



St. Helens
Council

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report

2015-16



St. Helens Council

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Chairman's Foreword

Chairman Overview and Scrutiny Commission 2016/17

On behalf of the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for 2015/16, Cllr Anthony Burns, I am pleased to introduce this year's Scrutiny Annual report which has been prepared to give an insight into the work undertaken by Scrutiny on behalf of the people of St.Helens.

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all members involved in the scrutiny process for their time, effort and dedication over the past 12 months. However, we need to recognise that the Council continues to experience huge change. The biggest contributing factor to this is the massive pressure put on St.Helens Council by the size and severity of cuts to the Councils funding from central government. The way in which we design and deliver services requires reappraisal. Decisions the Council makes need to be made well, with

full knowledge of the impact such decisions are likely to have on our communities. The scrutiny function provides a means to ensure all elected members have a clear role in this process. During this difficult time Scrutiny must not take a back seat - but must strive to improve and make our voice heard.

I would like to thank everyone who has taken part in our reviews this year. Thanks to those of you who gave us the ideas and started the ball rolling, those who have given up their time to share their views and concerns, helped us gather evidence or been involved in preparing briefings. This has resulted in well prepared and presented scrutiny reports and recommendations that have been a huge help to Cabinet and the Council in understanding what's happening in St.Helens.

Fostering campaign



What is Overview and 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. A list of the matters which will be considered by overview and scrutiny is published in its forward work programme.

How does Scrutiny work?

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

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 group. 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. These reviews are undertaken by Task and Finish Groups and will typically last around 4 months and may include a mixture of interviews with relevant officers, research of best practice, meetings with service users and community groups themselves and consultation with wider parts of the community.

Maintaining independence in the home



Scrutiny Activity During 2015/16

Review of Budget Setting Process 2015/16

In the current economic climate, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, led by Cllr Jeff Fletcher, wanted to make sure that the Council could continue to deliver the services which are most important to the Council and St.Helens residents.

The Local Government Finance Settlement was received on 17th December 2015. The settlements continue to support the Government's austerity plan into the 10th year. The Council's general grant has reduced by **£8.9m** for 2016-17 and a further **£15.9m** for the following three years.

With the grant reductions in mind, the Commission 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 was evident that this was extremely challenging across all portfolios. It was also evident that Chief Officers and Portfolio Holders were not underestimating the magnitude and severity of the task they were faced with, particularly in light of the significant savings that had already been required and delivered.

The Commission, at its meetings, welcomed the opportunity to discuss these spending plans with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate Services and the Assistant Chief Executive (Finance) and to understand the implications for departments and for service delivery.

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

Each Scrutiny Panel has undertaken at least one Review this year either individually or jointly with another Panel and they are summarised on the next page:



Overview and Scrutiny Commission
Councillor Anthony Burns

Key area we have looked at	What we've achieved
Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Scrutiny Panel	The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority has seen an extended role for scrutiny. The Scrutiny Team offer support to Members elected 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 Housing and Planning.
Dementia Friendly Borough	Scrutiny has worked closely with Public Health to raise awareness about dementia and help people understand what life can be like living with such a condition. Prior to undertaking the exercise, 6887 people had signed up to dementia friends however by June 2016 this had increased to 8000 - in part due to a campaign with St.Helens Star and work with the Scrutiny Panel.
Corporate Complaints	Scrutiny members were keen to look at our corporate complaints system and check if there were any areas which could be improved upon. We found that the current system was disjointed as complaints relating to Adult and Social Care and Children's Services were dealt with separately. We wanted to see all complaints on one system. We recommended that the use of the Council reporting App be widely promoted, particularly amongst Councillors themselves and that a call waiting system be made available which informed callers what number in the queue they were. This would go a long way to easing frustration when calling the contact centre.



Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel
Councillor Pat Ireland

Key area we have looked at	What we've achieved
Falls Prevention Strategy	The Panel focused in on Falls Prevention work whilst considering various Health Trust's Quality Accounts. From this we have received regular updates on the Falls Prevention Service and continue to monitor progress. We are pleased to hear of the improvements to the Service and the contract has been extended for a further 2 years.
Smoke Free Agenda	We held a special meeting with a number of our health partners to discuss progress made on the smoke free agenda for St.Helens. Many Health Trusts have made good progress and a number will have a total ban on smoking within their premises and surrounding outside areas by 2017. Whilst this is good progress, the implementation of this will need to be communicated and managed sensitively.
Older People and Loneliness	We set up a Task Group to look at issues surrounding older people and loneliness and what we could do as a Council to help to alleviate the effects. We visited a number of partners to discuss how best to work together and agreed that the Council, the Perth Centre, Age UK and Helena shared resources and worked collaboratively. We also felt it would be helpful if an additional review of older people in care homes was undertaken.
Engaging with Key Partners	The Panel have worked closely with the CQC attending and feeding into listening events and health summits for St.Helens and Whiston hospital and 5 Boroughs NHS Foundation Trust. Members have also worked closely with Healthwatch taking part in a number of enter and view visits of nursing and residential homes throughout the borough.



Environmental, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Lisa Preston

Key area we have looked at

What we've achieved

Flood Defences

In 2014 the Panel undertook a review of Flood Defences in St.Helens. Since this time certain areas within the borough have continued to be affected by flooding and so the issue continues to be a scrutiny priority.

We are pleased to report that additional defence schemes are in development at Beech Gardens in Rainford and potential new schemes have been identified at West End Road and Haydock. Planning applications are also to be reviewed and additional investment has been put into further preventative measures. Work continues with the Environment Agency. Funding for all those affected needed to be chased, however, all entitled home/business owners have been compensated accordingly.

Environmental Wardens and Fly Tipping

The Panel have continued to work on this issue and have undertaken a number of individual meetings with Chief Officers and Portfolio Holders as well as various site visits throughout the borough. Certain hot spot areas within borough continue to be affected by fly tipping and we are pleased to report that further work to alleviate this will be undertaken.

Alleyway inspections are to be undertaken and fly tipping prevention pilot areas are due to be expanded in 2016/17. Cleansing operatives will also be utilised to work with the Environmental Warden Team - it is anticipated that this and the decriminalisation of Section 46 offences will further improve the fly tipping situation.

Key area we have looked at

Review of Homelessness and Rough Sleepers

What we've achieved

The Panel undertook an extensive review of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping within St.Helens. This included visiting a number of hostels and support services as well as participating in an overnight homelessness count.

Whilst homelessness and rough sleeping continues to be a national problem, we are pleased to report that the Council will continue to work with the YMCA and the Salvation Army to provide cold weather provision to people at risk of rough sleeping during periods of cold or severe weather. This provides those affected with a practical opportunity to re-engage with services and access support or accommodation.

Review of Apprenticeships

The panel established a task and finish group to look at apprenticeships opportunities within the borough and what support was needed for the apprentices themselves and employers. We particularly concentrated on opportunities for those young people who were disengaged or were looked after.





Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Dennis McDonnell

Key area we have looked at

Support for Foster Carers

What we've achieved

The Panel established a task and finish group to examine what support we as a Council offered our Foster Carers. We devised a survey which was sent to every foster carer, spoke with foster carers themselves to listen to what they felt about the support they received and met with the National Fostering Agency Support Team and out of hours support.

We made a number of recommendations which will hopefully go some way to improving on the support already offered. A systematic training programme for foster carers was required together with better promotion/provision of the out of hours support service.

Children's Services and People's Services Department

The Panel have received regular updates from the Director and Portfolio Holder during the latter part of the municipal year. The current position and approach to addressing the issues in relation to Children's Services have been set out and as more detailed proposals are developed, Scrutiny will receive regular updates on progress. The panel have used some of the priority areas to inform their work programme for 2016/17.

Self-Harm

The Panel undertook a joint review of self-harm with the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel.

Key area we have looked at

Self-Harm

What we've achieved

As part of this review we were particularly interested in the review of CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service) Tier 2 Service and the provision of a Single Point of Access. We are pleased to report that the local transformation plan has been refreshed and an additional **£480k** pa has been secured for the next 4 years. The plan includes work on transition and on and the intention to develop a 'Junior No Secrets' provision.

Work with No Secrets and Schools continues and work has been on going to develop a menu of training opportunities aimed at increasing knowledge and understanding of mental health and wellbeing.



Safer Communities Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Charlie Preston

Key area we have looked at

Hate Crime

What we've achieved

The panel held a one off meeting with all relevant agencies to discuss hate crime and how we could work together to develop a better understanding and awareness. Work with schools and communities is crucial and funding for this was limited. It's known that Hate Crime is particularly underreported and we are pleased to report that this is a priority for the Community Safety Partnership moving forward.

Working with Key Partners

Both Merseyside Police and Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service are co-opted onto the Safer Communities Scrutiny Panel. This gives members an opportunity to receive updates at each meeting and discuss any areas of concern. This works well for Scrutiny and both representatives are engaged in the process and make good contributions to the work of the panel.



Audit and Financial Monitoring Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Jeff Fletcher

Key area we have looked at

What we've achieved

Budget and Performance Monitoring

As mentioned above, the Panel has continued to monitor budget and performance within individual service areas. Portfolio Holders and Chief Officers have been in attendance to answer questions relating to their particular areas.

Audit Reporting

The Panel reviews and scrutinises various Internal Audit reports and requests explanations in respect of outstanding Audit recommendations and internal control weaknesses. Progress on outstanding actions are checked at regular intervals. Occasionally, officers and portfolio holders are invited to the meeting to explain the reasons for the control weaknesses and outstanding actions.

What are our challenges for 2016/17?

Councils across England and Wales have undergone major changes in the last couple of years and this is set to continue for the foreseeable future.

As demographics and society changes, residents' needs are no longer the same. Our understanding of how public services impact on outcomes has also improved. There is now a recognition that a whole system approach, which includes residents and communities, is needed to make a real difference to people's lives.

The financial challenge has been a powerful driver of change and has forced local authorities to consider how they can continue to meet residents' needs in dramatically different ways. With public services likely to face more challenges over the next few years and greater devolution on the cards, the role of scrutiny and the work of the Panels will be increasingly important.

The Council is currently undergoing major change, three new departments have been established and a 20/20 vision is being developed to deliver more responsive services. Scrutiny members have an opportunity to contribute to this transformation and can assist with service review plans as they continue to be designed and delivered.

The need for sound effective decision making has never been more important. Scrutiny needs to provide a valid mechanism of challenge to monitor decision making, tackle poor service provision and ensure that value for money is delivered.

In addition, devolution has huge potential to pass on proper power to those best placed to understand what's needed to improve the lives of their residents and the places where they live. It's also critical to putting local councils in a position to manage the financial pressures they are currently under. Greater responsibility requires greater scrutiny. Devolution is a positive opportunity to build governance arrangements which are dynamic, flexible and really add value.

It is important to design governance systems which will be appropriate not only for what we have now, but for the work that the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority will be doing in future. The structures of delivery, the expectations of local people, the nature of public finances - all are also likely to change. We have to put in place governance frameworks that have the flexibility to change accordingly.



To achieve this further work is required in the following areas:

- Scrutiny and governance arrangements: How scrutiny is undertaken needs further examination. As public expectations change, the way that scrutiny undertakes its work needs to adapt for it to continue to be relevant, responsive and of public value. Better use of inspectorates such as CQC and OFSTED as a source of action or support.
- Improved budget and performance monitoring by Scrutiny members and better use of performance information reports.
- Increased contribution by those nominated to the LCRCA Scrutiny Panel and improved general member awareness in the scrutiny of the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. Increased development of stronger links between local and sub-regional scrutiny.

- Improved financial scrutiny - the council is continually under serious financial pressure therefore it's particularly important that cost effective decisions are made. Getting the work programme right is crucial to undertaking worthwhile scrutiny particularly when resources are limited.

For further information about this annual report or about Overview and Scrutiny work in St.Helens please contact:

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