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Overview & Scrutiny

Annual Report 2011-12

A message from Councillor Doris Hinkley, Chair Overview and Scrutiny Board

“Welcome to the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report, which explains the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Board (OSB) and its Task and Finish Groups during 2011-12.

Overview and Scrutiny is a vital part of Luton Borough Council’s responsibility to its residents. It works on behalf of residents to highlight issues of concern and makes recommendations for improvement to the Council and local partners. Overview and Scrutiny plays the important role of ‘critical friend’ to the Council’s Executive.

Overview and Scrutiny has worked and is currently working closely with many partners during this year who have all contributed to the well-being of the people of Luton and I take this opportunity to thank all the witnesses for their support and advice.

If you would like to find out more, all scrutiny meetings are open to the public and the Democracy Team will

be pleased to supply you with more information. Contact details are listed at the end of this report.”

Councillor Doris Hinkley

Introduction

The current structure for overview and scrutiny was introduced in September 2009 and comprises the Overview and Scrutiny Board and two standing committees – the Finance Review Group and the Health and Social Care Review Group. Time limited Task and Finish Groups are established to carry out specific pieces of work. The OSB oversees and manages the scrutiny process at Luton and has parity with the Executive. OSB mainly concentrates on strategic issues and is the Council’s main body for public accountability and strategy development.

The activities of the OSB are driven by a work programme, developed and agreed by the Board itself, that is constantly evolving and regularly updated.

The Chair of the Board in 2011-12 was Councillor Doris Hinkley (Liberal Democrat) and the Vice Chairs were Councillors Michael Garrett (Conservative) and Councillor Aslam Khan (Labour).

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Key Scrutiny Work in 2011-2012

- **Away Day**

An away day event was held on Saturday 17th September 2011. The event was extremely successful with many favourable comments for Jessica Crowe, Executive Director from the Centre for Public Scrutiny who facilitated the day. The day resulted in our obtaining useful material aimed at keeping scrutiny at the right strategic level and maximising its positive impact on the people of Luton. Breakout sessions also enabled participants to share their perspectives and expertise around our biggest challenges moving forward. A long list of significant issues was produced and consultation with the public resulted in a list of 5-6 issues, which will feed into the OSB's work programme for the next two years.

- **Working with External Partners and Local Communities**

Throughout the year, the Board received a range of reports and presentations from organisations and individuals from outside the Council to assist with overview and scrutiny work; these included Bedfordshire Police, Barnfield Academy, First Capital Connect and Network Rail, Active Luton and the Chair of the Luton Safeguarding Board.

- **Working with the Executive/Portfolio Holders**

The Board has continued to be actively involved with the work of the Executive, regularly scrutinising the Executive's Forward Plan, which remains a standing item on the work programme. Monthly meetings are also held with the Chair and Vice Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Board and the Leader of the Council, to discuss corporate issues facing the Council. The Executive Member for Housing has played a key role in providing evidence at the Empty Homes Task and Finish Group. The Executive Member for Finance has a standing invitation to attend the Finance Review Group.

- **Former High Town Recreation Centre**

The OSB meeting on the 9th June 2011 received a reference from Council to consider two petitions in relation to the former High Town Recreation Centre, locally known as the 'Drill Hall'.

Detailed evidence was given by key witnesses including Council Officers, the Leader of the Council, the Chief Executive, representatives of the two petitioning groups and residents of High Town, before making recommendations to the Executive.

The OSB made several recommendations to the

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Executive regarding process communication and also advised that the Executive should consider before making their final decision:

1. That the understanding for the Old Recreation Centre once closed was for the land to be earmarked for housing, although, no formal agreement existed;
2. That the High Town area is in urgent need for family housing, which is an issue replicated across the town;
3. The potential effects of their decision on community cohesion in the town.

In responding to the report and recommendations of the OSB, the Executive agreed that in relation to the disposal of assets, delegation of powers to officers and Portfolio Holders should have clearly defined parameters for officers to work within to avoid confusion, and any deviation from those parameters should be reported back to Executive for approval.

It was also agreed that as part of the process for the disposal of assets, an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) be included and that Ward Councillors be informed of significant issues affecting their wards as a matter of course.

Further details on this review can be obtained from the Democracy Team or by email at scrutiny@luton.gov.uk.

TASK AND FINISH GROUPS

The Overview and Scrutiny Board has the power and responsibility to set up time limited task and finish groups. The task and finish groups manage reviews of issues that are of public and corporate interest, research and take evidence and produce the final report with recommendations for the Executive. Membership of the task and finish group is drawn from all members of the Council other than Executive Members and can be extended to include statutory and non-statutory co-optees and experts in the relevant subject area.

Following consultation on items for the work programme, the Board set up two task and finish groups in 2011-12 to look into priority issues identified by Luton residents and Council partners – (i) Empty Homes and (ii) Local Bus Services.

Outlined below is a brief summary of the work of the two standing committees – the Finance Review Group and the Health and Social Care Review Group and the two current task and finish groups:

FINANCE REVIEW GROUP

The Finance Review Group (FRG) continued to sit in 2011/12 as a standing sub-committee of the Overview and Scrutiny Board (OSB). Its purpose includes:

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- Enabling closer scrutiny of the Council's finances;
- Enhancing decision-making process on spending priorities;
- Overseeing public involvement to improve accountability.

During the year, the FRG focused its scrutiny on four strategic areas of the Council transformation programme and kick-started the 'Transforming Luton Community Debate' programme. Building on last year's public consultation, the programme planned to reach out and obtain the views of residents on proposals to develop the Council budget for the next 3 years.

The FRG reported to the Executive on 13th February 2012, making ten recommendations around the strategic areas scrutinised and the community debate. These were all accepted and endorsed by the Executive, as helpful to them to make well informed and transparent decision.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE REVIEW GROUP

The Health and Social Care Review Group (HSCRG) was set up in 2011, as a new standing sub-committee of the Overview and Scrutiny Board. Its responsibility includes:

- Overseeing NHS reforms in Luton;
- Holding decision-makers to account for commissioning decisions;
- Undertaking health and social care topical reviews;
- Dealing with consultation by NHS organisations.

Since September 2011, the HSCRG reviewed and commented on diverse matters, including the:

- Luton and Dunstable Hospital compliance with the 'dignity' and 'nutrition' standards in elderly care;
- Progress of NHS reform;
- Development of the NHS Equality Delivery System;
- Council's Vision for Adult Social Care;
- Development of the Luton Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

The Group started participating in the on-going sub-regional joint health scrutiny committee to scrutinise the 'Healthier Together' review of health services across the South East Midlands.

EMPTY HOMES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Overview and Scrutiny Board agreed to set up the 'Empty Homes' Task and Finish group following consultation on priorities for the public during Local Democracy Week in October 2011. The issue of empty homes was highlighted as an area of concern and was the highest priority topic (64%) from 71 responses received from Luton residents.

The first meeting of the Task and Finish group held on 1st February, 2012 elected Councillor Melvin Cato as the Chair. The review was scheduled for three months with the final report and recommendations scheduled to go to the 7th June 2012 Overview and Scrutiny Board and Executive on 18th June 2012.

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At the time of publishing this annual report, the Task and Finish Group is at the evidence gathering stage and has received evidence from council officers and external witnesses to support the review.

Findings so far include:

- The need for finance to be made available to assist towards enforcement cost for uncooperative home owners and to buy and renovate long term empty properties to be used for social housing and subsequently help reduce the numbers on the housing waiting list;
- The need for a full time empty homes officer to be appointed as currently the position is temporarily filled and funded by the empty homes network agency;
- Better communication between Council departments; and
- to ensure the council's website is up dated with relevant information to include success stories to negate negatives perceptions by the public and media.

LOCAL BUS SERVICES TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Overview and Scrutiny Board also agreed to set up the 'Local Bus Services' Task and Finish group following Local Democracy week last year. The purpose of the task and finish group is to review the local bus services in and out of Luton (excluding Greenline, Coach services and the Luton Dunstable

Busway) to provide a better understanding of how bus service timetables, fares and routes are determined.

The first meeting of the Task and Finish group held on 2nd February, 2012 elected the Chair, Councillor Foord and is scheduled to run for six months with the final report and recommendations going to the 29th August, 2012 OSB and Executive on 10th September, 2012.

The Task and Finish Group is at the evidence gathering stage and has received information from Council Officers and external witnesses such as Arriva, Centrebus, the Disability Resource Centre and the Luton Senior Peoples Forum, with further evidence on Tendered Bus Services being given at the next meeting.

Findings and issues so far include:

- information relating to timetables and ticket offers/deals needing to be more easily accessible.
- The Task and Finish Group have requested the outcomes of the Arriva Customer Survey;
- Driver awareness has also been raised; for example buses often move off before elderly and disabled passengers are seated. This is an emotive issue and has recently been raised in the public press;
- Out of town employment areas are significantly under serviced by bus routes;
- The Task & Finish Group has also requested that mystery shoppers be used to identify further issues.

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CALL-INS

There were seven call-ins during 2011-12, which were considered and dealt with by the Overview and Scrutiny Board relating to the following issues:

- Local Assets Backed Vehicle – Outline Business Case
- Parking Scale of Charges
- Review of Street Cleaning Services
- Queen Elizabeth II Playing Field Challenge
- Transformation Strategy
- Luton Transformation Programme
- Supportive Living Service Review

WHAT ARE OUR CHALLENGES FOR 2012/13?

The Board will continue to focus on the big issues affecting the town and will continue to raise the profile and awareness of the Overview and Scrutiny process at Luton with our partners and Council Officers, to encourage participation and involvement and help identify key issues for its work programme.

Further topics for new task and finish groups will be identified by the OSB at its meeting in September 2012.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

EXECUTIVE - The Executive is responsible for the day-to-day running of the Council and the development of policy. Executive members have specific areas of responsibility eg: Housing, Environment, Adult Social Care.

CALL-IN - this is the process by which the Overview and Scrutiny Board considers whether a decision has been properly taken or is the right decision.

TASK AND FINISH GROUPS –
Time limited groups set up by the OSB to focus on a particular issue, either Council responsibility or other partner agencies such as Health Trusts, and to make recommendations to Executive. Whilst the Executive is not obliged to support the recommendations, it has been shown that effective consultation has been proven to lead to consensus and to Executive support for reviews undertaken.

CONTACT

If you want to know more, or have any suggestions for scrutiny, contact us in the Democracy Team on 01582 546041 or email scrutiny@luton.gov.uk.