

Overview & Scrutiny Annual Report 2010/2011



Introduction by Councillor Philip Cowen, Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Commission

The past year has brought with it a number of challenges for scrutiny many of which have been centred on the need to reduce the budget deficit at a national level that has had an impact upon the funds granted to local authorities from central government. We have also responded to calls from local councils to address issues pertinent to them for which Breckland is a key player, from members and officers to assist in the development of policy and we have monitored the business plan of the council insofar as it has an impact upon service delivery.

We have striven over the recent past to encourage the public to bring to our attention matters that may have a bearing upon the health, safety and general wellbeing of the district and thus it was with enthusiasm that the OSC was asked by Attleborough Town Council to review all aspects of car parking in the town.

Under the chairmanship of Councillor Shirley Mathews a Task and Finish Group was established to look at the issues that had been raised and the result was a successful outcome for all, with the cabinet at Breckland accepting the recommendations made.

The model adopted has been rolled out across the other market towns in Breckland and similar recommendations made to cabinet on behalf of Watton and Swaffham; Dereham and Thetford have yet to be reviewed.

The process is to be reviewed again in light of the recent decision that has seen on street parking enforcement change from the police to a combined LA agency.

At times when all are tightening their belts it is challenging to contemplate any capital expenditure. However if spend is inevitable, it is particularly important to ensure that the need has been defined and agreed, the costs are being managed properly and that the tax payer is receiving best value as a consequence.

Set against this background the council instructed a Joint Audit and Scrutiny Panel to review the provision of IT services for Members because of the changing demands being placed upon outdated equipment by the advance of the internet and other expanding remit of IT and related aspects of day to day council life.

Thus it was that we reviewed evidence, looked at the options and made a series of recommendations to ensure that the council tax payer receives best value for money and that the individual ward members may access speedily and effectively data to assist them in the discharge of their duties.

The future holds more of the same:

- Cabinet scrutiny
- Performance scrutiny and contract monitoring
- External scrutiny
- Partnership scrutiny
- Policy scrutiny

and in addition, we shall scrutinise the joint working arrangements put in place following the joining up of the Corporate Management Team with that of South Holland Council, to ensure that the tax payers of Breckland receive the high quality of service to which they have become accustomed.

Similarly the impending enactment of the Localism bill will have a bearing upon our work stream. We anticipate that our scrutiny of outside bodies and partner agencies with whom we do business will expand to review the ways and means by which non elected groups may receive public funding and be called upon to assist councils in the running of local communities.

As ever I am indebted to the support that I have received from the Vice Chairman, Councillor Robin Goreham, throughout the year. Furthermore the work and achievements of the Commission would have been much more daunting without the support of Member Services at Breckland. In particular that of Mark Broughton who has since left Breckland for a new challenge in the public sector but the baton has been passed, successfully, to a new team led by Rory Ringer and Teresa Smith. Their expertise will be invaluable to the members of the OSC in the months to come.



Councillor Philip Cowen
Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Commission

Membership of the 2010/11 Overview & Scrutiny Commission

Overview & Scrutiny Commission

Mr J P Cowen (Chairman)
Mr R F Goreham (Vice Chairman)
Mr A J Byrne
Mr K S Gilbert
Mrs D K R Irving
Mr A P Joel
Mr R G Kybird
Mr K Martin
Mrs S M Matthews
Mr J D Rogers
Mr B Rose

Substitutes

Ms S Armes
Mr G Bambridge
Ms C Bowes

Breckland Representatives on Joint Scrutiny bodies

Norfolk Health Overview & Scrutiny
Committee

Mrs Lady Fisher
Mr R Kybird (Substitute)

Norfolk County Strategic Partnership
Joint Scrutiny Panel

Mr J P Cowen



Introduction to Scrutiny

Overview and Scrutiny was established through the 2000 Local Government Act as part of the new governance and executive arrangements for local authorities in England and Wales. Elected members are either 'executive', who take decisions either individually as Portfolio holders or collectively as the cabinet, or 'non executive' who have a role to scrutinise council decisions, develop and review council policy and hold the decision-makers to account.

Scrutiny committees are also able to investigate matters of local community importance and in the last decade have expanded their role further on the back of a strengthened legislative basis to cover aspects such as scrutiny of the Local Strategic Partnership, Call for Action etc. It is anticipated that with the impending implementation of the Localism Bill that the role of and extent of work undertaken by Local Authority Scrutiny bodies will increase.

Overview & Scrutiny at Breckland

The Overview & Scrutiny Commission (OSC) is the overarching scrutiny body at Breckland Council which manages the Scrutiny work programme and co-ordinates dedicated task and finish groups that are established from time to time by the Commission.

Formal OSC meetings are held every 6 weeks (there were 9 formal meetings during 2010) at the main council offices in Dereham and, where relevant and appropriate, in the other market towns within the district.

The Commission currently has 12 members, is politically balanced and is made up of 10 Conservative Members, 1 Labour Member and 1 Independent Member. Breckland Council has also separated out the role of Finance and Risk Management from the OSC and formed an Audit Committee that reports directly to Full Council although its membership does include a member of the OSC who is able to give verbal reports from time to time to OSC.

The current Commission identified 5 broad areas of investigation that forms the core of the workload for either the OSC as a whole or specific Task and Finish Groups established for the purpose:

1. Executive Scrutiny
2. Partnership Scrutiny
3. Performance/Contract Monitoring
4. External Agency Scrutiny
5. Policy Scrutiny

Following on from this, there are a number of standard recurring items which are:

- The Executive Report – Executive members are invited to attend OSC on a rota basis and give a brief account of their portfolio activities as well as a heads up on the relevant issues on the horizon.
- Updates from Breckland District Council's representatives on the Norfolk County Health Scrutiny committee.
- Partnership Scrutiny – Which in previous years has included Wayland and Icen area partnerships.
- Contract Monitoring – Covering the outsourced delivery of council services, such as Planning & Building Control (Capita Symonds)
- Updates from Task & Finish Groups.

There are also regular standing items on every OSC agenda:

1. Call Ins
2. Referrals under the Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) mechanism.

With a multi-million pound budget, 200 staff and covering a population in excess of 130,000 and covering some 500 square miles of predominantly rural area, the Council makes many decisions that affect residents throughout the year. Scrutiny provides a prime opportunity to hold decision-makers to account and the past year has witnessed those decision-makers – Breckland's Executive Members – regularly appearing at the OSC to answer questions about their decisions and activities and generally to be held to account.

Scrutiny has also added value to the Council through regular monitoring of the performance of contracts through external providers covering Planning & Building Control (Capita Symonds), IT (Steria) and Environmental & Security Services (Serco) to ensure continuing performance levels and value for money.

The Commission and Group Memberships, Scrutiny structures and work undertaken at Breckland in 2010/11 are outlined in the following sections of this report.

Task & Finish Groups

Firstly a definition as to what a “task and finish” group does. This is a dedicated piece of work, a task or a project, within a defined terms of reference to be undertaken over an agreed timescale.

The object is to fully consider the issue under discussion and to produce a report identifying recommendations for improvement. The usual reporting route is from the T&F Group to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and then on to either Cabinet or Council for endorsement.

This section of the report details the work of these groups and the outcomes arising during 2010/11.

Provision of IT equipment

A Joint Audit and Scrutiny Panel (JASP) was set up to review the provision of IT equipment and facilities for elected members ahead of the District Council elections in May 2011, and to be completed by 31 December 2010.

After research with the members, and investigating products available on the market, it was decided that all Members would have their kit upgraded with new laptops and printers.

Contaminated Land

A Contaminated Land Task and Finish Group was established in March 2010. The purpose was to review the original strategy in light of an internal audit report and the need to identify the council’s new priorities for investigating contaminated land and the procedures to be used in prioritising work activities taking account of the resources available. A revised strategy has now been produced.

Parking

The OSC agreed to a widespread and comprehensive review of parking in the spring of 2009. Initially the task and finish group were planning to examine solely the issue of off street car parking in Breckland owned car parks in each of the five market towns in the district. However it was agreed to extend the remit to cover on-street parking also. Subsequently the focus shifted to Attleborough on receipt of a letter from the Town Council indicating local parking problems and traffic flows in the town.

During 2010/11, a review was undertaken of both Watton, and subsequently Swaffham.

The Group will continue their review and focus on Dereham and Thetford during 2011/12.

The various final reports and minutes of the meeting of the task and finish groups can be accessed through the website or by request from the Scrutiny Officer.

Joint Scrutiny

Breckland and South Holland District Council have joined together to form a 'Shared Management' structure.

The Commission were continually updated with the progress of this project.

The Profile of Scrutiny

The opportunity for members of the public – Breckland's residents – to get involved and suggest suitable issues for review by Scrutiny has always been championed at Breckland. In order to try to raise the profile of scrutiny in the community, attempts have been made through the local media to advertise Scrutiny and to seek press coverage of scrutiny work.

The Parking Task and Finish Group made a conscious decision to seek full community involvement in its reviews on each of the market towns. Parking is a sensitive subject at the best of times, particularly when the shadow of potential charging is brought to the fore when free parking has always been the norm. An example of this is with the review on the town of Swaffham, an initial press release (which was on the front page of the Swaffham & Watton Times) was issued

asking for comment and reaction from local residents on parking issues so as to help inform councillors.

The subsequent public meeting was well attended by both stakeholders and agencies such as the Police, Town Council, and also by the public. The press were also in attendance to report the meeting through their columns and help advertise what scrutiny was and the purpose of the review.

The Chair was also interviewed on Wayland Radio explaining the purpose of the review.

During 2011/12, the Commission will consider using 'Voice' which is a publication issued to every household in the Breckland. This is a fantastic opportunity to place an article about OSC and to advertise to the public that Scrutiny is a role for them. It will give an opportunity for the public to raise any concerns and to scrutinise these issues on their behalf. This gives an opportunity to engage the community into the services Breckland provide and to make a difference.

Norfolk Scrutiny Network

The Norfolk Scrutiny Network (NSN) comprises lead scrutiny officers from all first and second tier Norfolk councils. The Network meets quarterly to exchange information about their respective scrutiny activities and to share their respective work programmes in order to highlight current projects and reviews being undertaken. This free flow of information also presents opportunities for future joint working, to help prevent duplication and potentially facilitate joint working.

Through the Looking Glass

Local authority scrutiny continues to develop apace, with new provisions and opportunities being added to the function. Most recently these have included scrutiny of crime and disorder, the councillor call for action mechanism, possibilities for further joint working and opportunities for co-option onto scrutiny bodies.

Scrutiny is always looking to test itself and consider how it can improve and be more effective. Members attended a refresher training course held in June 2011 and as a result formulated the work programme for 2011/12. The work programme is intended to be a working document which whilst facilitating a sound basis for planning of future work is also flexible enough to accommodate new and topical issues.

The Overview & Scrutiny Commission will continue to welcome Executive Members on a rota basis to report on developments and issues within their respective portfolios in the coming year and thus provide an essential accountability mechanism. Similarly the Commission has also taken an interest – and will continue to do so in the coming year – of various partnerships with which Breckland works and interacts.

Likewise there will be a switch of emphasis to consider decision implementation through tracking systems which will identify decisions taken but not yet implemented and will allow members to question senior officers and portfolio holders accordingly.

Another continued feature will be a quarterly assessment of internal performance which again will allow identification and subsequent scrutiny of perceived areas of service delivery that are deemed to be falling short.

With the continued focus on Shared Management, Scrutiny will be undertaking a proactive role, and looking at how Breckland can work with South Holland in the Scrutiny function going forward.



Contacts

If you are interested in finding out more about Overview and Scrutiny at Breckland, have a query, or would like to suggest a community topic, please contact the Scrutiny Officer who will be pleased to assist further.

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