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***Crime and
Disorder***

Cemeteries

Performance

Pest Control

Budget

Homelessness

Housing Benefit

Waste



OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT

2016/17

Chairman's Foreword

Over the past year, Scrutiny has continued to provide a forum for Elected Members, partners and the Community to raise issues of concern relating to performance, community issues, Council Policies and national topics.

This annual report comes at a time when the Council is undergoing a major transformation programme, including commercialisation. This will continue to be considered throughout the coming year as part of our budget considerations and as a stand alone item on the 2017/18 Scrutiny Work Plan to consider the Commercialisation Strategy.

In the year to come Ashfield, like many Local Authorities, faces major economic challenges and scrutiny needs to play its part in meeting these as fully as possible. These challenges will have an impact across many areas of service delivery from the Council and partner organisations. The next 12 months will be challenging for all of us.

This report provides an overview of the topics, issues and considerations of both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Panels A & B during 2016-17, it also sets out some of the topics and issues that are scheduled to be considered by Scrutiny in the coming year as set out in the Scrutiny Workplan 2017-18.

I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank everyone who have participated in the Scrutiny process this year including officers, Members, the community and partners.

COUNCILLOR LEE ANDERSON – CHAIRMAN OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY



**Councillor Lee Anderson,
Chairman of
Overview &
Scrutiny**



Councillor Amanda
Brown Chair of Scrutiny
Panel A



Councillor Rachel
Bissett Vice - Chair of
Scrutiny Panel A



Councillor Helen Hollis
Chair of Scrutiny Panel
B



Councillor Cathy Mason
Vice - Chair of Scrutiny
of Panel B

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee's main role during 2016/17 has been to oversee, challenge and address performance issues of the Council, undertake reviews, manage the Scrutiny workplan and the overall activity of the Scrutiny process.

Scrutiny has considered a number of key issues throughout the year from both the scheduled workplan, issues raised throughout the year by residents of the District and through performance matters. These include:

- Housing Benefit Overpayment
- Corporate Plan Performance
- Impact of Changes to Waste Collection Service
- Crime and Disorder Scrutiny
- Fuel Poverty and Affordable Warmth
- Budget
- Encouraging Small and Medium Business
- Cemeteries – Home made Kerb Sets
- Community Engagement
- Access to Homeless Services
- Pest Control

The Committee and it's Panels continue to consider performance issues, policies (both local and national) and community views when setting its workplan.

The workplan is a live document and ongoing consultation continues to be undertaken with Officers, Members and partners throughout the year.

Community engagement will also form part of an ongoing consultation process in the coming year. All suggestions received will be discussed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the aim of developing a sound, informed and flexible workplan that will add value to the community and the work carried out by the Council and its partners.

Crime and Disorder – Overview and Scrutiny Committee

This extraordinary meeting of the Committee, to consider crime and disorder issues in the District, was the first meeting of the Council to be undertaken with a live Twitter feed to allow real time community interaction and questions.

Under the Police and Justice Act 2006, Overview & Scrutiny has the right to consider these issues and in particular, to scrutinise the performance of the Ashfield Community Safety Partnership. The Council and Nottinghamshire Police are both members of this partnership and this meeting allows the Committee to discuss its work with representatives from both partners.

In attendance were The Council's Service Director – Place and Communities, Community Safety Manager, Community Protection Team Leader and the Inspector for the Ashfield Safer Neighbourhood Policing Team,

The Committee explored the work of the Community Safety Partnership and its approach to tackling crime and disorder in the District. As part of this, Members were informed that over the last five years the Partnership had developed a more strategic approach, with a greater focus on trying to bring together the different agencies to help communities feel safer, by tackling the wider problems which lead to crime and disorder in certain areas and which put some individuals at risk of offending.

The Committee were informed that the partnership had focused on five 'Partnership Plus' areas in the District, where they had sought to put this more joined up approach into practice. It was explained that the approach had proved successful, but that one of the lessons learned was that in order to make further progress, the Council, Police and other agencies would have to do more to integrate their activities on the ground.

Members were also informed that the Police had moved to a 'hub' model for the delivery of specific services, rather than have these located at all Police stations. All of the different agencies were now working more closely together in order to reduce duplication and get the most out of their limited resources. A lot had already been achieved, including the co-location of the Police with the Council's Community Protection Team, and which he hoped could be built on further.

Members discussed the partnership initiative to tackle crime and disorder problems in the New Cross Support area. This initiative had proved to be very effective and was increasingly seen as a model for other areas to follow. The Committee welcomed this.

There was also an extensive discussion about the need for a visible presence by the different agencies in the community. The Committee made it clear that although it recognised the need to target resources more effectively, local people felt reassured by a uniform presence and this reassurance should be seen as an effective use of resources. Again, it was reiterated that the Council and the Police hoped to be able to do this by working in a more integrated way and so to maximise the effective use of resources.

Members also considered the ways in which local people and other organisations could make a contribution to Community Safety by providing intelligence and information which might be a symptom of a bigger problem, such as Domestic Violence. In particular, Members discussed whether more formal arrangements could be put in place for gathering this information - rather than relying on ad hoc reports - involving post staff, waste collectors or those who worked in shops. The officers agreed to investigate this.

It was recognised that significant progress had been made, but it was felt important that this should continue to be monitored; especially in the context of the moves towards greater integration that were now taking place and the co-location of the Police and Council teams together.

Fuel Poverty and Affordable Warmth

This topic was added to the 2016/17 Scrutiny workplan following concerns about fuel poverty and the far reaching effects that this can have to all aspects of life including health, employment and education.

Members were interested in considering the impact of Fuel Poverty on the District and whether existing policies and strategies had helped to alleviate it. The Panel also wanted to find out if there were opportunities for the Council to work in partnership to tackle the problem?

The Committee were informed that Ashfield has higher than average levels of Fuel Poverty in some wards in the District and that it is especially prevalent in older private rented housing, which often lack insulation or efficient heating systems. Many of those who live in the least energy efficient properties also have low incomes and often have to buy energy at high costs. This was seen as a specific problem for those who have to use prepaid meter cards, which can prove to be very expensive for them.

Members were told about the action which the Council had taken to help reduce Fuel Poverty in the District. This consisted of measures to bring down the amount of energy used, through better insulation, installing more fuel efficient boilers etc. It also consisted of support to help people switch to cheaper gas and electricity tariffs.

Members were anxious that vulnerable groups such as the elderly, should have access to Affordable Warmth, in line with the Council's Corporate Plan objectives around Health & Wellbeing. The Committee heard that warm homes can help older people to remain healthier and more active. This in turn reduces the need to provide expensive social and health care support, such as longer stays in hospital or having to move into care homes.

The Committee recognised that the Council had very limited resources with which to tackle Fuel Poverty and was likely to have even fewer resources in the future. As a consequence, it could not solve the problem of Fuel Poverty alone. Improved partnership working was considered to be the most appropriate way to address this issue.

Recommendations to Cabinet

- That the members of the Council's Sustainability Team be thanked for their successful efforts to reduce Fuel Poverty and promote Affordable Warmth in the District;
- That Fuel Poverty continues to be recognised as a priority within the Health and Well-being agenda as a major determinate of health and duly considered as part of ongoing Health and Well-being priorities;
- That the Council formally writes to Ministers recommending that it once again should be a mandatory requirement on energy suppliers to provide smart meters for all of their customers and not just "offer them";
- That Corporate Communications be asked to prepare an appropriate media release explaining the Committee's concerns;
- That improved information be provided on the Councils web site and social media explaining what people can do to become more energy efficient;
- That the Committee receives an update following the discussions between Cabinet and Robin Hood Energy;

Impact of Changes to the Waste Collection Service

Following the implementation of the new scheme in March and April 2016, the item was added to the Scrutiny Workplan for 2016/17. The item was added in order to gain an understanding of the impact of the changes to the waste collection service and whether there were any improvements that could be made.

Members were reminded of the details of the scheme whereby the existing 240 litre black lidded general waste bins had been transferred for use as garden waste bins. New 180 litre general waste bins had been provided to local residents. Households can request larger bins if five or more people live there, or if someone has a medical condition which requires them to dispose of additional waste.

Members were informed that the changes formed part of a new scheme, funded by Nottinghamshire County to help increase the District's recycling rates to 45%. This would, in turn, help to combat climate change, reduce the need for expensive landfill and save the Council an estimated £500k per annum in landfill charges. As part of this scheme, the County Council would pay for garden waste to be collected free of charge in the District for the next two years.

Members were informed that initial data indicated that fly tipping and littering had not increased since the new scheme had been introduced. Similarly, the volume of general waste taken to the Hucknall and Kirkby recycling centres had actually fallen.

The Committee discussed the operation of the scheme with the Service Director and Service Lead. Members were especially interested in whether there had been an overall increase in recycling, in particular whether there had been an increase in the amount of glass and plastics collected for recycling? Members were given a break-down of the figures for each of the three months. These indicated that the overall volumes had not changed greatly.

Members also enquired about the scope for promoting greater recycling. In this context, the Committee were given an understanding of the Waste Adviser role. There had already been over 600 Visits to offer advice to residents on how they can increase the amount of waste which they recycle rather than throw away.

The Committee were informed that the effectiveness of the post would be improved by working with the collection teams to help provide targeted advice, especially to those in areas with currently low recycling rates. Members discussed the long term prospects of the scheme and in particular what would happen when the Garden Waste services ceases to be free.

Conclusions

The Committee concluded that whilst the issue remained an important topic to consider, they would revisit it following 12 months of operation in order to carry out a more in-depth, evidence based review.

The reasons provided were that it would be more prudent to consider the issue when the scheme has been in place for longer, providing Members with sufficient data to analyse the impact of the scheme to residents and the district.

Housing Benefit Overpayment

Members agreed to consider the problem of Housing Benefit overpayment in the District and how the Council is responding to it as part of the 2016/17 Scrutiny Workplan.

Members were informed that most cases of HB Overpayment happen when claimants fail to inform the Council about changes in their personal circumstances that would reduce the amount of benefit they should receive - such as getting a job or a family member moving out of their home.

During consideration of this topic Members considered the Housing Benefit figures for the District and how it had changed over time. They noted that the volume of overpayments caused by claimants' not reporting changes in their circumstances had increased significantly. In many respects this reflected better operational performance as much of

this increase, it was explained, was the result of effective information sharing between the Council and the Department for Work and Pensions, which meant that additional cases of overpayment had come to light. This, in turn, meant that more of these payments could now be recovered.

The Committee felt that the Council should focus on both recovering overpayments and preventing them from happening in the first place – by making sure that claimants know just how important it is to report any changes in their personal circumstances. Members heard about what is already done to achieve this and the scope for doing more; especially when the new Council web site is launched

Members discussed the potential impact of changes to the benefits system and especially the introduction of Universal Credit. The key point to emerge from this discussion was that Universal Credit would eventually replace Housing Benefit for all claimants in the District, but that this was not likely to happen for at least five or six years, so it was important for the Council to continue to help claimants and reduce the volume of HB overpayments.

The Committee also felt that the co-location of the Department of Work and Pensions and the Housing Benefits staff in the Council's Central Offices would provide an ideal opportunity to help ensure that changes to claimant circumstances are picked up as soon as possible to prevent overpayment of the benefit.

Conclusions

The Committee concluded that there was a consensus that a lot of progress had been made to improve the way in which the Council handles Housing Benefit claims, with a quicker turn-around of claim applications, more effective co-operation to identify and claim back overpayments and a real understanding of the need to ensure that claimants report changes of circumstances as soon as possible. It was hoped that the Council's new web site would assist with this.

Cemeteries –Home Made Kerb Sets

This topic was added to the Scrutiny Work Plan due to the noticeable increase in home made kerb sets that often encroached on land beyond their allocated plots and caused ongoing difficulties for staff trying to maintain the grounds to an acceptable standard.

The Panel recognised that this was a very sensitive topic and that any recommendations would need to be considered with care and attention. As part of the review Members undertook a visit to a cemetery to view the scale of the issue in Ashfield.

As part of the review Members investigated a number of options, including;

- Council Installation of Kerb Sets
- Feedback/Comments from Cemetery Visitors and Plot Owners
- Purchase of Smaller Grass Trimmers

In addition to this, the Panel also considered best practice information from other local authorities,

Recommendations to Cabinet

- the current Cemetery Rules and Regulations regarding the prevention of erection of home-made kerb sets within the Council's cemeteries, be upheld;
- prior to any strict enforcement of the Council's cemetery regulations (in relation to the removal of home-made kerb sets), a targeted campaign be developed and undertaken by the Council's Communications Team to gradually raise the profile and awareness of the issue through recognised media outlets;
- it be reiterated by the Council that the issue of enforcement action in relation to the removal of home-made kerb sets be dealt with sensitively and compassionately whilst liaising with grieving relatives and friends of deceased loved ones;
- to investigate the possibility of including a variety of photos of home-made kerb sets within information packs given to purchasers of burial plots to highlight the problems associated with their deterioration and subsequent blight on the surroundings, their encroachment onto adjacent plots and the difficulties being experienced by staff endeavouring to maintain the site around them;
- the current procedures undertaken by the Council to assist purchasers of burial plots and the support offered to funeral directors, be strengthened to ensure that guidance is clear regarding the prohibited erection of home-made kerb sets;
- the development of a cemetery guide (small pamphlet size) to assist burial plot owners and grieving relatives/friends to understand the rules and restrictions as applied to Ashfield cemetery sites and to circulate as widely as possible to appropriate venues (i.e. funeral directors, churches, libraries, bereavement charities, community venues etc.);
- an initial exercise be undertaken with the help of local community groups to consider the possibility of providing a memorial/reflection area or community garden within each of the Council's cemeteries to enable grieving relatives, friends and visitors to place items of remembrance for their loved ones.

Pest Control (Street Vermin)

As part of the Scrutiny Workplan consultation, Members approved a review of Pest Control, with a particular focus on street vermin, as a topic that would benefit from scrutiny consideration.

As part of the preparatory work, the Chairman accompanied one of the Pest Control Officers for a morning visiting a number of premises in order to obtain a greater understanding of the role and the work undertaken by the team.

During the review, Members were informed that the services provided by the Team included:-

- Control of rats and mice;
- Control of pigeons
- Commercial contracts
- Treatment for cockroaches, bedbugs, squirrels, moles, wasps, ants and other insect pests

The authority currently charges a set fee of £60 for rat or mice control (x3 visits). However, some neighbouring authorities including Newark and Sherwood and Bassetlaw no longer provide a pest control service to residents.

In accordance with the Prevention of Damage By Pests Act 1949, every local authority has a duty to take such steps as may be necessary to secure so far as is practicable that their District is kept free from rats and mice and in particular:-

- Carry out such inspections as may be necessary;
- Destroy rats and mice on Council land/property;
- Enforce these duties on owners/occupiers;

In addition, under the Act it is the duty of the occupier to notify the local authority in writing if they become aware of substantial numbers of rats and mice on their property. Local authorities can consequently request that owners/occupiers carry out relevant treatments for rats or mice, undertake structural repairs and remove waste and harbourage.

Members concluded by acknowledging that the Pest Control Service was run by helpful, experienced and knowledgeable fully qualified pest controllers who offered a professional service at all times. Consequently, all Members agreed that the current service provided was fit for purpose and promoted good practice.

Recommendations to Cabinet

- Cabinet be requested to explore the promotion of the Pest Control Service via Notice Boards and advertising on refuse bins to highlight the importance of pest control/sensible disposal of waste;
- consideration be given to the development of an Education Programme to encourage schools, community groups and local residents to understand the importance of pest control issues;
- Councillors be requested to be more focused on pest control issues within their Wards;
- consideration be given to using social media as a communications channel to promote and advertise the Pest Control Service;
- Cabinet be requested to explore the expansion of commercialisation to enable the Pest Control Service to be offered to neighbouring authorities who currently do not provide this service in-house.

Homelessness

As part of the Scrutiny Workplan consultation, Members approved the topic of considering access to homelessness services and how we work with our partner agencies in addressing and preventing homelessness at the earliest possible stage.

The Panel held 2 meetings on this issue, however during the course of consideration of this topic, national progress on the Homelessness Reduction Bill and preparations of the Council to deal with these changes started to take place, thus changing the focus of the review.

During the review Members were updated on the potential implications of the draft Homelessness Reduction Bill. At the time of considering this topic, the Draft Bill had already passed through the House of Commons and would be progressing through the House of Lords with the second reading due on 24th February, 2017. It was hoped that the Bill would be enacted by the end of 2017 and twelve new measures were being introduced to amend the existing legislation.

A summary of the twelve measures/changes were considered during the review. It was acknowledged that should the Bill be passed, it would have implications for the Council

as follows:-

- expected 25% rise in homeless applications
- suitable IT and monitoring systems would need to be in place;
- new procedures finalised for non-priority need applicants;
- protocols agreed to work with specified referral agencies;
- enhanced self help and advice services on the website
- templates for personal plans;
- agreed additional staffing requirements
- development of new prevention initiatives;
- informing partner agencies and stakeholders of changes through homelessness forum.

The Panel concluded by agreeing that with imminent changes expected when the Bill receives Royal Assent (which it now has), a further update to the Panel was required with regards to actions that the Council would need to take (detailed in an Action Plan). In the interim, the Panel considered that early intervention, continued collaborative working with both other agencies and the community and regular updates to Members to keep them informed were important steps in preparation for the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Recommendations to Cabinet

- that Council recognises the importance of developing effective prevention initiatives (the Homelessness Reduction Bill [now an Act] seeks to place extra duties on Councils) to facilitate early intervention with households/persons at risk of homelessness to provide more detailed advice, support and guidance thus preventing homelessness wherever possible;
- that the Council continues to strengthen relationships with third sector organisations to facilitate the pooling of resources for tackling homelessness or the threat of homelessness within the Ashfield District;
- Members to be furnished with a copy of the 'How to Contact the Housing Options Team' leaflet;
- to consider the possibility of working with late night establishments and community initiatives to raise awareness and facilitate the necessary signposting should persons present themselves as homeless or are believed to be under threat of homelessness;
- to continue to work effectively with local services and communities to ensure the new outreach service is as effective as possible;
- to ensure that Panel Members are kept informed of progress with the Homelessness Reduction Bill [now an Act] and revisit the topic in due course to understand its implications.

Performance

Performance management is one of the key roles of Overview and Scrutiny and provides Scrutiny Members with the opportunity to proactively review and challenge performance, add value to the Council's services and monitor functions delivered with and by the Council's partners that add quality of life to the citizens of Ashfield.

During 2016-17, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee monitored the performance of an agreed list of priority areas identified in the Corporate Plan to assess where problems were arising and which aims and objectives were being achieved.

Scrutiny Members held a number of meetings to discuss performance issues with relevant service lead officers and Portfolio holders to actively challenge where outcomes have not been achieved.

The Committee have been pleased to note that the level of achievement against priorities identified within the Corporate Plan has improved significantly. Scrutiny of Performance is additionally supported by the Corporate Performance Manager. Issues raised during performance considerations have also been used to inform the 2016-17 Scrutiny Workplan.

Getting Involved

There are a number of different ways in which members of the community can get involved in Scrutiny. These are:

- 1. Attend A Meeting** - All Scrutiny meetings are open to the public to come and listen to the debate. There may also be a chance to speak at the meetings at the discretion of the Chair. The meetings are publicised and can be found at: <https://democracy.ashfield-dc.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?bcr=1>
- 2. Put Forward A Suggestion For A Topic To Be Considered By Scrutiny** - Any topic can be suggested for consideration for the Scrutiny workplan. To put forward a topic does not mean that you will have to become directly involved in the review if you do not wish to be. <https://www.ashfield.gov.uk/your-council/about-the-council/councillors-and-meetings/overview-and-scrutiny-function/>
- 2. Speak To Your Local Councillor** - Your local Councillor details are located on the Council's website at; <https://democracy.ashfield-dc.gov.uk/mgMemberIndex.aspx?bcr=1>

