



The Fourth Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committee

May 2008 ~ April 2009



Foreword by the Chairman

“Plurality which does not reduce itself to unity is confusion. Unity which is not the result of plurality is tyranny.”

Blaise Pascal, cited without further identification of the original source in François Guizot, *The History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe* (1851, Liberty Fund 2002 edition; translated by Andrew R Scoble, edited by Aurelian Craiutu)

South Norfolk Council continues to develop its well-deserved reputation as an exemplar of best practice and innovation in Overview and Scrutiny. For example:

- Since 2003, South Norfolk has been developing the concept of pre-decision Scrutiny, allowing non-Executive input into Executive decision-making before the event;
- In 2005, South Norfolk was one of the first authorities to introduce the distinction between the *suspensive* and the *non-suspensive* Call-In, providing a more discerning approach to the Scrutiny review of Executive decisions after the event;
- In 2007, South Norfolk introduced the *Community Reference*. Though in anticipation of the then proposed *Community Call for Action* (which was eventually restricted to a *Councillor Call for Action* in the final Act), South Norfolk’s *Community Reference* is far less bureaucratic and far broader in its scope than the statutory version;
- On a personal level, I have had two essays on Scrutiny subjects posted on the website of the Centre for Public Scrutiny and these are currently in preparation for publication in book form by the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham.

Though the last example listed above is of personal achievements, Overview and Scrutiny in South Norfolk is not a one-man-band. As Chairman my role is *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”). Throughout my tenure as Chairman of the Council’s Scrutiny Committee I have had the benefit of dedicated first-class officer support, the whole process has been openly embraced by Cabinets of both political persuasions and has received wholehearted co-operation from departmental and director-level officers.

But in the last resort, Overview and Scrutiny must be a member-led process and in South Norfolk has enjoyed enthusiastic and informed participation by councillors of both parties, and members of the public at large. Wherever possible, I have sought to promote a bipartisan approach to Overview and Scrutiny. Thus, a largely consensual style of working has been adopted and has paid dividends in excellent outcomes, some of which are set out in this report.

I record my appreciation to both members and officers for their continuing commitment to effective Overview and Scrutiny in South Norfolk and commend this report.

Since originally preparing these remarks we have learned that our Scrutiny Officer, Joanna Kitchener, will shortly be moving on to the important post of Executive Assistant to the Chief Executive.



I would like to thank Joanna for her excellent work and her commitment to her duties. I am confident that she will apply those same qualities to the new challenges that will face her. The whole Committee wish her well in her new appointment.

Cllr Christopher Kemp,
Chairman, Scrutiny Committee
13th April 2009

Membership of the Committee 2008/2009

Conservatives

David Goldson
Tony Palmer
Christopher Kemp (Chairman)
Alison Thomas
Sue Thomson
Keith Weeks
Michael Windridge

Liberal Democrats

Vivienne Bell
Murray Gray
Trevor Lewis (Vice-Chairman)
Gerry Watt

The Work of Scrutiny Over the Year

There have been a number of themes throughout the Committee's work in 2008 ~ 2009. These include:

- ❑ **Holding Cabinet to account**
- ❑ **Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups**
- ❑ **Other scrutiny work**
- ❑ **Overview Sub-Committees**

Holding Cabinet to account

A summary of decisions taken by Cabinet is published immediately after each meeting of Cabinet. Provided at least three 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.

Two decisions have been "called-in" and examined by us over the year. In one case, further examination and clarification of the issues led to us agreeing with the recommendations, with only minor alterations. With the call-in of the consultation of the Joint Core Strategy, discussion led to an additional seven suggestions and recommendations, all of which were agreed by Cabinet.

It is a measure of the general recognition of the importance of scrutiny's work at the Council that the Cabinet has asked Scrutiny Committee on more than one occasion to thoroughly examine and consider topics on their behalf.

Scrutiny Task and Finish Groups

Joint Scrutiny Review of Local Bus Service Provision

The purpose of this review, undertaken jointly by us with Norfolk County Council, Broadland Council and Norwich City Council, was to consider the current level and quality of local bus service provision and to identify if any further steps could be taken to improve the process.

A number of recommendations were made, including asking the Government to improve the role of the Traffic Commissioners, asking the bus operators to provide clearer information, including changing design of their timetables and asking the County Council to set up a Bus Users Association.



Sewage Treatment Works Task and Finish Group



The project to improve the STWs and get them adopted by Anglian Water was the largest project the Council has ever undertaken and so the project was examined to consider if any lessons could be learnt for projects in the future. A number of changes were made to the Project Management Guidelines all of which were agreed by Cabinet.

Parish and Town Council Task and Finish Group

A Task Group of four district councillors and two co-opted members considered the relationship between South Norfolk Council and Parish and Town Councils. The Group had heard from a number of witnesses, had identified various issues and made a number of recommendations. Anne Barnes, Cringleford Parish Clerk and Sue Lake, Training, Finance & Admin Officer at the Norfolk Association of Local Councils (NALC) assisted members in their deliberations at the 22 April 2009 meeting. A number of recommendations were endorsed, including improvements to the planning application consultation process, offering more training focussed on parish councils' needs, improvements to communications between SNC and local councils and many more.

In addition to the recommendations for this Council, a number of suggestions were also put to NALC and Sue Lake confirmed that a number of initiatives were already underway to address the issues raised by the Task and Finish Group, for example a new clerk induction day was being considered and pre-parish councillor training had been conducted in the past, but had been very poorly attended. NALC would encourage those 10 parishes in the District with no email address to set one up and a number of other recommendations were accepted by NALC.

Grants and Loans Task and Finish Group

A Task and Finish Group was established to identify a more efficient, effective and consistent approach to the management of grants and loans. Their remit was to consider the process by which the Council awards discretionary grants and loans; it was not to examine the individual grants or loans awarded and whether these are appropriate.



There were a number of conclusions the Group came to, for example setting up a Member Panel to concentrate on the high level, strategic decisions and decide all major applications each year. The group felt a yearly timeline for grants would be beneficial to the public as they could easily see when and what they needed to do. One consistent application form for all applicants has been designed and is on the website. A consistent set of criteria against which to assess grants has also been agreed and a separate process is being considered for Neighbourhood Grants. A mechanism will be set up so that applicants can report back on benefits and outcomes and one overall budget under the control of the CEX has been created to hold all discretionary grants monies.

The work the Group has undertaken will lead to a greatly improved process for applying for grants as part of the overall budget setting process and will enable the Council to accurately assess the benefits and outcomes and how residents' lives have been improved by the awarding of such grants.

Rural Pubs Task and Finish Group



This Task Group had been set up to examine the difficulties faced by public houses in the District and what advice or assistance this Council could offer them. The response to the survey collecting evidence was so great that a Conference was organised for publicans in September, which included workshops and information on key issues such as planning and marketing. Extensive national press

coverage was achieved for the Group in a number of publications.

The Group lobbied Government on a number of issues and issued a full report to all publicans with a number of recommendations and best practice. A Community Pub of the Year Award was also launched to raise the profile of pubs with the first award to be presented in the autumn of 2009.

Other Task and Finish Groups included:

- Performance Management – which recommended a format for how the new National indicators should be presented.
- Discretionary Grants Working Group – this group, set up to examine any organisation receiving a grant from the Council recommended that Borderhoppa receive the additional grant it had applied for this year, after Borderhoppa instigated a number of improvements.
- County Strategic Partnership – members from all the Norfolk authorities have formed a joint scrutiny panel to examine the delivery of the agreed actions of the Norfolk County Strategic Partnership.

Other Scrutiny Work

Civil Parking Enforcement

At their April 2009 meeting, members had raised the issue of on-street parking enforcement as the County Council is not willing to progress any delegation to district councils pending the outcome of Local Government Review, despite the levels of on-street car parking enforcement being unacceptable. Members therefore requested that the Chief Executive write to the County Council to express this Council's disappointment that the current inadequate level of on-street enforcement will not be improved in the immediate future and to request that the County Council agrees to progress the project to delegate on-street parking enforcement as a matter of urgency (subject to the position of other district councils). The letter was issued as requested and at the time of this report, we were awaiting a response.

Constitution and Governance of Parish and Town Councils

Members asked that the issues arising from the financial difficulties at Redenhall with Harleston Town Council (and the findings of the Parish and Town Council Task and Finish Group which had identified financial issues as an issue for some local councils) be discussed to ensure that the situation did not occur again. South Norfolk Council does not, of course, have any direct responsibility for how local councils conduct their financial affairs, however in the spirit of partnership working, members wanted to consider if any advice or assistance might be provided for local councils. There were a number of recommendations, including to encourage training for parish clerks and consider the provision of funds for this purpose, possibly by the County Council, South Norfolk Alliance and South Norfolk Council, an annual Induction Day for parish clerks and a new job title for the parish clerks to better reflect their role. It was also suggested that a note suggesting training for parish clerks be included in *The Link* magazine.

Overview Sub-Committees

Planning, Housing & the Built Environment Overview Sub-Committee

Members considered the arrangements for the Area Planning Committees as although the current system was working well, it was felt improvements could be identified. A number of recommendations were made, including the number of Area Planning Committees be reduced to two with an East/West split to align with the planning teams, the number of members on the Planning Committee to be reduced, all Planning/Area Planning Committees be held at South Norfolk House, for all Planning meetings to meet earlier and to amend the scheme of delegation to allow officers to determine more applications.

Members considered the issue relating to the publication of personal details on the Council's website, particularly in relation to planning applications. To ensure the public were aware of what would happen to correspondence, a warning that documents would appear on the Council's website was included in all acknowledgement letters, for applications, subsequent consultations and correspondence from any party. This warning also appeared on site notices and on the website. It was felt that this resulted in customers having given "implied consent" which would be a reasonable defence if the council was ever challenged.

Following the transfer of the Council's housing stock to Saffron Housing Trust under Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT), a number of promises had been made to tenants. Members wished to ensure that these promises had been fulfilled and considered the findings of an audit of those promises. The overall conclusion of members was that the majority of the promises had been delivered and the tenants' representatives' views were that the transfer had been the right decision by the Council.



Tourism, Heritage, Enterprise & Culture Overview Sub-Committee

Members considered the Tourism Quality Grant, which was designed to assist accommodation businesses to undergo a formal accreditation inspection. The cost, based on one-three rooms, was £204 for an inspection together with a one-off membership fee of £130. If the inspected accommodation did not meet the required minimum standard, Economic Development officers would be able to offer assistance. Members supported the introduction of the Tourism Quality Grant Scheme of a maximum of £200.00 over a period of two years, which was agreed by Cabinet.

Members had asked for consideration to be given to new on-line procedures for booking swimming lessons as with the current system, queues could easily mean customers waiting up to 3 hours. Following that request, a new on-line booking system had been implemented that had significantly reduced re-booking times and generated a number of compliments from customers.

Environmental Health & Recycling Overview Sub-Committee

Members discussed the issues around the combined Responsible Authorities Partnership (RAP), which was to be disbanded, and the re-launch of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) as a unit in its own right under the South Norfolk Alliance was supported. Members also discussed the role of Restorative Justice (RJ) which was an effective tool in bringing community members together to resolve problems and members felt this process should be utilised where possible. The Council's strong role within the CDRP by working with young people who are in or at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system was also welcomed.

Members discussed the Pitt review, which had considered all aspects of flooding and then discussed in detail the flooding issues in the District, which were largely caused by surface water and insufficient sewer capacity. Concern was raised that funds may be diverted to Norfolk County Council in the future if it was decided that the County Council should take a lead on drainage issues. It was agreed that the council should lobby for recognition of the district council's role in dealing with flooding and also for sufficient funding being made available by water companies to reduce the incidence of sewer flooding.



The Food Standards Agency was concerned that there were inconsistencies among Local Authorities in how food businesses were being scored on food safety and so a national 'Scores on the Door' scheme has been proposed. A typical scheme would be made of six tiers and use a star system. Members agreed to support the introduction of a 'Scores on the Doors' scheme for food businesses in South Norfolk and that the scheme should be in-line with national guidelines.

In order to move towards fulfilling the Council's priority of being among the best for recycling, members discussed the options for improving recycling performance in detail and recommended a number of improvements, such as siting additional glass banks at Mini Recycling Centres (MRCs), collecting further materials such as Tetrapaks, toys and bras, working towards recycling of street sweepings and litter, reducing food waste through education and awareness and the promotion of home and community composting, reducing contamination of recycling and rubbish bins, reducing side waste and actively encouraging the formation of further community compost schemes.

Members recommended a number of improvements to the Corporate Environment Strategy, which had been launched in September 2006. The Strategy identified a number of challenges that faced South Norfolk, such as global warming, transport and development pressures and the changing rural economy and the re-launched Strategy would set targets for 2008-12. Members were advised that the cost to carry out the work involved to achieve the outcomes of the Strategy would come from existing budgets and that previous work to review the Council's practices had resulted in some savings.

Improving Our Procedures

Best practice

There have been a number of examples where we have been asked to provide examples of how scrutiny is conducted at this Council, which demonstrates the reputation South Norfolk Council had gained for good practice in scrutiny. For example, how we deal with pre-scrutiny, the Chairman has been asked to assist on various courses at the University of Birmingham, our approach to the Community Reference has been referred to by the Centre for Public Scrutiny and many other examples.

Review of Procedures

The Scrutiny and Overview Committees agreed a change to how representatives on outside bodies reported issues back to the Council. Each outside body was linked to either the Scrutiny or an Overview Committee, thus enabling the representatives to report back, on an exception basis, any issues that they felt the Council should be aware of.

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

Legislation

The implications of some recently enacted legislation was considered, such as the Sustainable Communities Act and The Police and Justice Act, and any necessary changes implemented well ahead of any deadlines.