
PUBLIC SCRUTINY COMMISSION CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report provides a brief update for all Members on the progress made in the development of overview and scrutiny in Bracknell Forest since the introduction of revised arrangements at the end of May. I am very pleased at how much we have done over the last 6 months, but there is still plenty for us to work on, both as non-executive and executive Members, to build on this strong start.

2. THE SCRUTINY FUNCTION

- 2.1 The term overview and scrutiny covers a wide range of functions and tasks. I am keen that we take a broad approach to scrutiny, focussing not only on holding the Executive to account and keeping the Council's policies and performance under review, but also in contributing to policy development and generating ideas and input to debate on the issues that are important to people in the Borough. My aim is that we use our influence to support better, more open and accessible decision-making in the Council, reflecting the needs and views of local people and encouraging greater interest and involvement in what we do and how we do it.

3 EXPERIENCE TO DATE

- 3.1 The Public Scrutiny Commission and three scrutiny panels were formally established at the Council's Annual Meeting on 21st May. Our first task was to put together a scrutiny work programme focussing on the concerns and priorities of local people whilst also taking account of the ambitions set out in our Community Plan and our priorities arising from our Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). This was taken forward at a Joint Conference in early June, with Members of the Commission discussing ideas for the scrutiny work programme with the Executive and the Corporate Management Team. This was an essential step, allowing us to develop a work programme that was relevant to the needs of the whole Council. We agreed that over the next year we would undertake a series of scrutiny reviews on issues as important and varied as the provision of education in the Borough, how local transport needs are met and how we can influence and improve the health and well-being of local people (Annex A has further details of the work programme).
- 3.2 Since then, the Commission and all three scrutiny panels have met several times, initially to discuss the focus and timing for the various reviews and subsequently to begin more detailed scrutiny activity. During this period we have done much to establish and develop the new arrangements and have already learned a lot from the process. Areas of particular note include:
- Establishing 7 working groups within the Commission and individual scrutiny panels to take forward more detailed reviews on specific issues (for example a sub-group of the Public Scrutiny Commission that is looking at how we deal with abandoned vehicles in the Borough);

- Holding several formal and informal training and briefing sessions open to all members. These have included briefings by officers in the council and workshops run by visiting guest speakers;
- A productive discussion with the Leader about future options relating to the SmartCard contract;
- Meetings with and presentations from a number of external partners (particularly in relation to health scrutiny) to discuss various issues on the scrutiny work programme;
- A refreshing and stimulating discussion with members of Bracknell's Youth Forum about young people's views on a range of issues particular in relation to tackling antisocial behaviour;
- Escaping the chamber - including holding a scrutiny panel meeting at a local school and touring the council's social care and housing sites. This is an innovation that we wish to build on in subsequent months;
- Formally establishing arrangements for health scrutiny (within the remit of the Health, Social Care and Housing Scrutiny Panel) and actively developing relationships with a range of health partners;
- The extent of constructive cross-party working and discussion that has characterised the early stages of the new arrangements.
- Members and officers attending external seminars, conferences and events with other local authorities about the development of effective scrutiny arrangements.

3.3 Throughout this process, what has become increasingly evident is the appetite of Members to get more actively involved in effective scrutiny activity, whether that is in ensuring that the Council's performance remains on track, or in thinking about future priorities and emerging issues. I also welcome the support from both Members and officers in developing our new arrangements and helping to get them established and up and running quickly. We now need to build on this impetus and enthusiasm to ensure that we maintain this level of early progress.

4 NEXT STEPS

4.1 Over the next 6 months, I intend to carry out a more formal review of how the new scrutiny arrangements are working, including a survey of views from Members, officers and external partners involved about the progress we have made and areas for future development. There are also a number of issues that I am keen to consider further within the Council to increase the effectiveness of our scrutiny arrangements and ensure that they really add value for local people. These include how we:

- Raise the profile of scrutiny both within and outside the Council;
- Continue to develop a culture of constructive debate and dialogue enabling scrutiny Members to influence policy development;
- Manage our communication and information arrangements to support effective scrutiny, both in the context of performance management and future policy;
- Ensure that we remain focussed on issues that are of real concern to local people in Bracknell Forest.

- 4.2 Having now spoken to many councillors and officers involved in scrutiny in a number of different local authorities across the region, I am convinced that we are making rapid headway in an area that is recognised as continuing to provide one of the major challenges for local government. The arrangements we have put in place are widely coming to be seen as an example of best practice. Following a successful presentation by the Chief Executive to SOLACE Members in the South East, I am pleased to have recently received an invitation from the South East Employers Organisation to speak about our approach to scrutiny at a Member's seminar in the New Year.

Councillor Michael Sargeant
Chairman, Public Scrutiny Commission

PROGRAMME OF SCRUTINY REVIEWS – 2003/04

PUBLIC SCRUTINY COMMISSION

- **Review of community safety**

Separate working groups have been established to look at:

- tackling antisocial behaviour;
- CCTV provision;
- arrangements for dealing with abandoned vehicles in the Borough.

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

- **Transport review**

A working group has been established to consider arrangements for provision of community transport in Bracknell Forest

- **Review of strategic sites**

Initially focussed on the development of a planning brief for Amen Corner

LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL

- **Provision of education in Bracknell Forest**

Including arrangements for provision of school places within the Borough and consideration of future options.

- **Review of voluntary sector grant provision**

A working group is to be established to look at arrangements within Bracknell Forest for provision of grant aid to voluntary sector and community organisations

- **Heritage**

A separate group has been set up to conclude the work of the former Heritage Strategy Working Group

HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE & HOUSING SCRUTINY PANEL

- **Health & wellbeing**

A working group has been established to consider the recent review of adult day care services and its implementation

- **Housing stock options/housing economy**

To include consideration of the approach to housing allocations and key worker housing in the Borough