



Scrutiny

in the Forest of Dean

Annual Report

2009/10



Community Scrutiny and Review Committee
Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee

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Foreword

We are pleased to report on a very busy and successful year for scrutiny. The Council has undergone a year consolidating political and operational changes made last year, as well as learning to live within the financial constraints imposed by last year's budget. It is against this background that scrutiny has, we hope, developed in order to add value to the Council's activity.

We have been happy to receive a steady stream of public questions and note that other Council committees now include the same within their agendas. We continue to value these questions and urge members of the public to bring forward their areas of interest and concern.

We would like to thank all those members who have contributed to the work of task groups. They have helped produce some detailed reports with important recommendations.

Democratic Services has again provided thorough support and unbounded patience, enthusiasm and energy. We thank them for their continued assistance.

We would also like to thank all the Council officers and external agencies for the research and evidence they have given to all areas of our activity.



Councillor Terry Hale
Chairman
Community Scrutiny and Review

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Terry Hale'.



Councillor Philip Burford
Chairman
Corporate Scrutiny and Review

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Philip Burford'.

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Our vision for scrutiny

Our Council vision states “*We want the Forest of Dean District to be a thriving community where people are proud to live*”. We see a strong scrutiny function as essential in helping us work towards this vision.

Effective scrutiny is an integral part of the democratic process - ensuring that the Council remains accountable and delivers efficient services to our local communities.

Building on the strengths of the previous year, our Scrutiny and Review Committees and their Task Groups have demonstrated they can continue to play this vital role in a number of ways, including:

- Providing a strong voice on matters of local concern, representing the views of our communities
- Supporting policy development and improvement work, including seeking best practice from elsewhere
- Reviewing Cabinet decisions through the call-in procedure, to ensure decisions are in the best interests of local people; and
- Monitoring the performance and value for money of services run by the Council and other organisations,

The variety of work covered and the breadth of issues considered over the last year demonstrates that the Council takes effective scrutiny seriously and shows where progress continues to be made.

We believe it is vital to have robust governance throughout the Council and effective scrutiny is fundamental to this. The positive challenge of scrutiny can place the Cabinet and the Council in a better position to take informed and positive decisions. For this reason, we remain committed to supporting the scrutiny process and its continued development.



Sue Pangbourne
Head of Paid Service



Peter Hibberd
Strategic Director



Peter Amos
Leader of the Council

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What is scrutiny?

Public scrutiny is regarded as an essential part of maintaining effective decision-making at all levels of government. The Centre for Public Scrutiny describes scrutiny as ***the activity by an elected or appointed organisation or office, in examining and monitoring the performance of a public sector body, with the aim of improving the quality of public services.*** (A public sector body is one that carries out public functions or spends public money).

The scrutiny process endeavours to ensure that decision-making bodies, (Cabinet), are held accountable for their decisions, that their decision-making process is clear and accessible to the public and that there are opportunities for the public and their representatives to influence and improve public policy.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny believes that good public scrutiny is based on the following principles: -

- a) Providing a “critical friend” challenge to the cabinet and external authorities and agencies
- b) Reflecting the voice and concerns of the public and its communities
- c) Taking the lead and owning the scrutiny process on behalf of the public
- d) Making an impact on the delivery of public services

The focus for scrutiny must be based upon the achievement of outcomes rather than upon process and procedures in order to develop a function that can make a real difference to the Council and the district.

It is essential that the Council has an active and challenging scrutiny function that reflects corporate priorities regarding the provision of services.

Scrutiny should be positive, objective and constructive, seeking to add value to any service that it considers. Scrutiny should acknowledge good practice where found and recommend improvements where necessary.

Recommendations

Scrutiny's ability to influence the decisions taken and to develop and improve services relies on how robust and practicable their recommendations are. Recommendations must be evidence based with clear links to the key messages arising from their work. For the high priority reviews, this will include presenting preferred options to deliver the improvements identified through scrutiny work.

Recommendations should also support the following:

- Improving services for local people
- Helping the Council to use its resources more effectively
- Helping deliver efficiency gains
- Helping deliver better value for money

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Responsibilities

The Council adopted a new way of working in December 2007 by introducing a Leader and Cabinet governance arrangement. The key decisions for the next four months can be found in the forward plan (please see the Council website or contact Democratic Services on 01594 812625). This is aimed at improving democracy, accountability and efficiency.

Leader and Cabinet

The Leader of the Council and six councillors comprise the Cabinet. Each Cabinet Member is responsible for a portfolio of services. Cabinet decisions are made by the whole Cabinet at Cabinet meetings, but within the policy framework and budget agreed by the Full Council.

Scrutiny and Review

Where the decisions are made within existing Council policies they become effective immediately unless they are "called in". Calling in is a mechanism whereby other councillors can challenge key decisions before they are implemented. Two scrutiny and review committees of non-Cabinet members have been established to monitor decisions, review policies and performance and to make recommendations for future action.

Council

The Council has the ultimate power to hold the Cabinet to account.

The Council's functions are to

- Set the budget each year and the policy framework within which Cabinet members must operate
- Make decisions required by statute
- Consider, debate and approve budget, policy and major service proposals
- Scrutinise the performance of the Cabinet with the assistance of scrutiny committees
- Appoint the Leader and make appointments to the committees and outside bodies
- Consider wider matters affecting the authority

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Annual Scrutiny Event



On 3 September 2009 the Council welcomed Robert Rogers, Clerk Assistant and Director General, Chamber and Committee Services of the House of Commons to share his experiences of scrutiny at a national level.

Robert raised the following points regarding good scrutiny practice:

- Working methods – plan what is to be investigated, do your homework
- Be authoritative
- Flexibility is important
- Always have access to the people who are going to be affected
- Keep media sweet and informed
- Be supportive and courteous
- Give credit when credit is due
- Follow up recommendations
- Be aware of the delayed drop effect – don't always have to have an immediate response
- Consider carefully the witnesses you choose

In discussion to encourage more public involvement the following suggestions were made:

- Invent a mechanism to put the public in charge of the agenda
- Informally meet with local newspaper reporters to raise the profile of scrutiny and advise them what we are doing
- Take scrutiny out into the community, visit venues churches and parish halls
- Investigate any additional costs and extra work for officers
- How to determine topics /issues to discuss at meetings
- What it would achieve
- Try going out to the parishes to see the response

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Community Scrutiny and Review Committee annual report



Terry Hale
Chairman



James Bevan
Vice Chairman



Carole
Allaway Martin



Heather
Dalziel



Andrew
Gardiner



Paul
Hiett



*Gabriella
Kirkpatrick



Mairilyn
Smart OBE



David
Thomson



*Roger
Yeates

* Indicates membership for part of the year 2009/10

The committee's role

The role of the Community Scrutiny and Review Committee is to look at issues relating to the economic, environmental and social well being of the community and to consider the work of external bodies operating outside the council, including local partnerships, voluntary bodies and local health services.

Summary

The scrutiny function at the Forest of Dean District Council became effective following the introduction of the Government Act 2000 and involved a widespread programme of reform and modernisation across local government in England. Evolving from a three-tier scrutiny committee structure that was introduced during the initial stages of scrutiny at the Forest of Dean District Council, the Community Scrutiny and Review Committee was established in January 2006, and has met on four occasions during the period May 2009 to April 2010, two meetings were cancelled one due to the weather and the other due to purdah.

On 13 August 2009 the Chairman organised an event with Time and Place Road Safety charity. All members, town and parish councils were invited to attend. An informative presentation from the charity explained the consequences of drinking and driving, using a mobile phone whilst driving, driving at excessive speed and other road safety issues. At the end of the presentation a question and answer session was held.

During this period the committee has covered the following issues: -

- (a) Wild Boar recommendations
- (b) Public Conveniences
- (c) Anti Social Behaviour
- (d) Community Interest Company
- (e) Sanctuary Scheme
- (f) Home Improvement Agency
- (g) Community Engagement Strategy
- (h) Advisory Services Task Group

(a) Wild Boar Recommendations

At the meeting on 18 June 2009, members received the final report from the Boar Task Group. A full and comprehensive review had been undertaken including several evidence gathering meetings. The task group recommended that the council support the Forestry Commission in taking responsibility as the main landowner within the Forest of Dean in effectively managing wild boar and boar-like animals, wherever such animals might create potential risk.

The Forestry Commission, consulted with the Verderer's Court on how to manage the number of wild boar and boar like animals within the Forest of Dean, and on how to educate the district. These recommendations will be available on the Council's website www.fdean.gov.uk.

The following information relating to the situation with Wild Boar in the Forest of Dean was received by the Committee from the Forestry Commission: -

Following the work of the Committee's Task Group which assessed the issues with wild boar and derived a view from the community as to the best way forward, Peter Hibberd (FoDDC Strategic Director) wrote to the Verderers on 20th July 2009 and recommended that boar should be controlled to a level slightly less than at that time, in order to reduce damage and prevent harm to the Forest and visitors to the Forest.

This was considered at the Verderers Court on 24 July 2009 and the Verderers asked the Forestry Commission to draft a strategy for dealing with the wild boar and present it at the next Court, but in the meantime they asked the Forestry Commission to take steps to manage the situation.

A strategy was duly presented to the Court on 23 October 2009 and following discussion and some amendment, was endorsed - with a copy supplied to the Council and a summary published on the Verderers website (www.deanverderers.org.uk).

A meeting of the Community and Scrutiny Committee in the autumn resulted in a request to the Forestry Commission for information which could be published to guide the public on how to deal with boar in the Forest - this has been supplied to the Council.

Since the decision of the Verderers in July, steps have been taken to reduce the population as required by the management strategy with 40 boar removed in that time.

The operation has not been straightforward. It is apparent that extreme opinions are held for and against controlling the boar population. Equipment has been vandalised or stolen, and Forestry Commission staff have been publicly and personally threatened, necessitating police involvement. A further complication came in the formation of the "Friends of the Wild Boar" group which generated a lot of publicity about the issue, including claiming that all the boar would be gone from the Dean by August 2010. This required the Forestry Commission staff to engage in much media and public relation activity to present a more balanced view of the issue of boar populations.

The situation is complicated by the inability to actually evaluate the size of the wild boar population, and therefore whether the control measures which have been undertaken are succeeding in reducing it. Despite the control measures to date, it is apparent that the boar are still having an impact throughout the Forest of Dean. For example, early in the New Year, boar, prevented from feeding normally because of frozen ground, took to interfering with rubbish bins in the settlements. The reporting of this phenomenon was circulated literally world-wide. Since the thaw, the boar have taken to rooting the ground in search of food, and damage to verges and open areas is evident in many locations, notably on Ruardean Hill. In the past few weeks, piglets have become very evident, and control measures are currently restricted by the animal welfare issues associated with the lactating sows.

Implementation of the strategy will continue.

(b) Public Conveniences

At the meeting on the 23 July 2009, the committee was advised that the Asset Management Strategy Plan which was agreed by the Cabinet, was committed to retaining public conveniences in the main towns and key tourist locations.

(c) Anti Social Behaviour

At the meeting of the 23 July 2009 information was provided regarding current perceptions of Anti Social Behaviour. Preventative aims and enforcement methods were demonstrated on how the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership engage with local communities, on how to tackle anti social behaviour.

(d) Community Interest Company

Mr Bill Hobman, a representative from the Community Interest Company, was invited by the Chairman to attend the meeting of the Community Scrutiny and Review Committee on 15 October 2009, to update the current position of the company, following concerns from members of the public and councillors regarding payments that had been paid by the Council to the Community Interest Company. Various questions were put to Mr Hobman regarding the trading of the company. The Chairman advised at the meeting of 21 January 2010 that this matter was still on going and the Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee was also looking into this issue.

(e) Sanctuary Scheme

At the meeting of the 18 June 2009 it was suggested that a cabinet working group be considered to act as a forum for the Sanctuary Scheme exercise.

(f) Home Improvement Agency

At the meeting on the 21 January 2010 two representatives from Gloucestershire County Council attended this meeting advising the committee on how the Home Improvement Agency could provide a variety of services, and how this service could be improved and be run more economically. The Committee understood that in order to maintain services on a tight budget, the Council needed to work together with partners.

(g) Community Engagement Strategy

This report was presented to the 21 January 2010 meeting, it provided a draft Communications and Engagement Strategy, that set out the Council's commitment to communications and engagement. It detailed how the Council would coordinate the way we engage with all their communities to improve local services and help local people to influence decisions by making sure they have the information necessary to make informed decisions.

6.1

Advisory Services Task Group



Di Martin
Chairman

Other members

Terry Hale, Jane Horne, David Thomson

Lead officer

Steve Kendall, Group Manager for Sustainable Development

Terms of reference

The Community Scrutiny and Review Committee formed a task group on 4 June 2008, This task group was reconvened on 19 August 2009 with new terms of reference.

Reasons for Inquiry

- To investigate and gain an understanding of the issues surrounding provision of advisory services in the Forest of Dean.

Desired Outcomes

- To provide an assurance of the value for money and level of service that will be contributed from the joint commissioning of advice services.
- To guarantee a reliable and efficient service
- Watch and brief process of the cabinet decision

Summary

An update on the Advisory Services Task Group was presented at the meeting in January 2010. At that meeting members were informed that representatives from the Citizen Advice Bureau and the task group would discuss the position of the county's contract regarding the delivery of services in the district, and the best way to deliver advisory services in the district with the group. A full report will be presented to the Community Scrutiny and Review Committee by the Chairman at the June 2010 meeting.

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Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee annual report



Philip Burford
Chairman



David Easton
Vice Chairman



Keith
Aburrow



Derek
Biddle



Max
Coborn



Grace
Bensted



*Frankie
Evans



*Peter
Ede



Len
Lawton



*Denis
Riley

* Indicates membership for part of the year 209/10

The committee's role

The committee's role is to scrutinise internal issues relating to the planning, performance and management of Council services, including value for money. It checks on this aspect of the Cabinet's work as a critical friend and focuses on policy review and development.

Summary for 2009/10

The Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee met on 10 occasions in the civic year.

Cabinet forward plan matters

Each month the committee considers which items from the following month's Cabinet agenda would be appropriate for its scrutiny. The relevant Cabinet member then gives their initial thoughts to the committee and takes responses back to the Cabinet meeting. Issues this year have included service continuity after one-stop-shop closure, waste collection, waste partnership, GO-7 shared services, the place survey, the comprehensive area assessment, value for money service options, the 2010/11 budget and the workforce strategy.

Ongoing reviews

Data Quality

The committee has received regular monthly reports on this key area of development and concern for the Council.

The committee focused on the performance of the Housing Benefits team. At its meeting in March 2010 the committee considered the issue and agreed to take an oral report on the feedback from the upcoming Audit Commission inspection. The committee was pleased at the progress made by the benefits team and looked forward to the final report.

ICT

The committee has received regular monthly reports on this key area of development and concern for the Council. There has been significant progress in implementing the ICT review but there are still concerns regarding the reliability of the new member email system being implemented as a result of Government Connect.

Performance

The committee monitored performance management quarterly, using the quarterly performance reports as evidence. The committee resolved to focus on specific services at intervening meetings

Work plan

Councillor Burford invited Councillor David Penman, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at Cotswold District Council to give the committee an idea of how it had scrutinised the planning process progress, so that members could decide if a similar review was appropriate for this Council. He had found out about Councillor Penman's work at a county scrutiny learning set meeting and was pleased that the meeting had led to such tangible information sharing as this issue.

Further subjects to be considered for scrutiny activity can be brought forward by members of the Council or by the wider public via Democratic Services, the Council website or in writing to the Scrutiny Chairmen or their local ward member.

7.1

Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) Task Group



Grace Bensted
Chairman

Other members

Philip Burford, Max Coborn, David Easton, Maria Edey, Frankie Evans, Jane Horne and Di Martin

The Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee formed a task group on 10 June 2009 to assess progress towards delivery of the Sustainable Community Plan since the last working group report in March 2007.

Reasons for Inquiry:

- To assess progress towards delivery of Sustainable Community Plan since last working group report in March 2007
- Currently not all members understand the role of the Council in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)
- Provides value for money services that meet the needs of the community

Desired Outcome:

- The establishment of a clear structure and process for delivery for better prioritisation of community needs.
- The formulation of a 'route map' enabling members to influence delivery outcomes.
- Improved communication of LSP work with all members by defining representatives
- Clear elected member roles and responsibilities within LSP groups

Summary

The task group met on four occasions between July and November 2009. It considered evidence from the, Partnership Coordinator, Councillor Diana Edwards, the Cabinet member for the LSP (then Cabinet member for Community Well-being), member champions and the LSP through the Group Manager for Sustainable Development. Task group members also attended a Member Champion group meeting on 21 October 2009.

Recommendations

The task group requests that the Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee recommend the following to the Cabinet:

- a) *That member champions act as link members for all other members to the six LSP delivery groups, following the agreed terms of reference (as at annex B)*
- b) *That link members attend delivery group meetings and report back regularly to all members via ReMember in the first instance*
- c) *To add an item to each Full Council agenda entitled champion reports, where up to two champions would submit written reports and take questions*

That LSP officers report regularly the status of active and recently completed delivery group projects to a scrutiny committee.

7.2

Value for Money Task Group



Len Lawton
Chairman

Other members

Derek Biddle, Philip Burford, Jane Horne and David Thomson

Lead officer

Derek Broom, Group Manager for Finance and Property

Terms of reference

The Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee formed a task group on 30 April 2009. The committee agreed the task group's terms of reference on 10 June 2009.

Reasons for Inquiry:

- To seek practical ways of systematically monitoring value for money (VFM) by Corporate Scrutiny
- All aspects of priority 1 'provide value for money services that meets the needs of our community'

Desired Outcomes:

- To produce a framework including factors that act as triggers for scrutiny of VFM
- To identify possible areas for VFM scrutiny
- To test an area against the framework

Summary

The task group met on five occasions between the end of June and the end of September 2009. It considered evidence from models developed by Price Waterhouse Cooper, Mendip District Council and Birmingham City Council.

The group determined initial underpinning principles below that were developed at subsequent meetings.

- To consider contrast data alongside comparative data (Councils that deliver services in different as well as similar ways)
- To include commentary, which is essential to highlight elements that add clarity to the figures and set them in context
- To include cost per head
- To report against national indicators, which are audited and therefore might be up to 18 months old
- To use colour to help clarity
- To factor budget savings or overspend for the current year into the performance/cost grid
- To target the nearest higher performing council for more detailed analysis for each service area

The group set the criteria for determining a 'family' of similar councils. Treasury Officer, used Audit Commission website information from those 'family' councils to produce the framework matrix sheets.

The group asked officers to use agreed criteria to identify a smaller, more refined family group. That group comprises Babergh, East Dorset, Mid Devon, North West Leicestershire and South Derbyshire.

The group recognised that because it comprised audited figures, the information for the 'family' group might be up to 18 months old. Members agreed to insert up-to-date information in the matrices for the Forest of Dean District Council, so that trends could be observed.

On 30 September 2009 the Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee received a PowerPoint presentation outlining the key elements of the framework (available from Democratic Services). The committee added the following criterion to the agreed list: a figure for budget per head of population.

Recommendations

The task group requests that the Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee recommend the following to the Cabinet:

- a) That the framework and annexes be used by the Budget Working Group, the Corporate Scrutiny and Review Committee and any other appropriate Council body to help determine value for money of Council services;*
- b) To send all members a brochure outlining details of the 'family' group of councils;*
- c) To re-assess the criteria for the 'family' group of councils regularly.*

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Scrutiny Substitutes

So that the scrutiny process can continue at full strength, there is a pool of substitutes available to both committees.

The following councillors attend meetings when committee members of their political group are unavailable.



Georgina
Bensted



Maria
Edey



Nikki
Goodlad



Jane
Horne



Di
Martin



Graham
Morgan



Arthur
Thomas

This document can be made available on audiotape, in Braille, large print, a range of languages and in other formats if required. For further information please contact us on 01594 810000.

Forest of Dean District Council
High Street
Coleford
Glos
GL16 8HG

