

## 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 rapporteur 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.