

Report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee		Report No.12
Date of Meeting	22 nd November 2007	
Title of Report	Overview & Scrutiny Interim Report	
Link to Corporate Priorities	None specifically, but the work of Overview & Scrutiny links to all	
Public Report	Yes	

Summary of Report

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is required to produce an annual report to full Council on their workings, recommendations for future work programmes and amended working methods.

The purpose of this interim report, is to allow the Committee to reflect on the last 6 months.

Recommendations

The Committee is asked to consider whether it wishes to add any conclusions at Section 6 of the Report and to approve the interim report.

Other than those implications agreed with the relevant Officers and referred to below, there are no other implications associated with this report.

Financial Implications	Legal Implications	Community & Environmental Implications	Human Resources Implications	Equality & Diversity Implications
None	None	None	None	None
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1. Meetings

The Committee met 5 times. There are 11 members of the Committee. Appendix 1 sets out committee members attendance at the meetings and the substitutes who attended.

The Committee has set up three Task Groups:

- Housing Advice (Chair : Cllr Rachel Cinnamond)
- Household Waste Collection (Chair : Cllr Alan Hill)
- Rural Unitary (Chair : Cllr Chris Caswill)

These Groups met 5, 6 and 3 times respectively. Appendix 2 sets out the Membership of the Task Groups.

2. Work Programme

Overview and Scrutiny is generally recognised to have four rather distinct responsibilities (The development of Overview & Scrutiny in Local Government – INLOGOV Research Summary – ODPM 2002).

The Committee's work over its first 6 months can usefully be described under these headings:

a) Holding the Executive to Account :

- The Portfolio Holder for Waste and Sustainability, Cllr Sturgle, attended a meeting to explain the Executive's policies on **Environmental Issues**, climate change and waste. Recommendations were made.
- A decision to dispose of **land at Bristol Road in Chippenham** was called in and discussed with Cllr Tonge, as the Portfolio Holder for Assets, and senior officers. Some changes to the detail of the decision were recommended, and accepted by the Executive.

b) Performance and Policy Review :

- The Committee took an early decision to concentrate on a small number of indicators and reports, for example the Corporate Plan Progress Update and Poorly Performing Performance Indicators. From the reports received over the 6 months, it reviewed a small number of areas of the Council's work where prima facie evidence of concern emerged from these reports:
 - **Cleaner, Safer, Better Streets**
 - **Recycling Rates**
 - **Residents' Parking**
 - **Staff Sickness**
- Members of the public came to meeting to ask questions about the background to the Development Control (DC) Committee's award of retrospective planning permission for the Linden Homes flats in **Cocklebury Road**. This was discussed by the Committee at two meetings, leading to a recommendation to the DC Committee that a new procedure be adopted for handling submission of drawings by applicants after a plan had been approved by the Committee, or by officers on their behalf. Responses were also provided by officers to the questions asked by the residents.

The Housing Advice Task group will also contribute under this heading.

c) Policy Development :

- A report was presented to the Committee on Council Involvement in Health Issues, which had been held over from the previous administration period. The Committee made a number of recommendations to the Executive, aimed at strengthening the Council's Involvement with **Health** service issues. Given the high public interest in health services in the North Wilts area, the Committee recommended that some staff resources be earmarked for tracking and reporting on health issues.
- The Committee asked for early sight of the officers' draft **Youth Strategy**, and made a number of observations which it wanted to be passed on to officers and the Portfolio Holder.
- At its first meeting the Committee identified **Planning Enforcement** as an issue of great importance to local residents and officers made a presentation to the June meeting. After that discussion, officers developed a new draft Enforcement Policy, which was supported by the Committee at its October meeting. A small number of suggestions were also agreed, to be included in the recommendations to the DC Committee.

The Task Groups on Household Waste and Rural Unitary are also expected to make significant contributions to policy development, particularly to the unitary transition authority and beyond.

d) External Scrutiny :

The Committee has not so far undertaken any scrutiny of external bodies or activities. Engagement of work of this kind has been restricted by the realities of member and staff resources and by the initial uncertainty about the transition to a unitary authority, and its timing. However it will begin to engage in this way through the work of the Rural Unitary Task Group.

3. Process

Coming together for the first time in May, the Committee has taken a fresh look at its procedures and processes. It has introduced a number of innovations, for example:

- Agreeing on a set of criteria for identifying topics for review (attached at Appendix 3).
- Including an Action Report on the agenda of each meeting, to allow tracking of work and outcomes, and to provide building blocks for six monthly and annual reports.
- Ensuring that Portfolio Holders and officers are offered advance notice of the issues which the Committee wished to discuss with them.
- Moving the meeting start time till 7pm to allow fuller participation of members with full time jobs.
- Asking the Leader and Chief Executive for a budget and specific allocation of staff time and support resources. The latter was agreed.
- Agreeing a new 'light touch' process by which small task and finish teams can be established in areas where Committee members have an interest but where a

formal Task Group is not appropriate – and getting new supporting procedures for this approved by Council.

Looking to the immediate future, work is underway to improve the materials for publicising the Committee's work, in accordance with national good practice, and with the purpose of improving the communication of the O&S role to members, staff, stakeholders and the public. Similar work has just begun to make better use of the Council web site. The Committee will also discuss an overall communications plan.

4. Outcomes

The positive outcomes from this first six month period can be summarised as:

- ✓ Improving the Executive's decision on disposal of the Bristol Road land to Chippenham Football Club.
- ✓ Facilitating the development of a new Council policy on Planning Enforcement.
- ✓ Getting Health established as a specific portfolio holder responsibility.
- ✓ The Committee has established a Task Group on Household Waste, in collaboration with the Portfolio Holder, who has supported it with additional resources. The work of this Task Group is of central relevance not only to this Council but to the new unitary authority.
- ✓ Similarly the setting up of a Rural Unitary Task Group has been welcomed outside North Wiltshire, and the evidence it collects about other large rural unitary authorities should feed directly into policy debates within the transitional authority and beyond.
- ✓ Keeping a number of less well performing areas of the Council's work under the spotlight, most of which are now on course for major improvement.
- ✓ Making a proposal for an improvement in the way developers' plans are handled in the planning process.
- ✓ The Committee was able to connect to an issue of concern to members of the public and provide them with an opportunity to make their case.
- ✓ Introducing several improvements in the Committee's own ways of working.
- ✓ Securing some earmarking of staff resources and support, and the agreement that up to four O&S Task Groups can be operational at any one time.
- ✓ Introduction of this six-monthly process of review and reflection.

There were also a number of lessons to be learnt and cases where the Committee was not able to make the desired progress:

- The case for more focused attention on health service issues, both by the Executive and within the Council staff, was not made as strongly as it could have been and the Executive did not accept it.
- The Committee's input on the youth strategy was hampered by the non-appearance of the report's authors and the Committee did not in the event make any very substantive suggestions for improvement.
- The Committee asked a number of questions on the Council's environmental policies but did not in the end make any substantive suggestions for improvement.
- It was not possible to reach agreement on the scope for improvement of the handling of large scale planning applications, and the Committee changed its mind about enquiring into this issue from one meeting to another, leading to some public dissatisfaction.
- The Committee has not yet been able to persuade the Executive to allocate a budget for O&S work.

5. Issues for the next six months

The Committee's Housing Advice Task Group is due to report at the next meeting and the Committee will at that point consider if it wishes to establish one or two new inquiries.

Other challenges will include :

- Choosing topics for review which meet the agreed criteria
- The possibility of undertaking external review, connecting to the increased emphasis on partnership working.
- Balancing in-depth enquiries with performance overview.
- Working alongside the new transitional scrutiny group, taking advantage of the presence on the that group of the Committee's Chair (as the North Wilts representative).
- Handling with the workload, within the constraints of limits on members' time and supporting resources.
- Considering and taking forward the reports of the remaining two current Task Groups.
- Engaging with other non-Executive Councillors.
- Publication and communication outside the Council.

6. Concluding Comments

Appendices:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appendix 1 – Attendance at Overview & Scrutiny Meetings• Appendix 2 – Task Group Membership• Appendix 3 – Criteria for Agreeing Overview & Scrutiny Topics
Background Documents Used in the Preparation of this Report:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The development of Overview & Scrutiny in Local Government, INLOGOV Research Summary, ODPM 2002.• Minutes of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee from the meetings held on 24th May, 21st June, 19th July, 13th September and 23rd October 2007.

Previous Decisions Connected with this Report

Report	Committee & Date	Minute Reference
None	N/a	N/a