

Maidstone Borough Council

Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 1 December 2009

Overview and Scrutiny Function Review: Select Committees

Report of: Acting Overview and Scrutiny Manager

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting on 9 June 2009, the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to carry out a review of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) function. The relevant extract from the minutes of the meeting is as follows:

"Members of the Committee felt that it was opportune to review the Overview and Scrutiny function as it had been in place for eight years. A number of Members raised concern that enthusiasm for overview and scrutiny amongst Members was diminishing and felt it was therefore important to reinvigorate the process to ensure it remained an effective tool. Suggested aspects of the Overview and Scrutiny Function that could be reviewed included financing, the partnership with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, aims of scrutiny and scrutiny of the Cabinet. The Committee agreed to conduct this as its major review and was keen to invite external witnesses to assist in its review."

- 1.2 At the 7 July 2009 meeting, the Committee agreed the terms of reference for the O&S Function review; these are attached at Appendix A for information.

2. Select Committees¹

- 2.1 Select Committees work in both Houses of Parliament. They check and report on areas ranging from the work of government departments to economic affairs. The results of these inquiries are public and many require a response from the government.
- 2.2 Differences between the two Houses: House of Commons Select Committees are largely concerned with examining the work of government departments. Committees in the House of Lords concentrate on four main areas: Europe, science, economics, and the UK constitution.
- 2.3 Commons Select Committees
- 2.3.1 There is a Commons Select Committee for each government department, examining three aspects: spending, policies and administration.

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/committees/select.cfm> [Accessed 16 November 2009]

2.3.2 These departmental committees have a minimum of 11 members, who decide upon the line of inquiry and then gather written and oral evidence. Findings are reported to the Commons, printed, and published on the Parliament website. The government then usually has 60 days to reply to the committee's recommendations.

2.3.3 Some Select Committees have a role that crosses departmental boundaries such as the Public Accounts or Environmental Audit Committees. Depending on the issue under consideration they can look at any or all of the government departments.

2.3.4 Other Commons Committees are involved in a range of on-going investigations, like administration of the House itself or allegations about the conduct of individual MPs.

2.4 Lords Select Committees

2.4.1 Lords Select Committees do not shadow the work of government departments. Their investigations look into specialist subjects, taking advantage of the Lords' expertise and the greater amount of time (compared to MPs) available to them to examine issues.

2.4.2 There are currently five major Lords Select Committees:

- the European Union Committee
- the Science and Technology Committee
- the Communications Committee
- the Constitution Committee
- the Economic Affairs Committee

2.4.3 These five committees are re-appointed at the beginning of a new session. Each one runs inquiries and reports on issues within their specific areas. Occasionally, other committees are set up to look at issues outside of the five main groups.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Huw Yardley and Emma Gordon, Clerk and Committee Specialist for the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, will be in attendance for the meeting to discuss the operation of Select Committees.

3.2 Ann Widdecombe MP has provided a written statement outlining her views on select committees in order to provide an elected Member's perspective; this statement is attached at [Appendix B](#).

3.3 Members are recommended to interview the witnesses and identify areas of best practice that Maidstone's overview and scrutiny committees can learn from.