

SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2011/12

INTRODUCTION

Scrutiny is considered to be the main balance to the power of the Executive and involves many of the Councillors who are not on the Executive. Individual councillors are selected by their political parties to sit on the scrutiny panels.

The key roles of scrutiny are:

- ensuring that the Council and the Executive is accountable. This means questioning members of the Executive and senior officers about decisions that have been made or are about to be made. It also involves looking at how well the Council is doing against its policy objectives and targets for achievement.
- reviewing and developing policies. In this role, scrutiny can help the Council to develop its policy and budgetary framework. This might involve research and consultation with the community and other agencies on policy issues, good practice and looking at alternative ways of doing things.
- ensuring the continuous improvement of Council services. Scrutiny can make suggestions to the Executive for service reviews. Members of scrutiny panels are often involved in individual reviews where a particular service or function of the Council is thoroughly examined

In Carlisle, scrutiny operates through three panels - Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel, Resources Overview and Scrutiny and Environment and Economy Overview and Scrutiny. The Scrutiny Chairs Group (Chairs and Vice Chairs of the three Scrutiny Panels) meets on an ad hoc basis to deal with any overarching scrutiny issues.

There are eight non-Executive members on each panel and each panel is politically balanced (ie the proportions of each political party on the panel are the same as on the Council as a whole).

This annual report provides an overview of the work of the scrutiny function during the 2011/12 civic year. The first part of the report provides brief details of the work of the individual panels and gives details of examples of Task Group work. The second part of the report considers current scrutiny practices and issues this year and looks to the future, considering areas where further development could be considered.

Community Panel

Personal View from Cllr Olwyn Luckley, Chair of Community O&S Panel

The Panel, this year as in many others, has had a full work programme with lengthy agendas to tackle. Overall I see the Panel's work this year as primarily devoted to disabilities and vulnerabilities within our community. This brought about scrutiny of services for young people, the elderly and those with disabilities.

The Task and Finish group's recommendations with regard to the Disabled Facilities Grant Scheme in this era of scarcer financial resources should contribute positively to a service that has to cope with ever growing challenges.

The recommendations of the previous years Neighbourhood Working Task and Finish Group have been turned into an action plan which gives the Panel the opportunity to examine the outcomes.

We have continued to monitor the Cumbria Affordable Warmth project, the aim of which is to increase the insulation of homes which is essential in protecting the health of particularly the elderly and the very young and to reduce the cost of keeping warm which is the most expensive of outlays for many on limited income.

The Shaddon Gateway Centre has been a regular agenda item right through the year as preparations were made for its building's completion and opening in April 2012. This will be a facility with dual use; as a local Community Centre and as a venue for those agencies working in the field of homelessness.

Of particular concern to the Panel is youth homelessness and the need for expanding preventative measures together with the various support systems that bring about positive outcomes. The contribution the new centre can make will continue to be closely scrutinised.

The Panel this year also scrutinised the Council's Housing Strategy for 2011-15 which is set against the background of the present economic difficulties. The strategy is ambitious but realistically so, as Carlisle's demographics continue to change. Those demographics played an important part in the Panel's scrutiny.

The Carlisle and Eden Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership is embarking on its work this year without the administrative and financial support it previously had. This is of

concern to the Panel and the future outcome for the Partnership, which has to date a very successful record, will continue to be closely scrutinised.

The principle role of the Scrutiny Panel to my mind is to hold the Council's Executive to account for its decisions and actions, whilst making recommendations that would assist betterment of services. The attendance of Portfolio Holders at our meetings has enabled us to carry out that role in a constructive and non combative manner. I therefore thank them, the Director of Community Engagement and all other officers who have attended the Panel and Task Group meetings for their attendance and input.

Many thanks also to the Scrutiny Officer who has given such excellent service to the Panel.

DFG Task Group – box to be inserted with details of Task Group

Environment and Economy Panel

Personal View from Cllr Carole Rutherford, Chair of Environment & Economy O&S Panel

The Panel has had a very busy year both in the scrutiny of issues at the formal Panel meetings and more in depth work through a number of workshops and task and finish groups.

After a somewhat protracted delay the Panel finally saw many of the recommendations of its Parking Task and Finish Group being implemented and together with the Community Panel there was a joint Task and Finish investigation into Neighbourhood Working in our communities. Both these two pieces of works revealed how important it was that this authority works effectively with partners. The Parking one was mainly delayed because parking in Carlisle is not under the control of any one authority. Both the City and County Councils are involved, each with their own, at times, cumbersome structures, procedures and agendas to follow. All of which leads to delay and frustration when any changes to the system are suggested by any one party.

With Neighbourhood Working the situation was even more complicated. A large number of organisations whether statutory, private and voluntary all have a role to play in providing services to residents and visitors within the district. With all the financial constraints on all those involved it is vital that we work together to avoid duplication of some things whilst failing to provide others.

Under the Transformation process and the need to identify savings, the Council has had to look at new ways of delivering its environmental services such as waste management, street cleaning the maintenance of its green spaces etc. A number of workshops were held on

these issues many of which were thrown open to other scrutiny and non-scrutiny members. The Panel has also taken part in the ongoing work of the review of the Local Development Framework (LDF).

Partly I suspect because of the present economic climate, this year the Panel has placed a strong emphasis on the economy of Carlisle and what the Council can do to assist in its development. We have therefore followed with interest the development of the new city centre partnership and the possible formation of a Business Improvement District (BID). We thought that ideally this should not be just retail based but should have included the tourism side of the city offer. Carlisle has a relative compact city centre that includes the principal tourist venues side by side with the major retail outlets. Many of the issues and solutions to problems are common to both parties and a joint project could be of benefit to all.

It has often been said that Carlisle is a low paid and low skilled economy with employers maintaining that not only do people not have the necessary skills to fill existing job vacancies but that there are not always appropriate local courses available for them to train up their workforces.

To this end the Panel initiated a meeting that brought together employers, schools, further education and training providers, employment agencies and local government. It was encouraging to hear that some good joint working between some of the organisations present already existed and that people were keen to develop closer links between employers and education/training providers. Since that meeting one of the local academies has invited members to a follow up session to see how the Carlisle Career Academies project is progressing. Improving skills and aspirations of Carlisle's citizens is vital if Carlisle wishes to grow and prosper and this authority has a key role to play in helping to bring that about.

I have been involved in scrutiny and on this particular Panel (formerly the Infrastructure Committee) from its very start, I have therefore seen many changes take place to the role and work of overview and scrutiny over the last 10 + years. Many of us, particularly those members and officers used to operating under the old committee system, found it a little difficult to change overnight. Some might say that they still do!

After a somewhat shaky start Scrutiny has settled down and I think everyone would agree that, that over the years, all the Panels have achieved some very good pieces of work that could not have taken place under the old committee system. However, whilst some of the initial issues surrounding the format and procedures at meetings have been resolved there

are some that seem to be difficult to overcome and are still ongoing. Time tabling of reports between the Panels and the Executive still does not work as smoothly as it could and should. One of the purposes of introducing the new system was to streamline the decision process and yet we still have things going back and forth between Panels and Executive before decisions are made. There seems to be an iron cast rule that Scrutiny can not see a document before the Executive even where it would be speedier for Scrutiny to give its input prior to going to the Executive for a decision.

Resources Panel

A Personal View from Cllr Steve Layden, Chair of Resources O&S

I believe the past year has been a successful one for the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Panel. Our work has been carried out in the challenging environment of financial pressures, budgeting constraints and the ongoing Transformation programme. Whilst this backcloth limits the council's options for positive development, it has made the purpose of scrutiny extremely important in helping seek and ensure the best solutions.

Of particular interest and importance has been the Asset Review, which addresses vital issues and choices for the future growth, stability and opportunities for the City of Carlisle. The difficulties of the present economic climate in this country and in Europe, impact greatly on us all, but the Asset Review gives the Carlisle City Council an opportunity to put itself in a more advantageous position as we start to come out of recession. The Panel's involvement in considering the process has been welcome.

The Scrutiny Support has, I feel, operated well this year. The one scrutiny officer has highlighted issues and guided our deliberations in an effective and objective manner. Our discussions with the Chief Executive and with the Director of Finance have been open and informative helping us gain a clear sense of our direction of travel.

Our workshop on financial matters and budgetary factors helped to involve and inform more members, a trend I hope will continue to grow in the future.

I was pleased to be involved, as Chair of ROSP in the Task & Finish Group considering Disabled Facilities Grants. This examined the input of many interested parties and gave a clear sense of the future need for an integrated, holistic approach on the part of the various agencies involved in this increasingly significant area of funding.

A ROSP Task & Finish group is looking at the topic of Shared Services and will report on this sensitive area of activity in the new Council year.

Looking forward, my main hope would be that the Panel is able to be more proactive in considering future impact of policies and directions. Influences such as Welfare Services Reform, Locality of Funding and Transformation plans could be explored at an earlier stage in the evolutionary cycle, shaping the movement forward of the democratic process instead of mainly reacting to it.

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Part 2: Development of Scrutiny & Summary of Progress

Relationship with the Executive

A revised Protocol on Relations between Overview and Scrutiny and the Executive was agreed within the Annual report 2010/11. This protocol covered:

- Portfolio Holders' attendance at Scrutiny Meetings scrutinising matters within their portfolio.
- Scrutiny Members attendance at Executive meetings
- Discussions and advance notice of Forward Plan matters
- Portfolio Holders responding to O&S Subject Review Final Reports
- Responding to O&S recommendations/resolutions
- Planning for O&S Policy Development Role around Forward Plan matters
- Corporate Performance Monitoring

The protocol introduced Tripartite meetings which would be established for each of the three panels. Terms of Reference for Tripartite meetings were developed by a working group consisting of representation from the Executive, Scrutiny and Senior Management Team together with the Overview and Scrutiny Officer.

Unfortunately there was subsequently some confusion as to whether the meeting were to be held per panel or a generic Tripartite meeting for all. This has resulted in the meetings not being established within the Civic Calendar. One meeting did take place for the Environment and Economy O&S Panel and was deemed a successful means of communication between Executive and Scrutiny Members and Officers. **It is suggested that a meeting is held between the Scrutiny Chairs Group and Executive Members as soon as possible in the next Civic Year to revisit the protocol and agree or amend as appropriate.**

Forward Plan and Policy and Budgetary Framework

Improvements to the Policy Framework via a reduction in the number of policies reserved to Council were agreed by Council on 1st March 2011. This has streamlined the decision making process by enabling the Executive to make more decisions in the first instance.

The current format of the Forward Plan states the date when a report would be available for Overview and Scrutiny for issues both inside and outside the Policy and Budgetary Framework. For those issues outside the Policy and Budgetary Framework i.e. Executive

Decision this date is the next appropriate Scrutiny Panel following the date of the Executive decision. Scrutiny Members have not found this helpful as clearly the decision will have been made by this point and the only recourse is to call-in the decision.

It is therefore suggested that the format of the Forward Plan is amended for that those issues which fall outside of the Budget and Policy Framework to state only the responsible or lead Overview and Scrutiny Panel with no reference to date when the issue will be considered.

Agendas and Chairing of meetings

There have been some concerns this year about the length of agendas for a number of panel meetings. Invariably this has meant that several meetings have also run into the afternoon. This is not ideal as later items on the agenda can be rushed, officers may have waited around for some time and it is also difficult for Portfolio Holder and SMT officers when there has been a clash with other afternoon meetings, in particular Joint Management Team (JMT).

Concerns have also been raised that at times that Scrutiny within formal Panel's has not been as focused as it could be and Members have veered off the topic under discussion. At times Chairs of Panels have found it difficult to focus Members to the topic at hand and this can cause some frustration to other participants.

The guidance for Chairs will be revisited before the start of the next civic year and appropriate training will be sought for Chairs and Vice Chairs in order to fulfill their roles effectively. Chairs also need to give consideration as to whether they are receiving reports for scrutiny or for information only so that agendas are not filled with reports and presentations which scrutiny does not add value to.

Attendance at Meetings

It has been raised at a meeting of the Scrutiny Chairs Group that attendance by Members at Scrutiny Panel throughout the year has at times been sporadic and should be highlighted within this report. Substitute Members are not always available to attend or have not been arranged and on more than one occasion a panel has taken place with only 5 Members in attendance.

Although it is acknowledged that Members are not always able to attend every meeting due to busy diaries and commitments elsewhere, consistent scrutiny of ongoing topics requires

consistent attendance. Otherwise valuable Panel time can be spent going over old ground. Group Leaders are requested therefore to consider the availability of Members to attend scrutiny when allocating Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

Scrutiny Support

2011/12 was the second year following the reduction of dedicated scrutiny support. Early teething troubles have been ironed out and the Scrutiny Chairs Group have agreed that they are satisfied with the level of support by officers of the Senior Management Team. Regular meetings have been held between the relevant Chair, Vice Chair and SMT officer and it is the view of the Scrutiny Chairs Group that this should continue in 2012/13.

There has been a concern raised however that those Scrutiny Members who are not Chairs or Vice Chairs are not receiving adequate advice and support between Panels to enable them to undertake their role effectively. The Scrutiny Officer is available to any Member to support them in their role but clearly if this is the view of other Members then this needs be addressed early in 2012/13.

Scrutiny Structure

The Scrutiny Chairs Group request that a review should be undertaken in 2012/13 to look at the appropriateness of the number of Scrutiny Panels, which will also look at different ways of working, together with the remits and responsibilities of each panel.

Do Scrutiny Members agree that this is an accurate reflection of the work undertaken this year and address concerns raised appropriately?

Are there any other issues which Members would like included within the report?

Are there any particular topics that Members would like to be considered for review in 2012/13?