



St. Helens Council

Overview and Scrutiny

Annual Report 2009/10

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Foreword

I am pleased to introduce our 2009/10 Overview and 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.

The Scrutiny Committees have continued to support the work of the Council through their diverse work programmes and have provided opportunities for local people to have their say regarding issues that affect them.

Looking back over the year our work was varied and wide ranging from the review of Under One Roof to working with our neighbouring authorities, Halton and Knowsley on the joint health task group looking at the proposals for a supra-regional burns unit. We have delivered a full work programme, covering a wide range of issues from our own financial processes, the plans and proposals of our colleagues in health and the council through to partner performance during the tough economic climate.

I would like to place on record our gratitude to the councillors and officers - from both within the council and from partner organisations that have helped us to complete these reviews. I feel that we have begun to forge constructive and effective working relationships across the board and we believe this places scrutiny on an excellent footing to be able to contribute to service improvement for future years. Our revised scrutiny structure has continued to develop, and following the assessment of the scrutiny process which was undertaken in 2008, we will be looking to develop this further and make scrutiny even better.

This report sets out work conducted and achievements for each of the scrutiny committees during 2009/10 together with progress on the targets we set ourselves for raising the profile of Overview and Scrutiny.



Councillor Marie E. Rimmer

Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Commission 2009/2010

Some Questions Answered

What is Overview and Scrutiny ?

Often referred to as Scrutiny, the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function looks closely at services and issues that affect local people and ways to improve them.

Scrutiny Councillors have a responsibility as community leaders to involve local people in identifying issues of concern. They can then review these concerns by gathering information and making recommendations based on what they've found out. They are not restricted to Council services – they can look at anything that has an impact on the quality of life of people in St Helens.

Overview and Scrutiny councillors also keep an eye on how the Council's services are performing and whether targets are being met and are able to make recommendations as to whether new policies or changes to existing policies would lead to better outcomes.

The Executive is the Council's main decision-making body and scrutiny councillors have a responsibility to oversee its work and can challenge its decisions. Unlike the Executive, Scrutiny councillors do not hold any decision-making powers.

How many Overview and Scrutiny Committees are there and who sits on them?

There is an overarching Overview and Scrutiny Commission and five Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Any Council member who is not a member of the Executive can undertake scrutiny. During 2009/10 the following councillors and co-opted members have served on the Scrutiny Committees:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Remit in Brief	Membership 2009/10
Overview and Scrutiny Commission	Acts as the general interface with the Executive for all Overview and Scrutiny issues, reviews the Council's Forward Plan and identifies possible policy or strategy reviews	<p>Cllr M E Rimmer (Ch) Cllr Steph Topping (V Ch)</p> <p>Cllrs R Ayres, J Beirne, A Bowden, B Grunewald, K Knowles, L Maloney, B, Lowe, J Pearson, K Roughley, J Sheldon, E Smith, N Taylor and Stephen Topping.</p> <p>Co-opted Members</p> <p>Rev D Hall, Rev T Neylon, A Wellens-Heron,</p>

Adult Social Care and Health	Covers the provision, planning and performance of social and health care in services for older people and vulnerable adults across the borough.	Cllr J Pearson (Ch) Cllr J Sheldon (V Ch) Cllrs C Banks, D Crowther, B Lowe, L McGuire, P McQuade and N Taylor.
Audit and Financial Monitoring	Scrutinises internal and external audit activity and monitors and scrutinises the financial performance of the Council	Cllr Steph Topping (Ch) Cllr B Grunewald (V Ch) Cllrs P Astbury, A Bowden, R McCauley, J Parr, M. E. Rimmer and Stephen Topping
Children and Young People's Services	Covers the whole range of services relating to the provision of children and young people's services	E Smith (Ch) N Taylor (V Ch) Cllrs T Hargreaves, P Martinez-Williams, K Roughley, S Seddon, E Sheldon, and Steph Topping Co-opted Members Rev D Hall, Rev T Neylon, A Welland-Heron,
Environment and Safer Communities	Considers items relating to waste management, parks and open spaces, highways and crime and disorder issues	Cllr J Beirne (Ch) Cllr L Maloney (V Ch) Cllrs R Ayres, J De'Asha, K Deakin, D Grice, K Knowles and G Pearl
Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure	Considers items relating to borough wide economic development, regeneration, housing, culture, leisure and libraries.	Cllr A Bowden (Ch) Cllr K Knowles (V Ch) Cllrs N Ashcroft, S Glover, S Murphy, M Quinn, E Sheldon and Stephen Topping

How do we decide what work to do?

Each Committee develops its own work programme for the year which is then agreed by the Scrutiny Commission. The sort of work we get involved in aims to reflect the issues that matter most to local people. It should also match the Council's priorities. Each year we invite suggestions from key partners such as the Police, the Primary Care Trust, local business representatives, school head teachers and governors, parish and town councils, voluntary and community organisations, the community empowerment network and of course members of the public. This is to find out if there are any issues of concern that could benefit from a scrutiny review.

Once all the suggestions have been gathered, the Scrutiny Committees and the Commission decide which issues have the highest priority. Carrying out Scrutiny Reviews can be very time consuming and it is impossible to address all the issues that are suggested.

As Scrutiny Councillors we try to choose only those issues where we believe we can make a real difference.

How you can get involved in Scrutiny

There are many ways in which you can get involved:

- **Attending meetings** – Scrutiny meetings are open to the public (details of meetings can be found on the Council's website, www.sthelens.gov.uk)
- By **responding to questionnaires or providing written evidence** in relation to a particular scrutiny review
- By offering to **appear as 'expert witnesses'** during scrutiny review meetings, when invited to do so
- **Applying to be a co-opted member** – by taking part in scrutiny through co-option onto Task and Finish groups. Task and Finish groups are fact-finding forums and are invaluable for members of the public to raise concerns and issues, to allow Councillors to make evidence-based recommendations (details of how to apply can be found on the Council's website, www.sthelens.gov.uk)
- **Suggesting a topic** – You can suggest a topic for scrutiny in several ways. Firstly there's a form at the back of this report that you can complete and return. Alternatively forms are available at most Council reception areas or you can complete the online forms at www.sthelens.gov.uk If you would like to speak to us then please contact us on 01744 676277 or email us at scrutiny@sthelens.gov.uk.

Please note that Scrutiny cannot deal with individual complaints (to complain, please ring **01744 676789**) or look at decisions taken by Licensing or Planning, unless the issue concerns policy.

Key Messages from this year's Scrutiny Reviews

Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Joe Pearson

Review of Obesity – ‘It’s about what we do and what we eat’

Councillor Pearson headed the Task and Finish Group that looked at the issue of obesity. The Task Group wanted to examine the environments and cultures of organisations in St Helens that affected obesity and consider what could be done to reduce obesity within the borough. The title of this review reflected the approach and subsequent findings of the Task Group - *“It’s about what we do and what we eat!”* - reflected the small changes that could have a big impact on people’s health and well-being.

During this review the Task group received evidence of some exceptional work being undertaken, by a range of services and organisations, which undoubtedly contribute to the fight against obesity. However, not all organisations and services were aware of the work being undertaken by others and how working together could improve and enhance the services they offer. There were a number of issues around food packaging and advertising which could only be effectively tackled by national government. The Task Group acknowledge these limitations but asked St.Helens Council and it’s key partners to make a difference where it could.

The Task Group found that workplaces and schools were in unique positions to have a real impact on the behaviours of employees and pupils. Subsequently, it was felt that St.Helens Council could (a) make sure that St Helens schools have environments and cultures which promote physical activity and healthy eating, (b) promote opportunities and implement policies which would make employees more active and healthier, and, (c) encourage others to adopt health initiatives by leading by example.

In addition, St.Helens Council was able to identify opportunities for partnership working and cross-referral both within and outside the authority. Tackling obesity was not the responsibility of one organisation, indeed, one organisation could not resolve the complexity involved with obesity. Yet, a lot could be done to increase the amount of physical activity people undertake and reduce the amount of unhealthy food people consume.

The report made a number of recommendations, including encouraging the Council and partner organisations to lead by example in the use of the workplace as a setting to promote healthy lifestyles and in making healthy choices available to all their employees. It was also recommended that the Council nominate an ‘Obesity Champion’, at senior management level, to further develop, lead, co-ordinate and ultimately champion opportunities to promote the health and well-being of employees. Finally the report specified that any contractual

arrangements entered into by the Council, with BSF and other providers, should incorporate the principals of green travel, healthy food and physical activity.

The Task Group were confident that, if accepted, the recommendations outlined within the report would go a long way to improve the health of people in St Helens and help to reduce obesity.



Councillor Marie E Rimmer

Joint Health Scrutiny Task Group, St Helens, Halton and Knowsley Review of Burn Care Services

Councillor Marie Rimmer led this joint health Scrutiny Task Group, together with assistance from our neighbouring authorities, Halton and Knowsley and St Helens LINK. (The Local Involvement Network - An organisation that allows people to have their say about health/social matters)

Councillors within Merseyside had expressed concerns at the recommendations put forward by the Northern Burn Care Network and the proposals that a supra regional burns centre be established at Wythenshawe, Manchester. This could have resulted in the downgrading of the burns units currently located at Alder Hey and Whiston Hospitals.

A number of concerns had been raised regarding the adequacy of the consultation undertaken and the lack of financial underpinning. A number of meetings were held which allowed the Task Group to gather evidence from St. Helens and Knowsley Hospital Trust and Halton, Alder Hey Children's Foundation Hospital, Halton and St Helens PCT and the Northern Burn Care Network.

In addition to the above a site visit was held at Alder Hey Children's Hospital and a telephone conference was held between the Chairman, the Chief Executive (St Helens) and Mike Farrer, Chief Executive NHS North West. Correspondence was also exchanged with Andy Burnham MP, Secretary of State for Health, Ann Keen MP Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and Eddie O'Hara MP. In addition to this, briefing notes were prepared and circulated to all Merseyside MPs.

As the review was coming to a close, the Strategic Health Authority issued a press release, which concluded that there was no compelling evidence to demonstrate that the new supra regional service would improve on existing outcomes for those patients with the most severe burns. However, they agreed that if evidence should emerge in the future that demonstrated people with severe burns in the North West and across the North of England had significantly lower survival rates than in other regions, then the Authority would re-examine the proposals.

If this were the case then the proposals would be passed for consideration to individual PCT Boards and their Specialised Commissioning Groups who would be required to consult fully with the local population on the new service proposals.

In response to this, Health Secretary Andy Burnham issued the following statement on 11th November 2009.

"I am aware of the strong feelings on Merseyside about the future of burns services. In any debate about the future of burns care, it is important that successful services are not destabilised. The North West Strategic Health Authority have today given their view that there is no compelling evidence to make the case for change. In my view, this statement draws a line under the recent debate and takes these proposals off the agenda. "

Until any evidence emerges to the contrary, the burns units at Alder Hey and Whiston will not be downgraded and will continue to operate and provide excellent burns care service. Scrutiny's intervention helped to save the day!

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Eric Smith

Review of Activities for Young People

This review was led by the Chair of the Committee, Councillor Eric Smith. Local people, Councillors and the Council's partners suggested that Scrutiny look at what activities were available to young people, how these were communicated and what the barriers were that prevented young people from taking part.

The review sought to identify opportunities, for young people to engage in youth activities and opportunities to seek strategies to improve provision and access to services by young people. Particular attention was paid to **early intervention**, the engagement of young people and concentrated on **universal services** – those that are open and accessible to all young people.

It was agreed to look at what activities/services were currently offered to young people aged 9 –14 (although during the course of this review provision up to 16 years of age was considered) in Sutton, Thatto Heath, Bold and Windle specifically, but also across the Borough generally. Approximately 1500 questionnaires were distributed to schools and a number of focus groups were held. A site visit was also undertaken to Nottingham who had recently undertaken a similar review.

During the review it became apparent that whether perceived or real, the general feeling among young people is that there was not enough for them to do. Better, more targeted information was needed to increase knowledge of available opportunities.

Evidence showed that there was often a low awareness of what activities were available in the local areas – not just from the young people themselves but parents, external partner organisations and schools etc. Departments within the Council were not always aware of

what activities were provided by other departments or by the third or voluntary sector. However, the Family Information Service (FIS) was currently working on the creation of a database, which would go some way towards providing this information.

Throughout the review, the task group saw the Local Authority and schools playing a pivotal role in facilitating a joined-up approach by all sectors to provide youth activities. A number of recommendations were made including the creation of a fully inclusive Communication Strategy be devised with young people to promote participation in positive activities and the possibility of developing Local/Area Partnership Youth Action Plans in the four neighbourhood areas be investigated. A comprehensive list of recommendations that are relevant to the Council and our partner organisations have been submitted to the Executive.

The Committee is now eager to receive their response.

Environment and Safer Communities Scrutiny Committee



Councillor John Beirne

Review of Alcohol and Young People

The review of alcohol and young people was led by the Chair of the Committee, Councillor John Beirne. The Committee wanted to look at how some of the issues relating to alcohol and young people in St Helens could be addressed.

Local people, Councillors and the Council's partners suggested that the issue be looked at by scrutiny because it affected a lot of people in the borough. From anti-social behaviour affecting local communities to the individual health of our young people, there were plenty of important issues associated with young people's use and misuse of alcohol.

The review found that it was problematic to develop a clear picture of alcohol misuse among young people in St Helens and there were often problems regarding data sharing between different organisations. Improved data-recording and data-sharing protocols between agencies would go a long way towards improving the effectiveness of services related to young people and alcohol.

Every area has a Youth Alcohol Action Plan which sets out clear priorities that need to be met in order to address the problems of drinking by young people. The task group felt that an appropriate body should monitor the progress and implementation of this plan in order to ensure that its aims were being met in a co-ordinated way within St Helens.

They found that some excellent work was being undertaken by a range of organisations in St Helens, particularly relating to the control, prevention and education of young people's use and misuse of alcohol. However, it was clear that young people received mixed messages about alcohol and needed to receive consistent and appropriate messages about alcohol from all services and organisations that they came into contact with. Educational

establishments were key places to ensure that children and young people received timely and accurate information/advice about alcohol.

St.Helens Council had different arrangements than neighbouring Halton Borough Council for services relating to alcohol and young people. Whilst the task group was not aware that either arrangement was more or less effective, a review comparing the two arrangements and how each measures outcomes could identify areas of improvement.

A copy of the full report and a list of recommendations have been submitted to the Executive for consideration. The Committee looks forward to receiving their response shortly.

Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Andy Bowden

Review of Under One Roof

Local people, Councillors and the Council's partners suggested that the Council's Choice Based Lettings Scheme, Under One Roof was a topic that the Scrutiny Team should look at this year. Feedback from our Ward Committees highlighted that there was a general misunderstanding about the Council's and Helena Partnerships' roles in the scheme and Councillors felt it was important to look how the scheme works, how it impacts on communities and what if anything could be improved.

The task group was led by Councillor Andy Bowden and was supported by co-optees from Under One Roof and the Community Empowerment Network. Tenants and Residents Associations and Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) were also heavily involved in the review.

Evidence highlighted there was a distinct misunderstanding of the Council's role and the role of Helena Partnerships in the Under One Roof scheme. Many tenants believed that the scheme was purely Helena Partnerships' responsibility, whilst others thought that Helena Partnerships was just another 'arm' of the council. Feedback from the focus group highlighted this issue. The policy was the responsibility of the Council, whilst Helena Partnerships had been tasked with delivering it.

The task group felt that more needed to be done to get the message across about the amount of stock available, who it was currently allocated to, and the number of people waiting. Whilst recognising that Under One Roof was unable to discuss details of particular cases, this was often the cause of the feelings of mistrust. The perception of tenants could be quite fixed and it was felt that local agencies and local Councillors all had a role in assisting local residents to grasp these complexities.

The task group learnt that the use of local letting policies could go some way towards managing and creating more sustainable communities. However they recognised that the

use of these policies could be very complicated and were only a time limited solution. Whilst there are a number of local policies in place in St Helens, more understanding of their possibilities and benefits by RSLs was required.

A copy of the full report and associated recommendations has been submitted to the Executive for their consideration. The committee are looking forward to their response.



Councillor Andy Bowden

Review of Private Sector Housing

Feedback from Councillors, our partners and Ward Committees highlighted that there were concerns about how some private landlords were managing their housing stock and the impact this was having on communities. The Committee felt it was important to look at how this sector was being managed, how it impacted on communities, how we could use legislation, how we could better work with private landlords and others to help to address problems and what, if anything could be improved.

Councillor Andy Bowden, Chair of the Committee led the task group, who again, were greatly assisted by the Community Empowerment Network, Registered Social Landlords, National Landlords Forum and Tenants and Residents Associations.

We concluded that the Council had a key role to play in raising greater awareness of, and helping landlords gain access to, available grant or loan funding to improve the quality and energy efficiency of their housing. We would like the Council to be more proactive in engaging landlords in the development of future improvement programmes/schemes aimed at raising the quality and condition of private rented sector housing.

Throughout the review we were aware that one of the more frequent criticisms of the private rented sector related to the quality of management by landlords. The Rugg ¹ Review also highlighted this and recognised the need for a partnership approach. This involved working closely with private landlords and other agencies and using a mix of enabling, regulatory and enforcement functions to ensure a healthy and good quality private rented sector.

Accreditation is recognised as a good example of this and throughout the review we visited authorities and learnt of excellent examples of where the introduction of such schemes had considerably driven up standards in the private rented sector. These schemes allowed

¹ Findings from a review of Private Sector Housing by Julie Rugg and David Rhodes (known as the Rugg Review) were reported in October 2008 and raised a number of issues to improve the sector.

potential tenants to easily identify the more professional landlords who can offer them a better overall service both in terms of quality of accommodation and customer care.

We became aware that a Liverpool City Region Landlord Accreditation Feasibility Study was undertaken in August 2009. From this initial study, a report to the City Region Housing and Spatial Planning Board has been supported to progress this issue.

Whilst we felt that St Helens would benefit from the delivery of a joint accreditation scheme we believed that it was important that the existing local scheme was taken into account and built on. We proposed that any joint scheme be marketed and badged under a universal banner but contain local criteria unique in helping to better manage our communities.

Throughout the review we saw examples of the good work undertaken by the Landlord and Tenant Liaison Officer and heard a great deal of praise about the way in which the role is carried out from the focus group of tenants and residents. Relationships in the borough were well established and there are good working links with RSL's and Merseyside Police. However, whilst the Landlords Forum was well established, we felt that more could be done to promote it and bring partner organisations on board.

The full report and associated recommendations have been submitted to the Executive for consideration and the Committee awaits their response.

Financial Scrutiny

Overview and Scrutiny Commission



Councillor Marie E Rimmer

Review of Budget Setting Process 2010/11

In the current economic climate members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission wanted to make sure that they could continue to deliver the services which are most important to the Council and St Helens residents. Councillor Marie Rimmer led the task group and undertook a review of the Draft Portfolio Spending Plans as part of its scrutiny of the 2010/11 budget setting process.

There were a number of outcomes from this exercise that the Overview and Scrutiny Commission asked the Executive to consider and a response was received which detailed the actions and measures to be used to address these concerns.

Audit and Financial Monitoring Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Stephanie Topping

The Audit and Financial Monitoring Committee, chaired by Councillor Steph Topping 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 Committee has also reviewed and scrutinised all Internal Audit reports and requested explanations in respect of outstanding Audit recommendations and internal control weaknesses.

Developing Scrutiny in St Helens

Since the appointment of the dedicated team in February 2009, we have set ourselves targets for raising the profile of Overview and Scrutiny and involving partners in our work.

Some of the recent developments are:

- We had an excellent response to this year's invitation for partners and local people to put forward suggestions for the scrutiny work programme. As a result the work programme for 2009/10 reflected those issues that matter to our partners and local people.
- We have had a record number of co-optees, namely the Community Empowerment Network, the Primary Care Trust, Helena Housing, Merseyside Police and Registered Social Landlords becoming members of our task and finish groups. This has enabled scrutiny to benefit from their knowledge and experiences throughout the reviews and has resulted well-balanced reports and recommendations that will add value for the borough as a whole.
- We have developed dedicated scrutiny web pages which allow people to keep up to date with what we are doing. Copies of all reviews, newsletters and Annual Reports are available to download. The web site is promoted at every opportunity.
- We have produced a communications plan which aims to develop a co-ordinated approach to communicating all aspects of the scrutiny function both internally with members and officers and externally with the public and other key stakeholders. This will promote the 'value added' element of successful scrutiny and raise the profile of Scrutiny in St Helens.
- We have recently co-opted a member of the Police Authority onto our Environment and Safer Communities Scrutiny Committee which will assist with the thorough

scrutiny of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and the Community Safety Strategy.

- We continue to work closely with the Community Empowerment Network and St Helens LINKs and liaise to ensure that our work programmes complement and reflects the needs/priorities of communities within the borough.
- We established a joint health scrutiny task group with Halton and Knowsley and undertook a detailed review of Burn Care Services.

The Year Ahead

This annual report highlights the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Committees. We want to build on this during the forthcoming year, and ensure that Scrutiny continues to recommend improvements to public services and through this, make a real difference to users of those services.

In particular we want to focus on ensuring engagement with the key partners in the borough and with local people and our work programme for 2010/11 will reflect their priorities.

Scrutiny needs to add value in the work it carries out and including the views and experiences of residents is key to this. We will work hard to make sure that anyone has the opportunity to get involved should they wish to.

We will continue to work more effectively with our partners on scrutiny and continue to challenge our Executive members in a constructive way and make recommendations that result in positive outcomes for local people.

We will also continue to build good working relationships with our colleagues from health, police and community organisations.

Contact Us

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

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Contact Us

If you think there's a service or an issue that is in need of scrutiny, please complete the form below and return it FREEPOST

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