being introduced in 2008  
Councillors Greenslade (Chair) J Brown, Johnson, McLeod, Meerabux and Watkin,

The task group found that –

- Neighbourhood Forums are engaging with residents and offer value for money but because of the nature of projects this is difficult to quantify.
- Wards in Watford are not homogenous and it is clear that when it comes to community engagement one size does not fit all. The flexible system that is in place allows members to engage with residents in the most appropriate way.
- There is a strong consensus that Neighbourhood Forums are a significant improvement on Area Committees as they allow for more flexibility.
- Areas for improvement include publicity and the protocol for working with officers. There is potential for future development by extending the partnership working undertaken by ward members.

The task group made eleven recommendations which are to be considered first by Constitution Working Party and then by council.

#### **3.2.4 Call-in of decisions.**

There were no decisions called-in during 2010/11.

#### **3.3 Comment on process**

The committee built on the revised process adopted in 2008/9 which was to reduce the number of items considered at each meeting to allow guests more time to present their subjects and for members to have a fuller discussion of issues. This year, members deferred discussion of conclusions to a following meeting thus taking time to reflect on their conclusions and for officers to summarise evidence in a written report. It is considered that this approach has, over the year, produced better conclusions and is to be recommended for future performance reviews.

#### **3.4 Pre meetings**

Instituted to provide time for members to agree issues and plan their approach and for some informal training. Pre meetings are considered to be useful by officers but didn't work well for members because of poor attendance. Overview & Scrutiny should consider using these next year but in the context of the new structure.

#### **3.5 Chair's commentary**

It has been a year of change for the committee and we have attempted to involve all members, at one time or other, in the preparation of scrutiny items. The full committee has also spent a little more time on individual themes and rather than agreeing the recommendations on the same night as hearing the evidence, had some time for consideration and further clarification. We hope that this has led to more rounded conclusions.

Amongst our activities has been a look at the elections process, the management of leisure centres, choice based lettings, local economic policy and licensing enforcement and we hope that our insight will lead to improvements in all these areas. In addition a task group looked at the voluntary sector.

A working and credible scrutiny process is vital to local democracy and is the way the executive can be held accountable. I would like to thank all those that gave evidence or contributed to our work. Not least I would like to thank the Council's outgoing Scrutiny Manager, Mike Thomas for his invaluable support throughout the year.

Councillor Steve Rackett  
Chair of Call-in and Performance Scrutiny Committee