



St. Helens
Council

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report

2016-17





What is Scrutiny?

St.Helens Council is run by councillors elected by the people of St.Helens.

A small number of them form the cabinet (also referred to as the executive) which sets the direction, determines the priorities and takes the important decisions. The councillors in the cabinet hold powerful positions and it is important that they are held to public account for their actions. This is done through a system called overview and scrutiny and is undertaken by the non-executive councillors.

This is common to most local councils. They ensure that decisions are taken based on good evidence including the views of those with an interest in the matter and are in the best interests of the people of St.Helens. Overview and scrutiny is selective in what it looks at so that it can add value to the most important services provided by the council, its partners and contractors. Wherever possible it helps to shape policy through early discussions as well as scrutinising proposals before they are finally agreed. The scrutiny work programme is published on the council's website.

There is an overarching Overview and Scrutiny Commission and five Scrutiny Panels:

- Health and Adult Social Care
- Audit and Financial Monitoring
- Children and Young People's Services
- Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure
- Safer Communities

Scrutiny Chairmen 2016/2017



Cllr David Baines



Cllr Martin Bond



Cllr Jeff Fletcher



Cllr Joe Pearson



Cllr Charlie Preston



Cllr Lynn Glover

Any Council member who is not a member of the Cabinet can undertake scrutiny. Non Councillors may be co-opted onto Scrutiny Panels and task groups. At St.Helens we have a number of co-opted members who sit on our Children and Young People's Services, Health and Adult Social Care and Safer Communities Scrutiny Panels. Each year Scrutiny Panels undertake one or more pieces of work (reviews) that focus on particular issues and consider them in greater detail than is possible during Panel meetings.



Cllr David Baines

Commission Activity During 2016/17

Review of Budget Setting Process and Portfolio Spending Plans 2017/18

In the current economic climate, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, Chaired by Cllr David Baines, wanted to make sure that the Council could continue to deliver the services which are most important to the Council and St. Helens residents. A task group was established and led by Cllr Jeff Fletcher, Chair of the Audit and Financial Monitoring Scrutiny Panel.

The Local Government Finance Settlement was received on 15th December 2016. The settlements continue to support the Government's austerity plan into the 11th year.

With the grant reductions in mind, the Portfolio Holder meetings explored the implications for each portfolio of operating within the revised and reduced spending implied by the reduced Cash Limits. Of particular focus was the action necessary for each portfolio to maintain spending within the reduced budget.

It is evident that this will be extremely challenging across all portfolios. It is also evident that Chief Officers and Portfolio Holders are not underestimating the magnitude and severity of the task they are faced with, particularly in light of the significant savings that have already been required and delivered.

We are well aware that some extremely difficult decisions need to be made. In some instances, the scale of the savings required mean that these decisions will have an unavoidable impact on service delivery.

During 2017/18, Scrutiny will inevitably be looking at the impact of budget cuts on service delivery.



Scrutiny of the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority - covering the local authority areas of Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St.Helens, Sefton and Wirral - was established on 1 April 2014 with the aim of improving:

- the exercise of statutory functions relating to transport in the Combined Area
- the effectiveness and efficiency of transport in the Combined Area
- the exercise of statutory functions relating to economic development and regeneration in the Combined Area
- economic conditions in the Combined Area

In November 2015, it secured a Devolution Agreement with Government, securing £900 million of funding along with the devolution of powers and responsibilities from Whitehall. This Agreement was further developed in March 2016 and provides the resources, freedoms and flexibilities to deliver the City Region's strategic priorities around economic development, transport, strategic housing and employment and skills.

Part of the Devolution Agreement was to have a directly Elected Mayor for the Liverpool City Region. Steve Rotherham has since been elected.

In addition, the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority has established a Scrutiny Panel, which:

- Provides a 'critical friend' to policy and strategy development
- Undertakes scrutiny reviews into areas of strategic importance for the people of the Liverpool City Region
- Monitors the delivery of the Authority's strategic plan

The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority scrutiny panel has seen an extended role for scrutiny here at St.Helens. Cllr Baines as Chair of the Commission and Cllr Jackson were selected to represent the Council in order to achieve greater public accountability over decisions made and services delivered to the whole Liverpool City Region. The LCRCA Scrutiny Committee has completed a number of pieces of review work namely: European Funding, Affordable Transport and Apprenticeships.

In addition to this, the Portfolio holder responsible for Liverpool City Region engagement has regularly attended the Commission to give progress updates.

Budget and Performance Monitoring

The Audit and Financial Monitoring Scrutiny Panel, chaired by Cllr Jeff Fletcher has scrutinised the Budget Monitoring reports and the Corporate Financial reports on a frequent basis and sought information and explanations in respect of any issues of concern identified.

The Panel regularly requests supplementary reports and calls in officers to explain areas of underperformance. A feedback loop to the Executive is provided via a standing item on the cabinet agenda to address issues arising from scrutiny. There is also a standing item on the Audit and Governance Committee agenda to consider the Panel Chair's report on items scrutinised, highlighting issues the Panel wishes to draw to the committee's attention.



Scrutiny Reviews: Task and Finish Groups

Anti-Social Behaviour and Private Landlords

As private rented accommodation tends to be in poorer condition than other sectors and the transient nature of households living in the sector can mean that anti-social behaviour is more prevalent in privately rented property than in owner occupied stock. This is becoming an increasing cause for concern for members. In addition, a significant number of problems arise in the private sector that are ignored due to a small number of absentee landlords or landlords that do not have the inclination, skills or capacity to tackle problems caused by their tenants.

In addition to looking at Selective Licensing and voluntary accreditation schemes, our review provided a summary of the key remedies available to victims of anti-social behaviour who live next door to private tenants or anti-social owner/occupiers.

We are pleased to report that further consideration is being given by Cabinet to investing in early Anti- Social Behaviour intervention support and prevention and that various teams and agencies will work together to explore how to further publicise the importance of public reporting of ASB.

Apprenticeships

St.Helens offers a wide range of Apprenticeship opportunities which has increased over the last few years. Since 2010, an increase in government funding has seen more than two million apprenticeships taken up nationally. However, this surge in numbers has been mainly in sectors such as customer service, retail, administration and care.

This review was very timely as the legislation and government initiatives to drive up the number of apprenticeships in the UK have been developing as we have worked through the review process. The Apprenticeship Levy and Public Sector Target for Apprenticeships are going to have a big financial impact on St.Helens overall, especially the council. We need to ensure that we are prepared to make the most of the changes and reap the benefits that high quality apprenticeships can bring to the organisation. We heard first hand from young people in our borough that schools' poor promotion of apprenticeships is depriving pupils and their parents of information about the full range of options available through the apprenticeship route.

We believe that secondary schools are still not doing enough to promote apprenticeships to young people, and careers advice and guidance is not sufficiently detailed. It has been found that too few pupils experienced high-quality work experience and employer engagement as part of their compulsory education.

Cabinet have reported that a Council Apprenticeship Strategy will be produced which will take full account of the apprenticeship reforms and will link to the priorities of the Council's Workforce Development Strategy.



I found out about the breastfeeding service when I had my son and have attended every week since. It has become a brilliant resource for getting advice from both the breastfeeding team as well as from other mums. It has also been great to meet other mums in the local area.

I feel like I have made some really good friends through coming to the breastfeeding group.

- Mother from St.Helens

Infant Feeding

England has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world and St.Helens has one of the lowest rates in England. The number increased over the last few years and infant feeding support for mothers from the Council has increased in recent months. However, we acknowledge we still have more work to do to ensure that the children of St.Helens get the best start in life they can.

Low breastfeeding rates are costing the St.Helens health economy in excess hospital admissions of babies, treatment of childhood and adult obesity and treatment of additional cases of breast cancer. The NHS costs of low breastfeeding rates are estimated to be £38m per year and wider social costs of £2.8bn per year.

St.Helens has an established Infant Feeding Service providing information advice and support to pregnant women. Increasing rates of breastfeeding will not occur overnight, however by working together with partners, practitioners and organisations we will be able to help increase the rates of breastfeeding within the borough. This will not only be achieved by working with parents and families but by increasing the awareness of wider society towards acceptability and benefits of breastfeeding. Breast feeding is the most natural and healthy way of feeding babies and this must be recognised by society as a whole.





Children's Food Provision During School Holidays

Access to nutritious food is a normal everyday occurrence for most children and families, but a growing number of children are facing 'holiday hunger' as families struggle to feed themselves, on a day to day basis, and children are eating significantly less food during school holiday time.

Across the country various voluntary schemes have arisen, supplying food provisions to families in need and more importantly there is now a rise in the number of School Holiday Food Provision projects being established by both the voluntary sector and local councils. One such provision is the Make Lunch Scheme which has been operating since 2011. Kitchens are run by volunteers and this scheme is now operating within St.Helens helping to feed our children.

Make Lunch provides a two course hot meal to children who receive Free School Meals and are referred to the centre as 'in need' by the local Primary School. The children have a hot meal around tables and then engage in activities with the volunteers. Volunteers are drawn from the local community and local churches.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Barrie Grunewald made this a key point in his leader's speech 2016 that as a priority, vulnerable children should not go hungry during the school holidays and funding of £7,500 was allocated to initiate a pilot scheme.

Locally, St.Helens Baptist Church has been working with Make Lunch for the past three years, providing meals for local children and families during school holidays. In 2015 the Church was successful in securing funding from Veolia to upgrade their kitchen facilities and in September 2015 a new kitchen was installed.

Cowley International College have also been providing a school holiday lunch club for several years, identifying vulnerable pupils to ensure that they do not go hungry during school holidays. By coming together in 2016 with the Baptist Church and three other local Churches the service was expanded to help reach more children and families.

We are pleased to hear that from our recommendations a task & finish group to oversee this pilot project and spending plan is going to be developed. Those who have been identified to sit on this are: Public Health representatives, current providers of holiday meal clubs, Real Junk Food Reps, Childrens' Centre Reps, St.Helens College. A Public Health Commissioners Forum will be tasked with pulling together existing and potential partners to generate sign up / interest in broadening provision for the Summer holiday period.

Educational Health Care Plans

Members had raised concerns about Educational Health Care Plans (EHC) after receiving reports from several residents that use the service that plans were not being reviewed or established in appropriate timescales for their children.

EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs. It is the Local Authorities responsibility to undertake these plans within the given timescales.

We were satisfied that the department is working to improve this by employing extra staff to process new EHC plans and to clear the remaining statements that need to be transferred to EHC plans.

Ruskin Drive Sports Facilities

A report was submitted which updated Members on the development of Ruskin Drive sports facilities. It was reported that lessons had been learned from the problems which had been experienced with the Ruskin development and Scrutiny suggested a number of measures to help prevent this happening in the future. We can report that Cabinet have agreed the following recommendations.

- All major capital schemes be allocated a project sponsor at Assistant Director/ Director level;
- Identification of risks in projects be highlighted prior to commencement of any project and cash limits be stated on all identified risks
- A sensitivity analysis be undertaken at the outset of a project
- Reporting back to Scrutiny, be an integral part of the project management of major schemes so that members are kept informed of progress and potential problems throughout the duration of the project.

Looking Forward to 2017-2018

Having concluded the work undertaken by the Panel's in 2016/17, it is now time to turn our attention to the development of the work programme for 2017/18.

Key to developing the work programme is making sure that chosen topics align with the priorities set out in the Council Plan and planned budget reductions and that by undertaking task and finish group work this adds value. Liaison with Portfolio Members will continue to play an important part in our work and their attendance at Panels will provide us with a comprehensive overview of the key challenges within their portfolios.



How to find out more about Scrutiny

Overview and Scrutiny should reflect the issues that matter to those who live or work in St.Helens. Help us by telling us what you think we should focus on in 2017/18. We have the scope to look at any issue that reflects St.Helens not just council related services

You can contact us by using the methods listed below, or submit a suggestion for our work programme using the Scrutiny pages on Council's website.

Contact us

Email: joanneheron@sthelens.gov.uk

Tel: 01744 676277

Write to: Overview and Scrutiny, St.Helens Council, Town Hall, St.Helens WA10 1HP