

**SUMMARY OF ISSUES ARISING FROM VISIT TO MAIDSTONE**

**BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**OPERATING ENVIRONMENT**

- Different environment – only one urban centre
- Different political environment - Hung Council
- All Members interested in having a system through which they could influence the Council, as there was always a danger that they might find themselves in opposition.
- Overview and Scrutiny is largely apolitical
- There is a healthy respect for the Scrutiny function.
- Overview and Scrutiny is totally independent – can be critical
- Most recommendations by Overview and Scrutiny are accepted by the Cabinet as they are well thought through and evidence based
- No attempt to fetter Overview and Scrutiny work
- Call in can be by any two Non Executive Councillors - There are approximately 6/9 call ins per year - Call in tends not to change decisions but can result in Councillors receiving more information on an item
- Purpose of Overview and Scrutiny is not to make savings for the Cabinet – though savings were made in the first years

**SCRUTINY SET UP**

- 48 Councillors on 5 Overview and Scrutiny Committees
- Scrutiny Committees match Portfolios – more strategic than service based:-
  - Strategic Leadership
  - Customer Services & External Affairs
  - Environment & Transportation
  - Recreation & Community Services
  - External Scrutiny
- Budget = £8,000 (was £15,000)
- A system of substitution exists
- There are no working parties – no need as committees more focused
- There has never been a declaration of whipping
- Meetings are recorded by tape recorder

**SUPPORT FOR SCRUTINY**

- Adequate officer support is essential
- Dedicated Scrutiny section comprises one Manager and two Officers who clerk the meetings, undertake research, follow up action etc etc
- Cost of staffing is high - £100,000 for Overview and Scrutiny – but savings in the Committee section – lost two posts and recently lost one Overview and Scrutiny post
- Training for middle managers on the expectations of scrutiny

## **COMPOSITION OF AGENDAS**

- Tendency to have one item agendas focused and in depth
- Innovative items create press interest
- Referrals from Cabinet (albeit the Committees do not have to accept these)
- Only relevant items on the Forward Plan are submitted to Overview and Scrutiny Committees and the Plan itself is considered every three months
- All policy documents appear on Overview and Scrutiny agenda (albeit there is a designated committee for the purpose of considering Council policies, plans and strategies)
- The Committees receive quarterly Performance Monitoring reports
- Best Value Review progress is reported to Overview and Scrutiny Committees
- Cabinet Members attend their respective Overview and Scrutiny Committees three times per year – at the start to explain aims – halfway through to report progress – at the end of the year to report on achievements
- Overview and Scrutiny work plans are determined at the start of each year
- The work plan takes account of development plans for each portfolio
- In planning the work programme committees take into account where they can have most impact

## **ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS**

- COMT not involved in Overview and Scrutiny – have to be invited
- No attendance by right – only Overview and Scrutiny Officers
- Each Overview and Scrutiny Committee appoints their own Chairman

## **STUDIES UNDERTAKEN BY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**

- Each Committee aims to carry out one large review per year
- Topics are chosen that are of interest and that reflect the level of contact Councillors receive – most successful tend to be those of genuine concern to members of the public.
- Success generates commitment from other agencies
- It is endeavoured to reflect Councillors interests in study areas
- Much evidence is taken from academics – they are given a blank piece of paper and asked to design a system
- There is a facility to produce Minority Group reports
- Demonstrating results engages the public
- A study methodology has been adopted which is similar to that at Huntingdonshire
- Studies produce hefty weighty reports, and Overview and Scrutiny are invited to explain these when presenting them to the Cabinet.
- Contacts have been established with Groups/Organisations – to wait action
- Get out of the town Hall
- Think about how you can engage and consult stakeholders

## **FOLLOWING UP STUDIES**

- Cabinet provide a written response to Overview and Scrutiny Recommendations

- Follow up is through a rapporter system who regularly provides feedback to Committees
- There also are nominated Officers who take responsibility for monitoring recommendations
- An e-bulletin is produced after each Committee and also provides details of forthcoming scrutiny events
- Information on line

### **ROLE OF MEMBERS**

- Emphasis on the need for members to be equipped with the necessary skills and training where appropriate
- A good chairman can make all the difference.