

Agenda Item No:

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny (Services)

Date of Meeting: 10 June 2009

Report Title: Developing Overview and Scrutiny

Report By: Graham Belchamber
Scrutiny and Democratic Services Manager

Purpose of Report

To advise the committee of the views of the Audit Commission on the positive role and input of Overview and Scrutiny into the councils internal controls and performance improvements and the work commissioned by the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny to further develop the function.

Recommendation(s)

1. To note the report.

Reasons for Recommendations

To make the Services Overview and Scrutiny Committees aware of the positive report from the Audit Commission and work commissioned by the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny.

Background

Annual Audit and Inspection Letter

1. The Annual Audit and Inspection Letter provides an overall summary of the Audit Commission's assessment for that period. Whilst the letter referred to in this report is in respect of progress during 2007/08, it also comments on the latest performance in 2008/09 to assist in putting the 2007/08 performance into context.
2. Overall the report is extremely positive about Hastings Borough Council and its main messages are:
 - A. The Council has improved its performance in most of its priority areas.
 - B. The Council has a good track record of building its capacity and works well in partnership with others.
 - C. The Council performs well in its use of resources.

Positive Role and Input of Overview and Scrutiny

3. At paragraph 64, the report specifically highlights the key role Overview and Scrutiny is playing in the Council's performance and says;

"The work of the Council's two Overview and Scrutiny Committees is embedded and challenging the organisation to improve. The Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee review the council's performance, strategies and policies, contributing to policy development".
4. Members may recall that the 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment reported Overview and Scrutiny as being a weak area, focussing too much on internal issues and not on the councils key financial and strategic priorities. The 2005 Audit Commission assessment of Cultural Services commented in the same negative vein. In 2006 we reviewed Overview and Scrutiny to address those concerns and with cross party support introduced a new structure and with that came a new sense of purpose for this key function.
5. It is therefore pleasing to report that the Audit Commission have formally picked up on the improvements with the key words "embedded" and "challenging". These make it clear that Overview and Scrutiny has firmly established itself and is making its voice heard in a positive fashion.

Further Developing Overview and Scrutiny

6. Alongside this assessment the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny were timetabled to meet with the Scrutiny and Democratic Services Manager, Scrutiny Officer, Head of Policy and Performance and Marketing and Communications Officers to consider ways of further developing the function.

7. The meeting was successful and the Chairs and Vice Chairs commissioned a range of activities focussed on 3 key areas to be developed over the Municipal Year; the training for members serving on Overview and Scrutiny, dealing with performance management issues and communicating the functions roles and successes.

Training for Members Serving on Overview and Scrutiny

Constitutional Issues

8. Issue a briefing note to the chairs and vice chairs on the constitutional responsibilities of the function to assist with their performance and development.

Introduction to Overview and Scrutiny

9. Scrutiny and Democratic Services Manager, Scrutiny Officer and Head of Policy and Performance to continue to provide induction sessions for members new to Overview and Scrutiny and also refresher courses when required.

Financial Matters

10. Officers to provide a simple written guide for members on HBC financing, explaining the key issues and timetables with a glossary. Officers to also continue to provide a finance briefing session for all Overview and Scrutiny members as part of the Member's Induction Programme.
11. Officers to provide a separate briefing to Overview and Scrutiny members prior to the draft budget meetings on budget processes and key issues for Overview and Scrutiny to focus on.

Scrutiny Reviews and Policy Development Projects

12. Provide training for members on how to complete reviews and policy development projects. Also before reviews or policy development projects commence, provide the members on the teams with briefings on the subject they are considering.

Dealing with Performance Management Issues

13. Briefing sessions to be provided to the Chairs and Vice Chairs in advance of the quarterly Overview and Scrutiny Committees. The purpose is to enable the Chairs and Vice Chairs to gain an understanding of the key issues being reported to assist them chairing the committees and ensuring the committees address the key issues. These briefings will be part of the usual Chairs and Vice Chairs quarterly meetings.

14. The Chairs and Vice Chairs agreed that there was no requirement to alter the format of the quarterly performance reports any further, as they had been altered on a number of occasions and further changes could only be at the expense of the data being reported on.

15. Communicating the Functions Role and Successes.

Overview and Scrutiny Web Pages.

16. The web pages should be refreshed following each Annual Council and any changes to committee membership.
17. The web pages will be developed to include details of completed and on-going reviews with links to any published reports and the annual Overview and Scrutiny work programme.

Public Interaction with Overview and Scrutiny

18. Each review and policy development team should ensure they are discussing opportunities for direct public engagement as part of the project initiation process.
19. For any reviews where members of the public have been involved in providing evidence, they will be invited back to hear the draft report and comment before the final report goes to the next quarterly Overview and Scrutiny Committee for discussion and signing off.

Press Releases

20. The Head of Marketing and Communications to be asked to advise on issuing press releases highlighting key reviews, particularly where the views of the public were being sought or key reports of public interest were being discussed at Quarterly meetings.

Reporting Format

21. A common template for all Overview and Scrutiny reviews and policy development reports should be introduced.

Conclusion

22. Members will be interested to note that external Overview and Scrutiny workshops and training that I attend often feature colleagues from other authorities promoting their own particular Overview and Scrutiny practices and structures. It is pleasing to note that Hastings can be regarded as clearly being in the league of good practice and in many respect, best practice.
23. A good example of this was the recognition by the Overview and Scrutiny Manager at East Sussex Country Council who commented very positively on the comprehensive work programme that Hastings members complete as a Borough Council with limited resources, as compared to the much larger team of dedicated Scrutiny officers and other resources at County Hall.

Wards Affected

Ashdown, Baird, Braybrooke, Castle, Central St. Leonards, Conquest, Gensing, Hollington, Maze Hill, Old Hastings, Ore, Silverhill, St. Helens, Tressell, West St. Leonards, Wishing Tree

Area(s) Affected

None

Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness	Yes
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)	No
Risk Management	Yes
Environmental Issues	No
Economic/Financial Implications	Yes
Human Rights Act	No
Organisational Consequences	Yes

Supporting Documents

Officer to Contact

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