



Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

# Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report

2018-19



**Government Response to the Communities and Local Government Committee First Report of Session 2017-19 on the Effectiveness of Local Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committees**

Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government by Command of Her Majesty

# Introduction

The Centre for Public Scrutiny considers that the role of Overview and Scrutiny Committees in councils across the country is to '*understand, investigate and where necessary challenge decisions which affect ordinary people's lives*'. Over the last year the Council balanced its budget whilst managing the removal of its revenue support grant. It continued with the delivery of key development projects including new offices and a new theatre, and in partnership with Kent County Council and local councils, the delivery of community hubs in the borough. In 2019 the Council's Household Waste and Recycling Contract was due for re-tendering and the new service has significant changes including the kerbside collection of glass and an opt-in charge for the collection of garden waste. The Council continued to look at improvements to service provision through digital technology and a paperless workplace with Councillors now using tablets to access agendas and minutes. Audio recordings of meetings are now available for the public through the Council's website. Phase 2 of the public realm works started with funding from the Sustainable Transport Fund and the Council continued work on bringing forward a number of strategies and supplemental planning documents in preparation for examination of its Local Plan. These projects are defined as the Council's Corporate Priorities and are refreshed each year. The projects and challenges, along with the broader picture, that includes continued discussion over Brexit and the potential impact of a 'no deal' outcome are the same themes that two-tier authorities face regionally and nationally. The importance of maintaining good governance continues to be necessary in order to meet these challenges and the role of Scrutiny in two tier authorities continues to be an important tool in providing the necessary checks and balances in the decision making process, with transparency and independence of the executive. The role of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee remains that it should improve services for the taxpayer. It is important that Members involved in Scrutiny are able to continue influencing policy and challenging decision making within the Council and elsewhere in the borough, where the lives of residents and the services they receive are affected.

Throughout the last year the Overview and Scrutiny Committee sought to add value to the Council's work and provide a democratic route through which members of the public can influence the Council's decision and policy making processes. In the last 12 months the Committee looked at a number of borough-wide issues including: the levels of growth planned for the borough and how developer contributions would mitigate the impact on infrastructure; the Government response to the select committee report on the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny in local authorities; and at its April meeting the Committee will look at community safety and local policing.

This report seeks to highlight the work undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2018-19 and identify some of the opportunities that may be available to it in the next year in order to exercise its functions.

## Our Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee exercises a specific function required by law to support local democracy. The Committee can review decisions made by the Cabinet or any other part of the Council and its committees, as well as consider any matter which affects the Council's area and its inhabitants. The Centre for Public Scrutiny notes four key principles for effective scrutiny: providing a '*constructive critical friend challenge*'; '*amplifying the voices and concerns of the public*.' work is undertaken by independent minded councillors; and the scrutiny acts as a driver for improvement.

As highlighted in previous Overview and Scrutiny annual reports, the Council's cabinet advisory boards provide pre-scrutiny for key-decisions included in the Forward Plan and considered by the Cabinet. This has reduced the number of call-ins considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in that time (a function of the Committee).

The Committee has six scheduled meetings each municipal year and at each meeting members of the Cabinet are invited to attend so they can personally update the committee on their portfolio areas and their achievements against the Council's priorities. In 2018/19 the Committee continued to receive updates on the Calverley Square development and the intention is for those updates to continue as the scheme progresses. The Committee will also provide overview of the feasibility study for the civic complex as it proceeds.

Guest speakers from partner agencies and external organisations addressed task and finish groups initiated by the Committee and staff from across the Council and colleagues from other councils were invited to provide updates on borough-wide services. The Committee was able to discuss the work undertaken in other organisations and how best to respond to issues affecting residents locally.

A draft work programme was developed and agreed in August 2018 and the Committee was also given an opportunity at the end of each meeting to highlight any additional topics Members felt were important and that they wished to add to the work programme. A copy of the work programme was published as part of agenda papers and made available on the Council's website.

Where possible the topics identified in the work programme were aligned with the attendance of Cabinet members to enable a well informed discussion to take place with the right people around the table. These question and answer sessions were particularly valuable and enabled Cabinet member to focus their updates on issues which were topical at the time of the meeting.

## Meeting our statutory responsibilities

### Community Safety

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee is required to act as the relevant Crime and Disorder Committee for the purposes of the Police and Justice Act 2006 and Crime and Disorder (Overview and Scrutiny) Regulations 2009, and reviews the work of the Community Safety Partnership once a year at the April meeting.

In April 2019 the Committee will hear from the Partnership and look at the identified priorities for 2019/20 which are: domestic abuse; substance misuse and supply, and alcohol abuse (incl. violence-related issues); anti-social behaviour (incl. risk reductions in CSE and gangs); and road safety. The Committee will also hear from Kent Police's District Commander for Tunbridge Wells, Chief Inspector Pete Steenhuis, who will talk to members about local policing.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will continue to play an active role in channelling the concerns of resident over crime and safety in the community.

### Health

The delivery of healthcare locally in the community and helping people (particularly the elderly) stay out of hospital continues to be a priority for National Health Service Trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs). The Council has a role to play in delivering programmes that maintain healthy lifestyles such as smoking cessation and healthy eating. One of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's functions is to look at how health services are delivered in the borough and has a watching brief on the West Kent Health and Wellbeing Board.

The Committee receives an update from the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Wellbeing in April of each year and in 2019 the Committee will be updated on the Council's work in addressing homelessness in the borough.

### **Budget and Policy Framework**

The Committee plays a role in assisting with the development of the Council's Budget and Policy Framework. In November 2018 Members had an opportunity to look at the Council's Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2019/20. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also received updates on the status of the Council's cash reserves and how predictions of all income and expenditure and a prudent approach to arranging major contracts over the long-term would provide more certainty

### **Calverley Square Development and the Civic Complex**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee continued to receive updates as the civic development progressed through to the Compulsory Purchase Order stage and the members will receive an update on the CPO enquiry at the April 2019 meeting

The Committee will continue retain a focus on the project and looks forward to receiving further updates as it progresses. Members will also want to input into the feasibility study stage of the civic complex.

## **Member-led reviews**

### **Transparency in the Council**

In 2018 the Committee discussed the amount of information the Council held and how this was accessed, for example, through freedom of information requests. The Committee also wanted assurances that the public was able the easily and successfully negotiate the Council's website if the information was already held there.

### **Reducing Single Use Plastics in the Town Hall and the Wider Community**

In June 2018, a task and finish group was appointed to look at the usage of single-use plastics in the Town Hall and whether there were opportunities to follow the 4Rs of Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. A survey amongst staff and councillors and a (recycling) bin audit in the Town Hall identified a number of areas where, through process changes and with the cooperation of Town Hall users, recycling levels could be improved and the amount of single-use plastic brought into the building reduced.

Members of the task and finish group also worked with a staff group in the Town Hall to improve signposting for recycling and reduce dependence on disposable cups.

The Committee supported a resolution to Full Council which asked that the organisation within its commercial and public work, promote the elimination of single-use plastics across the borough and support the Government's proposals with the same aim.

## **Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

The Council's constitution requires that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee set its own work programme each year. This involves an initial period of consultation with Committee members, local councils, local community groups and societies, and residents. The Committee will then discuss the items suggested and decide which topics it would like to include and those areas it can influence effectively.

## **And what else have we learnt...**

In addition to the more detailed reviews that have taken place, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee heard about a range of topics involving the Council and its partner agencies.

### **Community Hubs**

The Committee received updates on the collaborative work undertaken to provide community hubs in Southborough, Paddock Wood and Cranbrook. In August 2018 Members were advised that each of the hubs has had its own challenges, with several agencies involved and the Council was working closely with those agencies to meet the needs of residents and the local councils.

### **Economic Development in Tunbridge Wells**

Members of the Committee were advised that the Council's Economic Development team was working with Royal Tunbridge Wells Together to promote the Business Improvement District and support opportunities for funding. The Committee also learnt that an updated Creative Industries Framework was being produced to identify barriers to growth in the creative sector. Members recognised that economic growth in Tunbridge Wells and the promotion of businesses and the retail sector was integral to the securing of business rates growth. Royal Victoria Place has new owners in British Land and it was explained to the Committee that a long-term approach would be taken to development of the area and that as leaders in the sector British Land had already made a significant investment.

### **Looking ahead to Opportunities in 2019-20**

Each year the Committee produces a work programme that lists those topics Members have chosen to look at, as well as those items which the Committee has a constitutional or statutory requirement to consider. Looking ahead to 2019/2020 – by the time of this report being considered the deadline for the UK leaving the European Union may have been extended and the impact on two-tier authorities and residents is still an unknown.

With the support of officers from Environment al Services task and finish group has been appointed to look at the re-tendering of the Council's Grounds Maintenance Contract.

One of the recommendations from the Government's response to the select committee which looked at the effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees was that scrutiny committees report to Full Council. The Overview and scrutiny Committee will need to look at the recommendation and how it fits with the current governance.

Once again, the Committee would like to hear from councillors at all levels, from residents and community groups in order to produce an effective, coherent and meaningful work programme - to understand what matters most to people in their local areas, to find out what is working well and what concerns exist. Although the committee will be meeting in June to plan for the municipal year ahead, it reviews the work programme at every meeting. There is always an opportunity to raise concerns, either

through borough, parish or county councillors, or through a member of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, or directly with the Council. The Council's website has an online form on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee page allowing anyone concerned about a local issue to suggest that it be added to the Committee's work programme. Alternatively anyone can email [scrutiny@tunbridgewells.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@tunbridgewells.gov.uk). Views submitted may well be discussed at the next Overview and Scrutiny committee meeting and if taken forward could bring about a beneficial change to communities.

Copies of agenda papers and minutes can be found on the Council website at:  
<http://democracy.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/meetings/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=359>

### **Final Words from the Chair**

I would like to thank the Committee members, supporting officers, colleagues from partner organisations and members of the public who have attended Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings over the last year. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has continued with a range of projects that it is hoped will improve growth and economic development and provide an improved cultural offer for residents and visitors, and make the borough a more attractive place to visit. I would like the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to continue its work in providing oversight on how these projects are managed as well as maintaining its 'critical friend' role when looking at policy and decision making.

**Overview and Scrutiny Committee members 2017-18:**

Councillors Tom Dawlings (Chair), Carol Mackonochie (Vice Chair), James Hannam, Dianne Hill, Thelma Huggett, Peter Lidstone, Bev Palmer, David Scott, Julia Soyke, Patrick Thomson, Zulhash Uddin and Chris Woodward.

Supporting officer: Nick Peeters