

Overview and Scrutiny
Annual Report 2007-08

Allerdale Borough Council

Membership
of the
Overview and Scrutiny Committees

Corporate Overview and
Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Nic Hardy (Co-Chair)
Councillor Tim Heslop (Co-Chair)

Councillor John Ardron
Councillor Bob Hardon
Councillor Joe Holliday
Councillor Ivor Humes
Councillor John Hunter
Councillor Jim Lister
Councillor Les Lytollis
Councillor Jean MacLeod
Councillor David Robinson
Councillor Margaret Snaith

Community Overview and
Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Barbara Cannon (Co-Chair)
Councillor Trevor Fee (Co Chair)

Councillor Binky Armstrong
Councillor Carole Armstrong
Councillor Duncan Fairbairn
Councillor Miriam Gainford
Councillor Jeffrey Gardner
Councillor John Heathcote
Councillor Carni McCarron-Holmes
Councillor Joe Mumberson
Councillor Ron Munby
Councillor Martin Wood

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Overview and Scrutiny
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Foreword from the Chairs

In this, our first year of chairing Scrutiny at Allerdale Borough Council, our Committees have covered a wide variety of topics which affect our every day lives, from health to under age drinking to the delivery of public services.

We aim to make a contribution to the public services provided across Allerdale, whether by the Council or other public sector agencies, and new legislation in the coming year will give Scrutiny more authority to do so.

The role of Overview and Scrutiny Members is challenging in any local authority. Our remit is to be a critical friend to both the Executive, the eight Members responsible for the day-to-day management of the authority, and to other public sector agencies. We need to both support them in their work and to hold them to account for the decisions they take.

This Annual Report gives an account of how our Committees have challenged the Executive and other public sector agencies and authorities, and where we have supported them in some of the difficult decisions that they have to take.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank colleagues, staff and partners for their help and support – we have both appreciated and valued your contribution.

We would also like to thank all those people who have helped us this year, by attending public meetings or by making their views known to the Scrutiny Committee - we will continue to try and reflect your views in the work that we do.

And finally, a thank you to our colleagues on the Town and Parish Councils. We have tried to work more closely with you this year, for our mutual benefit, and we look forward to developing this relationship further in the coming year.

Councillor Barbara Cannon
Councillor Trevor Fee

Chairs
Community Scrutiny

Councillor Nic Hardy
Councillor Tim Heslop

Chairs
Corporate Scrutiny

Your Health and Well-being

Health Services

Arrangements for scrutiny of our health services are generally carried out by a joint committee hosted by Cumbria County Council, with representatives from the six District Authorities.

This year, the Cumbria Primary Care Trust's 'Closer to Home' consultation, bringing fundamental change to the way health services are delivered in North Cumbria, was such a major issue that the Council was invited to submit their views to the parent health scrutiny committee.

Our Community Scrutiny Committee considered that their most effective contribution, would be to consult workers at the coal face. They were particularly concerned about proposals for emergency services, which they feared would see more people transferred to Carlisle, and about the capacity of GPs and partner organisations to deliver more home-based care.

There was also to be a substantial reduction in bed numbers both at the West Cumberland Hospital and at our community hospitals, and Members also feared that proposals for palliative care were not complementary to existing initiatives.

Members invited the Lead Emergency Care Consultant from the West Cumberland Hospital, the lead GP for road traffic accidents in Allerdale, the area co-ordinator for the Ambulance service, the local manager for the Fire and Rescue Service to their first meeting, and palliative care staff. The meeting was also attended by several Members of the public.

The evidence received brought into the public arena for the first time in the consultation phase, the reservations about some of the proposals that local professionals had and shortly thereafter, the Primary Care Trust held a meeting with lead professionals at which a compromise position was reached and which would see some increased capacity at the West Cumberland Hospital.

While acknowledging the reservations some professionals had, Members did recognise the visionary thinking that lay behind some of the proposals. They felt, however, that a strong and vibrant network of health, social and voluntary sector agencies would be required to deliver this. Their recommended response, endorsed by the Executive and Council, sought to ensure that contingency arrangements were in place to ease the transition and further develop these networks.

The Committee were subsequently pleased to note that the Primary Care Trust had listened to the concerns and had, for example, agreed that there would be no changes to community hospital bed numbers for two years, to ensure that networks for greater home-based care were functioning properly before reductions were made.

Adult Social Care

Allied proposals for the modernisation of Cumbria Care residential homes were also the subject of consultation, and the Community Scrutiny Committee again formed a recommended response for the Executive and Council.

It would be the Keswick and Wigton sites which would be affected in Allerdale, as part of a joint health/social care package. Members pointed out that, owing to high levels of health deprivation in some areas, the future needs of elderly people in Allerdale were likely to be more complex than elsewhere in the County, and this should be taken into account.

While acknowledging the service was being piloted in the County, there was concern that 24/7 care should be available to elderly people in receipt of home-based care. The impact of the proposals on grants for facilities for people with disabilities and a need for Extra Care housing was further highlighted.

Members were also concerned that refurbishment of care homes should take account of the décor and design that research has shown helps calm dementia patients – two-thirds of residents in a care home are expected to suffer from dementia, and that consultation should take place as soon as possible with planning authorities.

Members had also found that the provision of care in residential care homes was well regarded by inspectors, and that it was the accommodation which no longer met modern day needs.

Licensing Policy

The Corporate Scrutiny Committee contributed to a review of the County-wide licensing policy, where the health and well-being of young people was of particular concern to Members.

Members took evidence from all of the people that the Council is required to consult with when issuing licences. This included social services, where Members received reassurance of the conscientiousness with which licences were scrutinised for potential harm to young people.

Trading standards, who enforce legislation with respect to off-licence sales, were also interviewed and while pleased to note that Allerdale had a good record of not selling to under-age young people, Members' input served to strengthen the County-wide policy on off-licence sales.

Your Services

Post Office Closures

The nation-wide closure programme reached Cumbria this year, with proposals to close eight branches in Allerdale. It was made clear at the outset of the consultation that the Post Office required to close 2,500 branches to become financially viable and that they were confident their business model was equitable. In recommending a response, Members chose to concentrate on the accuracy of the information used and on putting forward local knowledge.

Where representations were made by local communities, Members put forward any inaccuracies or local circumstances which had been overlooked. On the basis of this evidence, however, they concluded that there were stronger cases for three of the post offices: Brigham, Grasslot and Vulcans Lane. The outcome of the consultation is as yet unknown.

Homelessness

Members considered Government advice to the Council on the delivery of a homelessness service. It was acknowledged that while there were external issues to take into account, and a rise in homelessness locally of 480% in recent years, there were a number of issues that the Council required to address and the Committee will be monitoring progress.

Environmental Services

The Community Scrutiny Committee has started a review of the environmental services the Council provides in partnership with others. Using survey evidence and attending public meetings, it has identified a number of issues which it will address in a report to the Executive shortly.

In the interim, though, it has become apparent that people value a weekly collection and equally want more opportunity to recycle. Many people are angry at the anti-social behaviour of others who allow their dogs to foul and who litter parks, streets and open spaces. This evidence will influence the report.

Benefits' Service

While Members had wished to carry out a review of the benefits' service, an in-house review was already underway and their role turned to one of monitoring and consultation. The findings of the review, which were supported by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee, should increase response times and see a move to more mobile working, and Members will continue to monitor progress.

Staff Recruitment

Responding to a Member of the Executive who had concerns about staff recruitment and retention affecting Council Services, our Corporate Scrutiny Committee examined processes and procedures and produced an interim report aimed at speeding up the recruitment process, while still recognising the need for a central overview of staffing. The review highlighted difficulties in recruiting staff to certain specialist areas and will continue this year to consider evaluation of in-house training schemes as a potential solution, and to monitor the impact of job evaluation on staff retention.

Call-ins

A Call-in is a time-limited process provided for in legislation to delay a decision taken by the Executive while Scrutiny carries out its own enquiries. The Executive can subsequently accept or decline any further scrutiny recommendations.

There have been two call-ins in 2007-08, a grant scheme proposal and the development of a cycle path, the recommendations from which were accepted by the Executive, with the exception of one minor amendment.

A Forward Look

In the coming year, scrutiny can look forward to further consultation, this time on mental health, to a review of Workington Town Centre after two years of operation, and to monitoring major regeneration developments. It will also have a substantial role to play in looking at the most efficient way of delivering services in partnership with other public and private sector organisations.

Our 2008-09 work plan will shortly be available on the web site. If you are interested in contributing in any way, we will be pleased to hear from you. Our contact details can be found on the inside page.