

# The Annual Report of Overview & Scrutiny in Watford Borough Council 2005/06

A Report of the Committee Chairs

# OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT – 2005/6

## 1. Introduction & Overview

At the beginning of 2005/06 Scrutiny set itself some ambitious plans for the year addressing two main areas:

- the work of the two committees and the Budget Panel
- further development of Scrutiny processes and practices.

Both of the committees and the Budget Panel have successfully completed their work programmes, although there are some issues to be addressed around the number and frequency of meetings. Scrutiny development has progressed although some of the items in the plan for the year have not been completed. Issues around meetings and development are discussed later in this report.

Overall, indications show that scrutiny has improved and progressed in 2005/06. This can be seen in better outcomes from some committee work, better engagement both inside and outside the Council and positive statements from people asked to contribute to the 2005/06 Scrutiny Survey. However, it is recognised that there is still work to be done and to move the process forward in 2006/07 the I&DeA has been engaged to carry out a scrutiny “Health Check” and provide some basis for further development work in 2006/07.

In 2004/05 the Council considered the structure of Scrutiny and the roles of the two committees (Policy Development and Call-in & Performance). The Council decided to maintain the 2004/05 structure and also agreed to the establishment of a Budget Panel to scrutinise the Council’s budget and budget making procedures. 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 2006/07.

A sub group of chairs and vice chairs from the two committees and the panel has met on four occasions in 2005/06. The group has members from all four parties represented on the Council and has the objective of providing some co-ordination of work across the three scrutiny bodies. It is proposed that the group continue in 2006/07 but to review its remit and performance once the Council has agreed scrutiny membership for the year.

## **2. Policy Development Scrutiny Committee**

### Membership:

Councillors Derbyshire (Chair)

Councillor P Mortimer (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Ajab, Greenslade, Mahmood, McGovern, O'Hanlon, Scott and Williams.

The committee met on twelve occasions between July 2004 and May 2005. At its first meeting in July the Committee considered a short list of review topics which had been the subject of consultation with the executive and community groups. The following is a summary of its main work topics.

### Road Transport (Bus) Services Review

This review was agreed because of members' concerns about the quality and performance of bus services in Watford. The Committee set out to assess the potential for increasing the use of buses and the resulting benefits for the Town and to determine the extent to which bus services, including special needs services such as Dial-a-Ride, are adequate and meet the needs of people who live and travel in Watford.

The Committee found that, compared to the best authorities, the level and quality of bus services in Watford is poor. It was particularly concerned about the lack of progress of bus service development, the apparent lack of ambition of parties involved with service delivery and prospects that the service is more likely to deteriorate rather than improve unless action is taken.

The Committee concluded that there is evidence to suggest that with good will, effort and cooperative partnerships significant improvements can be made. Whilst not without investment in terms of cost these improvements can increase bus use significantly and are likely to have a beneficial effect on traffic flows and the environment in and around the town.

The committee agreed a number of recommendations which will be sent to Cabinet in June.

### Community & Social Cohesion Review

This review was agreed because of members' concerns for cohesion in the town in the wake of the July 2005 bombings in London. This particular focus clearly has a bias towards looking at community relationships in terms of ethnicity which the Committee considered too narrow for its purpose, consequently, the Committee extended the scope to include issues related 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.

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

#### Youth Service review completed in 2004/05

Members received a response from the County Council to the Committee's recommendations arising from its review of youth services.

Members were advised that in response to the Committee's recommendations the County had been reviewing its operational structures through the Growth and Change programme. A review group drawn largely from the Youth Service had produced a set of proposals and a detailed consultation process had been conducted to enable the Youth Service and its key stakeholders help to shape the final structure.

A number of significant changes had been made to the new structure including:

- A strategic lead for the service located within the core and the local delivery of the service at area and district level in line with the arrangements adopted for other services to young people.
  - Closer integration of the Youth Service with other services delivered locally to young people by CSF.
  - Closer liaison and collaboration with services provided by district councils.
  - A minimum level of support and provision for each district area.
- The new structure was being phased in with effect from September 2005.

#### The Community Plan

At its meeting on 24 January the Committee looked at the Community Plan and considered its role in reviewing and monitoring the Plan. It was agreed that the Committee would select topics from the Plan which would be included in its annual work programme. This will allow the Committee to focus on a limited number of topics in depth and establish understanding of the topic and produce useful and meaningful outcomes. The Committee recommended that the Call-in & Performance Committee keep a check on the progress of the plan on a biannual basis to ensure it makes the required progress

#### Chair's/ Vice Chair's Perspective

The time spent at the beginning of the year in choosing and scoping the topics to be scrutinised by the Committee during the year proved to be invaluable. All members of the Council as well as Cabinet and Corporate Management Board members were canvassed for topic suggestions and those submitted were given fair consideration by the Committee in making its final selection of two topics for its year's work.

Good research material is essential for the Committee to do its work properly and in this respect the Committee was well served by its officers.

The Committee placed a lot of importance on first-hand evidence from members of the community. The contributions made by their giving evidence regarding both topics scrutinised were an integral part of the scrutiny process and proved to be invaluable. Involvement of the community in this way should be developed.

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

#### Membership

Councillor Gordon (Chair)

Councillor O'Connell (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Baddeley, Green, Jenkins, Leslie, Martins, Poole and Rackett

#### Work Summary

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

Regular -      Performance management (quarterly PI review)  
                     Performance management (Performance Plan monitoring)  
                     Budget monitoring

One off -        CPA progress assessment  
                     Human Resources  
                     Community Safety Partnership  
                     Equalities  
                     Service transformation  
                     Performance Plan for 2006/09

#### Comment on 2005/06 Work Programme

The main focus of the Committee's work since its inception has been performance management through quarterly reports on the performance of services across the Council. Changes were made in 2005/06 to avoid duplication of effort in the monitoring and review of performance information and to stratify the reporting process. This was in response to recommendations made by the Audit Commission in its review of Performance Management. It is anticipated that the IDeA review of scrutiny completed recently will provide further guidance on how best to move forward.

#### Chair's/ Vice Chair's Perspective

I am sure that the meetings of the committee have been useful in helping those attending to be better informed about a range of issues. But I am equally sure that the committee has carried out no true 'scrutiny' during the year.

The most recent changes to scrutiny structures left the council, in reality, with but this one scrutiny committee; (Policy Development, being what it is called –

not scrutiny). This one committee was effectively bound by council to focus on regular performance data, leaving little room for considered, in-depth scrutiny.

In order to develop effective scrutiny the function needs substantially increased resources in terms of dedicated officer support but, even more importantly, in terms of member time. More members must devote more time through more than one committee (or other working groups). Members should be willing to give time (if necessary during the day) to make visits and meet witnesses.

Subject to proper co-ordination, scrutiny members must be able to choose their own topics and have time and support for proper scoping, evidence collection and for debating conclusions and recommendations.

It is also essential that members approach scrutiny with mindset more forensic than political. Officers and cabinet members giving evidence must be sufficiently open to help scrutiny to receive and understand the facts and to make recommendations to help improve the Council's performance. More training in these areas is essential and scrutiny of non-council activities might help members develop their inquisitorial techniques, free from internal party political concerns.

Scrutiny should also be afforded a higher profile within the council's own procedures with a standing report to each meeting of full council, presented by the chairman of the committee or working group. This would also help bring some worthwhile business to council meetings.

While it might be administratively convenient to include call-in items on the agenda of scheduled scrutiny meetings, call-in items will tend to be fairly lengthy and, inevitably, will disrupt the scrutiny programme – particularly if witnesses have been called. It is suggested that call-in items should be dealt with at discrete meetings for that purpose.

None of these thoughts will be new. Certainly, I have shared them with officers, CPA Inspectors and the I&DeA. I trust that this last will make clear recommendations for the way forward - and that the council will embrace (and resource) them.

#### **4. The Budget Panel**

##### Membership

Councillor Rackett (Chair)

Councillor Ajab (Vice-Chair)

Councillors E Burtenshaw, Derbyshire, Gordon, Poole and Scott

##### Work Summary

The Panel met on six occasions during 2005/06, the focus of all meetings was on the Council's budget proposals for 2006/07.

The Panel reviewed the budget strategy, received a presentation from each service head on her/his service proposals for 2007/06 and the budget implications, considered and commented on the draft budget.

### Process and method

The operation of a Budget panel was new for 2005/06 as was the process and method. Consequently, at the end of the six meetings, the Panel and officers concerned with the work reviewed how the Panel had operated and the value of its output.

The review concluded that:

- The Budget Panel worked well and should continue next year.
- The membership of the Panel should, as far as possible, remain the same as for 2005/06.
- The process and content will be much the same as for 2005/06 with some changes to format and forums.
- New for next year will be an invitation to the Mayor/Cabinet Members to introduce the budget making process by setting the Council's priorities.
- The Director of Finance and Head of Finance will advise as soon as possible on a suitable timetable for meetings with the intention that the Panel's work will conclude in December.
- The Director of finance will report back on the value for money programme being considered by Corporate Management Board.
- Officers will research options for public involvement and bring a paper for discussion to the June/July meeting.

## **5. Initiatives and Development Work**

In 2005/06 the following development work was undertaken or started.

### **(i) Scrutiny Survey**

Across all groups, 68% of respondents described the operation of scrutiny at Watford as being only adequate or poor, a marginal improvement on last year 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 backbench) had a fairly neutral view whereas senior officers had the poorest view.

Reasons given for views that scrutiny is no better than adequate were wide ranging but common themes across all groups are:

- committees/members engage in political argument at meetings
- challenge is weak and ineffective
- performance is variable
- scrutiny produces few clear results and outcomes from its work

- poor communication between scrutiny and the executive and officers.

Suggestions for improvement follow reasons why scrutiny is poor:

- make the process apolitical
- member training to improve challenge
- have better selection of scrutiny topics
- improve performance and outputs
- introduce systems to improve communications.

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

The two committees and the panel will be asked to agree some actions arising from the survey and monitor their own progress through targets and performance measures.

It is proposed to repeat the survey in 12 months time and compare responses with those gathered in 2005 and 2006. A target for improvement, measured as an increase in overall satisfaction, will be set as a local performance target (LPI).

(ii) Scrutiny Development (Chairs) Group

2005/06 membership:

Councillors Ajab, Derbyshire, Gordon, P Mortimer, O'Connell and Rackett .

The group met on four occasions during 2005/06 but it was less well attended than in 2004/05. To some extent this limited the scope for discussion and meant that progress on some development work was not as good as had been expected. It may be that meeting dates and times did not fit well with members' other commitments, it is planned to and review the operation of the group with chairs appointed for 2006/07.

During the year the group discussed and agreed issues related to –

- Committee work programmes
- Member development
- Protocols and relationships
- Referred reports
- Public engagement
- Publicity
- Proposals for changes to the constitution related to scrutiny
- End of year procedures – survey, annual report etc.



It is proposed to continue the group in 2006/7 following a review of its terms of reference with members.

iv) 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. At the time of writing this Annual Report discussions were ongoing about the outcome and recommended actions.

v) Other matters

The meetings programme –

- Number and frequency of scrutiny meetings.  
The number of scheduled meetings in 2005/06 was insufficient for the Policy development committee to complete its work programme. It is proposed to schedule four additional meetings in 2006/07.
- Additional (non-public meetings) to further scrutiny and scrutiny member development.  
The Call-in & Performance Committee experimented with pre-meetings in 2005/06 to discuss forthcoming agendas and agree an approach. These meetings were a qualified success and it is proposed to continue with them in 2006/07 following agreement with members about content.

**6. Work plan and programme for 2006/07.**

It is considered to be good practice to consult widely on scrutiny forward plans and work programmes. Although response to consultation last year was very 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 Robert Gordon        Chair of Call-in & Performance Committee**

**Councillor Steve Rackett        Chair of Budget Panel**