



South Derbyshire

District Council

1. Background

1.1 Purpose of the Report

This is the eleventh Annual Report to Council from Overview and Scrutiny, as required by Article 6 of the Council's Constitution.

The report outlines how the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has discharged its functions during the municipal year 2011/12 and details the current position and outcomes of its activities.

1.2 Composition of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Committee has eight Members, being four Members of the Conservative Group and four Members of the Labour Group in accordance with the political balance of the Council. For 2011/12, the following Members were appointed to the Committee:-

Conservative Group

Councillor Mrs. Plenderleith (Chairman), Councillor Atkin (Vice-Chairman) and Councillors Mrs. Hood* and Mrs. Patten.

Labour Group

Councillors Bambrick, Bell, Mrs. Mead and Pearson.

*Councillor Mrs. Hood replaced Councillor Mrs Brown as a Member of the Committee in October 2011.

1.3 Main Purposes of Committee

The main purposes of the Committee are as follows:-

- (a) Make reports and/or recommendations to Full Council, Policy Committees or Area Forums in connection with the formulation of Policy and the discharge of any functions.
- (b) Consider any matter affecting the District or its inhabitants.
- (c) Review and/or scrutinise decisions made or actions taken in connection with the discharge of any of the Council's functions.
- (d) Exercise the Call-In procedure in respect of decisions made, but not yet implemented, by any Policy Committee or Area Forum.
- (e) Oversee the Best Value process and report findings to the relevant Policy Committee.



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1.4 Officer Support

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is supported by three Heads of Service and the Principal Democratic Services Officer. Other Officers attend meetings to contribute to specific reviews.

1.5 Meetings

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee usually meets every six weeks, on Wednesday evenings at the Council's Civic Offices, although some meetings are held in other venues related to the review area being discussed. Meetings are held in Open session, unless there are Exempt items for consideration. Additional task groups and special meetings have taken place for certain review areas.

1.6 Call-In of Policy Committee Decisions

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has the power to determine 'call-in' requests of any policy committee decision made but not implemented. During 2011/12, no policy committee decisions were 'called-in'.

2. Specific Areas of Activity and Achievements

2.1 Scrutiny Focus Sessions

The Committee held two 'Focus Sessions' in June 2011 and March 2012. The June event included an induction for new Members after the District Council Elections in May 2011. Consideration was given to the Work Programme for 2011/12, including new review areas proposed by Members. The Committee discussed publicity and consultation arrangements, together with the required scrutiny areas. An update was provided on the then Localism Bill and a proposal was considered to bring forward the process for compiling the Annual Work Programme. This led to a further Focus Session being arranged in March 2012 to consider reviews for the 2012/13 Work Programme.

2.2 Broadband

This successful review area continued into this municipal year. The activity included updates on the earlier partnership bids. New funding was available from the Government via Broadband Delivery UK, working with Derbyshire County Council on a local broadband plan and considering funding bids, to bring super-fast broadband to all parts of the United Kingdom.

2.3 Regulation Of Investigatory Powers Act 2000

The Committee has a function to monitor the use of covert surveillance techniques. A detailed report was considered in September, following an inspection by the Office of Surveillance Commissioners. Members gave approval to the Council's Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 Policy and Guidance Document and noted the Council's use of this legislation since October 2010. Further monitoring reports were presented each quarter, although it is evident that use of these powers has decreased significantly.



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2.4 Task Group Working

The Committee appointed task groups for review areas on Mobile Telephone coverage, Early Years' Provision in South Derbyshire and for a review of the Grounds Maintenance Service. This increased working capacity with periodic reports to the full Committee. The Task Group on mobile telephone coverage met on two occasions and resulted in a recommendation to the Environmental and Development Services Committee for training to be provided to all Members of the Council on Mobile Telephone Mast applications. This recommendation was accepted and the training provided.

The review of Early Years' Provision was progressed by the lead Member, who had originally proposed this review area. He met with Officers from this authority and Derbyshire County Council, to gather further information and provided periodic reports back to the Full Committee.

Three non-Members of the Committee proposed a review of performance and value for money relating to the Grounds Maintenance Service. A two Member task group was appointed, and held an initial meeting in Mid-February. The group sought to gather general observations from all District Members and parish councils on this wide-ranging service, which includes the maintenance of parks and open spaces, highway verges and hedges, together with grass cutting in residential areas. This review area continues and will be taken forward into the 2012/13 programme.

2.5 Reimbursement of Housing Benefit Subsidy

This review area was originally proposed as an outcome of the previous year's budget scrutiny work. As this was a broad service area, the review was focussed on the amount of housing subsidy due to the Council in respect of homeless persons, vulnerable groups in supported accommodation and to support the administration of housing benefits. Initially background was provided on the current shortfall being met by the Council, where Housing Benefit payments to individuals were not fully reimbursed by the Department for Work and Pensions. Options were explored to address the situation.

A further report was considered at the March meeting. This concerned housing benefit costs relating to accommodating homeless applicants in temporary accommodation and whether these costs could be reduced, whilst still maintaining an effective service. It was agreed that Officers seek to negotiate a reduced bed and breakfast rate for accommodating homeless applicants, utilising the threshold of a guaranteed number of clients. It was also agreed to explore further the option of partnering with a local bed and breakfast organisation, which may incur some capital costs, but would potentially reduce ongoing revenue costs. This review was carried forward to the 2012/13 work programme, with a further report due to be submitted to the Committee's Meeting in October.



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2.6 Empty Properties

This review area was also proposed as an outcome of the previous year's budget scrutiny work. It sought to identify the extent of empty properties across the District and to assist the Council to maximise income calculated through the 'New Homes Bonus', which potentially equated to £180,000. Other aspects considered in a presentation to Members were encouraging owners to bring empty properties back into use and the growing housing waiting list. After Scrutiny's consideration, a draft Empty Property Strategy was submitted to the Policy Committee.

2.7 Funded Voluntary Organisations

This comprehensive review area started in the previous year, with the Committee agreeing to receive presentations from the Funded Voluntary Organisations, to demonstrate the value provided to South Derbyshire residents. Detailed presentations were made over a number of meetings by Peoples Express, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the Council for Voluntary Services and Sharpes Pottery. An additional meeting of the Committee was arranged to receive reports on the bodies that received lower levels of funding from the Council. This review area provided a valuable insight into the work that is undertaken by voluntary organisations within South Derbyshire. The subsequent report to the Policy Committee will clearly show the value that these bodies bring to our area.

2.8 HRA Self Financing – Income Strategy

The Committee undertook a piece of pre-decision scrutiny, receiving a comprehensive report and presentation at its October meeting. This concerned the income strategy aspect of the move to Housing Revenue Account Self Financing. The Committee was made aware of the expected costs and the benefits as compared to the current subsidy system. A key element was achieving rent convergence and the need to move to a formula rent level. In order to assist the Housing and Community Services Committee in formulating the Income Strategy, Scrutiny asked Officers to organise a seminar for all Members, to provide further information on the move to HRA Self Financing.

2.9 Swadlincote Woodlands Scheme

A progress report was submitted in December 2011, with regard to the management and development of the Swadlincote Woodlands site and to update the Action Plan. It was identified that, at current levels of expenditure the remaining funding would last until 2017/18. Members took the opportunity to submit questions on the Action Plan. It was agreed to close the review and to have a further update in 12 months time.

2.10 Budget Proposals 2011/12 and Financial Plan to 2016

The Committee has a specific role to assist the Finance and Management Committee to develop the budget proposals. The Committee considered the budget at two of its meetings, in January and February 2012, considering the General Fund, Capital and the Housing Revenue Account. Members of Overview and Scrutiny were also invited to attend policy



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committee meetings, where detailed presentations were provided on the move to HRA Self-financing, as part of the review work shown at 2.8 above.

2.11 Crime and Disorder Scrutiny

The Council has a duty to undertake Crime and Disorder Scrutiny at least once each year. This year the area selected for review was the arrangements for the Police and Crime Commissioner and Police and Crime Panel. *The date for this review work is 2nd May 2012 and the Annual Report will need to be updated afterwards.*

2.12 Joint Scrutiny Work

The Council has continued its involvement in the Derbyshire Scrutiny Liaison Group and the East Midlands Scrutiny Network. These County and Regional groups provide a useful dialogue on the ever-changing requirements for scrutiny. A particular area of work in this year related to the arrangements for Health Scrutiny, with the Council contributing to a project facilitated by the Centre for Public Scrutiny working with Derbyshire County Council.

3. Work Programme 2012/13

The Committee brought forward the process to formulate its work programme, following guidance from the Centre for Public Scrutiny. Consultation took place to gather the views of a range of stakeholders in drawing together a 'long list' of potential review areas for 2012/13 and these were considered at a Focus Session in March. The Committee agreed to the following review areas being included in the work programme for 2012/13:

- Review of Cemetery Provision in South Derbyshire.
- Leisure Services Update, to cover:
 - The new joint leisure contract for Green Bank and Etwell Leisure Centres.
 - Rosliston Forestry Centre (including Environmental Education aspects).
 - Seeking a presentation from the group managing Melbourne Leisure Centre on its plans.
- A review looking at use of the Town Hall and Delph Area of Town Centre.
- A presentation on the Elections function.
- The Localism Act:
 - Register of Assets of Community Value.
 - The joint Area Forums/Safer Neighbourhoods trial.
 - Parish Councils and the planning process – effective consultation.
 - Wider consultation with Parish Councils and Members.
- Prescribed Scrutiny areas: Crime and Disorder, Budget Scrutiny and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers.
- Swadlincote Woodlands Update.
- Housing Benefit Review Update .
- Grounds Maintenance (Task Group).
- Early Years Provision.



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4. Concluding Comments and Acknowledgements

This report has aimed to demonstrate the tangible effect that Overview and Scrutiny can make towards improving and delivering quality services to the residents of South Derbyshire. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recognises and appreciates immensely the valuable contribution that elected Members, Officers and representatives from partner organisations make towards its work and acknowledges that without this support and co-operation, it could not fulfil its Constitutional remit to improve services for the benefit of South Derbyshire residents.

Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Members
of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
May 2012