

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY: FIRST ANNUAL REPORT

APRIL 2002

Submitted in accordance with Article 6.03(d) of the Constitution, which requires the Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group to report annually to full Council on the workings of the Overview and Scrutiny function.

I INTRODUCTION

1. Although Richmond upon Thames did not adopt new political management arrangements in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000 until May 2001, it established a Scrutiny Committee in May 1999 to
 - establish Task Groups to scrutinise and review aspects of service delivery in the Borough
 - review and recommend changes to policies
 - direct generally the development of the scrutiny function in the Council.
2. In the 2 years of its existence, the Committee established 12 Task Groups as follows, whose recommendations were considered by full Council:

	Topic	Chairman	Date of Report
1	Library Services	Cllr Samuel	12/99
2	Functions, Events and Catering	Cllr Daglish	12/99
3	Transport	Cllr Elengorn	2/00
4	Outsourcing Feasibility Project	Cllr Cornwell	4/00
5	Complaints	Cllr Orchard	4/00
6	Way to Work	Cllr Mackenzie	7/00
7	Children with Special Needs	Cllr B Matthews	7/00
8	Traffic Calming	Cllr Mollett	10/00
9	Equal Opportunities	Cllr Lee	12/00
10	Bad Debts	Cllr Carthew	12/00
11	Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures	Cllr Samuel	4/01
12	Green Environment	Cllr Elengorn	4/01

3. The adoption of new political management arrangements in May 2001 brought the establishment of 4 Overview & Scrutiny Committees:
 - Education and Culture
 - Environment and Sustainability
 - Social Care and Housing
 - Strategy and Resources.

An Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group, comprising the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Overview & Scrutiny Committees, was also established.

II REVIEW OF 2001/2002

General

4. The first year of operation of the new executive arrangements has been a time of learning, both for Members and officers, and the O&S function is not yet operating to its fullest potential. In particular, adapting to the “overview” role has taken some time and, although each of the Committees has evolved different ways of working, they have been almost entirely reactive, responding to Executive requests for comments on proposals and draft Policy Framework documents. All have however identified the need to be more proactive in determining their own agendas in future (see Section III below).
5. The importance of a robust O&S function to the success of the new political management arrangements was acknowledged by the Leader of the Council who attended 4 meetings of the Co-ordinating Group to review progress to date and discuss means of further improving the relationship with the Executive. Successful development of the function has however been impaired, in part, by a dearth of staff resources.
6. The facility for 3 Members of an O&S Committee to “call-in” an Executive decision prior to implementation has been exercised twice: Education & Culture in respect of an Executive Member Decision (EMD) to appoint a particular Member as an LEA Governor at Oldfield House School and Environment & Sustainability in respect of an EMD not to proceed with one element of a traffic management scheme in Barnes. The former decision was subsequently confirmed, the Committee having agreed that no further action would be taken; the Executive Member amended the latter to take account of the Committee’s concerns.
7. Significant time and resources were committed during the year to the issue of training for O&S Committee Members. General training was provided to all Members prior to the introduction of the new arrangements in May 2001, and in November 2001 Shared Intelligence were commissioned to provide further training in two workshops, building on Members’ experiences to date (see also Section III below).

Education & Culture

Chair: Cllr Cornwell; Vice-Chair: Cllr Samuel; 7 meetings

8. The Committee established a Scrutiny Task Group to examine the Primary Schools PFI Project, chaired by Cllr Gold. It reported in March 2002 and its recommendations have now been referred to Cabinet and the O&S Co-ordinating Group as appropriate. A second Task Group, scrutinising Connexions and the Youth Service (Chair Cllr Westmorland) will not report before Summer 2002.
9. The Committee also established 2 Reference Groups (or ‘Unsupported Task Groups’) dealing with Libraries (Chair: Cllr Samuel) and the Ofsted Action Plan (Chair: Cllr B Miller). They reported in February and their recommendations were referred to the Executive Members for Voluntary Organisations and Leisure and for Education respectively.
10. Other issues considered during the year included:
 - various Best Value Reviews, Service Plans, Performance Review Reports
 - Behaviour Support Plan
 - School Admissions
 - Annual Library Plan
 - Asset Management Plan
 - Exam results
 - SEN Budget Strategy
 - Education Development Plan
 - Early Years Implementation Plan
 - Cultural Strategy

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- 2002/03 Budget
- Ham Library.

Environment & Sustainability

Chair: Cllr Mann; Vice-Chair: Cllr Elengorn; 8 meetings

11. The Traffic Schemes and Safety Scrutiny Task Group (Chair: Cllr Style) reported in March 2002 and its recommendations have been referred to the Executive Member for the Environment.
12. The Committee also set up a Street Cleaning Advisory Panel and a Waste and Recycling Advisory Panel to work with the Executive Member for the Environment.
13. Other issues considered included:
 - various Best Value Reviews, Service Plans and Performance Review Reports
 - Interim Local Implementation Plan and Borough Spending Plan
 - Environment Consultation Strategy
 - UDP Review
 - Richmond Station Planning Brief
 - Road Safety
 - Supplementary Planning Guidance
 - Walking Strategy
 - CCTV
 - Air Quality
 - Biodiversity
 - London Local Authorities Bill
 - Blue Badge and Taxicard Schemes
 - Arcadia in the City
 - Planning Green Paper
 - Area Parking Studies.

Social Care & Housing

Chair: Cllr J Matthews; Vice-Chair: Cllr Mumford; 8 meetings (+ 1 joint with Strategy & Resources)

14. In response to reports of an unexpected overspend of £2.1M in the Social Services Department, and the subsequent Cabinet/Council decision to restructure the Department, the Committee established a Joint Scrutiny Task Group with the Strategy & Resources O&S Committee (Chair: Cllr B Matthews) to investigate the reasons for the overspend and the failure to predict its scale. The Task Group's report, which received all party support, was considered by the Cabinet in January 2002. All its recommendations were adopted, and the Executive welcomed the O&S contribution to addressing a number of serious difficulties. In addition, the manner in which the Task Group undertook its investigation and the content and structure of its final report have been widely promoted as best practice.
15. A second Task Group, chaired by Cllr Mumford, was set up to review all discretionary non-residential Social Services charges, and will report in the summer.
16. In the course of the year, the Committee also considered:
 - various Best Value Reviews, Service Plans and Performance Review Reports
 - Housing Strategy
 - Social Services reorganisation
 - Registration and Inspection
 - Carers and Disabled Children Act
 - Social Services Performance Indicators
 - Joint Investment Plan
 - Richmond Learning Disabilities Partnership Board

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- Adoption and Fostering
- Concessionary Fares
- Blue Badge and Taxicard Schemes
- SSI Inspection
- 2002/03 Budget Options
- Direct Payments
- Youth Justice Plan
- Joint Community Equipment Service
- Health O&S.

Strategy & Resources

Chair: Cllr S Jones; Vice-Chair: Cllr B Matthews; 12 meetings (+ 1 joint with Social Care & Housing)

17. The Committee established a Joint Scrutiny Task Group with their Social Care & Housing colleagues – see paragraph 14 above.
18. The Committee questioned the Leader and other Executive Members on a number of Executive proposals, including:
 - Asset Management Plan and Capital Strategy
 - Medium and Long Term Financial Strategy
 - Budget Consultation
 - Langholm Lodge
 - Revenue Budget Strategy and Council Tax
 - Community Plan.
19. They also considered
 - various Best Value Reviews, Service Plans and Performance Review Reports
 - E Government
 - Corporate Policy on Fees and Charges
 - Westfields School Project Review
 - Hampton Court House
 - Twinings
 - Education Asset Management Plan
 - Property Disposals Programme
 - Annual Audit Letter
 - Community Safety Strategy
 - Race Equality Scheme
 - Tourism Strategy
 - Capital Programme.
20. In line with best practice, the Committee resolved that their responsibilities in respect of audit (both external and internal) should be exercised by an Audit Sub-Committee, which met for the first time on 21 March 2001.

III LOOKING AHEAD

21. Building on both the successes and disappointments of the first year of operation of the new O&S function, the Co-ordinating Group have identified a number of areas for improvement and development over the coming year, amongst them:

Work Programme

22. The Committees, led by their Chairs, need to be more proactive in identifying the issues in which they wish to become involved. It is therefore recommended that they each identify as early as possible in the year specific items which can be reviewed or investigated alongside the

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programme of items which feed through from the Executive, public and other sources (acknowledging of course that unplanned/unanticipated matters may arise during the year which would also benefit from their attention). For example, the Social Care and Housing O&S Committee have agreed that they should be reviewing potential areas for savings throughout the year so that if further savings are required in future years, they will be much better placed to understand the consequences of any options proposed and to make an informed recommendation to the Executive. The approval of those overall programmes is the responsibility of the Co-ordinating Group.

23. All the Committees also need to make far better use of the Forward Plan, both in order to construct a programme of major items for the year ahead for in depth scrutiny and to identify issues on which they themselves may wish to consult others as part of the policy development process. The extent to which such use has been made of the Forward Plan to date has varied between Committees.

Training

24. The Member Induction Programme contains 3 elements of O&S training:
- a session on “Decision Making Processes” at the Members’ Evening on 8th May
 - each of the O&S Committee meetings in June to be preceded by a 30 minute briefing for all Councillors and Community Advisers, covering both “principles” and “practicalities” (and including examples of the way in which O&S has ‘made a difference’), with further training to meet identified needs to be arranged as required in July
 - ½ day O&S “Awaydays” on 6th and 13th July, combining ‘team building’ with the opportunity to identify the key issues.
25. In addition, it is felt that Chairs would benefit from specific training to give them more confidence to take the lead in planning their Committee’s agendas and work programme and the skills necessary to ensure that all non-Executive Members are able to contribute to the O&S process.

Health Scrutiny

26. In accordance with the provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2001 and associated Regulations (to be issued by the end of 2002), local authorities will be responsible for reviewing and scrutinising health services commissioned or delivered in the area. The local development of the function will need to be progressed with the PCT and other health partners with a view to maximising its effectiveness without placing undue pressure on either Member or officer resources. Preliminary discussions have already taken place at the Social Care & Housing O&S Committee, where concerns were raised about the considerable additional resources that will be needed. Reservations have also been expressed that local authorities are being required to take on this additional responsibility before having had time fully to absorb and manage the internal scrutiny function.

Resources

27. The principal source of support for the O&S function is the Democratic Services Section, where all O&S Members can seek advice and guidance. In addition to the traditional “Committee” functions, the officers also provide research and analysis, and support in its widest sense to Scrutiny Task Groups. Once the Section is fully staffed, the capacity to support Chairs in being more proactive will be further enhanced.
28. It is also hoped that additional support can be made available within the Service Departments, so that at the very least each Directorate has an identified senior officer with lead responsibility for O&S (which has already been achieved in Environment and Sustainability, with the designation of the Assistant Director, Environmental Protection and Customer Services).

Good Practice Guide

29. A number of local authorities have prepared such a Guide which has proved of particular benefit to inexperienced Task Group Chairs (and Secretaries). If resources permit, a Richmond upon Thames-specific version will be produced.

Monitoring

30. The Scrutiny process must not be seen to end with the production of a report and the acceptance of recommendations. Monitoring the implementation of agreed recommendations is equally important and it is acknowledged that this needs to be undertaken more coherently than at present, with relevant Executive Members and senior officers called to account if agreed actions appear not to have been progressed.

Public Involvement and Engagement

31. Although the opportunity exists for members of the public to make representations at O&S Committee meetings on any matter on the agenda, only at 3 Environment & Sustainability and 1 Social Care & Housing O&S Committee meetings have they availed themselves of the opportunity. There has however been more public and partner engagement with the Scrutiny Task Groups: the Joint Scrutiny Task Group on Social Services Finance received 16 written submissions; the on-going Task Group on the Review of Charges has received 12 written submissions and attracted representatives of 13 voluntary sector organisations, user groups, etc as well as a number of individuals to a public meeting; and 52 members of the public responded to a questionnaire issued by the Traffic Schemes and Safety Scrutiny Task Group.
32. Each of the O&S Committees can co-opt non-voting members; at present there are none on Education & Culture (which also has 4 voting church and parent governor representatives), 1 on Environment & Sustainability, 5 on Social Care & Housing and none on Strategy & Resources.
33. The Co-ordinating Group will wish to consider initiatives adopted in other authorities to increase public understanding of and interest/participation in the work of O&S bodies such as meetings at venues other than the Council offices; a Scrutiny-specific area of the Council Website; Scrutiny newsletters; annual report to Borough residents (rather than to Council).

IV CONCLUSION

34. Although in some respects the O&S function is not yet operating as productively and effectively as it might, valuable lessons have been learned over the course of the first year of operation and their application, combined with Member and officer commitment, driven by 1 or more O&S “champions”, will result in the function developing and maturing.

Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group:

Councillors David Cornwell (Chair), Martin Elengorn, Sue Jones, Laurence Mann, Brian Matthews, Jean Matthews, James Mumford and Geoffrey Samuel.

April 2002