



The Annual Report of Overview and Scrutiny in Watford Borough Council 2011/12

A report of the Scrutiny Committee Chairs

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report – 2011/12

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1. Introduction and overview

In 2011/12 the scrutiny structure was changed from previous years. One overarching committee, Overview and Scrutiny Committee, was introduced. Budget Panel was retained from the previous structure and was made a formal sub-committee of Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Community Safety Partnership Task Group was retained and continues to monitor the Community Safety Partnership. Three time-limited Task Groups were set up in 2011/12 –

- Hospital Parking Charges
- The Way Ahead for Council Services
- Waste and Recycling

The Annual Survey has been carried out and a summary of the results can be found in section 5 of this report.

Scrutiny chairs and vice chairs met twice with the Mayor and members of the Cabinet in 2011/12. Discussions took place about the new scrutiny arrangements. The Chairs and Vice-Chairs reported on the meetings which had taken place prior to the Joint Cabinet and Scrutiny meetings and updates on Task Groups.

Officers have continued to attend the Hertfordshire Scrutiny Network, a network of officers from the County Council and the ten district councils. The network provides an opportunity to share scrutiny related information across the county.

2. Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Membership:

Councillor Mark Watkin (Chair)

Councillor Steve Rackett (Vice Chair)

Councillors Nigel Bell, Sue Greenslade, Kareen Hastrick, Peter Jeffree, Stephen Johnson, Rabi Martins and Kelly McLeod

2.1 The Committee's work programme for 2011/2012

Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on seven occasions this year. This included one meeting to consider a call-in of a Cabinet decision. The Scrutiny Committee received reports on the following subjects –

- **Outstanding actions and questions** became a regular report to the Scrutiny Committee after the first meeting. The report included all the actions and questions which had been raised at previous meetings. The actions and questions remained on the report until Overview and Scrutiny Committee was satisfied with the response and it was agreed the actions had been completed.
- **Performance updates** were presented on a quarterly basis. It reviewed the performance of the Key Performance Indicators and other performance measures identified by the Scrutiny Committee for review. At the meetings Members discussed the performance indicators and sought clarification in certain areas. A particular area of concern was the performance of the Benefits Service. The Scrutiny Committee has monitored this service throughout the year and the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Shared Services provided regular updates.
- **Forward Plan** was reviewed in line with the Scrutiny Committee's terms of reference. Members noted the additions and changes to the Forward Plan since the previous meeting.
- **Task Groups** – the Scrutiny Committee considered proposed topics for Task Groups and the responses from Heads of Service. Three Task Groups were established during 2011/12, two of which completed their review. Further information is available in Section 4.
- **Review of previous reports** Throughout the year the Scrutiny Committee received responses from Cabinet and checked the progress of recommendations from previous reviews. In some cases Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a further review in the future and in other cases Members agreed that the recommendations had been met. The reviews carried out in 2011/2012 were –

Voluntary Sector Task Group (Cabinet response)

Affordable Housing review (Cabinet response)

Public Pride (review update)

Services for the Deceased (review update)

2.2 Call-in

There had been one Executive decision called in during 2011/12. Three non-Executive Councillors called-in Cabinet's decision regarding the "Review of three year grant funding programme to achieve savings", which had been discussed at the meeting held on 5 December 2011. Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 22 December 2011 to review the decision. It was chaired by Councillor Steve Rackett, the Vice-Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Following the discussion the Scrutiny Committee agreed to uphold Cabinet's decision. It was also agreed that Overview and Scrutiny Committee would examine the long-term impact on the four organisations which would be subject to the largest grant cuts. It was also agreed that Members would be involved in the development of the new Commissioning Framework for the voluntary and community sector.

2.3 Chair's commentary

The report above describes the work the Committee has carried out this year. What it does not tell you is that this year the way that scrutiny has been performed in Watford has been completely changed. We have introduced a new structure based on an Overview Committee overseeing task groups supported by a new team of excellent officers. Our brief has been to monitor performance and initiate task group based reviews which should be able to span both performance and policy issues. We also scrutinise the work of other bodies where it is of public interest to the residents of Watford. I am pleased to report that under this new scheme scrutiny in Watford Borough Council has been generally successful.

The committee reviewed and amended all the systems and services that were in place. We now have a rolling programme of scrutiny work that stretches into the future; there is a much tighter system of review of the impact of our past reports; we are looking critically at the indicators we use to monitor the performance of the Council's services to ensure that they are relevant and comprehensive; a bit like a super tanker, we took time to get underway and initiate task groups as we got to grips with our new way of working but those that have operated have produced excellent work.

I am particularly pleased that our major piece of work for this year, looking at how the Council will be accountable democratically as it introduces new ways of delivering its services, was requested by the Managing Director. I hope that other members of the senior leadership team and officers in the council will follow his example and propose areas for review particularly where new policy is being considered.

The Committee has three major challenges for the forthcoming year:

1. Greater range of topic subjects – by actively encouraging people from all areas including the general public or associated organisations to propose topics for scrutiny.
2. Keep the recommendations clear - be sure that topic reports generate recommendations that can be tested for their success in the future.
3. Broaden the membership of the task groups - we need to attract more non-executive members who are not on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to work on task groups and participate in the scrutiny process.

I would like to end by thanking all the members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for adjusting so well to their new role; the chairs and members of all the task groups, including specifically the Community Safety Partnership for the great work they carried out; all the officers in Legal and Democratic Services for their dedicated hard work, superb advice and support and their sheer professionalism when approaching this new role for all of them; and all those who contributed to the work of the committee and task groups in providing evidence, information or advice.

Councillor Mark Watkin
Chair Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2011/12

3. Budget Panel

Membership

Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa (Chair)

Councillor Tony Poole (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Shirena Counter, George Derbyshire, Sue Greenslade, Rabi Martins, Malcolm Meerabux, Steve Rackett and Mark Watkin

3.1 The Panel's Work Programme for 2011/2012:

The Panel met on six occasions during the year and considered the following:

- **Corporate Process Improvement Programme** was considered by Budget Panel on two occasions and looked at back office functions with a view to improving efficiency. £150,000 savings were ultimately identified.

Budget Panel supported the process but made the reservation that it should not affect service delivery.

- **Harlow Value for Money Comparison** was inconclusive and raised as many questions as answers. Budget Panel would like to revisit it using the latest data available in 2012/2013.
- **Housing Value for Money Review** was considered twice by Budget Panel. The Review identified £180,000 of service reductions.

Budget Panel had some concerns that this area was experiencing higher volumes of activity and perhaps this was not the right time to be making service savings.

- **The Final Outturn for 2010/2011** was considered and showed there was an underlying overspend of approximately £240,000.
- **The Finance Digest Budget Monitor** was regularly considered by the Budget Panel and is currently showing an overspend of approximately £600,000. This reinforces the effect that the recession in the wider economy is having. For Watford, commercial rent income is down; income receipts from areas such as planning fees are down; and the cost of homelessness is up. The Budget Panel were reassured that Leadership and Portfolio Holders actively try to identify compensating savings.
- **The Medium Term Financial Strategy was considered at the Meeting on 20th September** which indicated the austerity programme being faced by all authorities would set tough targets. It reinforced the need to meet service prioritisation savings targets set during the previous year's budget consideration. A major discussion point was the extent to which the Council's reserves could be used to help minimise the impact upon service standards.

- **Income Policy** was discussed by the Panel. It was felt that the Council needed to be clearer on its Income Policy. For example when services should be self-financing or when a degree of Council tax subsidy should be allowed. Comparators with other authorities were considered to be a useful aid in this process.

Budget Panel signalled an intention to major on this in 2012/2013.

- **Cost of Consultants** – the use of outside help was debated at length at one meeting of the Budget Panel. It was felt that there needed to be a clear distinction between a short, sharp review into an area of activity—with a defined pay back strategy. This needed to be compared with the ongoing employment of consultants when existing (and cheaper staff) could be employed.

Budget Panel wished to revisit this during 2012/2013.

- **Service Prioritisation Savings Review** – the Medium Term Financial Strategy highlighted the need to achieve a package of £3 million of savings over a three year period. Budget Panel reviewed progress in this area and noted that approximately £400,000 of proposed savings would not be achieved. The majority of this non achievement was due to a change of policy by Cabinet.

Budget Panel broadly supported the strategy for achieving the residual £2.6 million of saving.

- **Local Government Resource Review** – Budget Panel considered a paper from the Head of Strategic Finance outlining proposals from Central Government to allow councils to keep any additional income arising from growth in the Business Rates base.

A detailed presentation is to be made to the first meeting of Budget Panel in 2012/2013 which will include options around five year modelling of the affect upon Watford.

- **Council Roadmap** - the Managing Director had prepared a report indicating how the Council might achieve a further £2 million of savings in 2013-2016. This included reviewing the way services would be provided and indeed whether the Council should actually deliver the services directly.

Budget Panel accepted the need to develop these ideas and looked forward to receiving further reports in due course.

- **Trade Refuse Service** – Budget Panel considered this service and agreed it should break even and endorsed a 5% increase in charges in 2012/2013.

Cabinet accepted this recommendation.

- **Car Parking Permits** – a similar consideration took place relating to the need to increase these charges but the Panel felt this needed further consideration during 2012/2013 and recommended no increase in charges.

Cabinet accepted this recommendation.

- **Draft Revenue and Capital Estimates** – there was broad agreement that the Council had little room for manoeuvre in meeting Central Government's grant reductions. There was a view that some expenditure reductions should not be agreed and largely related to support for voluntary organisations and the housing service. The majority within Budget Panel felt that these reductions needed to be pursued. There was a unanimous view that Council Tax should be frozen in 2012/2013 This view was accepted by Cabinet.

With regard to the capital programme it was generally endorsed but Budget Panel noted that the approximately £4.5 million provision for improvements to the Cultural Quarter was just a budget figure at the present time and that community views were required before expenditure was actually spent.

3.2 Training

Two training sessions were organised.

The first related to the budget process and understanding how the component parts mesh together. This was largely for the benefit of a number of new members on the Budget Panel and very much set the scene for the work to be carried out by the Panel on financial planning.

The second training session involved a presentation on the Council's property review and the need to make the most efficient use of our assets and also included the identification of any surplus assets. This latter point is important as there is a continuous need to generate capital receipts if the council's investment/ improvement programme is to be realised.

3.3 Review of the work carried out in 2011/2012

At the end of each year Panel Members and support officers reflected on the Panel's performance. This year Members concluded that the Panel worked well with lively discussions on a number of occasions. It was generally felt that politics had not intruded on the decisions agreed by the Panel.

The reductions in public expenditure experienced by all local authorities obviously affected the work of the Panel but even here lively debates revolved around the need to cut some service expenditure, whether income charges should go up and the extent to which reserves should be used to soften the blow.

A representative of the Watford Observer regularly attended each meeting.

Budget Panel particularly enjoyed the presentation on the Property Review and looks forward in keen anticipation to a follow up session during 2012/2013.

Finally Budget Panel recorded its thanks to the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Councillor Andy Wylie, for attending each meeting, representing Cabinet and providing experience, wisdom and defence of Cabinet in equal measure. It also thanked officers, in particular the Head of Strategic Finance, for their support throughout the year.

3.4 Chair/ Vice Chair's Commentary

This year was my first year as the chair of Budget Panel. I am pleased to say I thoroughly enjoyed it. The work carried out by the Panel is listed above. I will comment on a few of them below.

Two training sessions were organised for the benefit of members on the Budget Panel and the feed back has been very positive.

Budget Panel looked at the need to increase the Control zone parking permits, after a lively discussion the Panel felt this needed further consideration during 2012/2013 and recommended no increase in charges. The Panel influenced Cabinet in agreeing a 5% increase in trade waste charges and indeed freezing council tax for another year. The Elected Mayor was generous enough to recognise the help Budget Panel had provided in shaping the 2012/2013 Budget.

All meetings attracted a very good attendance both from Panel members and interested member colleagues.

A representative of the Watford Observer regularly attended each meeting as there is a recognition that many detailed debates occur within this forum.

This year Members concluded that the Panel worked well with there being lively discussion on a number of occasions. It was generally felt that the political dimension had not intruded upon the ultimate decisions taken by the Panel and that reflected well upon the Chair and all Panel Members.

Finally I would like thank the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Shared Services, Councillor Andy Wylie, for attending each meeting and providing experience, wisdom and defence of Cabinet in equal measure. We would like to wish Andy all the best in the future. Thanks to all other officers who attended the meeting to present their reports and answer questions and my personal thanks to Bernard Clarke and Sandra Hancock for all their hard work/help.

Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa
Chair of Budget Panel 2012/13

4. Task Groups

4.1 Community Safety Partnership Task Group

Councillor Kelly McLeod (Chair)

Councillors Karen Collett, Asif Khan, Ann Lovejoy, Helen Lynch, Rabi Martins and Malcolm Meerabux

The Community Safety Partnership Task Group is a statutory Task Group which is established each year to scrutinise the work of the Community Safety Partnership.

Work programme

The Task Group met on four occasions and the following topics were considered:

1. An introduction to the Community Safety Partnership (CSP)

The Chair and other members of the CSP attended the meeting to give an overview of the work of the partnership. The Chair explained the reason the CSP had been set up and its duties. She outlined the different groups which delivered the partnership's work.

The Task Group's questions covered crime levels, the effect of the closure of the Stonham accommodation for ex-offenders, the progress of the Neighbourhood Watch scheme and the impact of crime on different communities in Watford.

2. Crime statistics- developing an understanding

This item was recommended by the Task Group in 2010/11 as the statistics were complex to interpret. Inspector Dent of Hertfordshire Constabulary attended and made a presentation to the Task Group.

Inspector Dent explained how Watford was compared with other, similar areas across the country. She explained how offences were categorised and how the Police monitored different types of offences. The Task Group discussed how Watford had been affected by the riots in August 2011.

The Task Group noted the availability of statistics at www.police.uk; Members concluded that this was an important resource for all councillors to use.

3. Antisocial behaviour in Watford

The Antisocial Behaviour Coordinator and the Community Safety Manager attended the meeting to address issues related to antisocial behaviour (ASB) that had been raised by the Task Group.

The Antisocial Behaviour Coordinator explained the different types of antisocial behaviour and his role within the Partnership. He discussed areas where ASB was particularly prevalent and the reasons for this. He reported on the levels of ASB and the strategic work that was taking place

to prevent and combat it. The Task Group raised specific concerns relating to ASB outside the town centre and the link between homelessness and ASB.

The Task Group noted the importance of promoting the Police non-emergency number (101) to residents and its role in reporting and recording crime and ASB.

4. Neighbourhood priorities

Inspector Dent from Hertfordshire Constabulary came to the Task Group's meeting to discuss how neighbourhood priorities were set. This was an item she had suggested at a previous meeting.

She explained how the consultation took place and invited Members' involvement in the process. The Task Group noted that this was an important way to feed in residents' concerns to the Police officers in their wards.

Chair's Commentary

I would like to thank the Task Group for participating so actively and enthusiastically with all the participants this year. As we try to concentrate on strategy and targets, it can be difficult not to bring in specifics and local issues that we as Members are aware of.

The Task Group cannot stress strongly enough the need for the public and members to use the Police non-emergency number (101) to report issues. Without a paper trail, the Council, Police and other members of the Community Safety Partnership cannot log complaints about antisocial behaviour and other community problems. There needs to be a history of issues before the Partnership can react and to rectify them within our communities.

A number of topics were suggested this year that a future Community Safety Partnership Task may like to review:

- The probation service
- The drug and alcohol strategy
- The strategy of the new Police Chief Inspector
- Monitoring the effect of part-night lighting on crime and disorder

The Task Group is always interested in suggestions of topics for scrutiny of the Community Safety Partnership. We feed back into the strategy and priorities that are set for our Partnership and would like to be notified of successes as well as failures. Please contact Democratic Services with topics that may be of interest to the Task Group.

The Task Group would like to thank all the officers and members of the Community Safety Partnership who attended the meetings and provided the Task Group with information.

Councillor Kelly McLeod
Chair of the Community Safety Partnership Task Group 2011/12

4.2 Hospital Parking Charges Task Group

The first Task Group was set up to review the parking charges at Watford General Hospital. The membership comprised Councillor Karen Collett (Chair and proposer of the topic), Councillors Ken Brodhurst, Kareen Hastrick, Peter Jeffree and Malcolm Meerabux. The Task Group met on five occasions and received evidence from the Associate Director of Infrastructure and the Associate Director of Strategic Development from the West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust and a representative from the Patient Advice and Liaison Service. The Task Group produced nine recommendations which have been forwarded to the Hospital Trust for its consideration. Overview and Scrutiny Committee have agreed to review any feedback in 2012/2013.

4.3 The Way Ahead for Council Services Task Group

The second Task Group to be agreed had been proposed by the Managing Director. The Way Ahead for Council Services' review sought to gain Members' views about the governance and cultural changes required for alternative service delivery models. The membership comprised the full Overview and Scrutiny Committee membership. The Task Group made three recommendations which were endorsed by Cabinet in March 2011. As a result of the recommendations a new scrutiny Panel has been set up to monitor outsourced services with effect from May 2012.

4.4 Waste and Recycling Task Group

The final Task Group agreed in 2011/2012 was the Waste and Recycling Task Group. This suggestion had been proposed by Councillor Derek Scudder, the Portfolio Holder for Environmental Services. The aim of the topic was to review recycling systems used by other local authorities to see if it would aid in increasing the recycling rate in Watford, whilst still maintaining the principle of weekly collections and without substantially increasing costs. The membership comprised Councillor Keith Crout (Chair), Councillors Jeanette Aron, Sue Greenslade and Kareen Hastrick. The Task Group met on four occasions. It was agreed that the Task Group would be adjourned as a Business Case dealing with the provision of waste services was being prepared and Members felt that it would be difficult to make informed recommendations without having sight of the Business Case.

4.5 Other Scrutiny Suggestions in 2011/12

Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a number of other scrutiny suggestions. The Scrutiny Committee noted the comments received from Heads of Services and agreed not to progress the suggestions further or to refer them to Community Safety Partnership Task Group. All Members who had proposed topics were contacted and informed of Overview and Scrutiny Committee's decision. In some cases the suggestion could be resolved by providing a written response.

The other suggestions were –

- Bin collection service in narrow streets
- Cycling on pavements
- Parking – large commercial vehicles on a residential streets
- Use of Cassiobury Park
- YMCA (Community Safety Partnership Task Group)
- Stonham Hostel (Community Safety Partnership Task Group)
- Recruitment policy for ex-offenders (Community Safety Partnership Task Group)

The reports and minutes of all scrutiny meetings are available on the Council's website – <http://watford.moderngov.co.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?bcr=1>

5. Other Scrutiny work

5.1 Scrutiny Survey

An annual scrutiny survey is carried out and people and organisations who have been involved with scrutiny during the preceding year are asked to participate. This includes councillors, officers and members of the public or representatives from external organisations who have attended as guests and witnesses.

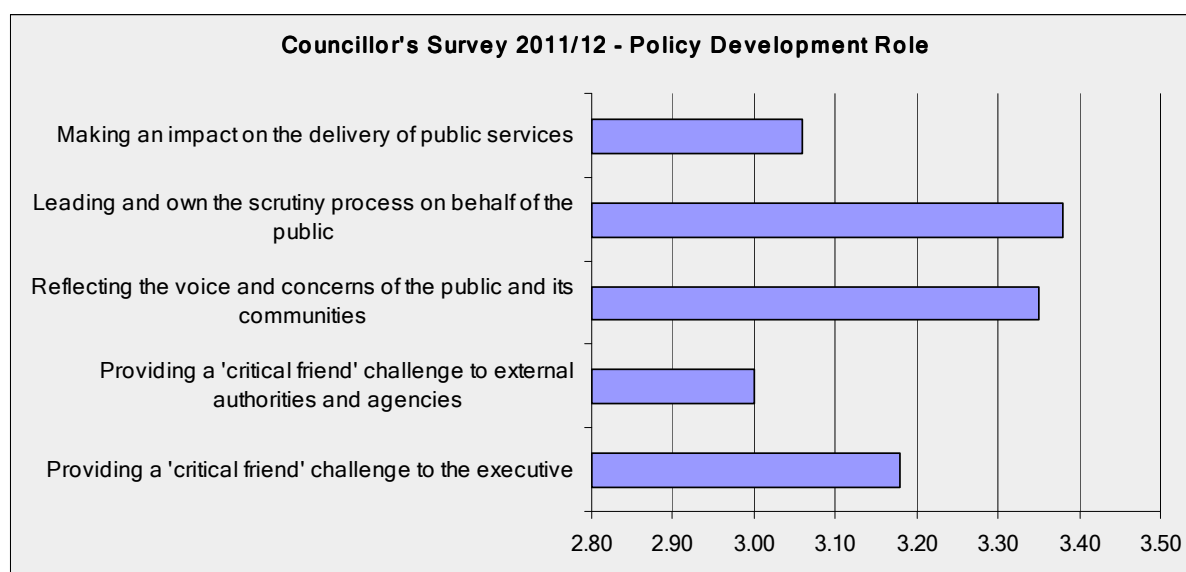
Councillors' survey

Of the 37 councillors (including the Mayor) in Watford Borough Council, 22 completed the survey. 12 Councillors out of the 21 who had taken part in scrutiny during 2011/12 completed the survey. The results of the survey showed that:

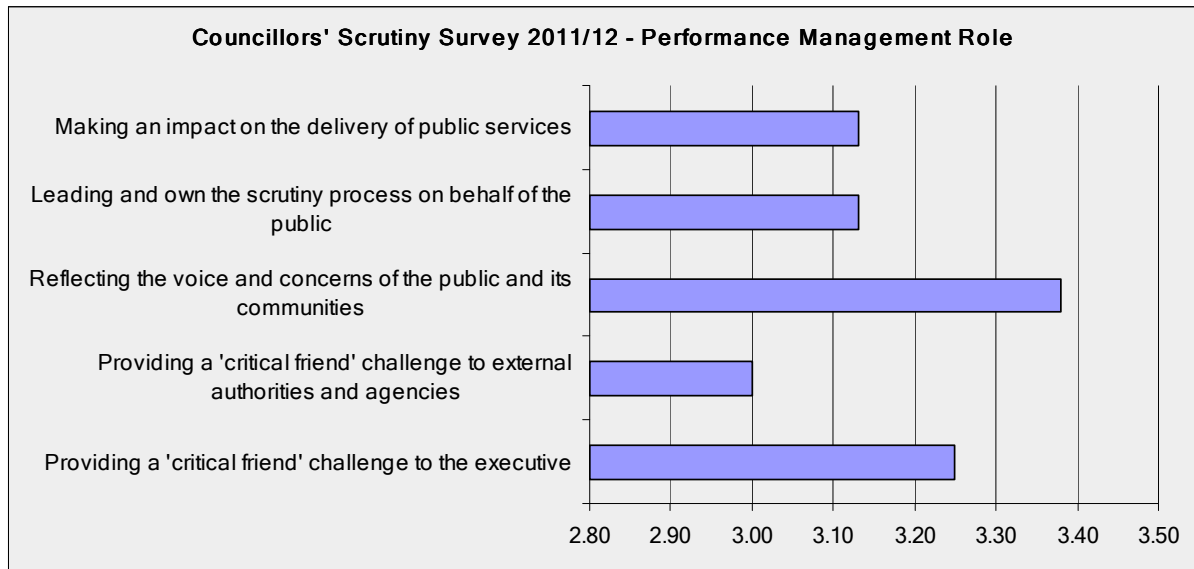
There were various reasons why Members had not taken part in scrutiny during the year. The main reason for not taking part was given as 'no time/other commitments'. Three people who had completed the survey had been first elected to the Council May 2012.

Members were asked to rate how effective they felt different aspects of the scrutiny work were in the five key areas identified by the Centre for Public Scrutiny. 21 of the respondents completed this question. The scores were out of 5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. All the aspects of scrutiny work received a rating average of 3.00 or higher.

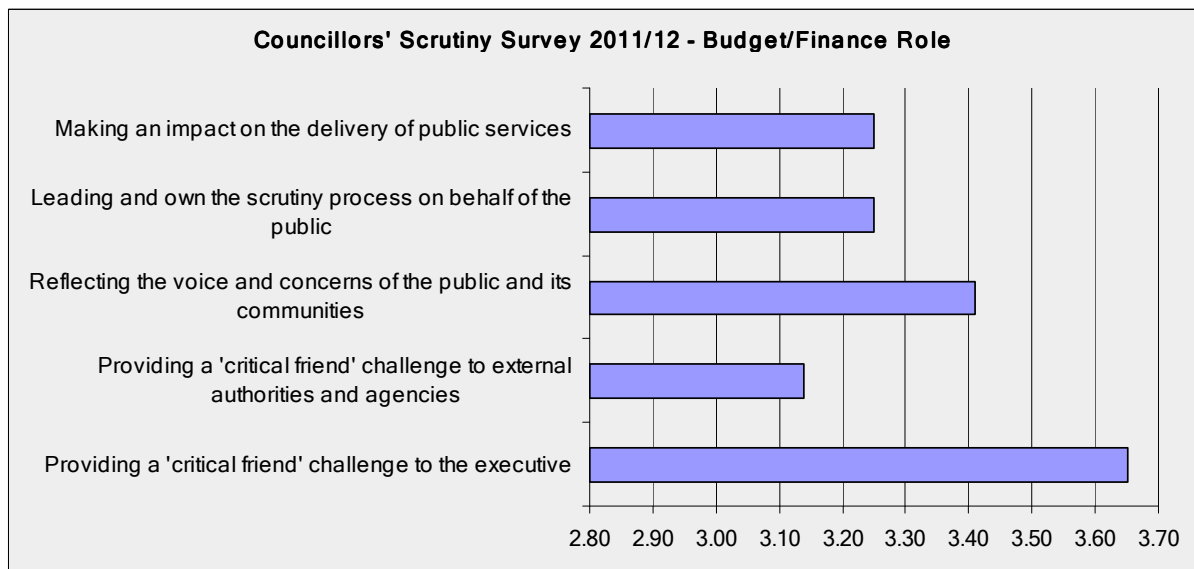
The first graph below shows the average rating for each aspect for the **Policy Development** role of scrutiny. The lowest rating average was 3.00 and the highest was 3.38.



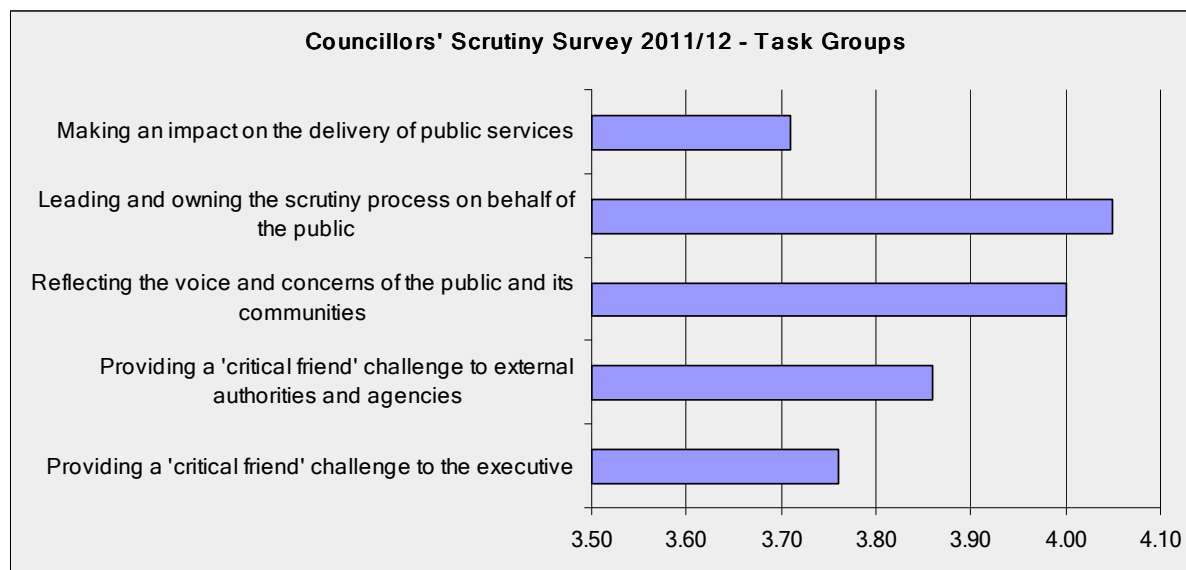
The second graph shows the average rating for each aspect for the **Performance Management** role of scrutiny. The lowest rating average was 3.00 and the highest was 3.38.



The third graph shows the average rating for each aspect for the **Budget and Finance** role of scrutiny. The lowest rating average was 3.14 and the highest was 3.65.



The final graph shows the average rating for each aspect for **Task Groups**. The lowest rating average was 3.71 and the highest was 4.05.



Members were asked for their views about how scrutiny could be improved in the future. The comments will be extracted from the survey and included as part of the review of the new scrutiny arrangements, which is due to take place in 2012/13.

Survey of officers

This survey, similar to the Councillors' survey, was completed by nine officers. The survey showed that six out of the nine officers felt that they understood their role. Two had replied that the question was not applicable and one had responded that they had partially understood their role.

When asked how scrutiny could be improved one officer suggested that increased work with the Chair would help to make reviews more meaningful. One officer commented that the scrutiny subjects were 'more in tune' with the needs of the Council and had been more focussed.

Survey of members of the public

This survey was completed by four people who had been guests and witnesses at Task Groups.

Three of the respondents felt that they had been well briefed before attending the meeting. The other person replied that they had been partially briefed. All respondents stated that they had understood the purpose of the meeting and their role.

5.2 Hertfordshire Scrutiny Network

The Hertfordshire Scrutiny Network held meetings throughout 2011/12. The Hertfordshire authorities agreed to invite authorities neighbouring Hertfordshire to take part in the network. Authorities from Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire have joined the network.

The network has had a number of meetings through the year to discuss whether there would be any impact for scrutiny from the new Police and Crime Panel, which is being established to monitor the Police and Crime Commissioner.

5.3 Cabinet/scrutiny meetings

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

The group met twice in 2011/12 and the following items were discussed:

- scrutiny work plans and programmes
- feedback from the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Budget Panel
- suggestions for scrutiny reviews

Three meetings have been scheduled for 2012/13.

5.4 Scrutiny Training

Two scrutiny training sessions were arranged for all Councillors in March 2012. The sessions were interactive and were facilitated by the South East Employers. The sessions were opened up to Councillors from other neighbouring local authorities. All Members who had completed the evaluation forms agreed or strongly agreed that the training had met objectives and would be helpful in future meetings.

Session 1 was entitled 'Chairing for Scrutiny'. Members discussed the role of the Chair and the skills required for effective chairing. This session had been attended by seven Councillors from Watford and two from East Herts District Council.

Session 2 was entitled 'Skills for Scrutiny'. This training focussed on questioning witnesses, listening techniques and the use of body language. The session had been attended by seven Councillors from Watford and two from other Hertfordshire councils.

6. 2011/12 Scrutiny membership

6.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Mark Watkin (Chair)
Councillor Steve Rackett (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Nigel Bell, Sue Greenslade, Kareen Hastrick, Peter Jeffree,
Stephen Johnson, Rabi Martins and Kelly McLeod

6.2 Budget Panel

Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa (Chair)
Councillor Tony Poole (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Shirena Counter, George Derbyshire, Sue Greenslade, Rabi
Martins, Malcolm Meerabux, Steve Rackett and Mark Watkin

6.3 Community Safety Partnership Task Group

Councillor Kelly McLeod (Chair)
Councillors Karen Collett, Asif Khan, Anne Lovejoy, Helen Lynch, Rabi Martins
and Malcolm Meerabux

6.4 Hospital Parking Charges Task Group

Councillor Karen Collett (Chair)
Councillors Ken Brodhurst, Kareen Hastrick, Peter Jeffree and Malcolm
Meerabux

6.5 The Way Ahead for Council Services Task Group

Councillor Mark Watkin (Chair)
Councillor Steve Rackett (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Nigel Bell, Sue Greenslade, Kareen Hastrick, Peter Jeffree,
Stephen Johnson, Rabi Martins and Kelly McLeod

6.6 Waste and Recycling Task Group

Councillor Keith Crout (Chair)
Councillors Jeanette Aron, Sue Greenslade and Kareen Hastrick

