

Annual Report of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels – 2014/15

Welcome to the Annual Scrutiny Report for 2014/15.

Against ongoing financial challenges, the overview and scrutiny panels and task and finish groups have continued with a robust programme of reviews. They have worked on a wide range of focussed and output - driven topics, helping the Council find efficiencies, keep pace with the demands of emerging legislation, and ensuring Council resources are put to best use.

The work has included inward facing tasks concerning the formulation of strategies and budgets, performance monitoring, reviewing processes, and identifying service efficiencies. Outwardly, it has looked at issues such as child poverty, crime and disorder and supporting local businesses, with engagement through mechanisms such as the armed forces covenant and the Local Enterprise Partnerships.

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

It is anticipated that the Council will continue to face significant financial challenges over the next few years. Thanks go to all those who have been involved in overview and scrutiny over the past 4 years of this administration - partners, the public, members and officers - for their hard work and enthusiasm, which has resulted in positive benefits to the operation of the Council and to local people.

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](http://www.newforest.gov.uk/Council%20and%20Democracy/Councillors,%20Democracy%20and%20Elections/Committee%20Documents).

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
Mrs M McLean
A D O'Sullivan
N S Penman
D J Russell

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
M D Southgate
M S Wade

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

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Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel –
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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 2014/15

Crime & Disorder

Members of the Safer New Forest Community Safety Partnership attended a meeting of the Panel to review 2014/15 performance. The Panel heard about the links between crime and wider social issues that affect community safety. They were pleased to hear that overall recorded crime has continued to fall. They questioned partners on how effectively local organisations are working together to address the links between some of the causes and reviewed the priorities being considered for the Community Safety Plan for 2014/15. The Panel identified a number of issues that they will be keen to follow up including arson crime, and victims and perpetrators of crime. These will be reflected in the Panel's work next year. The Panel continues to receive valuable updates from the Council's representative on the Hampshire Police and Crime Panel, on the work of the Crime Panel and the work of the Police & Crime Commissioner and feeds back any areas of concern through him to the Commissioner.

Children & Young People

The Panel established a Task & Finish Group to examine the levels of child poverty within the District and possible ways the Council could assist to mitigate the effects of child poverty. As part of its research the Task & Finish Group held a workshop session with external practitioners to help them understand the extent and types of child poverty in the District, the services being provided to assist families and young people and the ways in which the Council could improve its services to assist those stakeholders in improving the lives of vulnerable children living within the District. The Task & Finish Group made a number of recommendations to various Portfolio Holders including holding an annual Child Poverty seminar for external providers, which will be taken forward for action. Given the complexity of the subject matter, the Panel felt that the Task & Finish Group should reconvene after the elections in May to examine further issues relating to child poverty.

Community Alarms and Out of Hours

The Panel has kept a watching brief with the progress of combining of the CCTV and community alarm service. Regular updates have been given on the integration of the community alarms and out of hours functions into the CCTV control room, which had been initiated by the Panel's task and finish group. The Panel are pleased to report that the transition has been successfully completed despite challenges faced by staff in this process. The Panel were also pleased to note that the Out of Hours call handling service had been successfully brought back in-house. The year ahead would see a focus on exploiting the potential of the fully functional 24 hour control room and increasing the scope and responsibility of the business further, including partnership with other authorities where practicable and where capacity allowed. Despite the challenging transition and process of change, the CCTV and Community Alarms team had exceeded all expectations and the Panel looked forward to receiving updates on the future success of the team.

Affordable Housing and Housing Building Programme

The Panel has supported the Council's 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. The Panel was pleased to hear of the progress being made to increase Council housing stock and hopes that the momentum of pace with house purchases and new builds continues.

Nightstop Plus Task & Finish Group

Following the success of the Task & Finish Group last year in securing funding to pilot a 'Night Stop Plus' scheme, the Group have met to review the progress of this project and were pleased to note that the pilot will begin operation in April 2015. The 'Night Stop Plus' scheme will provide accommodation for older rough sleepers aged 24 years plus. Five hosts have been secured and are prepared to offer accommodation to those needing shelter. The Group will review the progress with the pilot in a few months' time and report back to the Panel.

Armed Forces Community Covenant Task & Finish Group

The Armed Forces Community Covenant has been in place since May 2013 following recommendation from the Armed Forces Community Covenant Task & Finish Group. The Armed Forces Community Covenant is a voluntary statement of mutual support between a civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community. The Task & Finish Group have met this year to review the progress with the covenant and were pleased to note that the covenant was working well. At this meeting the Group determined that in order to ensure that the Council was thoroughly committed to the covenant, an Armed Forces Champion be appointed. Cllr Beck has been appointed to this role and will report back to the Panel as and when necessary.

External Scrutiny

The Panel continues to value the input of key partners and Tenant Representatives as 'critical friends' in scrutinising the work of the Panel and the Council at large. The Tenant Representatives contribution to the work of the Panel is valued, not only by expressing views in debate and sitting on Task & Finish Groups, but also by presenting recommendations to the Panel. The Panel looks forward to continuing working with Tenant Representatives and welcomes great involvement from them.

Community Grants

For the first time, the Panel was engaged in the new approach undertaken by the Council in respect of Community Grants. The Panel reviewed the community grant applications received by the Health and Leisure Portfolio Holder and her initial assessment of each application. The proposed grants were supported. The Panel supported all grants as proposed by the Portfolio Holder. In considering the approach, the Panel expressed the view that the new process for allocating community grants worked well as it gave members the opportunity to express their views and comment before grants were allocated.

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

Main Reviews in 2014/15

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP's)

The LEP's Task and Finish Group was established to review what the needs were within the District and how these interlinked with the priorities and programmes of the respective LEPs, and with local networks.

The Group heard insightful and helpful presentations from Cllr Keith Mans of Hampshire County Council (who is a Board Member of both Solent LEP and Enterprise M3 LEP) and Derek Mather of Brockenhurst College (who was leading on two bids to the respective LEPs). Both presentations helped shape the Group's recommendations.

It was felt to be more effective to focus on particular aspects where there was a strong fit between the priorities of the LEPs and the potential benefit to business and communities in the District. There were other elements, where the Council and other agencies were currently active, that would also fit with the LEP agenda, principally the needs of small businesses; the advancement of superfast broadband and the development of skills in the care and hospitality sectors

After consideration of a schedule of key needs in the District and setting these against the priorities and programmes of the LEPs, the Group brought forward a number of key priorities as a focus for future work.

The Panel wished to encourage the use of New Forest Business Partnership and New Forest Tourism Association as the principal routes to encourage business engagement, including business representation on LEP boards.

The Leader of the Council felt that the approach would ensure the Council was well placed to secure optimum results from the LEPs, to the benefit of the local area. The future of the LEPs under the next Government was as yet unknown but it was likely that the opportunities for growth bids would continue and any transition to other arrangements would take some time to implement.

New Forest Business Partnership / Brand New Forest

The Panel received a report on the effectiveness of the New Forest Business Partnership (NFBP) and Brand New Forest (BNF) initiative.

The work programmes of NFBP and BNF were both vitally important in delivering the Council's commitment to supporting the local economy. The NFBP delivered the business-to-business elements of economic support, whilst BNF delivered the business-to-consumer element.

NFBP activities mainly targeted small businesses and NFDC's Employment and Tourism Team's support comprised mainly of the promotion and advertising, organising and sponsoring of events, and work on websites and publications. The initiatives were funded through NFBP member subscriptions.

Currently NFBP had 118 business members and, with an ongoing recruitment drive, hoped to double its membership over the next two years. A short term membership recruitment contractor had been appointed by the Partnership to promote membership. This year's BNF initiative had seen around 5,000 BNF cards now in circulation with 250 business offers. Card sales in 2015 had increased by 300% to date compared to 2014.

The Panel discussed the matter with Mr Rob Dewing, Chairman of New Forest Business Partnership, and Alison Smith, member of Brand New Forest initiative, who were both from the business community.

Mr Dewing felt the NFBP and BNF were a very important part of the local business landscape and the Council's support was very much appreciated. Mrs Smith, a local business owner, spoke in support of the Brand New Forest Card and the way in which it helped her business to succeed.

Mr Dewing was thanked for his work as Chairman of the NFBP over the past 5 years.

An update was received on progress with local Broadband provision and the way in which the Council had worked with providers and local organisations to identify and resolve gaps in provision.

The Panel also noted details of the LEADER Programme, which, with support from New Forest District Council and other partners, successfully submitted a bid for £1.43 million of funding from the EU's Rural Development LEADER Programme 2015 - 2020. This will be used to support the development of small businesses and not-for-profit groups in the rural parts of the New Forest and surrounding areas over the next 5 years.

The Panel suggested that all members be made aware of the good work being undertaken through the NFBP, the BNF initiative, and by the Council, and asked for a future report on the LEADER project. The Panel fully supported the ongoing approach with these initiatives and wished to emphasise the importance of a continued focus on job creation and opportunities, including apprenticeships.

Budget

The Budget Task and Finish Group met a number of times in 2014/15 to consider the budget for 2015/16 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.

Community Grants Process

The Panel has considered proposed changes to the current process for the awarding and scrutiny of annual revenue and capital grants as it appeared to restrict member involvement in the decision - making stage. Officers explained that the process had been varied over recent years and the intention now was to make it as transparent as possible, giving adequate opportunities for members to be involved, whilst being balanced against best use of time. The proposals would allow early involvement of members so that they could see and comment on applications.

Members generally felt the proposals represented a sound basis for future administration of grants, although some expressed the view that more might be done in terms of transparency and simplification of the forms for applicants. Application forms and supporting documentation would now be made available to all members on ForestNet, and members would be given an opportunity to comment. Members requested that they receive an email alert when this information was made available.

The Chairman felt the proposals facilitated a consistent corporate process for all Scrutiny Panels to follow when looking at their own portfolio grants.

Equalities and Diversity

The Panel received an update on developments since the report of the Equalities Task and Finish Group in September 2012. The Panel were reminded that, as a result of the work of the Task and Finish Group, a more streamlined approach to equalities had been achieved, involving a statement of commitment, and a review of the website content. It was noted that there had been 15,000 hits on the Council's equalities pages in the last two years. The Council also liaised with local interest groups on matters such as mobility, and provided translation of Council publications in different languages, and in braille. All staff had been encouraged to undertake an equalities e-learning module.

Council Tax Reductions and Discounts

The Panel considered proposed Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Council Tax Discounts for 2015/16. A Members' Task & Finish Group had carried out a comprehensive review following the first year of operation of the scheme in 2013/14 and recommended a number of changes, effective from 1 April 2014 which had been adopted. No changes were recommended to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Council Tax Discounts for 2015/16. The Cabinet endorsed this recommendation.

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

Main Reviews 2014/15

Car Park Ticket Machines

A task and finish working group worked closely with the officers to identify suppliers of replacement ticket machines for the Council's car parks, and in the evaluation of the products available on the market. After looking at the products available it became obvious that the market for providers of contactless technology was not sufficiently wide and it was consequently decided to delay the purchase for a year to allow this area of technology to develop properly so the Council could be more certain of a reliable product in the longer term.

Public Conveniences

A task and finish working group developed priorities for spending on public conveniences in the District having looked at the condition of each building and the usage levels. As a result, one convenience block, where there were severe antisocial behaviour problems, was identified for demolition and return to open space, another block recommended for transfer to the local council, and spending priorities assigned for replacement and refurbishment. The Panel was satisfied that the new modular design of conveniences was very cost effective both for refurbishment of existing buildings that sat well within the local environment, and for reducing the running costs of each building.

Tree Management Strategies

Following a detailed review process, through a task and finish working group, the Panel recommended the Cabinet to adopt a Corporate Tree Strategy and Tree Risk Management Strategy. The research which was carried out has established best practice and transferred that into the management of the Council's tree stock. The objective is to manage the Council's trees in a responsible and sustainable manner, to retain a diverse, healthy tree population into the future. The Strategy documents provide a guide to best practice for private landowners, and have also been brought to the attention of town and parish councils to assist in the management of their trees.

Other items 2014/15

Food Safety and Hygiene Service

The Panel reviewed the Council's performance in introducing the food hygiene rating scheme in the District and the effect that the scheme was having in improving hygiene standards amongst food providers. The Panel was pleased to find that all higher risk premises in the District had been evaluated and, overall, the proportion of premises achieving a standard of generally satisfactory or better is increasing (a rating of 3 or above) – from 86% to 92%. All ratings can be viewed by the public on the Food Standards Agency's website and by a mobile app. More businesses have been encouraged to display their rating stickers. The Council had also successfully bid for funding from the

FSA to provide a mentoring programme to improve hygiene standards at the 22 lowest rated takeaway businesses in the District.

Flood and Coastal Risk Management

A task and finish working group started to evaluate this very complicated area of work. With changes in government funding rules it is important that this Council takes a pro-active approach to ensure that the needs of the District continue to be met.

Home Energy Conservation Act – Progress

The Panel routinely screens the Council's biennial report to government on progress within the District on reducing carbon dioxide emissions and fuel poverty. The Council is performing well in tackling fuel poverty. National power generation trends have increased this District's carbon dioxide emissions, in common with the national trend, although per capita domestic emissions have remained relatively stable. New targets have been recommended through the Cabinet, to the Council.

Parking Service Performance

The Panel was updated on performance in the parking service and welcomed the continuing high level of compliance with the payment of parking charges. Currently only 0.5% of vehicles were parked without paying, possibly reflecting the high proportion of local people that use a parking clock.

Regional Coastal Monitoring

Having evaluated this Council's current leading role, both regionally and nationally, in coastal monitoring, the Panel recommended to the Cabinet, and consequently on to the Council, that this role should continue. The coastal monitoring team is based at the Southampton Oceanography Centre. The work was funded through the Environment Agency, with agreements in place between the participating local authorities that effectively safeguarded the Council's position as the body that took responsibility for the management of the finances. It is hoped that the current arrangements will be continued through new agreements to cover the period to 2021/22.

Waste Management

The Panel examined the Waste Management Strategy for the Council, before commending it to the Portfolio Holder for adoption. The Strategy is now more aligned to this Council's Corporate Plan, as well as the Project Integra Business Plan. The Panel took the opportunity to look at the Council's performance on waste minimisation and recycling – particularly the newly introduced kerbside glass collection service which has now been rolled out across the entire District. The Panel was satisfied that the Council was continuing to perform well, providing a good quality service to local residents, with Council policies managing to go against the national trend of increasing quantities of residual waste being produced.

In association with this work the Panel meets the Chief Executive Officer of Project Integra each year to discuss their performance in waste management across Hampshire County.