

Annual Report 2009/10

**Making a Difference: Overview and Scrutiny at
Staffordshire County Council**



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Overview and Scrutiny at Staffordshire County Council 2009/10

The Local Government Act 2000 modernised Local Authority decision making arrangements. The Act established a governance model for all Local Authorities which made the majority of functions that Council's carry out the responsibility of the 'Executive' or 'Cabinet'. In Staffordshire a Leader / Cabinet model of governance is in place. The Council Leader, who is appointed by a vote of all Councillors, has appointed nine further Members to the Cabinet. Each Cabinet Member has an individual area of responsibility or 'portfolio'.

The role of the Cabinet is to:

- make decisions in accordance with the policy framework decided by the Council;
- oversee and determine how the budget is spent; and
- undertake performance management.

The Cabinet is a **decision-making** body.

Overview and Scrutiny in Staffordshire is carried out by seven Scrutiny Committees. Broadly, their role is to hold the Cabinet to account and to contribute to the Authority's continuous improvement to ensure that good quality services are delivered to the communities and citizens of Staffordshire. Some of the key ways in which they do this are set out below.

Scrutiny has a key role in supporting the Cabinet to **develop the key policies and strategies** which govern the work of the Council. Much of the scrutiny review work that the Committees undertake enables Scrutiny Members to make recommendations to Cabinet to improve service delivery.

Scrutiny also has a role in **holding the Cabinet to account** by ensuring that they are implementing policy effectively and making good decisions. There a number of ways in which scrutiny holds the Cabinet to account - including the asking questions of Cabinet Members at scrutiny meetings and 'calling-in' decisions that have been taken in order to review them.

Scrutiny plays an important role in the Council's **performance management** by monitoring the Council's achievement of the priorities and targets set out in key business plans, including the Local Area Agreement, Strategic Plan, and Thematic Improvement Plans.



Scrutiny also looks at how well the Authority delivers services in **partnerships** with other organisations and bodies - in particular through the Local Strategic Partnership and Local Area Agreement. Scrutiny also has a special responsibility to scrutinise the provision of Health services in Staffordshire under separate legislation.

Community engagement is an essential part of all scrutiny work. Scrutiny has a responsibility to encourage Staffordshire residents, the County Council's partners and the local media, to participate in scrutiny. This helps to ensure that scrutiny work is focussed on matters that are important to the communities and citizens of Staffordshire.

Scrutiny Committees

Scrutiny Committees are made up of elected Members who undertake annual work programmes which focus on:

- the delivery of the County Council's and partners main aims, as set out in their business plans;
- areas where their involvement could help improve performance; and/or
- priorities and concerns raised by the public.

The seven Scrutiny Committees that carried out this work for Staffordshire County Council during 2009/10 were:

- Assets and Budget Scrutiny Committee
- Corporate Review Committee
- Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee
- Regeneration and Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee
- Social Care Scrutiny Committee
- Communities Scrutiny Committee
- Health Scrutiny Committee.

The Communities and Health Scrutiny Committees include elected Members from the county's district and borough councils as well as the County Council.

There are also Policy Advisory Groups (PAGs), which are allocated work by the Corporate Review Committee, to support the County Council in developing its policies by undertaking detailed investigations. This year PAGs have undertaken the following scrutiny reviews:

- Sickness Absence Management
- Renewable Energy Projects on County Council Land
- Community and Learning Partnerships



The Scrutiny Chairmen



County Councillor Alan White
Chairman: Corporate Review Scrutiny
Committee



County Councillor Lee Bates
Chairman: Assets and Budget Scrutiny
Committee



County Councillor Liz Staples
Chairman: Children and Lifelong Learning
Scrutiny Committee



County Councillor Kath Perry
Chairman: Communities Scrutiny Committee





County Councillor Janet Eagland

Chairman: Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee



County Councillor Brian Edwards

Chairman: Regeneration and Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee



County Councillor Geoff Morrison

Chairman: Social Care Scrutiny Committee



Introduction

Following the local elections in May 2009 Staffordshire County Council appointed a new Conservative administration. They immediately reviewed the County Council's scrutiny arrangements and we were appointed as the new Chairs of Staffordshire's Scrutiny Committees for 2009/10.

This year has been one of considerable learning for Scrutiny Members. In June many of us were not only new to our specific roles but were also newly elected to the County Council. Therefore much of our work this year has involved getting to grips with how the County Council works and the services it delivers.

Although we have had a lot to learn we have carried out a number of important pieces of scrutiny work this year and this report sets out some of the highlights. If you would like to see a complete record of all the scrutiny work which has been conducted this year you can have a look at our completed work programmes on the Staffordshire County Council website.

<http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/yourcouncil/decisionmakingcouncil/>

We would all like to thank the all the members, officers and external witnesses and experts that have participated in scrutiny over the last year, without their contribution we would not have achieved the successes described here.

The Scrutiny Chairmen



Your Council

We know that the County Council can only deliver the most efficient and effective services to the people of Staffordshire if it is managed properly. Therefore, scrutiny members undertake a range of work throughout the year to make sure the Cabinet and the officers who work for the Council are running an effective organisation.

Every year we undertake detailed scrutiny of the Council's process for developing its financial strategy. This year we interviewed all the Cabinet Members and Directors about their budget plans. We asked them about: value for money; service priorities; spending pressures; investment needs; and efficiency requirements. Our recommendations focussed on: ensuring the Cabinet has robust information around spending pressures and realistic assessments of potential savings; the need for careful analysis and close monitoring of major contracts to ensure value for money is delivered; the use of consultants; and the importance of partnership working, shared services and technological innovation for achieving savings. These recommendations helped to ensure that the budget was robust, transparent and reflected the Council's and communities' priorities.

This year we also looked at what the County Council can do to reduce the number of sick days taken by our staff. We found that manager's play a really important role in ensuring that staff are supported to return to work, but that policies and procedures are being employed inconsistently across the Council. We have urged the Cabinet to make training on sickness absence management compulsory for all staff. We also discovered that a key reason for absence among some groups of staff is muscular-skeletal problems like bad backs – therefore we have recommended that the County Council consider buying in a dedicated physiotherapy service that could get staff back to work much more quickly, and which has the potential to save the Council money.

The County Council can make real savings by ensuring it manages its corporate property effectively and the Cabinet have been working hard to develop a Corporate Property Strategy setting out a co-ordinated approach for the use, maintenance, development and disposal of property. As this is such an important issue we reviewed the draft strategy before it was approved and asked Cabinet to take into account the following issues: the importance of considering community needs when determining the future of properties; the importance of Local Member involvement in any decisions on disposals of land or properties; and that monies transferred to the Local Education Partnership following disposal of surplus schools should be kept to a minimum.



Your Health and Wellbeing

Improving the health and emotional wellbeing of the people of Staffordshire is a priority for the County Council and the local Health Service. Commissioning is the process they use to provide health and social care services that meet the needs of the population and tackle inequalities. It should drive value for money and care quality. Scrutinising health and social care is a sizeable task and the Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee and the Social Care Scrutiny Committee have focused on commissioning as a 'way in' for Members to understand and assess services. We have a keen interest in how patients and the public are involved in this process too.

At the start of the year, we finished off a review of the commissioning arrangements for the Midlands NHS Treatment Centre in Burton upon Trent as the current contract is coming to an end. This was the first time Members had looked at independent health care provision. As a result of this work, which recognised the quality of care provided, we set some expectations for future commissioning so that the facility will be used in the best way to meet local health needs.

We also reviewed the commissioning of acute stroke care services in the south of the County - to make sure that commissioners are acting to ensure the quality of the services. On a few occasions we have advised the Health Service on public consultation where changes to health services were proposed.

People are benefitting from joint commissioning and both committees have commented on joint commissioning strategies. One of these was drug and alcohol services, where we heard first-hand from people about their experiences of drug and alcohol addiction and recovery. We recommended a Council debate which gave rise to a commitment from the County Council to tackling the damaging effects of irresponsible drinking on individuals, communities and the local economy – with an expectation of support from other organisations.

Other work has included: Members responding to national consultation on Shaping the Future of Care Together – government reform of the care and support system to adults, agreeing the financial contributions to social care, the new patient rights in the NHS Constitution, and the national and local consultation on Quality Accounts, to try to make sure that these give you clear information about what you can expect from your local health services.

We must stress that the Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee remains committed to its part in making certain that lessons are learned from the events at Stafford hospital. During the year we have brought in representatives of the organisations involved to question what progress can be seen on patient safety, clinical effectiveness and patient experience. We will make sure that we exercise our scrutiny role robustly going forward.



We have also gone out and about around the County to learn more about the services being delivered.



Social Care Members (braving treacherous conditions!) visited Tamworth during January, in order to learn about some of the services on offer.



Health Scrutiny Members visiting the new Walsall Manor Hospital site.



Your Community

One of the changes made by the new Conservative administration at the start of 2009/10 was to introduce a Communities Directorate which works closely with partners across the County to deliver a wide range of community and cultural services including: libraries; archives; arts and museums; adult and community learning; family learning; Staffordshire's Young People's Service; community safety; and support for the voluntary and community sector. A matching Communities Scrutiny Committee was set up with responsibility for scrutinising these services.

As a new Committee, we have worked hard this year to figure out our remit and, in doing so, help the Council to establish some new ways of working to underpin its commitment to partnerships and communities.

We have been involved at the beginning of the development of the County Council's new partnerships policy and its approach to locality working and community engagement.

The new partnerships policy guides how the Council works with other organisations. Locality working is about how all the public services in one particular place come together to meet the needs and priorities of the people there. Community engagement is for Staffordshire communities to have a bigger say in decision making. Scrutiny forms part of the arrangements for making sure that all these ways of working combine to provide services which are value for money and benefit Staffordshire communities.

Throughout the year, the Communities Scrutiny Committee has focused attention on how your local Councillors can influence public service delivery on your behalf and on the opportunities for you to be active and engaged in the Council's business. Some of the plans we reviewed and contributed to were about help for people to access these opportunities - by learning to read or speak English for example.

Your Child

The well-being of all children in the County is a top priority for the Council. The rise in childhood obesity nationally, and the implications this has for the future health of the nation, is a concern for all Members. Therefore, scrutiny Members from the Children and Lifelong Learning and Health Scrutiny Committees carried out a one day inquiry to consider the County Council's approach to tackling childhood obesity.

Members heard from both County Council officers and representatives from the local Primary Care Trusts (PCTs). We found that obesity is a complex issue caused by a range of factors, only some of which the County Council and partners have an opportunity to influence. We heard that there is a lot of good work taking place but found that it was hard to judge the impact of this work on childhood obesity.



We made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet Member and PCTs around leadership (and the possible appointment of a joint Director of Public Health), strategic co-ordination, the allocation of roles and responsibilities, performance management and communications.

The Council has ambitious plans to transform education across the County, and we were keen to be assured that children and young people themselves are being engaged in this process. We were delighted to welcome pupils from Belgrave High School to a Scrutiny Committee in March, where they talked to Members about their involvement, through the Sorrel Foundation, in helping to develop the designs for school buildings as part of the Building Schools for the Future programme in Belgrave. The pupils impressed Members with their imaginative 'Time lord' themed presentation.



The County Council knows that the services we provide to support children, young people and their families more generally are also important in terms of improving attainment and aspiration. We looked in detail at the work that Staffordshire's Community and Learning Partnerships (C&LPs) have been undertaking over the last four years to deliver support services for children and young people in localities across Staffordshire.

Overall we were very impressed with the services we reviewed, but we did make a number of recommendations which we have asked the Cabinet Member to feed into an external review of the C&LPs which is currently taking place. These recommendations focussed on: the role and significance of Councillors' involvement in the C&LPs; the importance of ensuring the right mix of skills and experience among the officers supporting the C&LPs; the role of service users in determining the services on offer; ensuring robust business planning processes are in place; and the importance of being able to demonstrate the specific improvements which are attributable to the work of the C&LPs.



Your Environment

All Members recognise the challenges that lie ahead in terms of protecting the environment and ensuring that Staffordshire is a sustainable place to live for future generations. This year we have helped the County Council to review its climate change strategy 'A Hard Rain'; have undertaken a detailed review of the County Council's policy on the use of its own land to generate renewable energy; and looked at the County Council's policy on street lighting.

Our review found that as well as environmental reasons there are significant financial reasons for the County Council to allow the use of its land for renewable energy projects. However, we wanted to make sure that our proposals balanced these financial benefits against the need to ensure that the impact of wind farms, or any other development, on local communities and the environment be carefully considered. We have made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet which will inform their final policy and which set out clear criteria on which any application for such a project should be judged.

A number of Local Authorities have been reassessing their street lighting policies with the primary intention of reducing CO² emissions. Therefore, Members also attended a demonstration of the trials being undertaken for the introduction of energy efficient lamp and lantern technologies and of dimmable street lighting system in Whittington and Burton upon Trent. Members considered the trials and the information that had been provided and agreed that they supported the introduction of the new technologies (subject to further investigations of the cost involved) and they recommend to the Cabinet Member that these initiatives be pursued.

Further Information

If you would like to see the final reports of the Policy Advisory Groups or the other scrutiny reviews which took place this year you can find them on the County Council's website:

<http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/yourcouncil/decisionmakingcouncil/scrutinylibrary/>

Get Involved

We are always keen to hear from the public so if you would like to get involved in scrutiny, either to suggest a review or to contribute to some of the work we have planned for next year take a look at our website to find out how.

<http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/yourcouncil/decisionmakingcouncil/scrutinygetinvolved/>

Alternatively you can contact the officers listed below.



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