



Winchester
City Council

**PRINCIPAL
SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE –
ANNUAL REPORT
2005/06**

Annual Scrutiny Report

1. This is the Report of the Principal Scrutiny Committee for the 2005-6 civic year.
2. Key Achievements

The major achievements during the 2005-6 civic year were:

- The publication of a Good Scrutiny Guide for use by all members and officers;
- The development of the new Scrutiny Panels under skilful chairmanship;
- Regular questioning of Cabinet members as part of an improved system for holding the executive to account;
- Development of external scrutiny through interviews with the Chief Fire Officer, the chairman of the Winchester Local Strategic Partnership, the Deputy Chief Executive of the Theatre Royal and the Executive Member for the Environment at Hampshire County Council;
- Detailed examination of the Silver Hill proposals;
- The scrutiny of the arrangements for providing payroll services to the Winchester Alliance for Mental Health following the substantial loss that the Council incurred.
- Establishment of a framework for assessing the effectiveness of scrutiny in local government, jointly with the South East Employers.

Principal Scrutiny Committee met on 10 occasions during the 12 months and each scrutiny Panel met on four or five occasions.

3. Scrutiny Work

The work of overview and scrutiny covers the following areas:

- Overview of the Executive
- Policy Review
- Pre-scrutiny
- Audit
- External Scrutiny
- Responsive work.

4. Overview of the Executive

A key part of the work of scrutiny is to review the work of the Executive and this is carried in several ways:

- Questioning of Cabinet members
- Call-in procedures
- Review of the Forward Plan
- Scrutinising Key Decisions.

5. Interviews with Cabinet members.

The Leader of the Council attended the Principal Scrutiny Committee at the end of each quarter to answer questions about the Council's performance in matters relating to her portfolio.

The Panels carried out regular interviews as follows:

Resources:	Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources
Environment:	Portfolio Holder for Planning and Portfolio Holder for Environmental Health
Local Economy:	Portfolio Holder for Culture, Heritage and Sport & Portfolio Holder for Economy and Transport.
Social Issues:	Portfolio Holder for Healthy and Inclusive Communities and Portfolio Holder for Housing.

The Resources Scrutiny Panel was particularly concerned with monitoring progress on savings plans since a large proportion of savings identified by the Cabinet have been found within the back office areas. The Panel also monitored progress of the significantly large IT spend planned.

The Local Economy Scrutiny Panel asked that significant financial variances should be accompanied by an explanatory text. It also agreed that Fair Trade issues to be included in future reports. The Panel requested the Portfolio Holder for Culture, Heritage and Sport to consider alternative options for the management of the Meadowside Leisure Centre.

The Environment Scrutiny Panel suggested that the Sustainability Strategy needs to be rewritten because the original document is all about the city offices rather than the whole district. It also suggested changes were needed in the Street Scene elements of the Environment Strategy in the light of the Anti-Social Behaviour and Clean Neighbourhoods Act that has come into force,

Social Issues Scrutiny Panel, requested that Cabinet lobby Government over the perceived inequities in Winchester City Council's contribution to the National Housing Subsidy system. The Panel was also generally supportive of the pursuit of the 'Fourth Option' in connection to the calculation of subsidy for the HRA.

6. Call-in Procedures

The Committee considered reports involving expenditure that involved a supplementary estimate, either by virement or use of reserves, of more than £50,000 on the following subjects:

- Disposal of HRA land at Stanmore, Kingsworthy and Weeke.
- Personnel matters in Development Control.
- Inspectors' fees in connection with the Winchester District Local Plan.
- Park and Ride Contract.
- Upper Brook Street car park.
- Guildhall refurbishment works
- Capital outturn for 2004-5.

- Insurance fund reserve
- Options regarding the Council's accommodation

The Committee decided to call in the proposed expenditure on the Guildhall Refurbishment for further review and appointed a Panel to consider this in detail. The Cabinet however withdrew the proposal.

7. Forward Plan

The Cabinet's Forward Plan was reviewed at each meeting in order to identify decisions that were to be taken and that could be reviewed at future meetings.

8. Review of procedures and plans

Principal Scrutiny Committee reviewed the Communications Strategy and made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet for improvements that could be made.

The Committee also interviewed the manager of the Customer Service Centre on progress made and difficulties still to be overcome.

The Committee also carried out regular reviews of the risk management process and progress in this area.

9. Policy Review

Principal Scrutiny Committee started two large policy reviews, one on engaging with the community and the other on the progress of the Local Strategic Partnership. On Community Engagement a large number of witnesses gave evidence, highlighting some good practice and examples where the consultation could have been carried out more effectively. The LSP Panel interviewed some of the partners involved. The two reports have been agreed by Principal Scrutiny Committee and will be considered by Cabinet on 21 June 2006..

The Resources Scrutiny Panel launched two policy reviews, one related to the IT spend and the other to review how the Council handles the administration of benefits. The latter is in its early stages and is focussing on three specific areas – communication with and access for clients combined with training for Councillors, a review of benefits procedures and whether there is any scope for joint working with other authorities.

The Environment Scrutiny Panel undertook a review of the Open Space Fund. It interviewed officers, County Councillors, District Councillors and Parish Councillors and some members of the public. It presented eight recommendations, including the need for an audit, a parish-by-parish appraisal and parish clustering.

The Social Issues Scrutiny Panel submitted a report on community safety and recommended that a members training evening be arranged to brief members on issues of community safety, that the area community panels be widely publicised and that better links be established with community safety partnerships in neighbouring districts. The Panel also appointed Informal Scrutiny Groups to carry out reviews of internal information systems within the Housing department and also policies related to former tenant arrears.

10. Pre-Scrutiny

Principal Scrutiny Committee carried out a number of pre-scrutiny reviews in order to assist the better working of the Council. These covered the following areas:

- Changes to the Council's constitution;
- Corporate governance;
- New city offices;
- Silver Hill development in central Winchester.

A special meeting was held to consider in detail the proposed contract for Silver Hill and the Committee's suggestions were accepted by the Cabinet and the Council.

The Scrutiny Panels reviewed the proposed departmental budgets for 2006-7 and the draft business plans.

11. Audit

Principal Scrutiny Committee acts as the Council's Audit Committee and in this role carries out the following duties:

- Review of the auditor's annual management letter
- Oversees the work of the external auditor
- Reviews the work of Internal Audit.

The Joint Audit and Inspection Letter was considered by the Principal Scrutiny Committee and was largely very positive about the work of the Council. The draft report was considered in December and final letter in March. The report contained for the first time a Direction of Travel Report which indicated positive progress being made by the Council. In the Use of Resources report the Council has been graded as adequate. The Committee agreed that the Corporate Management Team should consider the report and advise the Cabinet on what work needs to be done to secure a better rating.

The External Auditor's workplan for the year was presented and agreed.

Internal Audit completed 10 detailed audits for presentation to the Committee.

Principal Scrutiny Committee expressed concerns about cash collection procedures and as a result of these concerns an interim further report was presented to the Committee to demonstrate how these concerns were being addressed. They were mainly concerned with the banking of cheques relating to planning applications in a timely manner.

The Internal Audit plan for 2006-7 was approved.

The Committee worked with the external auditor on problems relating to the payroll services provided to the Winchester Alliance for Mental Health. The external auditors were interviewed about a report that had been prepared and the Committee considered it was incomplete and requested that further work being done on the matter.

12. External Scrutiny

External scrutiny was a feature of the work programme during the last 12 months. Principal Scrutiny Committee interviewed the Chairman of the Winchester Local Strategic Partnership on the work of that group which is now well established in the district and which has established a number of partnerships dealing with crime and disorder reduction, biodiversity, housing provision and the local economy.

The Committee also met the Deputy Chief Officer of the Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, Mr House, and questioned him on the proposed changes to the service that would affect the Waterlooville fire station that serves some of the southern parishes and the role of the North walls fire station.

The Local Economy Scrutiny Panel interviewed the Chief Executive of Theatre Royal, Winchester about its progress and members of the Winchester Fairtrade Group about their work to achieve Fairtrade status for the city. The Panel also questioned the Executive Member for the Environment at Hampshire County Council, Councillor Tim Knight, and two of his senior officers about transport issues in the district and aspects of the County Council's Local Transport Plan.

The Social Issues Scrutiny Panel interviewed the following speakers to provide information, answer Member's concerns and gave suggestions for collaborative working:

Diana Wooldridge, Chief Executive of WACA and Chairman of the Supported Housing Partnership – to ensure that clients did not remain in supported accommodation that was no longer appropriate to their level of required care, etc.

Alan House, Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service – due to a diary error, for which he apologised, reported to Principal Scrutiny Committee on reorganisation of the Service in the District.

Margaret Newbigin, Chairman of the Winchester Housing Forum – detailed the aims of the Forum, membership and achievements.

Nick Bell (Shenton's Solicitors) Chairman of the Winchester Community Legal Services Partnership - at the conclusion of his presentation he requested that a City Councillor be affiliated to the partnership to help raise the profile.

13. Responsive Work

Two members of the public made presentations to Principal Scrutiny Committee, one on matters connected with WAMH and the other on the Council's accounts. At the Local Economy Panel concern was expressed about the speed limit in Colder Common, the need for an athletics track in Winchester, and street trading permits in Winchester.

14. Liaison Work

Scrutiny Liaison Meetings were held on four occasions, bringing together the chairs of the scrutiny Panels and the chair of Principal Scrutiny Committee.

15. Work Programme

A Scrutiny Work Programme is published at regular intervals during the year. This is now published on the Council's website.

16. External Contacts

The Council is represented at meetings of the South East Scrutiny Chairs Network and at the annual conference of the Centre for Public Scrutiny. The chairman of the Principal Scrutiny Committee has been chairing a scrutiny capacity building project on behalf of 32 Councils in Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and the Thames valley region. As part of this project Winchester City Council participated in a workshop to devise a system to measure the effectiveness of scrutiny and this will be included in the final report of the project.