

**Vale of White Horse Scrutiny Committee
Annual Report to Council 2016/17**



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Foreword by the Chairman



Councillor Debby Hallett, Chairman of Scrutiny Committee

I assumed the Chair of Vale of White Horse Scrutiny Committee in May 2016. We had emerged from a period of different chairmen with different styles of scrutiny and with a focus on different things. My experience had been as a member of the Scrutiny Committee, and to be an effective chairman I sought support from officers and consultant Scrutiny experts to find my way toward my own style and focus.

I set three main objectives for the year:

1. Increase engagement of committee members, council members, officers, Cabinet members, and the public in the Scrutiny process.
 - a. I began this by implementing more inclusive practices of query within the committee, such as circulating Individual Cabinet Member Decisions and prompting pre-committee discussion about upcoming issues. I've had positive feedback.
 - b. We've agreed a process for proactively managing our Scrutiny work programme, to engage more members in their areas of interest or expertise, and bring issues of greatest concern to the Scrutiny Committee.
 - c. We've increased the training courses available to committee members so they will feel more competent and confident. Opportunities for general and targeted O&S training come along every few months. I encourage committee members to take part.
 - d. We respond, where we can, to public requests to look more closely at some policies or processes.
 - e. I'd like to poll all council members for their suggestions; I've tried this a few times and got low engagement, so I'll reconsider my approach.
2. Improve the reputation of Overview and Scrutiny for adding value to our policies and strategies.
 - a. One tool for this is to commit to producing an annual Scrutiny Report to Council, where we will report to council what we've contributed in the year.
 - b. Another key change is to resist the temptation to correct grammar, typos and spelling, and to encourage policy writers to use the Communications team to create a better document. We need Scrutiny Committee to contribute substantive recommendations, not to be the punctuation police.
 - c. Another way to do this is to discuss with heads of services their concerns about Scrutiny and ways they see Scrutiny to add value to their work. I met with individual Heads of Service in summer of 2016, and that has helped us to adopt approaches that work for the Heads of Service and the Scrutiny Committee, and therefore for the whole council.
3. Improve the working relationship of Scrutiny with Cabinet, to bring draft policy and strategy documents to Scrutiny earlier in the process, not at the very end, one day before adoption. We've improved how we do this, and I've had feedback that things are more effective and communications are better now. I'm always trying to improve and I welcome feedback from Cabinet.

What is Scrutiny?

The national advisory body, the Centre for Public Scrutiny, defines 'scrutiny' as follows:

Public scrutiny is an essential part of ensuring that government remains effective and accountable. Public scrutiny can be defined as the activity by one elected or appointed organisation... examining and monitoring all or part of the activity of a public sector body with the aim of improving the quality of public services.

Scrutiny ensures that decision-making processes are clear and accessible to the public and that the people taking decisions are held accountable for those decisions.

All of this leads the council to making better policy decisions and bringing more effective strategies to inform the work we do on behalf of people who live and work in the Vale of White Horse.

Membership of the Scrutiny Committee 2016/17

Councillor Debby Hallett (Chairman)

Councillor Alice Badcock (Vice-Chairman)

Councillor Ed Blagrove

Councillor Katie Finch (until October 2016)

Councillor Vicky Jenkins

Councillor Mohinder Kainth (from October 2016)

Councillor Monica Lovatt

Councillor Ben Mabbett

Councillor Chris Palmer

Councillor Judy Roberts

Scrutiny Committee is a politically balanced committee

In addition, Vale members also serve on other Scrutiny committees:

- Councillors Debby Hallett (co-chairman), Alice Badcock, Katie Finch (until October 2016), Mohinder Kainth (from October 2016), Monica Lovatt, (until October 2016) Ben Mabbett and Chris Palmer serve on Joint Scrutiny Committee (with South Oxfordshire District Councillors) which considers matters that affect both councils' areas or their residents.
- Councillor Debby Hallett and Councillor Ed Blagrove serve on the Five Councils' Partnership Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee, which scrutinises decisions made, or action taken, by the Five Councils' Partnership Corporate Services Joint Committee in connection with the provision of services through the joint outsourcing of corporate services.
- Councillor Monica Lovatt serves on the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which looks at the health services provided by the NHS and other providers in the county.

Training

During 2016/17 Scrutiny members have attended the following training:

Course	Provider	Attendees
Financial Scrutiny 22.09.16	Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS)	Chris Palmer
Questioning Skills 20.10.16	CfPS	Debby Hallett Chris Palmer Judy Roberts
Scrutiny in Challenging Times 04.11.16	CfPS	Debby Hallett
Developing an Effective Work Programme 05.04.17	South East Employers	Debby Hallett Chris Palmer Judy Roberts

Summary of Scrutiny Activity

During 2016/17 the committee met on 8 occasions. Its work included:

- Undertaking a detailed review of both the draft Local Plan Part 1 document and the lessons learnt from the process.
- Suggesting amendments to the draft Statement of Community Involvement which were accepted by the Cabinet member.
- Carrying out an annual review of The Beacon's operation and recommending the implementation of a detailed performance plan. This was accepted by the Cabinet member.
- Recommending alterations to the proposed Abingdon moorings policy which were accepted by the Cabinet member and incorporated into the final policy.
- Considering and making recommendations to Cabinet and Council on the Better Oxfordshire proposal for a single unitary authority for Oxfordshire. These recommendations were included in the final proposal to the Department for Communities and Local Government.
- Developing a detailed work plan for 2017/18.

In addition, the Joint Scrutiny Committee met on 7 occasions. Its work included:

- Reviewing the performance of contractors Biffa Municipal, Sodexo Ltd (Horticultural) Services and GLL
- Reviewing and recommending amendments to a preliminary draft of the temporary accommodation strategy.
- Holding a special meeting in order for representatives of OxLEP to give a presentation and answer the committee's and the public's questions on its Strategic Economic Plan.
- Considering a report on the operation of the Five Councils' Partnership and recommending the Five Councils' Partnership Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet to address a number of issues when considering the contracts
- Reviewing and endorsing the draft joint communications strategy.

For Next Year

In 2017/18, intentions include:

- Publish the committee's work programme on the Council website.
- Introduce an annual "Ask the Leader" meeting for the Leader of the Council to answer questions from the committee and members of the public.
- Hold a Scrutiny best practice workshop.
- Continue to encourage members to take up training opportunities.
- Develop closer working relationships with the Cabinet/Cabinet members for to enable Scrutiny Committee to add value to the decision making process.
- Commission at least one "task and finish" group to carry out a detailed review of an important topic. These Groups focus on a particular topic area/issue and they have a particular value in assisting in the development of policy.