

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2008/09

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INTRODUCTION



Councillor Jim Ranger

Chairman Corporate Business Scrutiny



Councillor Colin Woodward

Chairman Community Scrutiny



Councillor William Quince

Chairman Environment Scrutiny

A total of 37 Members have served on the scrutiny committees or task and finish groups this year, giving generously of their time, enthusiasm and expertise. This report sets out their many achievements; and our hopes and plans for the coming year.

1. What is Scrutiny?

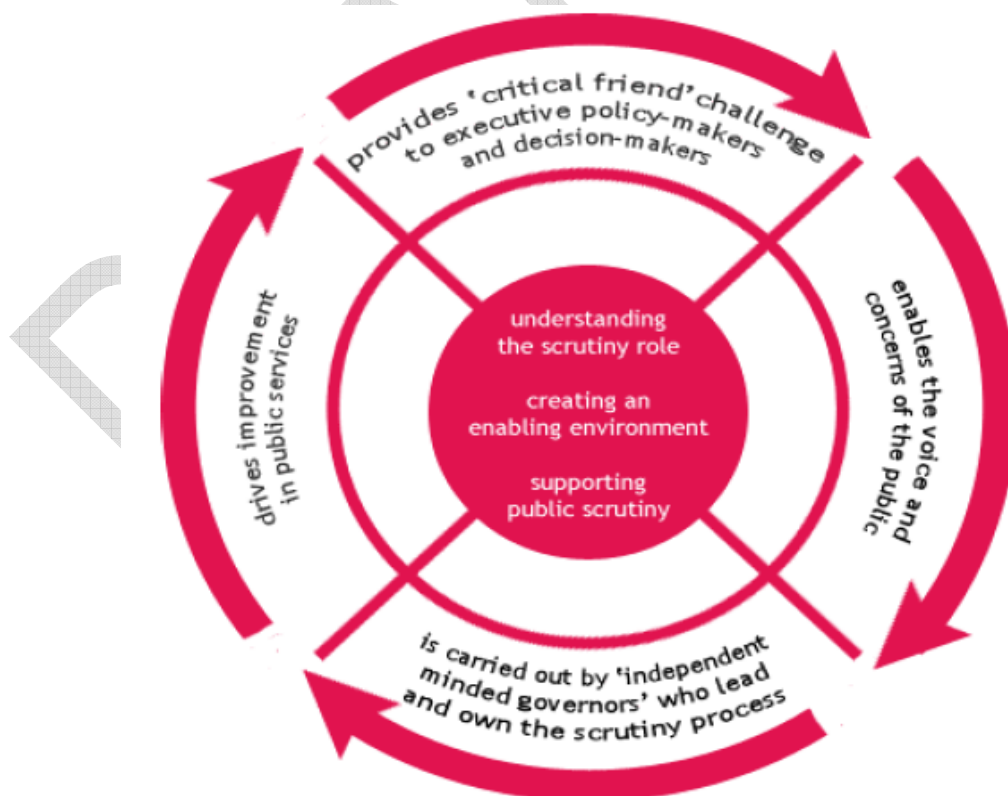
The Local Government Act 2000 says that councils must have at least one committee that has the power to review or scrutinise decisions or actions which affect the authority's area or its residents.

The aim of scrutiny is to provide an open and transparent forum in which to ensure that policies and services are meeting the Council's priorities and the needs of local people.

Scrutiny Members act as a critical friend to the Executive and other local service providers, helping them to monitor performance and develop sound policies. They also have the power to hold the Council's Executive to account by "calling in" decisions before or after they have been taken.

Scrutiny committees cannot make decisions or policies themselves, but they have the power of influence. They make recommendations informed by partner and public opinions, performance information, examples of best practice and expert advice.

The Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) has set out the 'four principles of good scrutiny' which should apply in the scrutiny cycle:



2. Scrutiny at East Herts

2008/09 is the first full year of the new scrutiny arrangements in East Herts. Following a review during 2008, the original two committees which focused separately on policy and performance, were restructured into the three 'service specific' committees given below.

Corporate Business Scrutiny (scheduled to meet 8 times per year) deals with the following:

- regular performance monitoring
- pre-decision scrutiny (selecting from the Forward Plan)
- budget scrutiny
- scrutiny and policy development of the 'business' side of the council including finance, ICT, facilities, legal, procurement etc.

Community Scrutiny: Community Safety and Protection
Scheduled to meet 4 times per year Community Development, Leisure & Culture
Health and Housing

Environment Scrutiny: Planning Policy and Transport
Scheduled to meet 4 times per year Environment and Environmental Quality
Conservation and Climate Change

All three committees have responsibility for internal scrutiny, external scrutiny and call-in and will pick up new powers as they are devolved from central government. These evolving powers are explained in more detail in Section 11 of this report.

East Herts Council has a seat on the county-wide Hertfordshire Health Scrutiny Panel. Our representative is the councillor who is Chairman of our own **Health Engagement Panel** which operates as a 'standing panel' under the Community Scrutiny Committee.

The Committees are supported by one full-time officer post. The Scrutiny Officer role is to provide project management support to the Scrutiny Committees and undertake research and information analysis in relation to reviews or 'topic groups' set up by the main Committees. Another important strand of the officer's role is to ensure external witnesses, experts, partners and local residents are all appropriately involved in the scrutiny activity within East Herts.

During this year it became clear that a few areas of scrutiny responsibility needed to have their descriptions updated and a couple of activities would fit better under an alternative committee.

Consequently, during a council-wide revision of the whole Constitution, the following changes were proposed to full Council on 4 March 2009 and agreed.

Current wording or situation	New wording or change	reason
<i>Add to all 3 committees</i>	To monitor the contributions made by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and partners to the quality of life for residents of East Herts within the remit of this committee	to reflect the growing importance of working positively with external partners
To consider the draft budget which is recommended to the Council by the Executive and scrutinise the budget	To consider the budget setting processes and strategies of the council	to better represent the early intervention and involvement of scrutiny in the budget setting cycle
CCTV Partnership and Police Liaison (RAG)	Crime and Disorder Reduction	to up-date the terminology
<p><i>Remove</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Control • Planning Enforcement • Development Control <p>from remit of Community Scrutiny</p>	<p><i>Add</i></p> <p>these areas to the remit of Environment Scrutiny to sit alongside</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning Policy • Local Development Framework (LDF) 	To allow closely related/overlapping issues to all be considered under the remit of a single committee and avoid duplication/confusion

3. How do the Committees decide what to scrutinise?

Councillors select issues which are:

- Of local public concern
- Linked to the council's vision and priorities
- Capable of being influenced
- Not being scrutinised by another body

And they can draw ideas for topics from

- National and local performance data
- Results and feedback coming out of residents' survey(s)
- Responses to our Link magazine or ideas direct from residents
- Issues raised regularly in the local press
- Executive and non-Executive Members
- Corporate Management Team
- Topics which the scrutiny committees previously identified but did not have time to review during the previous year

4. How to get involved

Scrutiny is strengthened by involving partners and residents. They bring expertise, local knowledge, fresh ideas and external challenge.

If you would like to know more, ring the Scrutiny Officer on 01992 531612 or e-mail scrutiny@eastherts.gov.uk

You can access full details on any item or outcome mentioned in the following pages of this report via our website. Agendas, reports and minutes of every council committee are posted and regularly updated – and meetings are open to the public:

<http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/committees>

If you ever take part in one of our scrutiny reviews and every time you attend as an observer, we would value your feedback to help us improve the process. An on-line feedback form is available at

<http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/scrutiny>

or you can ask for a paper-based version from the Scrutiny Officer.

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ACHIEVEMENTS May 2008 – April 2009

5. Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee

Chairman: Councillor Jim Ranger
Vice-Chairman: Councillor Mike Wood

Councillors

D Andrews	J Hedley
R Beeching	G Lawrence
R N Copping	J Mayes
R Gilbert	J Warren

Substitutes:

Cllrs P Ruffles, N Wilson, C Woodward, R Taylor

Scrutiny:

- C3W
- Data Protection and Data Sharing Protocol
- Legal Code of Corporate Governance
- Annual Governance Statement
- Recruitment Services
- Review of the Constitution
- Risk management and strategic risk register
- Service Plans and Budget (inc fees and charges)
- Corporate Strategic Plan

Performance monitoring:

This is an important role for scrutiny. At every alternate meeting the committee receives a report from the council's Performance Team showing how well the services are performing against target levels. Some of these targets are set by central government and some by local agreement. The report is known as a 'Healthcheck' for good reason – it is a way of taking the temperature of the council and checking it is operating well.

- Corporate Annual Report for 2007/08
- Monitoring the CPA Improvement Plan
- Four times a year the Committee receives

Learnt about:

- New CAA Framework (UoR)

Contributed to

- East Herts response to the government's consultation on 'Improving Local Accountability'

Reviews:

- Performance Indicators: a small group of 5 councillors (under chairmanship of Cllr Janet Mayes) looked at the detailed information and statistics which the authority has to record and report on. Much of this data is legally required and used by the Audit Commission to formally 'inspect' the council - but local councillors also need to monitor progress and performance on a regular basis so they could quickly pick up on any issues and prevent a 'falling' figure becoming a 'failing' one.

East Herts takes Performance Monitoring very seriously and this group wanted to ensure key information was reported to the right committee in a timely manner and in a clear format that was more 'user-friendly'.

- Plain English and Report Writing: a group of 7 councillors (also under the chairmanship of Cllr Janet Mayes) spent time looking ways to improve the quality and style of the reports they have to read. These reports are also available to residents and local media via the council's website and at committee meetings which are all held in public.

The members of this group were keen to ensure all the reports being considered by councillors and used by them to make decisions, would be readily accessible by everyone.

- Shared Services: a group of 7 members (under the chairmanship of Cllr Jim Ranger) has just started to review how East Herts works in partnership with other councils and agencies on a range of services. Joint working has become an important way of offering residents more efficient and responsive services – and councillors want to check we are doing everything we can to be effective.

This group will report back to Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee in July 2009.

Call-In:

No Call-In was heard by this committee during 2008/09.

Comment from Cllr Jim Ranger (Chairman):

“Much of the work of this Scrutiny Committee is on policy issues which lead to service improvements over a period of time. The one issue with an immediate outcome for residents is the 2009/2010 budget. Our detailed work as the budget was developed led to recommendations, largely around staff costs and the freezing of Councillors’ allowances, which were accepted by the Executive. This resulted in the Executive recommending to Council a reduced increase in Council Tax from 3.8% to 3.4%”.

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6. Community Scrutiny

Chairman: Councillor Colin Woodward
Vice-Chairman: Councillor Dorothy Hone

Councillors

P Ballam	A Dodd
N Clark	A Graham
K Darby	P Grethe
A Dearman	J Taylor

Substitutes:

Cllrs G McAndrew, P Ruffles, S Rutland-Barsby, M Wood, D Clark

Scrutiny:

- The East Herts Homeless and Homeless Prevention Strategy 2008-2013 was scrutinised at the final meeting of last year and this year the Scrutiny Committee went on to review
 - East Herts Housing Strategy 2008/11
 - Choice-based letting scheme and Housing Register Allocation policy
 - Affordable Housing: options in the current economic climateAs part of their on-going commitment to support residents, the committee **has already asked** to have an updated Empty Homes strategy and action plan presented to them during next year to allow them to check it is sustainable and robust.
- The leisure and cultural services have received attention from this committee over the past year with work undertaken on
 - The new leisure contract procurement process
 - **Development proposals at Grange Paddocks and Hartham Common Leisure Centres**
 - **Castle Hall – review and development plans**
- Some key recommendations were made by Community Scrutiny to the Executive – and accepted by them - regarding
 - Options for the future delivery of Community Meals
 - Community transport initiatives and allocation of bus subsidies.Both of these issues impact on some of the most vulnerable and isolated residents of East Herts and the committee will continue to monitor these services to ensure changes do not have a detrimental impact on their quality of life and well-being.

- During this busy year, the committee also managed to find time to look at
 - East Herts District Children's Trust Partnership action plan
 - Comprehensive equalities policy and action plan
 - Cultural Strategy – end of year report
 - "Everyone Matters" – a sustainable community strategy for the district of East Hertfordshire

Performance monitoring:

- A 'Healthcheck' is received by this committee at every meeting covering the services under its remit. The report is a mixture of written information explaining the performance data and visual material which shows both a current position and a trend chart so councillors can quickly pick up if something is going off-track. This close monitoring has made a significant contribution to the sound management of the council.
- More detailed annual reports were received from our key partners who attended in person to present a summary of their work over the previous year and answer questions from councillors
 - Community Meals Service (WRVS Meals on Wheels)
 - Registered Social Landlords (Housing Associations) with annual reports from both Circle Anglia and Riversmead
 The CAB (East Herts Citizens Advice Service EHCAS) would usually report to the committee, but this year the session has been delayed until the first meeting of 2009/10 to allow them to report more fully on the outcome of their recent re-organisation.

Up-dating:

In order to deliver efficient and effective services to residents, all local councils are looking for ways to work in partnership with other agencies in their area. One significant national development is the formation of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). These bring together different parts of the public, private, community and voluntary sectors allowing different initiatives and services to pool resources and support one another to gain the best outcomes for local people. Everyone is working towards the same the objectives and targets coming out of a negotiated Local Area Agreement (LAA) – and this should avoid duplication, build capacity and provide more cost-effective services in future.

Locally, the county LSP is called "Hertfordshire Forward" and the committee was brought up-to-date with a session on partnership and community working designed to broaden their understanding of the new structures, the make up of the district LSP and what has been achieved to date.

Reviews:

- No separate topic was reviewed by Community Scrutiny outside of the scheduled Committee meetings. During 2008/09, resources were allocated to set up and support the very active Health Engagement Panel.

Call-In:

No Call-In was heard by this committee during 2008/09.

Comment from Cllr Colin Woodward (Chairman):

“Community Scrutiny has played a key role in driving improvement of the District's services. Of particular note has been the detailed examination of process and proposals leading to the successful award by tender of the contract for the District's gyms and pools to SLM, a leading national operator, which should bring significant benefits to residents and users.”

7. Health Engagement Panel

Chairman:
Councillor Kim Darby



Councillors
S Bull
D Hone

M Wood
B Wrangles

Consultation:

This Panel has been very involved in events and initiatives going on with Health Service partners. Members have invited a number of speakers to their meetings throughout the year and so given councillors the opportunity to contribute directly to local health developments.

- East & North Herts NHS Trust – gave a presentation on their Consultation on Foundation Status for Lister, QEII, Hertford County and Mount Vernon hospitals
- West Herts PCT and East & North Herts PCT – consultation exercise on local procurement of GP-led Health Centres
- Feedback from 11 May 2008 consultation event on ‘site option appraisal for hospital/health campus in Welwyn Hatfield’

- East & North Hertfordshire PCT – an opportunity to meet and question their (acting) Transport Project Manager

In November 2008, East Herts Council submitted a written response to the consultation phase of the Mount Vernon Cancer Services Development Project.

Internal scrutiny:

- As a district council, we have a significant part to play in the general well-being of local residents. The Health Engagement Panel contributed extensively to the development of the East Herts Public Health strategy 2008-2013 ([click here for a direct link](#) to this document) and the Panel continues to check on whether the planned projects are delivering positive results. Their work this year has included
 - Performance monitoring of progress against 2008/09 action plan
 - Review of strategy and proposals for 2009/10
 - Agreement on 2009/10 action plan

- Promoting physical activity through planning, transport and the physical environment – a ‘select Committee’ style debate with officers
Comment from Cllr Kim Darby (Chairman):

“The December 2008 meeting saw the HEP breaking new ground! The Panel was the first (East Herts) committee to scrutinise a topic using the same approach employed by Select Committees in parliament. This was a valuable exercise and enabled Panel members to investigate in depth how this council encourages people to be more physically active – not just through the obvious leisure services but also through our work on planning, transport and the environment. It was also an opportunity to demonstrate the extensive knowledge of the officers and shows the commitment of the whole council towards our local public health agenda”.

External Scrutiny:

Formal scrutiny of the Health Service lies with Hertfordshire County Council and all 10 district councils make contribution to that body. The timing of our Health Engagement Panel meetings are set to fall just before these HCC meetings. This allows East Herts councillors to consider agenda items in advance and discuss what local perspective needs to be voiced at the main Hertfordshire Scrutiny Committee.

These HCC meetings are also open to the public and details can be found through their main www.hertsdirect.org website (or [click here for a direct link](#) to the Health Scrutiny Committee meetings page).

8. Environment Scrutiny

Chairman: Councillor Will Quince

Vice-Chairman: Councillor Duncan Peek

Councillors

W Ashley

P Grethe

D Clark

G McAndrew

A Dearman

M McMullen

Mrs M Goldspink

N Poulton

Substitutes:

Cllrs A Dodd, G Lawrence, P Ruffles, G Scrivener, M Wood,
N Clark

Scrutiny:

- Enhancements to Jackson Square car park (capital investment)
- Parks and open spaces development programme (early in year)
- Parks and open spaces strategy and action plan (later in year)

Performance monitoring:

- Contract Performance 2007/08
- Stop the Drop – a consideration of the CPRE campaign
- Every meeting gets Healthcheck

Reviews:

- Street naming and Numbering: a sub-group of councillors (under the chairmanship of Cllr Peter Ruffles) reviewed the detail of East Herts guidelines designed to help everyone understand what is acceptable in the naming of new roads and apartment blocks – and even in changing the name of a single house. The new guidelines set out what is now involved in requesting new names be adopted and emphasises the importance of consulting with the relevant town or parish council – and doing some local research to check any new name is in keeping with the immediate area.

These guidelines are available for residents or developers to access via the East Herts website or [click here for direct link \(PDF document\)](#).

- Climate Change: this important topic has kept a group of 7 councillors (with Cllr Duncan Peek as chairman) busy during the whole year. After gathering extensive evidence from partners, young people and interested groups, East Herts now has a draft strategy and action plan ready to take out for wider public consultation.

During spring and early summer 2009, residents, young people and town and parish councils will have a chance to let us know how they feel about our Climate Change ideas. East Herts is striving to act in a responsible way as an estate manager, a service provider and as a community leader – and we need to check we have covered every angle and that we have the support of local people to move ahead with our plans.

- Environmental Quality Standards: one of our priorities is 'Pride in East Herts' and councillors are very keen to ensure the appearance of the district – towns, villages and countryside – is attractive to residents and visitors. As a district council, we are not able to maintain land owned or managed by other agencies or undertake cleansing of their property. This means we need to forge partnerships and influence others to work with us to raise standards across the whole district.

A group of councillors (under the chairmanship of Cllr Nigel Poulton) has just been convened to review the opportunities to work with partners to improve the appearance of the district and ensure East Herts is prepared for the government's new Comprehensive Area Assessment which will inspect the district 'as a whole' – not just council owned and managed areas. This group will report back to the Environment Scrutiny Committee with recommendations in September 2009.

Learnt about/updating

- HCC Procurement of suitable composting plant
- Visit to London Waste Ltd Eco Park

Call-In:

One decision made by an Executive Member was 'called in' during 2008/09. This related to Sponsorship of Roundabouts and so was heard by the Environment Scrutiny Committee at a special/additional meeting on 10 November 2008.




The Executive Member for Planning Policy and Transport made a decision ([Non-Key Decision 08/33](#)) that the pilot scheme which had been running for sponsorship of roundabouts should be adopted on a permanent basis and expanded district-wide. Seven councillors were concerned about this decision and felt that the pilot had not been allowed to run for its full term. Without proper analysis of the outcomes and feedback from this pilot phase, the councillors believed the decision was premature and could not be justified.

After a lengthy debate, Members of the Committee agreed with many of the concerns voiced by the 'call-in' councillors. The decision was referred back to the Executive with a request for it to be reconsidered in the light of their comments. The Executive did discuss the matter at their meeting on 25 November 2008 and accepted the recommendation to continue with the full term of the pilot phase and not expand the scheme on a permanent basis at this time. The Executive has arranged for a report to come back to them in spring/summer 2009 with a full analysis of the whole pilot scheme and ways to address the specific areas of concern raised by Scrutiny.

Comment from Cllr Will Quince (Chairman):

"XXXX"

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considered	Items are not automatically coming back unless there is a specific problem or issue identified.	
Manage agendas to allow fuller debate on forward-looking, policy-shaping items	Councillors felt that the work programming and agenda management had really improved this year. However, some meetings still had too much on the agenda for really in-depth scrutiny to be undertaken.	
Have more timely involvement in the annual service planning and budget setting process	Councillors are particularly pleased with the progress made on this objective during 2008/09. They were involved at a much earlier stage, consulted during the year and were able to recommend changes at the final stage that made a real difference to the final outcome.	
Involve the vice-chairmen more fully (carried over from 2007/08).	All Vice Chairmen are invited and involved in the pre-meeting briefing session to ensure they are fully aware of the background detail of items on the agenda. Vice Chairmen were also involved on an equal footing at the internal scrutiny evaluation process and in the interviews carried out by the Audit Commission (when they came in to assess the work of the council).	

The Chief Executive, Directors and the Executive were canvassed for written feedback and asked for examples of how the scrutiny process in 2008/09 had supported the work of the council and asking for specific areas to strengthen during 2009/10.








It is testimony to the constructive nature of the relationship in East Herts, that scrutiny is seen as a positive function by both Executive members and senior officers. The non-confrontational approach and realistic recommendations made by scrutiny mean that their intervention is valued – even when they challenge and question decisions. Not everything can be accepted by the Executive, but there is a genuine willingness to listen.

- *“CBS provides a fruitful working group for the development and ‘polishing’ of council governance arrangements such as data protection and risk management.”*

- *“The work of the Environmental Scrutiny task and finish group on Refuse and Recycling (which met during 2007/08) will help deliver a significantly improved service to all residents in the district when it is fully implemented in autumn 2009.”*
- *“From an officer perspective, they (scrutiny meetings) offer a crucial opportunity for officers to hear the views of a wider range of elected members. They fulfil this function very well.”*

Scrutiny committee members were all invited to workshops in January and February 2009 to evaluate their performance in 2008/09. A written response form was also made available to those members who could not attend the interactive sessions.

Councillors were asked to look at how well the scrutiny activity in East Herts matches up to the four principles of good practice set out by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (refer back to diagram on page 2 of this report).

provides ‘critical friend’ challenge to executive policy-makers and decision-makers	Although working well, feedback suggests that councillors want to be ‘sharper’ or ‘stronger’ in their challenge during the coming year	 
enables the voice and concerns of the public and its communities	Although councillors can and do repeat what their residents have told them – we need to involve the public more directly and this is reflected in our action plan below	
is carried out by ‘independent-minded governors’ who lead and own the scrutiny role	This is seen as being done reasonably well but feedback suggests that, with growing confidence and experience in their role, councillors want to ‘lead’ more	 
drives improvement in public services	There are some good examples of where scrutiny has made a difference but councillors feedback shows they are keen to actively ‘drive’ improvement	 

Councillors also looked at our own, local criteria used in East Herts to select an issue to review at scrutiny. There was unanimous agreement to continue with the same six checks during the coming year. This means that items must:

- Be of local, and preferably current, concern
- Be linked to the council’s corporate objectives

- Be capable of being influenced by this committee
- Be of manageable scope – focused rather than too wide ranging
- Be of sufficient scope to warrant a scrutiny review – not something that can be easily fixed by meeting with the service provider
- Not being scrutinised elsewhere (e.g. another Scrutiny Committee)

Over the 2008/09 year, councillors feel that effective use has been made of task and finish groups to complete a range of significant scrutiny reviews. Members are pleased with the success of these groups in getting to the heart of issues. Combined with the selection criteria listed above, councillors are keen to have more complex topics allocated to a task and finish (topic) group – rather than try to deal with them too quickly and superficially in the forum of a committee meeting.

Other examples of good practice by the scrutiny committees valued by councillors, Executive members and senior officers include:

- High attendance of members at scrutiny committee meetings
- Building on the scrutiny experience and expertise of committee members and not changing everyone around at the end of every year
- Having a non-confrontational, positive approach
- Offering a useful forum for partner agencies
- Being well-supported by officers
- Giving officers direction to shape policy and meet priorities (with the Climate Change strategy being highlighted)
- Attendance by Executive and non-committee members

Looking at general things that might be done differently or better, councillors expressed a view that the layout of the room and seating makes a difference to the conduct of the meeting.

They have requested that any Executive member attending a scrutiny committee meeting to present a paper should be clearly 'identified' as the person to question and challenge on issues of policy – leaving the supporting officer to provide background data if necessary. Councillors feel that the interactive, round-table style of debate has resulted in some officers being inappropriately drawn into aspects of scrutiny and areas of accountability which actually sit with elected members. There is **no** move to make scrutiny in East Herts more confrontational – this suggestion is for role clarity and to improve structured questioning.

Councillors are also looking forward to the positive, practical outcomes of the Report Writing and Plain English task and finish group. Anything which helps them manage the 'mountain' of written material they have to deal with is very welcome!

Members also identified some areas in which they would like to further strengthen scrutiny in 2008/09:

What we want to do:	Action plan:
Continue to work on increasing the involvement of residents and local interest groups in the scrutiny function of East Herts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote awareness of public involvement • Pro-actively invite local interest groups to meetings with agenda items relevant/appropriate to their 'cause' • Continue with Climate Change consultation • Review issues which really motivate and concern the public
Continue to bring evidence from independent or outside sources (including inviting expert witnesses in, making visits where appropriate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find ways of doing more under Corporate Business Scrutiny • Emphasise the comparative data and references to external evidence in written reports being presented to councillors (as it is not always practical to meet the people or make a visit)
Plan agendas well in advance to limit the number of items that have to be heard (as an open item) at the 'wrong' committee in order to meet a pressing deadline	Have regular meetings during the year between scrutiny Chairmen, Vice Chairmen and the scrutiny officer to facilitate planning, timing, co-ordination and monitoring of scrutiny activity
Involve the Vice Chairman in tracking recommendations made by scrutiny and in the active monitoring of outcomes and results	
Scrutiny of external public bodies and outside bodies – one of the evolving roles of scrutiny	Active participation when invited to join any joint scrutiny activity set up by Hertfordshire County Council &/or another district. Potentially: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth service • Highways congestion • Highways maintenance • Flooding issues (Pitt review) • Local Area Agreement (LAA) and Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) • Pathfinder arrangements
Ensure all scrutiny members know what issues are being discussed at which committee meetings and topic groups in advance and be informed of wider scrutiny issues around the county	Continue to make good use of the existing weekly Members' Information Bulletin (MIB) Pilot a periodic e-mail summary issued by scrutiny officer

10. WHAT ARE OUR PLANS FOR 2009/10?

Work programmes

Councillors were asked to agree outline agendas for their 2009/10 meetings at the last meeting of their committee in the 2008/09 civic year - but there is flexibility to review and amend them throughout the year to keep the work of scrutiny relevant and topical.

The most up to date versions can be found under the papers for each committee published on the East Herts website (follow [this link](#) to read the most recent 'Work Programme' report under each scrutiny committee).

The committees will add to their work programmes by selecting from a list of potential 'special' topics drawn from a number of sources. To date, the following issues have been identified for closer scrutiny during 2009/10:

- Corporate Business = XXXX
- Community Scrutiny = XXXX
- Environment Scrutiny = Planning Enforcement (see below)

Also, there are several pieces of work which will run on into 2009/10 -

East Herts task & finish groups running on into 2009/10
Shared Services – started in spring 2009 and due to report back in July 2009. Looking at two services which we provide or use in an arrangement with other councils to find out the 'characteristics' of what makes a good partnership.
Climate Change – draft strategy & action plan published in April 2009 but further work will be needed in summer 2009 (after the public and partner consultation phase) to finalise the documents.
Environmental Quality Review – started in spring 2009 and due to report back in June 2009. Looking at opportunities to work with public, private and voluntary partners to improve the appearance of the district (in advance of the new inspection standards).
Planning Enforcement Review – just getting started in spring 2009 and due to report back in September 2009. Looking to review the policy and approach of the Council toward planning enforcement activity. To ensure that it is appropriate, proportionate, meets expectations and can be delivered within resources available.

Some of our task and finish groups meet several times, spread out over a number of months and this is appropriate when evidence needs to be gathered over time. However, there may be some topics which could benefit from 1 or 2 day scrutiny, where councillors can be immersed in an issue over a shorter period of time – making recommendations based on fresh and immediate evidence. This approach may be piloted during 2009/10 if deemed appropriate by the relevant Chairman and governed by the availability of councillors.

11. The evolving role of the committees

The Empowerment White Paper, *Communities in control: real people, real power* was published in July 2008 by the Department for Communities and Local Government. A period of public consultation followed during the summer and autumn of 2008 and East Herts Scrutiny Members submitted a detailed response on the aspect of '*Improving local accountability*'. The government's response to the feedback arrived in January 2009 and councillors were pleased to see that their feelings were generally reflected in the outcomes and proposed actions – although they do still have some concerns around the detail of petitions triggering public meetings and the move to 'remote' attendance/voting at committees.

Many of the points raised through this public consultation and the proposals set out in the government's response paper have been incorporated into the new '*Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill*' currently going through parliament. This is only at committee stage in the House of Lords and still needs to go through the Commons, so we don't yet know exactly what changes or additional duties this might bring to the scrutiny function. Later in 2009/10 we should have more detail and be in a better position to start planning for the future.

The government has brought in new powers for ward councillors to help them tackle local problems on behalf of their constituents and these can come into force from 1 April 2009. The powers are contained in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Police and Justice Act 2006 but we had to wait until February 2009 for the publication of the associated guidance.

Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) provides councillors with the opportunity to ask for discussions at scrutiny committees on issues where local problems have arisen and where other methods of resolution have been exhausted. The powers are limited to issues affecting single council wards and are designed as a "long stop" to be used when all other attempts at resolution have failed.

At East Herts, we feel we are open to debate and constructive, problem resolution so the new CCfA will give us the chance to formalise the good practice we already carry out. The full powers under the 2006 and 2007 Acts cover a range of areas, not just scrutiny, so we must check that all our procedures and the Constitution are updated to fully accommodate CCfA. We need to ensure our scrutiny structure/framework can be used for a *Councillor Call for Action* issue to be appropriately aired.

The Police and Justice Act 2007 outlined further powers for scrutiny committees around crime and disorder. Proposals for implementing these new powers came in from the Home Office on 12 March 2009 and need to be in place from 30 April 2009. Work is currently underway to ensure we can comply with the legislation.

12. Training

During 2008/09 councillors had the opportunity to attend the following scrutiny related events:

- an in-house session on “Effective Scrutiny”
- a session on “Chairing Scrutiny” – organised by another district authority and delivered by a speaker from Institute of Local Government Studies at Birmingham University
- a county-wide, day conference and workshops with Jessica Crowe Executive Director of Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) as the main speaker
- a CfPS Parliamentary Seminar (held at the House of Commons) called “*Putting the ? back into scrutiny*”
- a session run by our Auditors to bring members up to date on the new Comprehensive Area Assessment – particularly the technical area of Use of Resources
- an in-house session on “Data Quality” to explain all the checks that are carried out on statistics and information before they are reported – to ensure decisions made by councillors are based on sound evidence
- tutorial-style training on ‘Covalent’ – the Corporate Performance Management software designed specifically for the public sector and used by East Herts – to give members the skills to look up any information they are interested in, at any time.

A continuing training programme will be needed to keep councillors briefed on their developing role as described above in Section 11 and offer them the chance to strengthen their scrutiny skills.

They will have another chance to attend some of the 2008/09 events which are provided on a rolling programme, but Members have also requested some new areas of training for the coming year:

- Questioning techniques including:
 - Framing questions which are objective, constructive and probing
 - Dealing with expert witnesses
- How to analyse and interpret data
- Evaluating evidence
- Making evidence-based decisions and recommendations

13. Summary

Is one needed??

DRAFT V4

There will be a limited print run of this document.

Greater use will be made of signposting interested parties, partners and residents to the Council's website to access the Annual Report. This will minimise use of material resources, distribution costs and gain potential CO₂ efficiencies from on-line provision.

<http://www.eastherts.gov.uk/scrutinyannualreport> XXX

If you do require a paper copy, there will be a limited number available at the reception desk in both Wallfields and The Causeway – or contact the Scrutiny Officer on 01992 531612 : e-mail scrutiny@eastherts.gov.uk