



St. Helens
Council

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report

2008/09



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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to introduce our 2008/09 Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report. I believe it clearly demonstrates Scrutiny Councillors here in St.Helens are continuing to embrace and overcome the challenges that scrutiny brings.

During 2008/09 we have introduced new scrutiny support arrangements and new ways of working by scrutiny committees and their associated working groups. February 2009 saw the introduction of a dedicated scrutiny support team that is able to give scrutiny a more independent perspective.

The new scrutiny process is working well with some real achievements. It provides an improved opportunity to work with local people to consider issues that are of concern to them, as well as helping the Council improve its performance and continue to make a difference.

The role of scrutiny continues to evolve and, with the introduction of the new Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, will strengthen its connection with the major providers of public services in the local community.

Looking back over the year as a whole, it was inevitable that time would be required to get the new processes and ways of working operating correctly. The breadth of the issues considered and the quality of the recommendations made over the last year indicate that the Council takes the responsibility of effective governance seriously – effective scrutiny is integral to this.

The report sets out work conducted and achievements for each of the scrutiny committees during 2008/09, and I look forward to Overview and Scrutiny achieving even more in 2009/10.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has taken part in our reviews this year. Thanks to those of you who have given up their time to share their views, helped us gather evidence or been involved in preparing briefings. Without your contributions, we would not have been able to come to our informed conclusions.



Councillor Marie E Rimmer
Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Commission



What is Overview and Scrutiny?

For the last eight years, the Council has operated on the basis of a 7 member Executive, which has responsibility for making decisions on the policies agreed by Full Council.

Overview and Scrutiny Councillors consider and, where necessary, question the decisions made by the Executive. By stepping back from the day-to-day decision-making process, they are able to look in detail at the quality of Council and other local services that affect the lives of people in St.Helens. They monitor the Council's performance, and make recommendations as to whether new policies, or changes to existing policies, would lead to better outcomes.

Unlike the Executive, Scrutiny Councillors do not hold any decision-making powers.

As leaders of the community, Overview and Scrutiny Councillors try to make sure that local people are involved in identifying issues that can be dealt with through the scrutiny process.

During their reviews of specific issues, they gather information in many different ways and regularly consult local people. The recommendations that they make, whether to the Executive, the Council, the Primary Care Trust, the Police or to other external organisations, are very influential and are always based on the evidence that they have collected.

How many Overview and Scrutiny Committees are there?

In March 2008, Professor Steve Leach of De-Montfort University was commissioned to carry out a review of Overview and Scrutiny in St.Helens. Following this review, Overview and Scrutiny saw a new structure implemented. An Overview and Scrutiny Commission and five Overview and Scrutiny Committees were established.

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 in which we get involved 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, 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.

Who's who on Overview and Scrutiny Commissions?

Overview and Scrutiny Commission



Chairman
Councillor
Marie E Rimmer



Vice Chairman
Councillor
Stephanie Topping

Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure



Chairman
Councillor
Andy Bowden



Vice Chairman
Councillor
Ken Knowles

Adult Social Care and Health



Chairman
Councillor
Joe Pearson



Vice Chairman
Councillor
Janet Sheldon

Audit and Financial Monitoring



Chairman
Councillor
Stephanie Topping



Vice Chairman
Councillor
Barry Grunewald

Children and Young People's Services



Chairman
Councillor
Eric Smith



Vice Chairman
Councillor
Neil Taylor

Environment and Safer Communities



Chairman
Councillor
John Beirne



Vice Chairman
Councillor
Linda Maloney

How you can get involved in Scrutiny

There are many ways in which you can get involved:

- **Attend 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
- **Apply 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)
- **Suggest a topic** – one key objective of scrutiny is to reflect concerns of the public and its communities. If you would like to suggest an issue for them to review, 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.

Developing Scrutiny in St.Helens

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

Some of the recent developments are:

- We have introduced a quarterly scrutiny newsletter to keep people up to date with what we are doing – this is available in Council offices and on our website.
- We have produced a scrutiny leaflet explaining what scrutiny is and how local people can get involved. The leaflet encourages feedback/suggestions for the work programme and has a freepost return slip. The Community Empowerment Network has been very helpful in publicising scrutiny and has distributed our leaflet to representatives of community organisations within St.Helens.
- We are constantly trying new ways in which to encourage local people to tell us about the issues that concern them where scrutiny's involvement might make a difference. This year, the scrutiny team had a stall at the St.Helens Festival and worked hard to promote awareness amongst St.Helens' residents.
- We've had an excellent response to this year's invitation for partners and local people to put forward suggestions for the scrutiny work programme. A special workshop consisting of over 60 people was held which identified priority issues for scrutiny. These topics were then put out to full public consultation, via the Council's website, Ward Committees, the Community Empowerment Network, schools and colleges, the local press and the Council's magazine. As a result, the scrutiny work programme for next year is made up of topics not only identified by councillors and partner organisations, but also reflects the concerns of local people.
- Councillor Rimmer, the Chair of the Commission, attended a meeting of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to present scrutiny's proposed work programme for 2009/10. This gave the LSP the opportunity to comment, suggest and volunteer to take part in review topics they felt would benefit from scrutiny's input. We recognise that, by working this way from the outset, it will help to make our reviews meaningful to all those taking part and will result in adding real value.

- We are continuing to use more 'Task and Finish' group working with appropriate support from officers, outside the formal committee environment. We feel that this way of working enables those on the Task Group to investigate an area more thoroughly and gives them more opportunities to ask questions and fully understand the issues.
- We are very keen to encourage the use of co-option onto our 'Task and Finish' groups and have had offers of help to work together on next year's work programme, from a number of organisations within St.Helens. We believe that assistance from members of the public and under-represented community groups can be extremely valuable, as Councillors would like to hear from 'users' of services. These views help towards producing a well-balanced report – we will continue to pursue the use of co-option.
- We recognise the benefits of good consultation and we are keen to work with the Council's Consultation Manager to make best use of the various resources we have on offer. Amongst other things, we will continue to use the potential of the Council's website, establish appropriate Focus Groups and make more use of the Residents' Panel to better inform, engage and involve the community.
- The Scrutiny Team have attended the Council's Ward Committees to promote awareness around scrutiny. We intend to utilise this further with the aim of developing our consultation around scrutiny topics/reviews at Ward Committee level.
- Work has been ongoing behind the scenes on the effect of recent legislation that will enhance the powers of scrutiny and give it a more prominent role in shaping the future of St.Helens. A 'Councillor Call for Action' process is being developed which should lead to key issues and local problems being tackled quickly.

Training

Following the introduction of the new scrutiny arrangements, all members have been offered the opportunity to undertake a personal development plan. This highlights the areas where individual members feel they would benefit from further training.

Specific scrutiny training has been offered on chairing meetings, the new Scrutiny arrangements and the Council's Code of Conduct for Members.

External training was also provided on Scrutinising Partnerships. Scrutiny members felt that it would be useful to invite key partners to take part and, therefore, learn more about Scrutiny's remit and how new legislation might affect them.

A number of one-off briefing sessions have been held with Scrutiny members, which have proved very useful and are programmed to continue throughout 2009/10. Sessions during 2008/09 include awareness around the Multi-Area Assessment process, St.Helens' approach to the personalisation agenda, the Policing Green Paper, Communities in Control, and Under One Roof – the approach to Choice-Based Lettings.

The Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen also continue to attend the North West Employers' Scrutiny Member and Officer Group. This provides an opportunity to share good practice amongst local councils and discuss issues affecting scrutiny.

Key Messages from Scrutiny Reviews in 2008/09

Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Committee

- Review of Eligibility Criteria

This review was to look at the application of eligibility criteria for adult social care services in St.Helens and to get an understanding of the customer journey from assessment through to services commencing. It became apparent at the outset of the review that there were proposed national developments and it was agreed to examine if the eligibility criteria and associated processes in St.Helens were fit for purpose.

The review included hearing evidence from service users, carers, the Care Management Team and the Access to Information Team. Feedback showed that service users and their carers were generally very positive of the service they had received. However, a number of respondents were unaware of the contact details of the person who carried out their assessment or advised of how to complain if services were not meeting their needs.

A number of areas were identified where improvements could be made, in particular strengthening the system which would ensure that FACS classifications are maintained within the Council's databases.

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee

- Review of CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)

The aims of the CAHMS review was to gain an understanding of specialist provision provided by schools, Children and Young People's Services, CAHMS and through the Acute Trust at Whiston, and examine how this provision for emotional wellbeing and health was developing.

As part of the review, the Task Group was keen to look at how emotional wellbeing was being promoted in St.Helens' schools and undertook a number of site visits. It became apparent that prevention and early identification were key elements to an effective approach to emotional wellbeing and mental health, and that this was being achieved at school level through a number of initiatives including SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), SCAMHP (Short Child and Adolescent Mental Health Programme) and Rainbow (Resilience Training).

During the review, it became apparent that initiatives such as these equip staff with the necessary skills to identify potential issues at the earliest possible stage, and deal with the matter appropriately, either at school level or with additional external support.

The Task Group were encouraged by the extent to which the schools that they visited had adopted the programmes in place and embedded these into the ethos of the whole school. However, whilst information was provided to evidence the number of schools within the Borough to which these training programmes have been delivered, there was limited information regarding the extent to which the school embraces them.

A list of recommendations for both the Council and the PCT was produced towards improving service delivery, and these have been submitted to the Executive. The Committee is now eager to see their response.

- Review of Governing Bodies

A Task Group was appointed to undertake a review of Governing Bodies in a sample of schools in order to consider the contribution that Governing Bodies make to the performance of the school and outcomes for pupils. Whilst it was recognised that these bodies were purely voluntary, The Task Group felt it was important to consider that appropriate communication channels existed and that the Governing Body was as effective as it could be in its role within the Borough's schools.



The review included hearing evidence from a range of sources, including documentary evidence, presentations from the Governor Development Officer on the roles and responsibilities of Governing Bodies and the role of St.Helens Council's Governor Support Services, and the despatch of 1100 questionnaires to every school Governor in the Borough (over 400 were returned - a response rate of 36%). Evidence from these questionnaires helped to inform the interviews that were undertaken with Head Teachers, Chairs of Governors, Staff Governors, Parent Governors and Community Governors at various schools.

Whilst most of the findings from evidence presented was positive, results from the questionnaire, however, revealed a relatively low attendance rate at training, with 48% of respondents stating that they had attended no training, and a further 35% having been on one or two courses within the last school year. In addition, 56% of respondents attended the Governor introductory course when they became a Governor. The Task Group raised concerns about the low figures and felt that there should be a strong statement of expectation by the Local Authority that all new Governors undertake induction training before becoming permanent members of the Governing Body.

The completed review is due to be submitted to the Executive in Autumn 2009 and has recommended that the feedback from the vast amount of consultation undertaken be submitted to the Governors' Forum for general discussion.

Environment and Safer Communities Scrutiny Committee

- Review of Safer Routes to Schools

The purpose of this review was to assess if the School Travel Plan Project and Safer Routes to School scheme were being rolled out effectively, and assess the impact and effectiveness of the scheme. The DCSF had produced guidance which stated that every school in England will be engaged in the School Travel Plan Project by 2010 – whilst a number of schools within St.Helens had become engaged, the Task Group wanted to examine the barriers to schools becoming involved in the project, and what could be done to improve this.

Consultations, presentations from various departments and site visits to a number of schools provided the Task Group with a valuable insight. It became clear that some schools did not have the resources available to carry out the preparation required, and only those able to commit the time and resource were the ones with Travel Plans. Some of the teachers undertaking the work were doing it in addition to their daily workload. Overall it was felt that good progress had been made and, whilst not every school had a fully functioning Travel Plan, most schools were engaged in the process and were aware of the advantages.

A final report will be submitted to the Executive in Autumn 2009.



Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Committee

- Review of the Town Centre

This review was originally set up to look at how we could look towards regenerating the town centre. However, since initially agreeing the scope of the review, the Committee acknowledge that economic conditions had changed significantly in a relatively short period of time as the review progressed. Whilst interviews took place during the last 6 months, evidence gathered from these was already out of date in many ways. The Committee, therefore, took into account the work already being undertaken in identifying and implementing strategies to control the effect of this.

From the outset of the review, it became clear that the topic chosen covered a multitude of areas, each which could have been subject to a separate review in itself. As a result, the Committee agreed to undertake a light touch approach and highlighted areas which they felt could benefit from further investigation.

From the various interviews and presentations undertaken, the Task Group agreed that main key issues and challenges facing the town centre were:

- Vacancy rates
- Getting more people into the town centre
- Improving the retail offer
- Ravenhead Park and Tesco Stadium development
- Management of the town centre
- Town centre parking.

The Task Group agreed a number of recommendations that will be used to inform further work of the Committee around the strategic management of the town centre.

Financial Scrutiny

The Scrutiny Commission has scrutinised the Executive's budget proposals for 2009/10 and raised concerns with the Executive on the draft spending plans. Subsequently, a response was received from the Executive detailing measures and actions to address these concerns.

The Audit and Financial Monitoring committee 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. This Committee has also reviewed and scrutinised all Internal Audit reports and requested explanations in respect of outstanding Audit recommendations and internal control weaknesses.



The Year Ahead

This annual report highlights the steps the Council has taken in achieving effective scrutiny through the establishment of a designated resource to support its 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.

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 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.

It is nearly a year since the new scrutiny arrangements were introduced and we intend to undertake a detailed self-evaluation exercise to look at how we operate and to identify any areas for improvement. This will be completed by the end of this year.

We will also continue to build good working relationships with our colleagues from Health and the Police. The new legislation promotes the co-option of partner representatives onto Health and Community Safety Committees, and we will be looking to encourage this.



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St.Helens Council

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