

Annual Report of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels – 2016/17

This Annual Report covers the work of the scrutiny panels between May 2016 and March 2017.

The Council has continued to face reductions in Central Government funding with growing demand for key council services. Scrutiny has been at the heart of finding new ways of working, not only internally but with external partners, to ensure that essential services that satisfy the needs of our residents are delivered.

All three of the Council's scrutiny panels have responded to the Council's priorities by focusing their work programmes on helping the Council find innovative ways of working, to find efficiencies in work processes and budgets. Recommendations are made to the appropriate Portfolio Holder or the Cabinet.

Task and Finish Groups continue to lead on undertaking in-depth reviews. All members of the Council have had the opportunity to get involved in this important work, not just those serving on the appointing panel, but also those with key interest or expertise in the particular subject. This allows all members to add value and input into the scrutiny process.

Moving forward, smaller budgets may create conditions where innovative ways of working will come to the fore. The scrutiny panels, in developing future work programmes, will need to focus on a range of issues relating to service delivery, as well as protecting existing revenue streams and identifying new areas to increase income.

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL
(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:
Environment and Planning & Transportation)

Main Reviews 2016/17

Car Park Ticket Machines

A task and finish group was appointed, previously, to evaluate options for replacement ticket machines for the Council's car parks. It was decided, following the initial stages of the procurement process, not to proceed as the technology for card based payments was evolving rapidly and there was not, at that stage, an established industry standard. The procurement was therefore put on hold for a year. The task and finish group was reconvened and developed a new scheme that will allow remote monitoring to provide for better maintenance, better data collection on ticket sales and better cash management. Of the 73 machines, 13 allow card payments. It is not possible to use card payment options in some areas as the 3G mobile phone service is inadequate. The Panel endorsed the Group's report and officers have now implemented the changes. New machines had been installed by the end of December 2016.

Cemeteries Regulations

The Panel established a task and finish group to work with the officers to progress a fundamental review of the Regulations that control the operation of the Council's cemeteries. The opportunity was also taken to update the registration scheme for Stonemasons and Monumental Masons who are authorised to work in the cemeteries. The revised Regulations, in addition to being very comprehensive, seek to be clear and readable, making it easier for bereaved families to understand what can and cannot be done. A number of outstanding issues have been addressed, such as updating the Council's practice in accordance with developing best practice and industry standards, including that young deceased people aged between 12 and 18 years will be classified as children and consequently subject to a lower burial charge. Recommendations will be made to the Cabinet on 5 April.

Coastal Funding Task and Finish Group

This group was established to evaluate options for achieving funding for coastal protection schemes in the District under the Government's new rules that require local funding sources. The group met a number of times in the early part of the year. Most recently they have received a briefing from the Manager at the Environment Agency who has special responsibility for this area of work, to explore best practice and interesting initiatives elsewhere.

The Council's Tree Management Strategy

The Panel reviewed the effectiveness of the Tree Management Strategy which was adopted in 2014. The strategy targeted resources on a risk assessed basis. With the use of modern technology, records were being accessed and updated on site, with the information gathered being used to generate the programme of works. The strategy had also allowed this Council to work jointly with Test Valley Borough Council for the contract for tree management. The new contract became effective on 1 January 2017. This new contract arrangement is very successful as the volume of work from the two Councils is sufficient to justify one of the major national companies maintaining a depot at Cadnam so they can respond effectively to the contract. The Council therefore has access to a wider range of heavy duty equipment to respond to emergencies, such as major storm damage. The strategy will be reviewed again in June 2017, with any comments being passed to the Portfolio Holder for consideration.

District Local Plan Review

The Panel has been kept informed of progress in developing proposals for inclusion in the District Local Plan Review. An initial consultation was held on potential options. The responses received have been analysed and researched to inform the choice of sites that will be included in the document that will be published for consultation prior to submission to the Secretary of State for consideration at an Examination in Public. It is now expected that the Cabinet will consider the Council's proposal document in September.

Household Waste Recycling Centres

The County Council's proposals to achieve significant savings against the budget for the operation of household waste recycling centres across the County had been a cause of significant concern, following the initial consultations. The Panel has assisted the Portfolio Holder in making detailed representations on the potential ill effects of any closure or reduction in opening hours in this District. Following a visit by Cllr Humby, the County's Portfolio Holder, it was announced that there would not be any closures, and indeed the opening hours at Efford would be extended to 6.00 p.m. to match the hours at other centres.

Project Integra

The Panel has undertaken its annual review of the performance of Project Integra, the partnership for waste management in Hampshire, in delivering its business and action plans in respect of waste disposal and recycling. The Panel was satisfied that the partnership was meeting the objectives in the action plan and was also planning for the future, aiming to increase the proportion of waste that was re-used or recycled; and also looking for ways to reduce the overall cost burden on the taxpayers of Hampshire. A proactive approach is being taken, based on a "whole system" approach to waste management being developed following research commissioned by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Chief Executives. The maintenance of the quality of the materials collected is important in retaining access to markets with good financial returns. One issue of immediate importance is the potential opportunities offered by the programmed refit of the Alton Materials Recycling Facility, which will define what materials can be recycled in the next 15 year period. Waste reduction is also a key focus, particularly with respect to reducing food wastage, with a number of initiatives, such as publishing recipes for using left over food, being used.

Planning Fees

A task and finish group has been established to market test the fees currently charged for non-statutory services, such as pre-application advice, and to make recommendations on potential additional sources of income.

Recycling Bring Banks in the District

The Panel supported the findings of a study into the future need for recycling bring sites across the District. Following the introduction of the kerbside collection of glass, the need for bring sites had considerably reduced. The analysis of the quantities of materials collected from each site and of the capabilities of the collection vehicles demonstrated that the number of sites could be reduced from over 100 to around 20, spread across the District. The collection arrangements should also be changed to improve efficiency. This rationalisation allows consideration to be given to increasing the range of materials that are collected, for example by running a trial of the introduction of Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment collection points.

The Panel suggested that there should be greater coverage than proposed in the rural areas in the north of the District and this was taken into account in the final proposals agreed by the Cabinet.

The review will achieve savings of around £140,000 per annum.

Totton Air Quality Management Area

The Panel has maintained a watching brief on air quality within the Air Quality Management Areas in the District. This year the decision was taken to revoke the Air Quality Management Area in Totton. This Area had been declared to address poor air quality caused by stationary traffic around the railway crossing in Junction Road in Totton. Since the Air Quality Management Area had been declared there had been no exceedances of the air quality standards and, in accordance with Government guidelines, the Cabinet was recommended to seek revocation. The Panel satisfied themselves that monitoring of air quality in that area would continue, to ensure that there is no deterioration.

Traffic Management, the Traffic Management Agency and Grass Cutting

The Panel have been kept informed on the progress of discussions with the County Council on future arrangements for traffic management in this area. Historically, this Council have undertaken certain functions on the County's behalf and have, in addition, supplemented the service from NFDC's own resources. The County Council undertook a review, in the light of the continuing pressures on them to achieve budget savings. Their final proposal was that some traffic management works would be taken back in house, with the payment to this Council reduced by about 40% from 2017/18 and 60% in 2018/19. One of the effects of the change was that only traffic management schemes that met the County's key objective of casualty reduction would be considered. The County have now agreed, following negotiations, that they will allow locally important schemes to be progressed, provided they are funded locally. This Council has agreed, in principle, to continue to supplement the budget, to allow some flexibility and control to be retained locally.

Negotiations are underway with the County Council to try to retain grass cutting and shrub maintenance, where again this Council supplements the County's normal maintenance regime to achieve standards that are more commensurate with the aspirations of local people and the image of this important tourism destination. The Panel will assess the outcome of these negotiations in due course.

Portfolio Holder reports

The Environment and the Planning and Transportation Portfolio Holders both attend the Panel's meetings on a regular basis and maintain a constructive dialogue on work in progress.

COMMUNITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL
(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:
Housing & Communities and Health & Leisure)

Main Reviews 2016/17

Community Grants

The Panel established a Task & Finish Group to review the process for awarding community grants, as well as examining applications for grants for 2017/18.

Over a series of three meetings the Group met with fourteen applicants seeking community grant aid funding from the Council. Members reviewed the current award process and eligibility criteria to ensure that the process was transparent and fair. The Group also examined how any funding support given would directly benefit residents of the New Forest and meet the Council's corporate priorities. The Group endeavoured throughout to balance the financial constraints of the Council against the needs of the voluntary groups and the good work they provided within the community. The Group made recommendations to the Cabinet on the allocation of community grants for 2017/18. These recommendations were taken forward by the Cabinet and agreed by the Council when setting the budget.

Dibden Golf Centre

A Task & Finish Group was established to review the performance of Mytime Active in their operation of Dibden Golf Centre. Mytime Active commenced management of the Centre on 1 April 2012 as part of a 30 year contract agreement with the Council. Part of the contract included provision for the first five years of rent to include fixed increments. The Group examined the performance of Mytime Active in order to assess the level of rent the Council should seek in the next five years, namely 2017-2021.

The Group has held three meetings to date, one of which took place at Dibden Golf Centre where members undertook a tour of the site and facilities. Members also held informal discussions with representatives of local golf clubs and some service users, and also received a presentation from representatives of Mytime Active.

The Group agreed to develop a closer working arrangement with Mytime Active to monitor and report back to the full Panel with regards to the investment programme for the next five years, given that Mytime Active has rescheduled the investment originally agreed.

The Task & Finish Group has come to a preliminary view regarding the future level of rent for the Centre, and is in the process of discussing this with Mytime Active board members. The Group hopes to submit a full report with recommendations to the May Panel meeting following these negotiations.

Legislative Changes

The Panel have received regular officer briefings on major legislative and proposed Government policy changes relating to housing and welfare.

The Panel has considered the impact of the Housing & Planning Act 2016 especially -

- 'Pay to stay': market rent for higher-income tenants
- Replacement of secure 'tenancies for life'
- Right to Buy and sale of higher-income assets

The Panel will continue to keep a watching brief on these issues most notably to advise the Portfolio Holder and the Cabinet on how changes might affect the interests of the Council and its tenants.

The Panel has also examined the Government's Housing White Paper "Fixing Our Broken Housing Market". This Paper proposes significant changes to planning and housing law in

order to implement a range of policies aimed at expanding the housing market and improving the affordability of homes.

The Panel has expressed a number of concerns regarding the Government's expectations in relation to increasing housing supply and the additional pressure this would place on local authorities. With the high cost of building and the increasing financial pressure being placed on Councils, largely through cuts in Government grant, the Panel is of the opinion that this Council would struggle to meet the Government's expectations, whilst addressing social housing needs within the District, and has requested that Portfolio Holders consider these comments in their response to the consultation.

Community Safety

In fulfilling its role as the statutory committee for scrutinising crime and disorder, the Panel reviewed the strategic assessment prepared by the Safer New Forest Strategy and Delivery Group. This assessed the Partnership's performance against the actions identified in the 2016/17 Partnership Plan. It also considered and supported draft actions for inclusion in the 2017/18 Partnership Plan.

The Panel continues to receive valuable updates from the Council's representative on the Hampshire Police and Crime Panel, on the work of that Panel and of the Police & Crime Commissioner.

Updates

The Panel has also received updates on: -

- Initial proposals for a review of the Council's health and leisure service and will consider this in greater detail at their meeting in May.
- The progress made against the recommendations of the CCTV Task & Finish Group in respect of the procurement arrangements for the transmission and maintenance contracts, and discussions with local town and parish councils with regard to their contributions to the cost of cameras in their area. The Panel will consider these issues further at their meeting in May.
- The Council's proposed strategy for future housing development and progress on the Council Housing Buy-Back & Development programme.
- Progress in implementing changes to the welfare benefits system and of universal credit.
- Progress against key actions and service reviews under the remit of the Panel.

External Scrutiny

The Panel continues to value the input of key partners, service users and Tenant Representatives as 'critical friends' in assisting the Panel in its work and the Council at large.

CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL
(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:
Leader and Finance & Efficiency)

Main Reviews 2016/17

Work Programme

The Panel's work programme has focussed on supporting local business, as well as encouraging changes in the delivery of Council services to a more business-led footing, and supporting new income generation initiatives, in the face of continuing government funding reductions.

Residential and Community Care in the New Forest

The Panel has considered the significance of the Care Sector in the New Forest district, the constraints it faced, and assessed where the Council could provide practical assistance and support. The residential care sector accounts for 4000 local jobs, equating to 5.8% of the New Forest workforce. The Panel agreed that the Council should use its existing relationships with local colleges, networks and care sector businesses to act as 'honest broker' to help ensure that businesses are accessing the full range of support available to them. Further work will be undertaken, including a facilitated meeting with sector representatives, to explore the potential for collaboration in sharing best practice amongst care sector businesses, and developing the skills of employees through training that is accessible to them. Updates will be brought to the Panel as necessary.

Hospitality Sector

The Panel has monitored progress on a programme of work identified by the Task and Finish group to assist the hospitality sector, through the New Forest Tourism Association and Hotel Group, Brockenhurst College and Bournemouth University.

Marine and Engineering Sector

In 2017/18 the Panel will be turning its attention to supporting and encouraging marine and engineering sector companies in the New Forest in exporting their goods and services.

Vibrant Towns and Villages

As part of the Panel's efforts to support local business and improve the vibrancy of towns and village centres, a series of town and village workshops were held in September and October to gain a better understanding of the issues impacting local retail centres and to identify ways in which these barriers could be overcome through collaborative working. A number of outcomes and recurring themes were identified including: town and village centre planning, identifying and sharing best practice, skills and digital training, innovation and transformation, Brand New Forest and broadband. The Council will assist partners in addressing these wherever possible.

Broadband Provision in the New Forest

The Panel will be holding a further session in May with BT Openreach and Hampshire County Council to review progress with Broadband provision in the District, in view of the importance of fast broadband to business and residential users. A toolkit developed with the help of the Council to assist rural communities to provide self-funded broadband projects was launched in 2016.

Commercial Property Investment

The Panel considered a proposed income generation strategy through commercial property investment, either for the purpose of economic development or regeneration within the District, or for the purpose of income generation for the provision of services, or a mixture of both. An indicative example given suggested that an investment of £25m funded by borrowing on a repayment basis may be required to achieve a net annual profit of £500k (after allowing for borrowing costs) based on a 6% gross target yield. Many other local authorities were now investing in this way and part of the exercise was to learn from other councils, which included a visit to Guilford Borough Council as well as contact with various others. The Panel supported the overall approach, which was later agreed in detail by the Cabinet, and the Panel will receive progress reports.

Review of Tourism Services

After careful consideration, the Panel considered and supported recommendations to the Cabinet on two aspects of the Council's tourism service – the Visitor Information Service (VIC) at Lyndhurst and the Tourism Association.

The Council felt that the tourism business sector should take responsibility for determining the way in which the New Forest is marketed and promoted as a destination to visitors for the benefit of business.

The Council will provide assistance to the Tourism Association in terms of the initial set up and for the first 3 years of the new arrangements. After this the Council would expect the Association or Company to be able to fully fund its activities. The new arrangement required the establishment of a new Company in order to carry out activities including receiving the transitional funding which the Council will make available from April 2017 until March 2020.

These two initiatives will reduce Council expenditure by approximately £160,000 per year.

Economic Development Team

The Panel has considered the future work and priorities of the NFDC's Economic Development Team (ED), and has made recommendations to the Cabinet.

The Council's objectives for the new ED team will be set out in a draft Strategic Economic Plan for the District, which will be shared with all partners. It will include support for the New Forest Business Partnership and expanded business sector engagement, the development of a New Forest Business First public sector partnership that maximises the benefits for local business, including external investment.

Budget Task and Finish Group

The Panel received the annual report of the Budget Task and Finish Group. The work of the Group included meetings with Portfolio Holders to scrutinise proposals and offer assurance on behalf of all Members of the Council.

The Group were pleased that a number of their last year's recommendations had been adopted and progressed. The Group were impressed at the clear shift of all Portfolios towards a more business-led approach and a strong theme of business development. The changes arising from corporate re-structuring and service reviews, both of which had delivered significant savings and which were ongoing, were supported. The Group encouraged the Cabinet to seek further opportunities for provision of services in collaboration with other authorities, as well as increasing income generation by offering the Council's services to other organisations, where practicable.

Customer Services Review Task and Finish Group

The Customer Services Review Task and Finish Group is overseeing work to transform the way customers access our services, through the better use of digital service delivery. The project is looking at increased efficiency of processes and improving the customer experience through website development, looking at top transactions and processes. The project will require investment. It is anticipated that the review will result in financial efficiencies. The Panel is being kept informed on progress.

ICT Strategy

The Panel received the new ICT Strategy for the next 12-18 months. The strategy covered measures to protect and maintain front-line services, wireless connectivity, collaboration with external organisations, proposed staff structure, the project's portfolio / asset renewal programme, operating model, and Members' ICT. The Panel was very supportive of the Strategy and asked for an annual update, with brief progress reports mid-year.

Performance Management

The Panel received a presentation on performance and productivity covering the Performance Management Framework, service performance, employee performance, and pay and performance.

Electoral Review Task and Finish Group

In response to a Council decision, the Panel has established an Electoral Review Task and Finish Group to make recommendations on whether the Council should request the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to undertake a review of NFDC with a view to reducing the number of members on the Council. The Group will meet again in the autumn, so that Local Plan projected population growth figures can be factored into the population of prospective wards for any potential schemes.

Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) Grant Task and Finish Group

The Panel has agreed to form a Task and Finish Group to review the future Relationship, as well as funding and other support and advice for the New Forest CAB. The Group will make recommendations for 2018/19.

Key Actions and Service Review Programme

The Panel has regularly received progress reports on the corporate service review programme for all portfolios. A recent report identified related savings totalling £446,000.

Promotion of Film and TV Production in the New Forest.

'Film:New Forest' (FNF), NFDC's partnership with Creative England to encourage filming in the area, has had a successful first year. Following a Task and Finish group recommendation to encourage filming in the Forest, and the signing of a 4 year partnership agreement with Creative England, related events have been held, including a crew evening involving 100 people from a number of organisations, as well as a Locations event to inform owners and land managers about the potential benefits and opportunities of working with television and film companies. FNF representatives were present at the Film Expo South event to publicise the Forest as a film venue. There is some evidence that the project may already have led to significant investment from the sector. The Panel will be kept informed of progress.

Other Matters Considered

- Housing White Paper
- Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2017/18
- Asset Maintenance and Replacement Programme
- Financial Updates