

Annual Report

Of the Scrutiny Committee
2006 ~ 2007



Foreword by the Chairman

... it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to... any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust ... for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; ...

Edmund Burke, Speech to the Electors of Bristol, 3rd November 1774

Developing from the groundwork under the chairmanship of my predecessor, Roger Smith, over the past four years that I have been Chairman of South Norfolk's Scrutiny Committee, the Overview and Scrutiny function has become part of the fabric of the District's democratic institutions.

Whether holding the Administration for the time being to account and thus providing the essential checks and balances as a counterpoise to the concentration of executive authority in a majority-party Cabinet, or in utilising its growing forensic expertise in areas of public concern outwith the direct jurisdiction of the District Council, South Norfolk's Scrutiny Committee has shown itself to be a "critical friend" to the whole community and its institutions.

In this work it has had the excellent advice and assistance of the dedicated team of professional staff provided to support the work of the Committee. Thanks are due to Tony Fielder, our Scrutiny Manager, to Steve Goddard (now with North Norfolk District Council as its Democratic Services Manager) and to his successor as Scrutiny Officer, Joanna Kitchener, and to James Overy our Committee Services Officer for their expertise and effort to ensure that Overview and Scrutiny are delivered in and for South Norfolk District.



Cllr Christopher Kemp,
Chairman, Scrutiny Committee
2nd April 2007

Membership of the Committee 2006 ~ 2007

Conservatives

Derek Blake
Brian Clark-Taylor
John Fuller
Christopher Kemp (Chairman)
Beverley Spratt
Keith Weeks
Garry Wheatley
Martin Wilby

Liberal Democrats

Pat Dore
Jane Mackie (Vice-Chairman)
Alistair Miller
John Peterson
John Simpson
Fred Watkins
Gerry Watt

What is scrutiny?

All 46 councillors of South Norfolk Council meet together to set the overall policies and priorities, and approve the annual budget at the Full Council meetings. A Cabinet of seven councillors, all from the majority Liberal Democrat group, makes most of the day-to-day decisions, to implement the approved policies and budget.

The Scrutiny Committee is an important check and balance on the concentration of responsibility in the hands of the members of Cabinet. Scrutiny can hold members of Cabinet to account. It can suspend and “call in” Cabinet decisions for detailed examination. It can examine any aspect of the Council’s performance, acting as a “critical friend” to suggest improvements, and helping to ensure that the Council’s services are effective and provide “best value”.

The Council has a power and duty to promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of local residents. To achieve this, the Council increasingly works in partnership with other public bodies, which provide local services, providing civic leadership and championing the interests of the area. The Scrutiny Committee is chaired by an opposition member and has a conservative majority.

Partnership working can help to improve co-ordination, avoid duplication and identify gaps in provision, but it raises the same issues of accountability and effectiveness as the Cabinet system. Scrutiny Committee therefore looks beyond the Council’s own services to the whole range of services provided by our partners, such as the County Council, Housing Associations etc.

In common with practice across the Council, the public are encouraged to participate in Scrutiny at South Norfolk Council and can raise topics for consideration by Scrutiny, attend and speak at meetings and can also give evidence as expert witnesses.

To provide an overview of policy development, and advise Cabinet and Council, South Norfolk Council has four Policy Development Panels, which include representatives of our partners and councillors of both political parties. Each panel meets quarterly and concentrates on an aspect of local wellbeing, corresponding to one of the Cabinet “portfolios”.

In order to coordinate the activities of Scrutiny Committee and the Policy Development Panels, their Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen form the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee (OSMAC). This also decides partner representation on the Panels, and meets quarterly.

The Work of Scrutiny Over the Year

There have been a number of themes throughout the Committee's work in 2006 ~ 2007. These include:

- ❑ **Partnership Reviews**
- ❑ **Holding Cabinet to account**
- ❑ **"Pre-Scrutiny"**
- ❑ **Scrutiny of external partners**
- ❑ **Community Hospitals**

Partnerships reviews

In general terms, the Scrutiny Committee have found that partnerships often arise when a perceived failure exists of separate organisations and services to adequately meet the needs and expectations of users and the public. Another common theme is the need to base planning and provision on holistic themes that affect whole communities or the provision of common services, for example Benefits (East Coast Revenues and Benefits Partnership). In understanding why partnerships have been set up, we also noted that a benefit of partnership working is that partnerships often attract additional resources and that this is a strong incentive for collaborative working, for example Norfolk Connect. The Norfolk Connect Partnership aims to bring all of the Norfolk Councils together to share information, knowledge and experience to improve services to residents.

The Scrutiny Committee examined the Norfolk Waste Partnership in July. This partnership has pioneered recycling such as the NEWS facility in Costessey and is increasingly focussing on waste minimisation, for example encouraging home composting to reduce the amount of material that enters the waste stream. We were assisted in our review by Mr Oliver Furbur, a Norfolk County Council officer who praised the work of this Council's staff on recycling and waste minimisation.



The East Coast Revenues and Benefits Partnership has achieved performance improvements for this Council and its partners, Waveney and Great Yarmouth councils. Currently the three councils use the same IT software, with only small differences in procedures, and this allows shared training, and possibly staff exchanges to cover temporary shortages.



We set up a South Norfolk Alliance Scrutiny Task Group as it was agreed that its structure was not “fit for purpose”. The Task Group undertook varied research, including surveys, interviews with partners, observation of meetings and analysis of best practice elsewhere. Structural changes were then recommended with an Executive Board, together with a number of task and finish groups as required and twice-yearly all-partner meetings.

The Alliance has adopted all of those recommendations. Transitional arrangements are due to be made for the new Executive Board of the South Norfolk Alliance to sit for 6 months at least, starting in January 2007. After a suitable bedding in period, we intend to review the effectiveness of the new arrangements.

Holding Cabinet to account

A summary of decisions taken by Cabinet is published immediately after each meeting of Cabinet. Provided at least 3 councillors agree, any decision can be “called-in” by Scrutiny. This effectively means the decision is delayed until Scrutiny can examine the decision at its next meeting.

Seven decisions have been “called-in” and examined by us over the year. In the majority of cases, further examination and clarification of the issues led to us agreeing with the recommendations.

The decision on postal services was called in as members were concerned that the substantial savings could be made, due to the liberalisation of the market in postal services, but were being delayed whilst awaiting the results of a further report.

In September 2006, we dealt with a call-in regarding the Access to Services project as members felt that no case had been made to continue with the access to services project. They were of the opinion that the consultant’s fees already incurred had been wasted and that further expenditure could not be justified. After clarification, we recommended that a fully costed action plan should be included with the project.

“Pre-Scrutiny”

The “call-in” process is an important part of the necessary checks and balances of the democratic process, however it is essentially a reactive process. Complementing this function is the more pro-active “pre-scrutiny” of decisions before they go to Cabinet. In this way, we may be able to offer recommendations and improvements to reduce the necessity to “call-in” decisions.

Scrutiny Committee undertook “pre-scrutiny” of the Council’s Corporate Plan for 2006/9 and made some suggestions, which were incorporated in the version considered by Cabinet in June.

We also examined the concessionary fares scheme in Norfolk. We agreed that as a principle, the Council supported increased bus usage. Eligible residents however should only be encouraged to apply for a bus pass if they intended to use it. We also suggested that 'with regret' be added to the recommendation to indicate our concern that community transport schemes would be excluded from the Norfolk-wide scheme from 2007/8. It was also suggested that Cabinet be requested to undertake a review of public transport in the District.



We considered options for further improvements of the planning enforcement service. The importance of good performance management, clear service standards and analysis of achievement against these standards was emphasised. The small number of enforcement notices served in South Norfolk underlined the success of the Council in resolving issues without the need to serve formal notices. We endorsed the actions that were to be taken in the report and recommended changes to the prioritisation of cases. We also recommended that a simplified version of the enforcement procedures flow chart with the addition of a timescale and advice on enforcement action should be circulated to parish councils. We also requested that the Corporate Enforcement Strategy was updated.

It had been identified that the Emergency Committee, which would be convened in times of civil emergencies, needed to be formally ratified by Full Council to include it in the Constitution. We also requested that the wording relating to the powers of the Emergency Committee be amended to "relevant powers" and also that training should be provided for all members of the Committee.

Scrutiny of external partners

At our January meeting, we were pleased to welcome representatives of the Norfolk Police Authority and the Norfolk Police. We examined issues relating to Neighbourhoods and Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and posed a number of questions to representatives. As a result, a motion expressing the Council's full support for the efforts of the Norfolk Police Authority to secure full funding from Government for the number of Police and Community Support Officers was sent.



In view of concerns over possible tensions that existed between the various duties of the Broads Authority, we invited the Authority to attend our November meeting. We were also seeking clarification regarding overall funding of the Broads Authority, the current status of the private Broads Bill and provision relating to dredging.



We offered our support to the Authority with lobbying the relevant Government departments around the Sediment Management Strategy. A lack of coordination between the Environment Agency and its contractors was highlighted in the meeting and we offered to assist the Broads Authority to improve this situation.

We welcomed the availability of the hydrographic survey on the Broads Authority website which would benefit all users of the Broads and suggested that a helpline be established to allow members of the public alert the Broads Authority of silted areas of the Broads. We also welcomed the proposal that the Broads Authority took over the licensing of hire boats which was currently being done by several Local Authorities to ensure a common approach to matters of river safety.

We have engaged in a joint scrutiny with Scrutiny Committees from Norfolk County Council, Broadland District Council and Norwich City Council to review the current level and quality of local bus service provision in the greater Norwich area by First Eastern Buses and other providers. We will also be identifying if further steps could be taken to deliver the first class bus service that the area expects. This joint review will commence in May 2007.

Community Hospitals



We were asked by Full Council to advise on an appropriate response to the Norfolk PCT's consultation on community hospital beds and the Task Group's final report will be going to the May AGM Council meeting for consideration.

All Hallows Hospital, Ditchingham

Other Scrutiny Work

The Committee examined the work of the Equalities Group. Members supported the excellent work, which is being done and praised what had been achieved. However, the Committee noted that financial support for this activity appeared

under a number of different budget heads. The Committee recommended that, in order to recognise the importance of the equalities agenda, the funding for the Council's Equality and Diversity activity should be clearly indicated in the budget for the next financial year and this recommendation was adopted.

At our November meeting, we considered a report on the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government's White Paper. The Scrutiny Committee may soon find itself with increased responsibilities as a result of this paper. The strengthened ability for local members to champion local issues of concern to residents via the proposed Community Call for Action could be another string to Scrutiny's bow. The details of how this will work in practice have yet to emerge.

In addition to the above, the Council was a founder member of the Norfolk Scrutiny Network, which comprises members, and officers of each Norfolk Local Authority. The network is a forum for sharing best practice and has organised two successful conferences on scrutiny issues.

Improving Our Procedures

We recognise that Scrutiny may not be the best-known element of local government and so the Committee felt it would be useful to provide some background information. South Norfolk Council's website has been expanded to include what Scrutiny does (and doesn't do), how to raise a topic for Scrutiny, what to expect if you attend a meeting of Scrutiny and much more. A regular newsletter has also been produced and published in various places, including the website and has been sent to parish & town councils in the district to keep the public informed and encourage public participation.

A uniform template for Policy Development Panel Work Programmes and the Scrutiny Work Programme has been developed. The new design better identifies the links between the topics covered by all of the Overview & Scrutiny bodies of the Council.

Sufficient officer support is vital and in July, we were pleased to welcome a full time Scrutiny Officer reporting to Tony Fielder, the Scrutiny Manager. On Steve Goddard vacating the post, Joanna Kitchener has now joined the team as Scrutiny Officer and I am sure this additional support will enhance the workings of Scrutiny Committee. South Norfolk Council's approach to providing full time scrutiny support has been recognised nationally as best practice.

Several councillors and Scrutiny Support Officers from other councils have attended our Scrutiny meetings over the past year, amongst them North Kesteven District Council.

I am also pleased to report that the Council, thus showing the value of the Scrutiny Committee here at South Norfolk, has adopted all but two of the recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee.

Looking to the Future

The new Council from May 2007 will have new councillors and new priorities and areas for Scrutiny to look at. However the Scrutiny Committee has made provisional arrangements for the new Committee to consider topics, including the third year of partnership reviews, a task group to comprehensively consider all aspects of planning consultation, the future of rural post offices and many others. The definitive work programme will be agreed with the new Scrutiny Committee early in the life of the new Council.