

Meeting:	Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee
Date:	23 March 2006
Subject:	Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Responsible Officer:	Director of People, Performance and Policy
Contact Officer:	Heather Smith, Scrutiny Officer
Portfolio Holder:	Communications, Partnership and HR
Key Decision:	No
Status:	Part 1

Section 1: Summary

Decision Required

The Sub-Committee is requested to approve the draft Chair's report of the Sub-Committee's work over the past four years for inclusion in the 2005/06 scrutiny annual report.

Reason for report

The annual report will address the requirement placed on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to report to Council on the work done in the previous year. Additional information on performance in the previous three years is being provided to reflect the end of the current Council electoral cycle.

Benefits

The Sub-Committee benefits from the opportunity to report on its work over the past year, which will include raising the profile of future work areas both within and outside the Council.

Cost of Proposals

This report is not seeking financial resources.

Risks

There are no identifiable risks associated with this proposal.

Implications if recommendations rejected

The Sub-Committee would risk missing the opportunity for its work to be adequately reflected in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's report.

Section 2: Report

2.1 Brief History

2.1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is obliged under the Constitution to report to Council on the work done in the previous year and on its annual work programme for the forthcoming year.

2.1.2 This year being an election year, the Annual Report will contain details of the work undertaken since the last council elections in 2002, supported by individual contributions from each of the scrutiny bodies. A draft Chair's contribution for this Sub-Committee is attached at Appendix A for Members' consideration.

2.1.3 Normally, the work programme for the next municipal year (2006/07) would be included within the draft Chair's report as the section entitled "areas of future work". This year, a detailed work programme will not be finalised until after the election, but some preliminary details on issues which have been discussed for inclusion in the work programme are included.

2.2 Options considered
Not applicable to this report.

2.3 Consultation
All of the Scrutiny Sub-Committees are being consulted on their particular draft Chair's report before the inclusion of the section in the full annual report, which will be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at their next meeting.

2.4 Financial Implications
There are no financial implications.

2.5 Legal Implications
Article 6.03(d) of the Council Constitution provides that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee will report annually to full Council on its activities.

2.6 Equalities Impact
None relevant to this report.

2.7 Section 17, Crime and Disorder Act implications
Implications relating to the future role of the Sub-Committee are included within the draft Chair's report, attached as Appendix A.

Section 3: Supporting Information/ Background Documents

Appendix A: Draft Chair's report on the work of the Strengthening Communities Sub-Committee 2005-06

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Introduction

This year has been busiest ever for Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee. We have conducted an in-depth review of reducing fear of crime in Harrow as well as considering a wide range of varied and stimulating topics including:

- Monitoring the workings of the Harrow Strategic Partnership. We anticipate that the Local Area Agreement (LAA) will continue to be of interest to the Sub-Committee as it develops. We hope that our reducing fear of crime review will contribute to the delivery of the LAA.
- Income deprivation and learning about the joined up working taking place between the Council and the Department for Work and Pensions.
- Receiving performance reporting from the council and the police and also considering the format and nature of future reporting.
- Youth crime prevention and diversionary activity.
- Corporate equalities.
- Crime and disorder reduction.

Scrutiny reviews

Reducing fear of crime review

Fear of crime was identified as an area of concern for local people by the Council's June 2005 MORI quality of life survey. Residents said fear of crime has a negative impact on quality of life, with 42% stating it has a moderate impact and 24% a high impact. The survey also identified that nearly 79% of residents said that the level of crime was the most important thing in making somewhere a good place to live. 53% of respondents said that the level of crime was the thing most in need of improvement. Harrow is, however, one of the safest boroughs in London in terms of recorded crime and so we undertook a review to find out why and to identify possible solutions.

The highlight of the review was our successful reducing fear of crime conference, which was attended by around sixty local residents. It brought together key figures from the council, police and other agencies to discuss why fear of crime in Harrow is disproportionately high, even though actual crime levels in the borough are around the lowest in London. The conference demonstrated that police visibility is a key issue and we hope that the roll-out of the Safer Neighbourhood teams will help to improve reassurance. Other issues identified included streamlining and improving communications and developing partnership working in the area of fear of crime. This important piece of work formed the backbone of the review and enabled us to develop stronger relationships with officers in the Council and also in partner organisations. When our work in this area was reported at Harrow's annual meeting with the Metropolitan Police Authority Chair, the Chair commented that Harrow was the first borough he had visited in his programme of visits to all London boroughs that had highlighted the role of scrutiny.

Post offices in Harrow

Post Office Ltd's closure programme has formed a significant plank of our work over the last few years. The climax of our work in this area was a public meeting held in September 2004, which was attended by around fifty local residents who expressed concern about the nine proposed closures to a panel which included Drew McBride (Head of Area, Post Office Ltd) and Kay Dixon (Chairman, Postwatch Greater London). Sadly, in spite of the meeting and a response from the Council expressing concern at the proposals, all nine closed. As a result of public concern we decided to meet with Post Office Ltd and Postwatch one year on. At this meeting we were pleased to learn that the improvements to the remaining branches that were promised as part of the closure programme have been made. As a result of the discussion at the meeting, Postwatch undertook to include branches on College Road and Headstone Drive in their mystery shopping exercise (scheduled for spring) to assess queuing because of concerns raised during our meeting. Postwatch also indicated that they had been paying close attention to the South Harrow branch as the improvements promised following the franchising of the branch had not been delivered.

Statutory obligations

Statutory obligations for the Sub-Committee are likely to be strengthened in 2006/07. The Police and Justice bill, before parliament at the time of writing, is set to extend the powers of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to encompass the work of the crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRP). In Harrow, the CDRP takes the form of the Safer Harrow Management Group, a sub-group of the Harrow Strategic Partnership. Scrutiny will play a key role as a check and balance on community safety decision-making, tackling cross cutting issues and supporting partnership working; this is intended to involve the police, fire and PCT, who will have a duty to consider recommendations from scrutiny and report back on action taken or the reasons for not acting. We believe that this will build on relationships that scrutiny has been establishing, particularly through the reducing fear of crime review.

A last resort mechanism called the 'Community Call for Action' is also proposed, whereby ward Councillors will be expected to use informal methods to seek resolutions to community safety problems raised by local people. The scrutiny committee is expected to have a role in difficult cases that have not been resolved through the informal mechanisms available to the ward Councillors.

Ongoing work of the committee and other activity

A key area where we have been able to have impact concerned the proposed closure by the Greater London Magistrates Court Authority (GLMCA) of the Harrow Magistrates Court. We have considered and co-ordinated efforts by local agencies including the Magistrates' Court itself, the council, police and various stakeholders, in developing an appeal against the decision to close the local facility, which was successful. We have also had an ongoing interest in provision to address domestic violence and hate crime; in our first year a reference was made to Cabinet indicating our support for the creation of a full time permanent Domestic Violence Officer post, which was agreed.

Areas for development in future include performance reporting. We have recently had a very constructive discussion with officers in relation to the

monitoring of crime and community safety statistics, which we hope will lead to the development of a scorecard for examination by the Sub-Committee; this will enable us to strengthen our performance monitoring role, a role which will become increasingly important when our statutory responsibility is extended to the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP).

Potential areas for future consideration

Within the scrutiny annual satisfaction survey (discussed in more detail in the Overview and Scrutiny Committee section of the annual report) the area of anti-social behaviour was identified as a potential topic for review from the perspective of analysing its causes, effects and solutions. We also recommend that relationships with the voluntary sector be considered in 2006/07 as detailed below.

Community involvement

Community involvement has been a major aspect of our work on reducing fear of crime and also on post offices in Harrow. Community input has helped to inform our recommendations.

In our first year, we received presentations from the Harrow Association of Voluntary Service and the Harrow Association of Disabled People. In addition, as Chair, I met informally with a cross section of community and voluntary sector agencies in order to further identify their needs. We have built on this foundation over the last few years. Unfortunately, due to our commitment to undertake the reducing fear of crime review and the post offices work we were unable to undertake our planned review of the effectiveness of the Council in supporting the capacity of the voluntary sector to attract funding. In the light of this and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Hear/say review of community engagement, we recommend that relationships with the voluntary sector be considered in 2006/07.

Lessons learned over the past four years

As this is our final annual report, this represents a valuable opportunity to consider the way in which the work has evolved. Four years ago we were faced with a new area of work and over the past four years we believe we have developed our knowledge about the areas within our remit. In the last year in particular we believe that this has helped to increase our effectiveness in addressing issues of relevance locally. We have tried to focus on areas of strategic importance to our partners and believe we have developed constructive relationships with officers both inside and outside of the council.

Membership

Strengthening Communities Scrutiny Sub-Committee

Councillor Thammaiah (chair)
Councillor Seymour (vice-chair)
Councillor Dharmarajah
Councillor Ann Groves
Councillor Lavingia
Councillor Janet Cowan
Councillor Vina Mithani

Reducing fear of crime scrutiny review

Councillor Thammaiah (lead)

Councillor Seymour (deputy lead)

Councillor Nana Asante

Councillor Ann Groves

Councillor Lavingia

Councillor Janet Cowan

Councillor Eileen Kinnear

Councillor Vina Mithani

Statistical information

Meetings:

4 ordinary

In-depth reviews:

1

Review meetings:

7

Visits/other:

2 (post offices one-off meeting; fear of crime conference)