

Annual Report of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels – 2013/14

Welcome to the annual scrutiny report for 2013/14.

Last year's report indicated that the Council, like many other local authorities, faced challenging financial times. Whilst this has proved to be the case, this Council, through financial diligence, is better placed than many authorities to meet the challenges. However, it still remains a difficult time for Local Government. Particular attention has therefore been paid to scrutiny of the Council's budget and those areas which are likely to impact on important issues to residents such as changes to welfare reform.

The role of Task & Finish Groups in influencing Council policy and key decisions has gained momentum, and members who serve on these groups have put in a considerable amount of time examining issues and working up proposals. All of the Panels continue to have a close working relationship with their Portfolio Holders who regularly attend meetings to report on their activities and listen to debate.

Panels have an important input into the Council's decision-making process. That input is likely to be more crucial in the future as the financial pressure on Local Government continues.

All three Overview & Scrutiny Panels are developing their work programmes for 2014/15. Finding new, more efficient ways to deliver Council services is a key theme running through each.

The following pages highlight some of the key activities that have taken place during the year across the Council's three overview and scrutiny panels.

If you would like to see further details of the work of each of the Panels and all of the topics that the Panels have reviewed, please visit the Council's website at www.newforest.gov.uk/Council and Democracy/Councillors, Democracy and Elections/Committee Documents.

Membership of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels

Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel

Mrs P Jackman (Ch)
S P Davies (V/Ch)
J E Binns
D A Britton
Mrs P J Lovelace
B D Lucas
A D O'Sullivan
N S Penman
D J Russell
M S Wade

Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel

J G Ward (Ch)
Mrs A M Rostand (V/Ch)
A R Alvey
M R Harris
J D Heron
M J Kendal
Mrs M J Robinson
A R Tinsley
D B Tipp
Mrs P A Wyeth

Environment Overview & Scrutiny Panel

W S Rippon-Swaine (Ch)
Mrs D E Andrews (V/Ch)
Mrs S V Beeton
Ms R Bellows
Mrs S M Bennison
S J Clarke
W H Dow
A T Glass
Mrs M McLean
M D Southgate

If you would like to know more about the work of each of the panels please contact the Committee Administrator below:

Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel –
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Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel –
andy.rogers@nfdc.gov.uk

Environment Overview & Scrutiny Panel –
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Community Overview & Scrutiny Panel
(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:
Housing & Communities
Health and Leisure)

Main Reviews 2013/14

Crime & Disorder

The Chief Inspector and Community Safety Officers are regular attendees at Panel meetings, assisting members in their understanding of crime and disorder activity in the New Forest. With support from the Chief Inspector, the Panel reviewed the work of Safer New Forest (the statutory Community Safety Partnership for the New Forest) by scrutinising key data held within its strategic assessment. The assessment contained vital statistics on crime, disorder, substance abuse and other community safety matters affecting the district. Whilst the data showed that crime in the New Forest had reduced overall, it also revealed a growing number in serious road accidents. The Panel recognised the need to investigate the benefits of local multi agency work to reduce the numbers of killed and seriously injured road accidents and established a Task & Finish Group comprising of representatives from Health & Wellbeing Board, the Police and a representative from the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Panel. The Group will report back to the Panel in the autumn. The Panel also concluded that the prolonged economic situation continued to have an impact on crime, particularly metal theft, reoffending rates and substance misuse. The Panel has received reports and presentations on these issues and will keep a watching brief on these to ensure that the Police have the necessary support from the Council, as one of its key partners, in addressing the issues.

Health & Wellbeing/Children & Young People

The Panel reviewed the health programmes offered at the Council's Health and Leisure Centres and their contribution to community wellbeing, as well as how capacity issues were being managed at the centres. The Panel was pleased to see that the programmes and outreach work benefited all sections of the community, particularly those with health conditions and in areas of deprivation. Members were pleased with the success of the centres and the increase in throughput, and noted that, with successful programme management, capacity at the centres was being managed well.

In recognising and supporting the Government's national agenda to end child poverty by 2020, the Panel invited external professionals to assist in determining the extent of child poverty in the district and explore ways in which the Council could assist partner organisations such as the Local Children's Partnership in tackling child poverty. Preliminary findings of the Panel were that partnership working was essential to ensure the best start in life for young children and to support families to achieve this. It was clear that this approach can lead to long-term benefits across the public sector as individuals subsequently need fewer interventions and support. In recognising the complexities of this issue, the Panel discussed the issue at a further meeting, and undertook a thorough scoping exercise for a fuller review. The Panel has now set up a Task & Finish Group to examine whether local programmes aimed to tackle child poverty are being delivered effectively.

The Panel has also looked at the work of the New Forest Health and Wellbeing Board and has supported its work on dementia, which is a significant issue in the District.

Housing

During the year the Panel has received regular reviews from its Community Alarms and Out of Hours Task & Finish Group which was established to investigate and advise on the amalgamation of the CCTV, Community Alarms and Out of Hours services into a single internal structure. The Task & Finish Group in their detailed review concluded that the operational benefits, the opportunity for the Council to add

value to its services, and the future business opportunities, favoured changing internal structures. The Group therefore recommended to the Cabinet (which was subsequently agreed) that the Council's 24 hour community alarm service for elderly or vulnerable residents be brought in-house and re-launched as Appletree Careline. At the end of January 2014 the alarm monitoring transferred from an outside contractor to the Council's own CCTV and Community Alarms team, based at Appletree Court. The change has enabled the Council to provide a 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, service designed to assist elderly or vulnerable residents to remain independent in their own homes for as long as possible.

Another successful outcome following a review by one of the Panel's Task & Finish Groups is the work undertaken by the Homelessness Night Shelter Task & Finish Group. This Group was set up to gain a greater understanding of the nature and extent of rough sleeping in the District. The Group found that there were problems with rough sleeping in the New Forest, but the numbers were not well understood, due to the rural nature of the District. Whilst there was provision for rough sleepers aged 16-24, through Nightstop, there was no such provision for adult rough sleepers. After holding discussions with Nightstop about the possibility of extending their services to adults, Nightstop were able to secure funding to pilot a 'Night Stop Plus' scheme which would provide accommodation for older rough sleepers. The Task & Finish Group is to monitor the progress of this scheme in reducing the numbers of adult rough sleepers in the New Forest.

The Panel has supported the Housing strategy. It regularly receives reports and verbal updates from the Service and the Housing & Communities Portfolio Holder and asks challenging questions. The Panel is keen to see the continued growth of affordable housing in the District and a reduction in the housing waiting list.

Emerging Priorities/Challenges for 2014/15

As the local government landscape continues to change rapidly, 'scrutiny' will need to be more adaptable than ever in order to maintain a robust check and balance on service delivery.

There continues to be many changes affecting services/issues within the Panel's terms of reference. These include developments in adult social care, troubled families, child poverty, welfare reform and the changing health agenda.

Ensuring that key council services such as crime and affordable housing meet the needs and expectations of residents will continue to be a priority for the Panel as the Council negotiates its way through the national period of financial difficulty.

The Panel will continue to ensure that the Panel's approach to scrutiny includes advice and information from partners and tenants, by engaging with them on a regular basis so that the "critical friend" relationship remains robust and challenging.

In setting its work programme for 2014/15 the Panel has identified the following key areas for review: -

- Anti-social behaviour
- Arson Crime
- Child poverty
- Welfare reform changes
- Housing development & acquisitions programme
- Supporting the Health & Wellbeing Board's work on dementia

Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel
(Responsibility for scrutiny of the following Portfolios:
Leader
Finance and Efficiency)

Main Reviews in 2013/14

Electoral Review

In February 2013 the Council requested a Task and Finish Group to investigate decreasing expenditure by reducing the number of councillors. The Task and Finish Group has met on a number of occasions throughout 2013/14. It was apparent early on that the Boundary Commission's own timetables (which indicated an 18 month process) made it impractical to attempt to complete a review in time for the 2015 elections, and that, if the matter went forward, any changes would not be introduced until after the 2019 elections. The Task and Finish Group have consulted all members of the Council twice on a number of options for change. Just over half of the Council had commented with a majority of members in favour of no change. The Group recommended that the Council should pursue a reduction in the number of councillors. The Panel however did not support the Group's recommendation and recommended to the Cabinet and the Council that a reduction not be pursued. The Cabinet has made a recommendation to the Council, which appears elsewhere on the Council agenda.

Localisation of Council Tax Support

The Panel has considered a revised Council Tax Reduction Scheme to take effect from April 2014, following recommendations from a Task and Finish Group. In the light of experience of the scheme's operation to date, the Task and Finish Group's proposal for 2014/15 was to cap reductions at Band D, reduce the savings limit from £16,000 to £6,000, and increase the minimum contribution from 8.5% to 10%. It was noted that for a couple on income support receiving £112.55 per week, this would mean their weekly Council Tax payment would rise from £1.60 to £1.88. These recommendations were approved by the Cabinet and the Council. The Task and Finish Group also considered the Discretionary Rate Relief policies but no changes to the actual policy were recommended.

The Council's Approach to Economic Growth (LEPs Task and Finish Group)

The Panel has considered a wide range of issues impacting on local economic activity. This was because of concern with the impact on local business of current economic conditions, and how the Government's growth agenda was impacting on the Council's finances. A briefing on economic growth and the Council's policies in helping local business was given to members on 21 October. This led to the establishment of a Task and Finish Group on Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). The Group has begun to review the needs of the District and the way in which they relate to LEP priorities. The priorities identified so far have a strong emphasis on economic growth, high value development in employment and transport as well as infrastructure and housing. The Group's final report will be brought to the Panel in the autumn.

Budget Task and Finish Group

The Budget Task and Finish Group met a number of times in 2013 to consider the budget for 2014/15 and beyond. The Group met with all Portfolio Holders and was pleased to see that Cabinet members had plans in place to meet the needs of services, balanced against pressure on

budgets. A number of issues were highlighted to the Cabinet for future monitoring, and the Group will meet again in June to review progress on these.

ICT Strategy 2014-2019

The Panel has considered a proposed ICT Strategy for 2014-19, which included details of the related investment programme and funding requirements. The report detailed expected outcomes, the current context within NFDC, the technology landscape, the work programme supporting the strategy, and the effective deployment of ICT. Members were advised that due to the steady and sustained investment in ICT over a long period of time, there were no significant gaps in the current ICT infrastructure. Cloud computing would be a new development, and the improvements to wireless cover at Council premises was a key part of a broader project to reduce procurement costs for computer equipment. This envisaged staff use of tablets and their own devices. The District Council was part of a private/public project aimed to provide at least 90% of Hampshire with fast broadband. ICT projects continued to be scrutinised by the 'Dragon's Den' ICT Investment Panel. The proposed strategy was recommended to Cabinet and was subsequently adopted.

Updates

The Panel has received updates on the introduction of Universal Credit and its implications for the Council. It has also:

- received a presentation on the Council's Workforce Strategy.
- considered a report on the annual performance and provisional budget out-turn for 2012/13 as part of its general remit to oversee the Council's finances corporately.
- monitored the project to deliver Broadband to the District, involving work with various organisations including HCC, the NPA and DEFRA.

Environment Overview & Scrutiny Panel
(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:
Environment & Planning & Transportation)

Main Reviews 2013/14

Parking

The Panel monitored the effect of changes to car parking arrangements in Lymington, following the decision to convert 47 long stay spaces at Cannon Street to short stay places. With the addition of 47 public long stay spaces, following office optimisation at Lymington Town Hall, there has been a successful increase in parking provision and turnover in the use of spaces in the town. Unfortunately it has not been possible to secure additional parking at weekends, on private car parks.

A task and finish group also undertook a detailed review to establish whether charges should be introduced for blue badge holders, who currently park in the Council's car parks free of charge. It was decided that, in the current economic climate, it would not be appropriate to change any of the current car parking charges.

Policy for the Provision of Sandbags

Following an extensive review by a task and finish group it has been decided that, while help will continue to be given to households and businesses facing exceptional incidents of flooding, those who are subject to regular danger from flooding should take more responsibility for the protection of their own properties. The availability of more effective and affordable equipment for flood protection for households and businesses, together with the potential danger to members of the public going to busy depots, during emergency conditions, to collect sandbags, are both key drivers to this change of policy, which will start to be implemented from this spring, to become fully operational next winter.

Money Issues around Planning

One of the issues that the Panel explored with the officers was the way in which a developer's ability to pay the financial contributions normally required to support development is assessed. Government policy and the difficult economic climate meant that, at one stage, many developers were claiming that their project would not be viable if required to pay, with the consequent lack of funding to this Council prejudicing key objectives such as the provision of affordable housing. The Panel was satisfied that the Council was rigorously assessing such claims, and only allowing those that were justified.

Another money matter around the development control function has been the introduction of charges for pre-application advice for planning applicants. The task and finish group that originally concluded that such charges should be introduced evaluated the outcome after a year of operation and was pleased to report that income was on target and the quality of developments was being maintained. The reduction in the number of requests for advice, following the introduction of charges, had also released staff resources to provide other functions.

Food Hygiene

A task and finish group appointed by the Panel had previously advocated the adoption of a food hygiene rating scheme for food premises in the District. This year the Panel was updated on the implementation of the Food Standards Agency's "Scores on the Doors" scheme, which is being rolled out across the District. The Panel was satisfied that the scheme was achieving its objectives of informing the public and allowing them to select the higher rated premises, encouraging businesses to improve their standards of hygiene.

Project Integra and Waste Management

In scrutinising how well Project Integra has been operating within this District, the Panel asked the new Head of Project Integra to attend their meeting in January to discuss progress with the implementation of the current action plan and proposed activities for the future. The Head of Project Integra has now been in post for a few months and the Panel was pleased to see that progress was being made in improving operational planning and performance measurement, and that a fresh look will be taken at the materials collected for recycling.

Alternative Fuelled Vehicles

A task and finish group has looked at whether there would be any benefits, environmental and economic, from using alternative fuelled vehicles within the Council's fleet. It has been concluded that the Council is currently using the best available technology, but that this topic should be revisited, as technology develops, to ensure that the best choices continue to be made.

Keyhaven River Mooring Agreements

A task and finish working group looked at a number of issues associated with the Council's moorings at Keyhaven. They recommended changes to the licence agreements, which will come into force from 1 April this year. Additional mooring places have been identified, which will increase the Council's income. The installation of CCTV coverage, to increase the security of the moored boats, in common with other marinas operating in this area, is being actively pursued.

Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management

This group was established to look at the implications for the management of this area's flood and coastal defences including the requirement to deliver partnership funding for schemes. The group has met twice so far and is considering the Council's possible approach to securing the necessary funding to enable essential coastal flood defence works to be undertaken in the future. This is particularly relevant following the recent adverse weather events.

Other Issues Considered:

The Panel has

- commented on the Enforcement Policy for planning matters
- kept in touch with progress on the Examination of the Local Plan Part 2 and Community Infrastructure Levy. These documents will be adopted shortly.
- commented on the Ringwood Local Distinctiveness Document prior to its adoption.
- monitored the joint working arrangements with the County Council on the delivery of the County's functions under the Flood and Water Management Act 2010.
- visited the Southampton Oceanographic Institute to look at the Council's role in coastal protection.
- supported proposed increases in the charges for cemeteries to ensure the Council did not attract undue custom from outside the District.
- established a task and finish group to evaluate the introduction of the kerbside collection of glass for recycling. The Group has monitored progress on the 3 phase implementation across the District and will report to the Panel in the summer.