

Annual Report 2010/11

Making a Difference: Overview and Scrutiny at Staffordshire County Council



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Overview and Scrutiny at Staffordshire County Council 2010/11

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 Councils carry out the responsibility of the 'Executive' or 'Cabinet'. In Staffordshire 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.

During 2010/11 overview and scrutiny in Staffordshire was carried out by eight Scrutiny Committees. Broadly, the role of the Scrutiny Committees is to hold the Cabinet to account and to contribute to the continuous improvement of the services that 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 in order to achieve the objectives set out in the County Council's Strategic Plan. There are a number of ways in which scrutiny holds the Cabinet to account – including asking questions of Cabinet Members at special accountability sessions and 'calling-in' decisions that have been taken in order to review them.

Scrutiny also looks at how well the Authority delivers services in **partnerships** with other organisations and bodies and 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 eight Scrutiny Committees that carried out this work for Staffordshire County Council during 2010/11 were:

- Corporate Review Committee
- Assets and Budget Scrutiny Committee
- Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Committee
- Communities Scrutiny Committee
- Regeneration and Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee
- Schools and Colleges Scrutiny Committee
- Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee.
- Social Care Scrutiny Committee.

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



The Scrutiny Chairmen



County Councillor Alan White
Chairman: Corporate Review Scrutiny
Committee



County Councillor Lee Bates
Chairman: Assets and Budget Scrutiny
Committee



County Councillor Ivan Jennings
Chairman: Children, Young People and
Families Scrutiny Committee



County Councillor Kath Perry
Chairman: Communities Scrutiny Committee





County Councillor Brian Edwards
Chairman: Regeneration and Infrastructure
Scrutiny Committee



County Councillor Bob Fraser
Chairman: Schools and Colleges Scrutiny
Committee



County Councillor Janet Eagland
Chairman: Staffordshire Health Scrutiny
Committee



County Councillor Geoff Morrison Chairman:
Social Care Scrutiny Committee



Introduction

This year began with exciting political changes nationally, with the election of the new Coalition Government in May. Since then, the new Government has introduced a range of policy and legislative changes which have had a considerable impact on the County Council, not least the announcement of a significant reduction in the amount of funding which will be received by Local Authorities over the next few years. As Scrutiny Members we have been working hard to help the Cabinet to understand the implications of these changes. We have also considered how the County Council can take advantage of some of the opportunities presented by the new policy direction, for example, we have scrutinised the new Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and contributed to the County Council's response to the consultation on the significant proposed transformation of the National Health Service (NHS).

There have also been exciting developments at the County Council with the appointment of a new Chief Executive, Nick Bell, in April 2010. We invited Nick along to our work programme planning event in June so that we could get a sense of his priorities for the organisation and for Staffordshire. The work we have carried out this year reflects some of those priorities.

At the same time we have undertaken a number of specific reviews of local issues and services and made recommendations to the Cabinet Members about how the County Council can do things differently to ensure that the residents of Staffordshire get the best possible services.

This year we have also developed a new approach to holding the Cabinet Members to account, through specific Cabinet Member Accountability Sessions. This is an approach we will be looking to build on next year and would really like to see the public getting involved by coming along to ask questions of the County Council's political leadership.

We would all like to thank 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

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.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

Every year the Assets and Budget Scrutiny Committee undertakes detailed scrutiny of the Council's process for developing its financial strategy, in order to ensure that the budget reflects the County Council's and the communities' priorities and is balanced. This year that work was even more important as the County Council had to respond to the new Government's reduced Local Government Settlement. As such, the Committee adopted a new approach and, instead of interviewing all the Cabinet Members about their budget plans they focussed their attention on those areas with the biggest budgets or where particular risks had been identified.

One of the key recommendations from the work was that the County Council must closely monitor the achievement of savings over the course of the year, as any failure to achieve the identified savings would put significant pressure on the budget in future years. The Committee recommended that Cabinet Members should report regularly to the relevant Scrutiny Committees about the delivery of savings targets.

A good budget needs to demonstrate how the organisation invests in its priority areas. One of the County Council's key priorities is achieving economic recovery and regeneration by facilitating growth in the private sector and Members were concerned that 'traded services' were competing unfairly with the private sector. Members have urged that the County Council adopts a cautious approach to traded services to ensure that they do not unintentionally threaten local economic recovery. They also intend to undertake some focussed work next year to establish a core cost of one of the traded services, so that a more robust assessment of value for money can be undertaken.

Transformation

This year, the County Council began a wide ranging programme of transformation aimed at ensuring that it can meet its priority outcome objectives. This has involved a major reorganisation of the Council's staffing structure to reconfigure many services under Directors for People and Place. All of the Scrutiny Committees have been challenging Cabinet Members to ensure that these changes deliver the improvements to the Council that are needed to ensure priority outcomes are met.



The Corporate Review Committee has maintained a 'watching brief' on the overall programme of transformation, including regular challenge of the newly established Transformation Support Unit. This unit supports the management and development of the individual pieces of work that will result in changes to how the council operates.

The Committee will continue to ensure that scrutiny Members play a key role in shaping these changes through the development of future projects and will also be responsible for ensuring the overall transformation plan is on track.

The Committee has already considered the Council's developing plans to improve the way it responds to its customers. The Corporate Review Committee highlighted a number of issues, including the need to provide a range of options for interacting with the council and the value of the current dedicated phone number for highways enquiries.

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. As such the Social Care and Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committees undertook three intensive pieces of review work this year looking at: community malnutrition; cardiac rehabilitation and lower-level preventative mental health services.

Community Malnutrition

The Social Care Scrutiny Committee was first alerted to the issue of community malnutrition by the Council's Health Development Team. Members were surprised by the potential prevalence and impact of malnutrition on the local health economy. The aim of the review was to assist the County Council and other relevant organisations and professionals to develop a workable strategy to systematically monitor and address malnutrition in the community.

One absolutely crucial finding from the work was that, despite the fact that there is significant and growing evidence regarding the prevalence of malnutrition in the community and community care settings, there is a low level of awareness among health and social care professionals, and the public more widely, about malnutrition and the impact it can have on health. Therefore, many of the recommendations made by the Committee are about raising awareness so that some of the (relatively) simple measures which can be taken to prevent malnutrition are carried out more widely, for example regular weighing of at-risk people.



The review also highlighted the potential risks and opportunities emerging as a consequence of changes to the way in which health and social care services are delivered. In particular, it highlighted the important role of the County Council in facilitating better partnership working amongst the professionals who are in a position to screen for and address malnutrition. The County Council must also be alert to the risks (as well as the benefits) presented by offering greater independence and choice in relation to social care services.

Particular consideration needs to be given to how contracts for those services which impact nutrition (e.g. personal care at home) are drafted and to the role of the County Council in ensuring quality even if it does not deliver a service directly. The report made a number of recommendations regarding how the County Council can best do this.

The review was reported on in the local press and is now in the hands of the Cabinet Members for Adults' Wellbeing and Public Health and Community Safety who will be responding to the recommendations over the next few months.

Cardiac Rehabilitation

The Health Scrutiny Committee has undertaken a review of cardiac rehabilitation provision in Staffordshire, focussing on heart attack patients. A national report by the British Heart Foundation showed low levels of take up across the country and Members wanted to understand more about the take up rates and factors affecting them for Staffordshire residents.

Two review days were held with presentations from representatives from the Heart and Stroke Network, public health, commissioners, hospital staff and service users. Members were pleased to hear from a local GP representative.

The report of this work is being finalised and will include recommendations aimed to ensure that patients have equitable access to service provision in Staffordshire.

Mental Health

The Health Scrutiny Committee gave a significant amount of attention to mental health services this year – with a focus on the shift towards prevention, promotion and early intervention.

As part of the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) Health Inequalities Scrutiny Programme, a working group of the Committee have been carrying out a review concentrating on the three areas of: improving access to psychological therapies; promoting the mental health of the recently unemployed; and meeting the mental health needs of people with long term conditions.



Members have taken the opportunity to try out some different ways of working, in order to hear from various organisations, and to use some innovative techniques to involve a number of patients and public in the review. The review is drawing to a close and the final report will include recommendations aimed at making sure there is a coherent range of services to meet the needs of the population. Together with other scrutiny in the area of mental health, this work feeds into the implementation of the mental health commissioning strategy for the county. It has also contributed to the CfPS publication “Peeling the Onion” which showcases learning to help other councils to carry out similar reviews.

Integration

As well as undertaking these detailed reviews Members of both Committees have been keeping a keen eye on changes to the delivery of community health services in the county. From September 2011 community health services that were previously delivered by the two Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) in Staffordshire will be delivered by a single Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Partnership NHS Trust. In the future, a range of adult social care services currently delivered by the County Council will also be delivered by the new Trust.

The Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee has been consulted as the organisational solution for the Trust has developed. Members have been kept informed of the work of the project board and team leading the transformation and the results of consultation. Some of the key points which the Committee has raised as the plans have developed include:

- that safeguarding must be the number one priority through the change;
- concern about the short timescale for establishing a new organisation from four different organisations with different financial resources and pressures behind them (this has been extended);
- the impact on community hospitals and links to other service changes;
- the future model of service that the new organisation will be expected to deliver – patient pathways and the need to be realistic about the degree of integration that can be achieved to begin with;
- concern about the impact on the workforce; and
- the importance of robust governance (including information governance) and financial arrangements.

At every opportunity Members have focussed on what the changes will mean for patients and this will continue to frame their scrutiny of the proposed Trust, in particular the arrangements to integrate adult social care services.



Health Service Improvement

Staffordshire Health Scrutiny Committee remains committed to learning any lessons for scrutiny from the events at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. This year saw the introduction of Joint Health Scrutiny Accountability Sessions, dedicated to scrutiny by County and District/Borough Councillors of particular Trusts and including public questions. They have begun to bring greater co-ordination to scrutiny at this level, leading to recommendations and identification of issues to follow up. The task for the coming year is to make sure these sessions are sufficiently challenging and go hand in hand with other types of more direct scrutiny to contribute to improving services.

The report of the Public Inquiry is awaited but, for now, the Committee intend to promote awareness that people can raise health issues with their local councillors and health scrutiny, continue to challenge commissioners and providers with any concerns straightaway and consider greater involvement of independent experts in its work.

Your Child

Education Provision in Rural Communities

The Schools and Colleges Scrutiny Committee reviewed education provision in rural communities as they wished to seek assurance that all pupils were able to access services which deliver the best possible outcomes. They were also conscious that changing demographics in Staffordshire's rural communities, specifically falling birth rates, had the potential to have a significant impact on education provision.

The Committee learned that small schools, which are often located in rural areas, faced specific challenges in respect of:

- recruiting and retaining staff, specifically those in senior leadership positions;
- per pupil costs;
- keeping abreast of national changes;
- sustainability of provision and the ability to create the best learning environment;
- levels of attainment;
- opportunities for professional development; and
- effectiveness and efficiency.

The Inquiry heard from a number of education professionals and partners including representatives from the Birmingham and Lichfield Diocese as well as colleagues from Shropshire Council.



The findings from the inquiry recommended that a policy be developed that would apply to all schools across the County (not just those that are rural and/or small). This would ensure transparency in the process of any school review. Members were very clear that they wished to stress a review would not lead automatically to the closure of a school, but rather start a process that in many instances would result in support/guidance or clarification of the issue that triggered the review.

The report from the inquiry also recommended a set of criteria triggers to initiate a review. Proposed triggers included the timescales by which a new head teacher should be appointed, minimum attainment levels and Ofsted categorization. They also proposed mechanisms by which members would be kept informed of any reviews.

The Executive have responded supporting the recommendations arising from the inquiry and are developing a policy based on the findings of the Committee.

School Year

The new Government is committed to increasing diversity of education providers, creating more freedoms for individual schools and enabling schools to move out of 'local government control'. As such, the Schools and Colleges Scrutiny Committee considered how this new diversity of provision would be managed in Staffordshire. As academies are free to determine their own term dates Members were particularly interested in the impact of the changes on the organisation of the school year across Staffordshire.

The Committee requested that the Cabinet Member set out the County Council's policy regarding the organisation of the school year and school term. As a result of scrutiny's interest in this matter and their request that the Cabinet develop a clear policy, an initial consultation with Headteachers and Chairs of Governors regarding a possible change to a five-term year has been undertaken. During 2011/12 a full consultation exercise will be carried out and, dependent on the result, changes to the school year will be implemented.

Your Community and Environment

Burntwood Household Waste Recycling Centre

In June the Corporate Review Committee considered the decision to close Burntwood Household Waste Recycling Centre. The Committee was particularly concerned about the lack of public consultation which had taken place and as such they referred the decision back to the Cabinet to be reconsidered.



The Committee specified that further work looking at: the degree of consultation; funding and budgetary considerations; and alternative options should be undertaken before the Cabinet made a decision. As a consequence of scrutiny's work the Cabinet decided to keep the site open.

Local Transport Plan – Rural Access to Services

As part of the scrutiny of the Local Transport Plan, a working group of Members undertook a detailed scrutiny review looking at rural transport and its impact on access to services with a view to developing proposals regarding how access issues could be addressed within the context of a limited budget.

Some of the specific questions which Members considered were:

- What are the key barriers to access which rural communities experience and what is the County Council currently doing to address these issues?
- What are other County Council's doing to address the issue of rural access to services?
- What role can Elected Members play in delivering solutions?
- What is the potential impact of the government spending review and possible reductions in funding for transport and how could this be mitigated?
- How far should rural access be prioritised vis-à-vis other County Council local transport priorities?

One of Members' key findings was that Staffordshire's rural communities are very diverse and, as such, it would not be appropriate to adopt a single 'rural transport policy' for the whole County. They were also very conscious that the resources available from central government to support local public transport schemes were likely to be reduced in future years. As such, they made the following recommendations:

- that the County Council establish clear criteria for assessing support to local transport schemes;
- that the County Council develop a more robust mechanism for local member engagement in local transport reviews, recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach is not suitable in Staffordshire;
- that Scrutiny Members undertake some further work to assess the viability of rolling out demand-led services (like Moorlands Connect) in other areas of the County;
- that the County Council continue to support and develop volunteer transport schemes, and through the volunteering campaign help these schemes to recruit sufficient volunteers;
- that the County Council find ways to improve the quality of bus services (for example, through a dedicated complaints number and more vehicle inspectors), particularly for services which are subsidised by the Council; and
- that Scrutiny Members undertake a piece of work looking at urban transport issues.



As a consequence of Scrutiny's work, the criteria for assessing support to local transport schemes will be set out in the County Council's Passenger and Accessibility Management Plan. Furthermore, consultation meetings with local members have been set up by the Cabinet Member and a pilot volunteering scheme will be developed through South Staffordshire Rural Transport Partnership. In future, bus companies which receive a subsidy from the County Council will be required, through contracts, to display a contact number to which complaints about the service can be reported.

Volunteering

The Communities Scrutiny Committee has carried out three pieces of work on the subject of volunteering this year. Some members were involved a workshop to inform the development of a new countywide vision and strategy for volunteering. The County Council has invested in improving the capacity of the third sector through a new Service Level Agreement (SLA) with Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Consortium of Infrastructure Organisations (SCIO). Scrutiny is part of the monitoring arrangements for the SLA and the Committee reviewed the first six months' progress, finding that it was contributing to the priorities of: strategic engagement; promoting volunteering; and matching organisations to the commissioning opportunities of the County Council.

Members have also assessed the impact of the Council's own action to promote volunteering through the Volunteer Staffordshire campaign – making sure that learning from the first year shapes the focus for the next. As the partnership between the County Council and the volunteer centres matures, a stronger focus on increasing the numbers of volunteers is possible. The Committee also sought to make sure that the council is listening to feedback from the third sector in order to promote good practice in commissioning from them.

Community Safety Campaigns

In its capacity as the County Council's crime and disorder committee, the Communities Scrutiny Committee has reviewed how community safety campaigns are planned, delivered and evaluated. The views put forward, to the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Community Safety, about the development of the approach included support for:

- the countywide community safety partnership (Safer and Stronger Communities Strategy Group) acting as commissioner of campaigns, based on evidence and agreed shared priorities, as this approach seems most likely to maximise the impact and minimise the cost of such communications activity - this does not mean that every campaign will be countywide necessarily;
- solution focused campaigns, with clear objectives aimed at influencing both perception and behaviour and aligned to operational activity;



- common criteria to evaluate the success of campaigns around whether the target audience have seen the message, taken it on board, and acted as a result to achieve the priority - but with evaluation methods tailored to the campaign to get both quantitative and qualitative information;
- sharing good practice between partners and more widely; and
- the involvement of local councillors at each stage.

Partnership Working

The Communities Scrutiny Committee has kept abreast of developments to create a more streamlined approach to strategic partnership working in the county and early progress on Total Staffordshire pilots – focusing on those few priorities and places where extra effort is required to make a difference. Members have been keen to emphasise the opportunity that scrutiny provides for the strategic partnerships to demonstrate their responsiveness to the concerns of communities.

Making Sure the County Council Achieves its Objectives

Making sure that the County Council's senior politicians are delivering on their objectives is one of the main roles of scrutiny. This year, the Scrutiny Committees adopted a new approach to 'accountability.' Instead of focussing on 'performance indicators' a much wider range of information was collated to enable the Committees to hold the Cabinet Members to account – including financial information; summaries of complaints and representations; and information from external inspections agencies. The Members plan to develop this approach next year, in particular by increasing public participation in this process.

Further Information

If you would like to see the final reports of the 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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