



# **Overview and Scrutiny**

## **Annual Report**

**21<sup>st</sup> May 2015**

## **Foreword of Councillors Mary Dooley, Hilary Gilmour and Keith Bowman, Scrutiny Chairs 2011-2015**

This year the three Scrutiny Committees have considered the impact of work undertaken previously and with this evidence I am confident in saying that Scrutiny in Bolsover District Council is contributing to the Improvement of public services. Examples of the work of Scrutiny and its impacts are detailed in this report.

Over the past four years we have continued to enjoy a strong working relationship with the Leader and the Executive. We have had continued support and received positive comments when presenting our reports and recommendations to Executive. It will be a key priority for the Scrutiny Chairs to develop the relationship with the new Leader and Deputy Leader to continue the good relationships between Scrutiny and the Executive that we have worked to build and maintain.

Once again, we were encouraged to submit our work to the Centre for Public Scrutiny – Good Scrutiny Awards and the work carried out by the Safe and Inclusive Scrutiny Committee on the Community Houses has been put forward.

As well as celebrating our successes, Scrutiny Management Board carried out a self assessment which identified a number of improvements to the way we work in our Committees and carry out our reviews and we have provided all Scrutiny Members with the opportunity to reflect on how Scrutiny works in order that we can continue to build and improve on Scrutiny at Bolsover District Council.

Scrutiny across the Country has been in the spotlight more recently due to service failures in public services;

*The Alexis Jay, Robert Francis and Louise Casey Reports into appalling service failure in local public services have, amongst other things, illuminated the risks of weak overview and scrutiny – either in the capacity of non-executive councillors to carry out their scrutiny role or in the commitment of political leaders and others to respect and support the scrutiny role. Scrutiny by elected members is one of the mechanisms of local accountability currently relied upon significantly to provide assurance to central government, parliament and the public that public funding is being spent effectively at local level and delivering the outcomes that are expected.*<sup>i</sup>

At the Annual Scrutiny Conference, Scrutiny Members received a briefing on the findings of these reports and have reviewed our Scrutiny Procedure Rules to ensure that we can be confident that Scrutiny at Bolsover District Council is and will continue to be effective.

We will continually assess how our Scrutiny Committees operate and look at ways to build upon our success.

## **2014/15 Scrutiny Reviews**

## **Enforcement**

The Safe and Inclusive Scrutiny Committee carried out a review of Enforcement on dog fouling, fly tipping and littering. The Committee felt that as a matter of urgency, the Authority should use whatever means were at its disposal to improve our performance on enforcement in these three areas to help make our District free from litter and fly tipping and safe from the potentially fatal disease of toxicariasis. Nine recommendations were made to Executive to address issues around enforcement, of which eight were accepted.

## **The impacts of Welfare reforms and other issues on the Contact Centres**

The Improvement Scrutiny Committee identified this review at the Annual Scrutiny Conference to consider the impact on Customer Services due to Welfare Reform, one year after its implementation.

Nine recommendations were made to Executive of which, eight were accepted.

## **Street Cleanliness**

The Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee identified this subject for review because performance against the Corporate Plan Target E06 had fallen from 92.31% of streets/land meeting cleanliness standards in March 2013 to 81% of streets/land meeting the standard in March 2014. The target within the Corporate Plan was 96%.

The Committee gathered evidence from the Portfolio Holder and Assistant Director, Streetscene and concluded that under the new Corporate Plan 2015-2019 the concerns regarding performance would be addressed. No recommendations were made to the Executive as a result of this review.

## **Scrutiny Webpage**

It was identified through self assessment and through the 2014 Customer Excellence assessment that Scrutiny needed to publicise its review work as a way to feedback to stakeholders and interested parties.

With this in mind, the Safe and Inclusive Scrutiny Committee undertook a spotlight review of the Scrutiny webpage which involved one session considering how the current webpage was presented and looking at examples of how other authorities presented their Scrutiny webpage(s). At the following meeting the revised webpage was approved by the Committee and later approved by the Scrutiny Management Board.

All completed review reports once approved by Executive are now published on the Scrutiny webpage and stakeholders are provided with a link to view the final reports. This allows us to demonstrate to Members of the public how their comments and involvement in Scrutiny has influenced our reports and recommendations.

## **Hard to Let Properties**

A spotlight review of Hard to Let Properties was commenced in December 2014 due to concerns regarding the loss of revenue for the Authority as a result of long term void properties – which looked at Sheltered Accommodation.

Members of the Improvement Scrutiny Committee completed their review in February 2015 and the report and recommendations were considered by Executive in March 2015.

The review made recommendations to improve properties that were long term voids together with improved promotion and advertising of the benefits of sheltered accommodation.

Executive deferred consideration of the recommendations until the June 2015 Executive meeting pending further information from the Assistant Director of Community Safety and Head of Housing.

### **Business Support**

The Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee carried out a review of Business Support which was identified at the Annual Scrutiny Conference where Members were keen to be involved in the progress of the Growth Strategy. This review was identified as a focus where Scrutiny could contribute towards the actions set out in the action plan arising from the Growth Strategy.

The Committee sought the views of local businesses and spoke to the officers involved in supporting businesses and the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration.

The Review produced five recommendations which would assist the Economic Development Team to support as many businesses as possible and bring about some positive changes to the way we present our offer of business support to our businesses.

### **Some of our successes.....**

We're pleased to see things happening that have been recommended through our Scrutiny Reviews, e.g. The Leisure department is now having discussions with regards to the provision of residential accommodation at the Pleasley Vale Outdoor Activity Centre (which was one of the recommendations made by the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee in its review of The Future of Pleasley Vale Mills).

There will be a new target within the Corporate Plan 2015 – 2019, ***Introduce alternative uses to 20% of garage sites owned by the Council by March 2019.*** At the conclusion of the review of Unused Council owned Land, Garages and Garage Plots, the Improvement Scrutiny Committee made recommendations which included;

1. Consider undertaking a project to identify Council-owned sites and garage plots that consume a disproportionate amount of the Grounds

Maintenance and Cleansing budgets and look at measures to reduce problems.

2. Consider producing an Improvement Plan to put in place arrangements for the management of Council – owned sites and garage plots with a view to disposal and/or development.

After raising concerns about the Cavendish Walk precinct following a site visit to Bolsover Town Centre, during the **High Street and Town Centre Scrutiny Review**, Old Bolsover Town Council led a tidy up of the area, the seating area was repaired and the businesses were promoted with other projects in the Town Centre to raise awareness of the retailers located at Cavendish Walk.

The Safe and Inclusive Scrutiny Committee made the following recommendation, ***produce publicity material using image of child with dog excrement with explanatory text indicting 'Toxicaria: this is the risk to you and your children posed by the dog owner that doesn't pick up'***. As a result of this recommendation and following discussions at the Environment Enforcement Cleansing and Education Group, a front page article was placed in 'In Touch' the newspaper for Bolsover District Council's residents and businesses in November 2014 which raised awareness of the health risk from dog fouling and resulted in increased reporting of dog fouling by residents and businesses in quarter 3, 2014/15.

We are also pleased to see that within the new Corporate Plan 2015-2019, a new target will be included; ***'Annually undertake 10 local environmental enforcement and educational initiatives in targeted areas to deal with dog fouling, littering or fly tipping'***.

As mentioned in the introduction, we were invited to submit the review of Community Houses, carried out by the Safe and Inclusive Scrutiny Committee to the Centre for Public Scrutiny – Good Scrutiny Awards 2015. Members of the Scrutiny Committee feel that this review particularly demonstrates how recommendations from Scrutiny have impacted positively on Communities across Bolsover District. ***We will find out on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2015 whether our work has been shortlisted.***

## **Improving the Scrutiny Function**

Views have been sought from Scrutiny Members as to how successful the Scrutiny function has been over the past four years and suggestions were requested as to how the function can improve.

On the whole, the feedback received suggested that Members are happy with the way Scrutiny operates and are confident that it works well. Over the last few years the Committees have adapted their working practices to ensure that they work as efficiently as possible and it is felt that Members have gained in confidence and this is reflected in the fact that reports and recommendations are valued by Scrutiny and Executive.

The table below shows recommendations made over the last four years across the three Scrutiny Committees and the percentage of those recommendations that have impacted on the way that services are delivered.

Year	No. of Scrutiny Recommendations made to Executive	No. of recommendations accepted by Executive	% of recommendations that have been implemented and there is evidence to demonstrate impacts.
2011/12	34	34	<b>56%</b> (19 recommendations)
2012/13	22	22	<b>68%</b> (15 recommendations)
2013/14	24	24	<b>79%</b> (19 recommendations)
2014/15	29	27	<b>59%</b> (16 recommendations)

*It should be noted that some recommendations are still outstanding and some are withdrawn over time due to changes in department structures and implementation or removal of local or national policy which is why the number of implemented recommendations does not add up to the number of recommendations made.*

Examples of the most effective Scrutiny Reviews include the review of the Discretionary Housing Payments Policy and the review of Community Houses. It is no coincidence that Scrutiny Members had the support and assistance of Senior Officers throughout the review or that the review had been suggested by a Senior Officer/Director in the first place.

A number of comments received suggested that Scrutiny Members are still concerned that they don't get to know what the other Scrutiny Committees are working on which is a concern as the Budget Scrutiny Committee has a standing item where each Scrutiny Chair provides a verbal update on the work of the Committee. Also, all Scrutiny minutes are contained within the minute books which are noted at the monthly Council meeting.

Disappointingly, some Scrutiny Members feel that their work does not have any influence over decisions made about the Council and our Communities. Recommendations once approved by the Executive are monitored through the Perform system. Members can access the system at any time to see how their recommendations are progressing and whether actions have been carried out. Updates have been provided through the Committees at requested intervals to monitor progress but perhaps the Scrutiny Chairs could continue to promote the use of Perform so that Members can check progress against their recommendations when they require an update.

It was felt that the Scrutiny Management Board was adding unnecessary complication and delaying recommendations being considered by Executive. Therefore, during the review of the Scrutiny Function it was agreed not to establish the Scrutiny Management Board at the next Annual Council meeting. Producing an annual work programme would become the responsibility of each

individual Scrutiny Committee ensuring that Scrutiny Members feel that they have some influence in the work they carry out.

In a recent report, the Centre for Public Scrutiny discusses the findings from a survey of scrutiny effectiveness carried out between September and November 2014. This has raised some interesting points regarding member scrutiny and governance arrangements and calls on all councils to review their own member scrutiny and governance arrangements in the light of the Francis and Jay reports to ensure they are providing robust, evidence based challenge to service delivery and performance that draws on the views and experiences of residents and service users and provides assurance that risks are being appropriately managed. It is suggested that Centre for Public Scrutiny's Accountability Works for You methodology could be used for assessing scrutiny's effectiveness and this is something to be considered as we start to put together the Scrutiny work plans for 2015/16.

## **Conclusion**

Only when we reflect on the work done over the last four years can we truly see the amount of time and effort that has been put in by Scrutiny Members and all the Officers and Portfolio Holders that have contributed to and supported our work.

It is important that the Authority continues to acknowledge the contribution that Scrutiny makes to improving services and that the Chairs and Vice Chairs ensure that robust Scrutiny Reviews are carried out that consider the views of all relevant stakeholders in order to produce realistic recommendations that result in demonstrable positive impacts.

---

<sup>i</sup> Centre for Public Scrutiny: Hiding in plain sight: barriers to effective scrutiny. February 2015