

Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees 2009/10

May 2009 brought a change of committee structure, replacing the Scrutiny and Corporate Overview Committees with four new Committees covering both the elements of scrutiny and the overview of future policy.

The broad remits of the four Committees are:

Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordinating

- Developing partnership working, helping to achieve integrated Devon service delivery;
- Achieving savings through remote working with neighbouring authorities;
- Working with parish councils, Police, Fire and the Primary Care Trust;
- Comprehensive Area Assessment issues;
- Local Strategic Partnership commissioning;
- Crime and Disorder.

Communities Overview & Scrutiny

- Affordable housing, housing availability;
- Urban, rural and Safe Communities;
- Developing, reviewing and monitoring the effectiveness of the Council's work on equality and diversity;
- Developing and implementing the community empowerment visions;
- Scrutinise community engagement and empowerment initiatives and governance arrangements, with input from communities to drive improvement.

Economy Overview & Scrutiny

- Recession recovery;
- Town services and High street future;
- Skills and training;
- School provision for leavers and achievers; further education provision;
- Property based decisions;
- Local government association issues.

Service Delivery and Performance Overview & Scrutiny

- Focus on the right sized establishment;
- Monitoring progress of systems thinking reviews;
- Monitor on-target delivery

Each Committee has worked hard to encourage full participation with the new arrangements, establishing strong links with both Portfolio Holders and Member Champions. Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of each committee also meet informally on a regular basis to debate issues, progress and assessing the workload of each Committee.

Local Development Framework

Member concern about LDF progress prompted a review by the Co-ordinating Committee. As a result, there is now a better understanding of the work of the LDF Panel, the vision for the District and the work needed to reach the goal of a core strategy that will meet inspection but crucially meet the needs of the District.

Comprehensive Area Assessment

Securing a positive assessment for future years has promoted related work with all the Committees in looking at the key strategies and documents used by the Audit Commission to assess the Council's progress. This work will continue for the next civic cycle, working as closely with the Lead Auditor, Martin Green, as possible to pinpoint the evidence needed to provide to future assessments. There will be particular focus on the Local Area Agreement in the coming months. The results from the Place Survey will also drive some work for all of the Committees in the next civic cycle.

Crime and Disorder

Joint arrangements to run alongside the existing Community Safety Partnership (CSP) have been put in place, to monitor the work of the CSP by both East Devon District Councillors and Mid Devon District Councillors. This is in the form of the East and Mid Devon Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Panel, who will meet at least twice a year, and feedback to the Co-ordinating Committee.

Affordable Housing

Identified as an area needing attention in the Comprehensive Area Assessment, the Communities Committee considered an interim policy for delivering more affordable housing, and other measures to help bring more affordable units forward. The policy was recommended to the Development Management Committee who subsequently agreed to put it in place.

Rural Business Survey

Survey results confirmed the view that training opportunities for small rural businesses were few, and Members debated how improvements could be made to offer better opportunities, including what could be offered from the District Council.

Better links with Business Representatives

Representatives from business groups and Chambers of Commerce were invited to present their issues of concern to the Economy Committee. Issues such as car parking charges and the level of business rates were hot topics for many of the areas represented.

Systems Thinking

Performance Measures Reports resulting from the systems thinking reviews are regularly considered by the Service Delivery & Performance Committee. Each of the services involved so far; Development Management, Housing Benefits and Housing have changed the way they work and continually monitor their performance, comparing it against the previous quarter's data. In the past year each of the three service areas have enjoyed considerable improvement. Preventable demand in the Customer Service Centre is also regularly monitored, particularly in respect of the waste handling contract roll-out.

Quarterly Monitoring

Improvements have been made to the presentation of the information on monitoring, in conjunction with Members, to provide reports that make problems quickly identifiable and actions to rectify made clear.

Other work by the Committees during the year has included:

- Business Tenants Survey, looking at ways of addressing the need for small and medium sized units;
- Review of Health & Health Equality policy, with principles agreed relating to the Council's role to play in health; The Communities Committee was consulted on the "New Horizons" document by the Department of Health on the future approach to mental health, hearing debate from the NHS Partnership Trust. Aspirations of the Council's role in mental health awareness were debated and subsequently taken on as the Council's agreed position;
- Charging for pre-application advice and the level of charges against the type of application. The Executive Board recognised that charging would help to find improvements to the service and recommended a charging regime;
- Taking a first look at Asset Management, with a view to future monitoring of the Asset Management Plan in future months. A new Member Champion for Asset Management was agreed at full Council as recommended by the Co-ordinating Committee;
- Reviewing the Licensing Policy;
- Rural Manifesto debate to establish the Council's position in order to inform both the LDF and the Council's core aspirations for Rural Communities;
- Debate on the Government consultation paper on Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 4: Planning for Prosperous Economies;
- Review of the East Devon Business Centre and exploring links with the Exeter Science Park, which will continue in the next civic year;

- Monitoring delivery of the Economy and Development Service Plan, with focus on how to secure funding for the New Growth Point Delivery Team;
- Reviewing actions taken as detailed in the Children's Play Strategy, looking at facilities across the District and how to assess their worth to young people, as well as how to better promote them;
- Receiving presentations from Member Champions through the year has resulted in a better understanding of their role, with suggestions on their future direction and raising their profile;
- Supporting the move towards a town centre manager for Seaton

In summary, the Committees have responded well to the challenge of a new remit and are in a strong position to continue the work needed to monitor delivery against the Council's corporate priorities.