

## **Annual Report of the Overview & Scrutiny Panels – 2017/18**

This Annual Report covers the work of the scrutiny panels between May 2017 and March 2018.

The last 12 months have proved to be yet another challenging year financially for the Council. However the Council continues to rise to these challenges by continuously reviewing the way in which it provides its services, to ensure that residents receive value for money. The Panels have continued to examine expenditure and processes through its Task & Finish Groups, particularly through the work of the Budget Task & Finish Group. That Group has made positive contributions by suggesting changes and more efficient delivery of Council's services, resulting in demonstrable savings.

The Panels have adjusted their remits following the change by the Leader of the Council to the number and content of Cabinet Portfolios. They have been involved in action planning following the Peer Review recommendations, and have played a significant role in promoting an electoral review with the aim of reducing the number of members on the Council. In addition, the Panels have assisted the Council to respond to the introduction of key legislation such as the Homelessness Reduction Act which has significantly altered the Council's statutory responsibilities and duties.

Issues which have had a major effect include: -

- The Peer Review – following the review in October, the Council received feedback with 8 key recommendations. Following input from all three Panels, the Council has developed an action plan to address the recommendations raised in the report.
- The changes in the Cabinet – the Leader of the Council increased the number and content of the Cabinet (from 6 to 8). The Scrutiny Panels have therefore seen a change in the Portfolio Holders relating to their Panels. The Portfolio Holders remain engaged with their Panels, continue to provide regular updates and are clear and transparent (through prior consultation) in their decision making.
- The proposal to reduce the size of the Council from 60 members to 48 was approved by the Council at the beginning of 2018, following a number of meetings of a Task and Finish Group reporting to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England will now schedule a review, but any changes arising from that review won't take effect until the quadrennial District Council elections in 2023. However, it is envisaged that the Panels will be involved in the work that will be needed to put forward a new pattern of wards to take account of the proposed reduction in the number of Councillors.

The way in which the Council (members and officers) utilize technology in their service delivery will be at the forefront of a culture change that will aid the efficient delivery of services. Scrutiny Panel members will help to ensure that changes do not impact on the quality of service provision.

The ongoing need to identify and implement efficiencies is likely to see increased workloads for the Panels, which remain committed to ensuring that the Council and its residents have confidence that the limited resources available are directed to the most important priorities.

## **ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

**(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:  
Environment and Planning & Transportation)**

### **Main Reviews 2017/18**

#### **Coastal Defence Work**

The Coastal Defence Task and Finish Group has continued to explore options for securing funding for future coastal defence work in the District. The main focus so far has been on learning from experience elsewhere, drawing particularly on the experience of the Environment Agency and also the Coastal Partnership East.

#### **Planning Fees and Charges**

A task and finish group reviewed the charges for non-statutory services, to make sure that they were achieving cost recovery, where this was appropriate, and also looking for any additional fees that could be introduced to raise income. The planning fees had been subject to inflation-linked price increases since their introduction in 2012 and were due for a more rigorous review. The Panel commended the Group's recommendations to the Portfolio Holder and the Planning Development Control Committee for adoption. In future, the fees will be set on a full cost-recovery basis on all services.

The Task and Finish Group also recommended some changes to the Council's web pages to achieve greater clarity for users of the service.

#### **Public Conveniences**

A task and finish group assessed the condition of a number of public conveniences across the District and made a number of recommendations on the priorities for refurbishment and replacement over the next years. These priorities were adopted by the Panel and commended to the Portfolio Holder. The Panel also supported the Group's recommendation that the possibility of closing the public conveniences at New Street, Lymington should be explored, as should the possible return of the conveniences at Eling Recreation Ground to Totton and Eling Town Council.

#### **Other Items**

##### **Air Quality**

The Panel has been kept updated on various developments with respect to air quality. Firstly, the national context has changed with the publication of the Air Quality Strategy and the UK Plan for Tackling Roadside Nitrogen Dioxide Concentrations in July 2017. This imposes additional responsibilities with respect to air quality in the District, and the Panel has been kept informed as officers' understanding of the implications has developed.

An associated topic is the work to introduce a clean air zone in Southampton, which will affect a small part of this District along the A35 up to the boundary with Southampton. This Council has been working closely with Southampton City Council, which will be publishing key documents over the next few months. This remains a significant area of interest for the Panel. The Portfolio Holder appointed a member advisory group to assist in the development of the outline business case for submission to the Government. The membership of the group is the local ward councillors (Cllrs L Harris and Harrison); Cllrs Bennison and Glass from the Panel; and Cllr Beck from the wider Council. The outline business case had to be submitted by the end of March.

##### **Enforcement Activity (Street Scene)**

The Panel was briefed on changes to the officer structure to create an Enforcement Team that had a wider range of responsibilities, with each officer trained to offer a greater degree of cover over a range of key enforcement functions.

##### **Corporate Tree Strategy and Tree Risk Management Strategy**

The Panel reviewed the effectiveness of these two Strategies, which were adopted in 2014. The Panel was pleased to note that the two documents had streamlined the Council's programming of work and response to one-off incidents. The Panel was also pleased to

note that the contract for works to the Council's trees, which was run jointly with Test Valley Borough Council, was operating smoothly and effectively.

### **New Forest District Local Plan**

The Panel has maintained a watching brief, throughout the year, on progress in developing the Local Plan to go out to public consultation.

### **New Forest Spring Clean**

The Panel was advised of the action being taken by this Council to support community led "Spring Clean" litter picking events across the District. Unfortunately, the very severe weather over the weekend of 3-4 March affected all but one of the Spring Clean events scheduled for that weekend, but it is hoped that these will be rescheduled. In all, 27 events have been arranged, with this Council providing advice and technical input, equipment and collecting the sacks of litter.

### **Pest Control Service**

The Panel has been briefed on work on the charging structure for the pest control service to try to bring its operation onto a cost recovery basis. Benchmarking has established that this Council's charges are 85% less than other local authorities in the area and 300% less than the private sector. Charges will be increased over the coming 2 years to bring this Council more in line with neighbouring authorities.

### **Project Integra**

The Panel received its annual update on performance by Project Integra and was briefed on future developments that would affect the refuse and recycling collection activities.

The Panel also considered the Project Integra Action Plan to cover the next 3 year period and have commended it to the Portfolio Holder for approval.

### **Textile Bring Banks**

The Panel was briefed on the action being taken to maximise the returns to this Council from textile bring banks situated on council-owned land, such as car parks. It is intended that income from this source will, in future, be directed towards wider community benefit through the community grants process.

### **Traffic Management Programme 2018/19**

The Panel reviewed the proposed programme for the coming year and commended it to the Portfolio Holder for approval. The scope of works that can be carried out is now severely limited by the County Council's criteria which effectively constrain projects to those that achieve casualty reduction.

## **COMMUNITY OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL**

**(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:**

**Housing Services, Leisure and Wellbeing and Community Affairs)**

### **Main Reviews 2017/18**

#### **Community Grants**

The Council received 23 applications (up from 17 last year) for Community Grant aid support during August – October 2017. In following the adopted practice for reviewing applications, the Task & Finish Group reviewed each application against the Council's adopted community grants eligibility criteria. The Group determined that three of the applications did not meet the criteria for varying reasons. In total 19 applicants were invited to give a presentation to the Group outlining their grant request. In determining each funding request, in addition to referring to the eligibility criteria, the Group assessed each application against the Council's Corporate Plan priorities, the value for money being offered and how projects would directly benefit residents of the District. The Group then made recommendations to the Panel and to the Cabinet on the allocation of grants for 2018/19. These recommendations were taken forward by the Cabinet and agreed by the Council when setting the budget.

#### **Dibden Golf Centre**

The Task & Finish Group, after a series of meetings with representatives of Mytime Active, and site visits to the Centre, proposed a rent increase over the next five year period as well as a five year investment programme. This recommendation was agreed by the Panel and subsequently by the Cabinet. In addition, the Chairman of the Task & Finish Group now meets Mytime Active on a quarterly basis, to monitor progress against the agreed investment programme. The Chairman of the Task & Finish Group has held one monitoring meeting and reported back to the Panel on the progress of the investment programme and the performance of Mytime Active at the Centre. The Task & Finish Group will remain a Standing Group for the Panel, and meet biannually to ensure that targets against the investment programme are met in order to safeguard the Centre which is an important asset to the Council.

#### **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 2017/18 Partnership Plan. In addition, the Panel supported the actions set out in the draft 2018/19 Partnership Plan.

#### **New Financial Assistance Policy (Disabled Facilities Grants & Home Repair Loans)**

The Panel considered proposed changes to the Council's Housing Financial Assistance Policy for disabled adaptations via the Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) and essential repairs for vulnerable homeowners via Home Repair Loans (HRLs). A Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) was a means-tested grant that helped disabled persons to adapt their homes to meet their needs.

Additional money from the Government's Better Care Fund, together with increased HRA funding for District tenants, had provided the Council with greater scope and flexibility to undertake improvements to the homes of the District's disabled residents. The changes to the new policy reflected this greater flexibility. The Panel strongly supported the changes to the policy to provide greater assistance to the Council's most vulnerable disabled residents to access the support needed to remain in their homes.

## **Other Items**

The Panel has also received updates on: -

- Progress on the CCTV Task & Finish Group recommendations relating to the financing of CCTV cameras in the District.
- Health and Well-being schemes within the District.
- The Panel received a presentation on the facilities development at St Barbes Museum.
- Potential impact of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the review of key housing strategic documents.
- Progress in implementing universal credit in the District.
- The formulation of the proposed housing strategy.
- Regular updates from Portfolio Holders.

The Panel has also recently established two new Task & Finish Groups: -

Community Grants – the Group was established to examine the Council's current community grant process for the allocation of annual grant funds. The Group will review the current eligibility criteria and councillors' community grants award.

Health & Leisure – the Group was established to examine options for the future delivery of the Council's health and leisure provision.

## **CORPORATE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL**

(Responsible for scrutiny of the following portfolios:

**Leader & Corporate Affairs, Finance, Corporate Services & Improvement and Local Economic Development, Property & Innovation.)**

### **Main Reviews 2017/18**

#### **Budget**

The Panel considered the recommendations of the Budget Task and Finish Group, which noted good progress on some of last year's recommendations, but emphasised the need for action on reducing expenditure and pursuing transformative initiatives, with the minimum of delay. The main recommendations concerned Leisure Centre provision, work on Homelessness, partnership / collaborations, waste management, pensions costs, and smarter working.

#### **Property Investment Strategy**

The Panel has monitored the introduction of two investment strategies, commercial and residential. In respect of the Commercial Property Investment Strategy, the Panel was pleased to note the recent purchase of a health centre in New Milton at a cost of £2.1m, yielding £137k per annum in rent. A Residential Property Investment Strategy has also been agreed recently, providing opportunities for purchasing or developing properties for rent under a range of different tenures. Implementation of the Residential Property Investment Strategy will require incorporation of a Council controlled company, which would provide regular reports to the Panel.

#### **Economic Development Strategy**

The Panel has agreed to set up a Task and Finish Group to oversee the finalisation of the Economic Development Strategy before its publication.

#### **Electoral Review**

The Panel has recommended that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England be requested to undertake a review of the electoral arrangements in New Forest District Council, with a view to reducing the number of Members on the Council from 60 to approximately 48. There was insufficient time for implementation by the next election in 2019, meaning that any changes will not have effect until 2023.

#### **Citizens' Advice New Forest (CANF) - Review of Grant**

The Panel considered the recommendations of the Citizens' Advice New Forest (CANF) Task and Finish Group. The Panel recommended that the grant be set at £255,000 for 2018/19, but with the expectation of agreed grant reductions from efficiencies on office accommodation and new operating models in future years.

#### **Democratic Engagement**

The Panel has established a Task and Finish Group to review the current decision-making arrangements (insofar as is permissible by law) to seek to improve community access to and involvement in the democratic process.

#### **Customer Services**

Members received an update on progress with the customer strategy. A lot of work was being undertaken in the background to improve customer transactions, technology and workflow. The ICT infrastructure was being upgraded and related resources being brought forward to improve new ways of working.

#### **Council Tax Reduction Scheme**

The Panel considered the proposed Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2018/19 as recommended by the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Task and Finish Group.

## **Other Items**

### **Broadband Provision in the New Forest**

The Panel received a progress report on the provision of broadband in the New Forest, including input from representatives of Hampshire County Council and British Telecom, and parish council representatives.

Although much of the Forest now had access to broadband of at least 2mb per second, this was considered the bare minimum, as Superfast Broadband was deemed to be 24 mb per second and this too had yet to be satisfactorily provided in the area. Parish council representatives expressed concerns about prolonged delays with provision, while recognising that there were particular challenges for the New Forest, due to its rural nature, complex land ownership issues, and the constraints within a National Park Authority.

The Economic Development Team will continue to work with communities in delivering their own schemes, and to help partner agencies resolve issues on obtaining local permissions connected with provision. A further Panel update is planned for later this year.

### **Budget Performance, Key Actions and Service Review Programmes**

The Panel has monitored the annual performance and provisional budget outturns in the context of forecasted funding reductions. It also noted key delivery actions and a summary of the completed service reviews and related ongoing savings.

### **Procurement**

The Panel received a presentation on transformation of the Procurement function by implementing a “centre led” procurement organisation, together with related processes within the District Council.

### **ICT Strategy Update**

The Panel received a presentation from the Service Manager (ICT) on the ICT Strategy. The main goals of the current strategy (2017-2018) are to fix the worst legacy problems and to enable flexible and mobile working by staff (‘smarter working’). This is making good progress with many interim steps taken to stabilise and secure service delivery, and large projects have started to replace the aged ICT infrastructure and most problematic applications. In addition, projects are enabling NFDC staff to work in a more flexible and mobile manner. The next ICT strategy, to run from 2019 to 2022, is now in its formative stages.

### **Film New Forest - Progress Update**

The Panel received a report on the progress of Film New Forest as well as future development of the initiative. Financial gain across the Forest was estimated at £45,000 per day when filming. Support for the Film New Forest Project would be maintained in order that the progress made to date may be built upon and further sector related benefit brought to local businesses.

### **National Farmers' Union Presentation (NFU) - Agricultural Industry in the New Forest**

The Panel received a presentation from an NFU representative on New Forest farming and the implications of Brexit. The Common Agricultural Policy provided affordable food and income support for farmers, as a large part of their income was from EU subsidies. Reliance on imports jeopardised food security for the UK and as such it was a strategic industry. The shortage of seasonal labour was a concern. The LEADER Project was appreciated by the farming industry locally and the Council was encouraged to continue to support it.

The Panel felt it was important for the Council to do all it could to support the farming industry, assisting with raising awareness on where food came from and what farmers did, and to give public relations drive to illustrate the need for farmers, for food and for land management.