

Review of the Scrutiny Partnership and Resources

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1. Background

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Partnership between Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Borough Councils has been in place for just over a year. The Partnership began following the Overview and Scrutiny Manager assisting with a scrutiny review at Tunbridge Wells in 2006. Following the review the Improvement and Development Agency for local government carried out a check up of the scrutiny function at Tunbridge Wells and made a number of recommendations, including that scrutiny should be adequately resourced and restructured. The Partnership was formed in April 2007 with the objective of sharing best practice, encouraging joint scrutiny at a member level and sharing expertise whilst achieving savings through sharing the management costs between the two Councils. Both Councils have reviewed the benefits of the partnership in their respective annual reports. The annual reports for 2007-08 demonstrate that both Councils have benefited as a result of the partnership.
- 1.2 The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee at Maidstone requested that both teams review the scrutiny partnership and the resources for scrutiny. This report outlines whether the partnership has achieved its objectives, the national context in relation to resources and how the scrutiny officers and councillors perceive the resources for scrutiny. The recommendations relate to the findings of the review.

2. Recommendations

For Maidstone

1. Members endorse that the surplus savings from the Overview and Scrutiny Partnership be used to gain additional administrative support for the Maidstone team.
2. The Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager work with the scrutiny Chairmen at Maidstone and the Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer to identify ways to use the professional support budget to increase the support available to scrutiny.

For Tunbridge Wells

1. Work is distributed evenly between the team members to ensure that adequate research is carried out for all Select Committees.
2. The training budget for Members be used to provide professional support where appropriate for example facilitating budget scrutiny.

For both Councils

1. The Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen and Vice Chairmen use either office numbers or her mobile phone number to contact the

Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager to increase availability and capacity.

2. That cross-team working amongst officers be encouraged to increase capacity and resilience.
3. That joint reviews be identified to make the most of the partnership and scrutiny resources.
4. That joint member meetings be held to increase the sharing of best practice.
5. That Scrutiny Chairmen regularly review committee work programmes and resources required with the Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager.
6. The Chairmen identify any additional resources they require for scrutiny as a result of this paper.

3. Did the Partnership Achieve its Objectives?

3.1 The following objectives were identified for the partnership as part of the "achieving more together than we could alone" partnership proposal:

- Sharing Expertise and Best Practice
- Greater Joint Working at a Member and Officer Level
- Achieving Savings

Outlined below are examples of how the partnership met the objectives set as taken from the scrutiny annual reports for both Councils.

3.1.1 Sharing Best Practice and Expertise

The scrutiny teams at both Councils have met and shared learning. This year we held a 'big ideas day', where each team member gave a presentation on a different area of scrutiny expertise including:

Health Scrutiny;
Public Engagement;
Member Engagement; and
Councillor Call for Action.

3.1.2 We have also held briefing sessions between teams following particularly successful scrutiny for example the learning from the budget scrutiny at Tunbridge Wells was shared with the Maidstone scrutiny team to help improve budget scrutiny at both Councils for 2008-09. As a result of the workshop two joint member training seminars will be held, one covering budget scrutiny and the other questioning skills.

3.1.3 The Chairmen at both councils have also met and shared learning and work programme ideas. In 2008-09 we plan to have a joint scrutiny member event between the councils for all scrutiny members.

3.1.4 We were placed second and highly commended in the national Good Scrutiny Awards for Best Use of Resources because of the unique partnership arrangement.

3.2 **Greater Joint Working at a Member and Officer Level**

The Highways scrutiny review is an example of both Councils carrying out additional work as a result of the partnership. One team member from Tunbridge Wells and one from Maidstone supported this review with the Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager putting together the final report. The team members were new to the role and were able to support one another and share work throughout the review. As a result of the joint scrutiny review a new customer charter will now be developed with standards set for response times and a tracking system has been put in place to monitor Joint Transportation Board recommendations and actions, ensuring the district input into highways is not lost. Neighbouring authorities in Kent have carried out similar reviews relating to Highways but this was the first one that Kent County Council have responded to and acted upon.

The team acknowledged that whilst there had been joint working at an officer level at events such as big ideas day and the joint highways review there had not been cross Council committee support to assist with absence management and the gaps in resources created by staff turnover. In Tunbridge Wells for the first 4 months the team was one member down and in Maidstone the team was one member of staff down for three months during the first year of the partnership. Only one officer lives within the boundaries of the Borough Council they work for so joint working and cross committee support can prove difficult as a journey home for all team members working at the other Council would be at least an hour. The team has acknowledged that geographical distances are a problem but has committed to cross Council working when needed as long as this is not a regular occurrence. Overtime is normally paid for evening meetings to scrutiny officers and where officers are expected to attend meetings at the 'other' council this should include their journey home. It should be noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager does not receive overtime for evening meetings

3.3 **Achieving Savings**

The partnership has resulted in over £10,000 of savings for each authority in relation to management costs for the service. Further savings will be created through increased joint working between officers and members as research resources can be pooled for scrutiny reviews. This can be seen as for 2008-09, the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee at Maidstone has selected one complex major review for the whole year plus one joint review. The partnership has allowed an additional review to take place with resources pooled.

4. **Resources for Scrutiny**

4.1 **How the resources compare nationally**

- 4.1.1 The Centre for Public Scrutiny conducts an annual overview and scrutiny survey looking at a variety of scrutiny issues including the resources available for scrutiny. The survey results published in 2008 looking at the municipal year 2007-08 identify that the average number of scrutiny committees per authority is 4, the average number of reviews is 6 with most authorities completing between 3-6 reviews. Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells are comparable to the national average as there are 4 committees at Maidstone and 3 at Tunbridge Wells. The report does not however cover scrutiny working groups; last year, there was one shared working group between the two Councils, at Maidstone there were 2 working groups and at Tunbridge Wells we supported 4 major working groups plus several more small groups for short task and finish reviews such as housing policy, the budget and plastic bags.
- 4.1.2 Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone produced 3 major review reports each last year plus one shared report on Highways; in previous years Maidstone has produced a greater number of major review reports, during 2007-08 however the scrutiny committees only opted for one major review per committee and for External this review was shared with Tunbridge Wells. The scrutiny team has since revised the work programme process to encourage members to lead and own their work programmes. This year there are two major reviews per committee at both Councils and we hope to see a return to previous form at Maidstone with the production of 8 reviews with meaning and impact. This compares to a national average of 6 reviews with a clear cluster of 3-6 reviews completed per annum for most authorities.¹
- 4.1.3 When looking at the level of support provided to scrutiny nationally, 73% of authorities had a dedicated scrutiny team and the average number of full time equivalent (FTE) scrutiny officers is 2.9². Respondents to the survey include district, county, unitary and London borough councils. The average support provided for district councils is 1.4 FTE. Both Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells have significantly more resources than the majority of district councils; this is further supported by the responses to the benchmarking survey later on in this report. When looking at the quality of scrutiny, whilst resources are important so are a number of other factors including motivated councillors and chairmen.
- 4.1.4 Whilst both Councils have significantly more resources in terms of staff the discretionary budget for scrutiny does not fare as well. At Tunbridge Wells there is no discretionary budget for external meetings or professional support and at Maidstone there is £2,000 for professional support plus a small printing budget outside of agenda printing. The national survey identifies that in 2007 the average discretionary budget was £11,853 with districts having on average £5,323 available. 25% of respondents indicated that there was no discretionary budget available to scrutiny.³

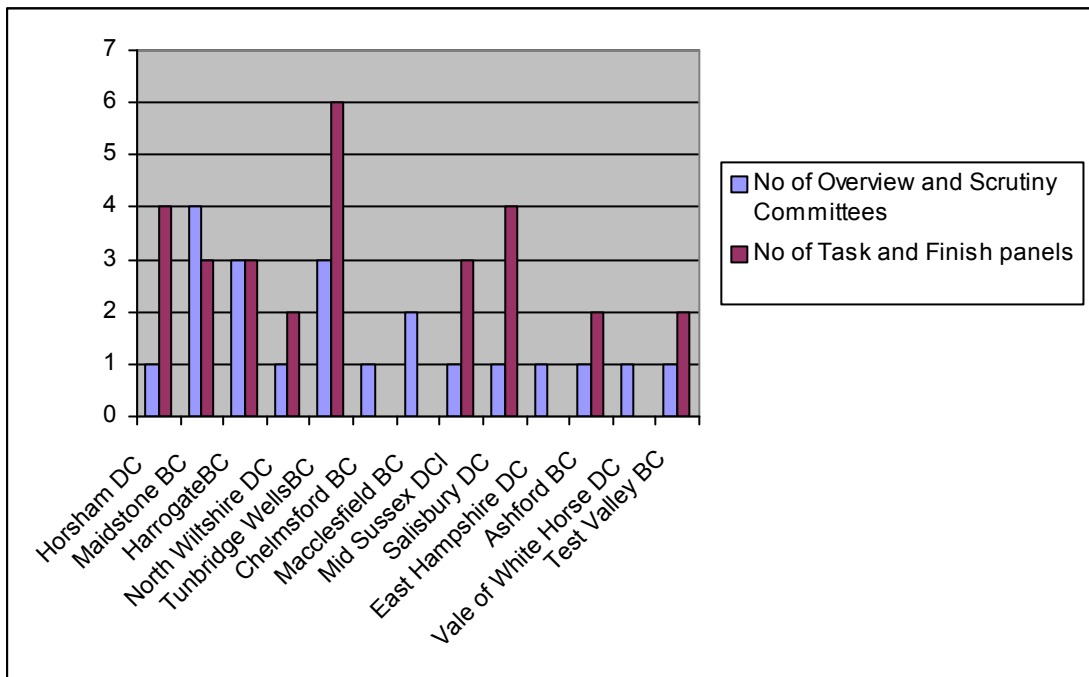
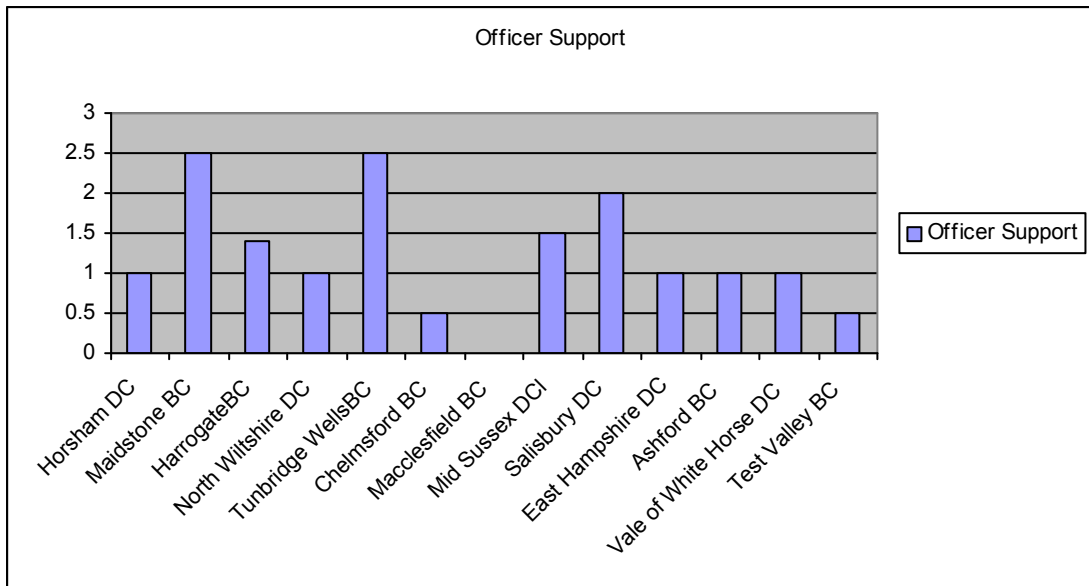
¹ Centre for Public Scrutiny, Annual Survey 2007, page 5

² Ibid, page 8

³ Ibid, page 10

4.2 Benchmarking survey

The teams completed a benchmarking survey conducted by Harrogate District Council of neighbouring authorities in 2008. The survey identified the support provided to scrutiny, the number of scrutiny committees and the number of evening meetings held across 13 district councils. For resources provided to directly support scrutiny Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells provide the most and we also have the greatest number of committees, working groups and evening meetings.



4.3 The Scrutiny Team Perspective

4.3.1 What's Changed?

A workshop was jointly held with both scrutiny teams to identify how the resources for scrutiny had changed since the partnership and whether extra resources were needed for effective scrutiny. The team believed that the most significant change had been to the manager's role; the manager has moved from a committee support role to a more strategic service development role. There has been a shift in focus from committee support to scrutiny service development, management and team mentoring. The role has also changed in that the manager has been invited to speak at a number of national events and lead a number of workshops since the creation of the partnership. This has boosted the reputation of scrutiny at Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells at a national level.

Before the partnership there were 5 scrutiny committees at Maidstone and the Overview and Scrutiny Manager was the lead support for the Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Manager was also expected to attend additional committee meetings to cover sickness absence or staff turnover. The team believes that the capacity of the scrutiny team at Maidstone has changed with the manager covering seven committees rather than five in relation to supporting scrutiny officers and absence management. Last year because of turnover and the staff training that then arose following recruitment the manager attended 40 Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings 23 at Maidstone and 17 at Tunbridge Wells. This does not include the Overview and Scrutiny Management Group, Liaison group or working group meetings. The team noted that now both teams were fully trained the manager would not be required to provide as much committee support as she did in the first year of the partnership. During the last year the two Senior Overview and scrutiny Officer have supported in the region of 35 evening meetings demonstrating the workload incurred by the section. The issue of capacity had been more keenly experienced by Maidstone than Tunbridge Wells as Maidstone was an established team with 3 full time officers, which was then reduced to 2.5.

The teams also commented that there was now more opportunity for sharing best practice and joint team meetings and big ideas day had created an opportunity for sharing learning and developing new skills. The joint review of Highways had been far more successful in terms of response from the County than other district council's scrutiny reviews of the highways service in Kent. The other notable change was the creation of a senior officer role within the teams allowing personal development and career progression in a service where historically officers have developed and left following an average of two years of service.

Both teams agreed that the quality of Councillors and their levels of enthusiasm for scrutiny as well as the skills of scrutiny chairmen had a major impact on scrutiny outside of the resources given to support it. The

teams believed that the level of member support demonstrated would impact on the quality of scrutiny and its outcomes regardless of the level of resource.

4.3.2 Are the resources right?

Below is a breakdown of the resources and tasks to support Scrutiny pre and post partnership. The tables show the changes created by the partnership. From the tables below it should be noted that Maidstone before the creation of the partnership identified that the number of committees should be reduced from 5 to 4 which has a subsequent reduction in committee administration workload.

Tunbridge Wells

	Pre-partnership	Post Partnership
Tasks to support scrutiny	Minutes and Agendas (Members wrote own reports and carried out own research)	Research, Agendas, minutes, briefing reports, scrutiny reports, project managing reviews, arranging witnesses, scoping reviews
Committees	3	3
Committee Support (the support provided directly to scrutiny committees)	0.8	2.2
Resources	Officer time from Democratic services	2.5 team members
Service and Team management	0 (no team in place)	0.3
Team Structure	0.8 of democratic services officer	0.5 manager 2 officers

Maidstone

	Pre-Partnership	Post-Partnership
Tasks to support scrutiny	Research, Agendas, minutes, briefing reports, scrutiny reports, project managing reviews, arranging witnesses, scoping reviews	Research, Agendas, minutes, briefing reports, scrutiny reports, project managing reviews, arranging witnesses, scoping reviews
Committees	5	4
Committee Support (the support provided directly to scrutiny committees)	2.5 (Manager supporting one scrutiny committee. Plus working groups and liaison group)	2.2
Resources	3 team members plus £600 for printing and £2k for professional support	2.5 team members plus £600 for printing and £2k for professional support
Service and Team	0.5	0.3

management		
Team Structure	1 manager, 2 officers	0.5 manager, 2 officers

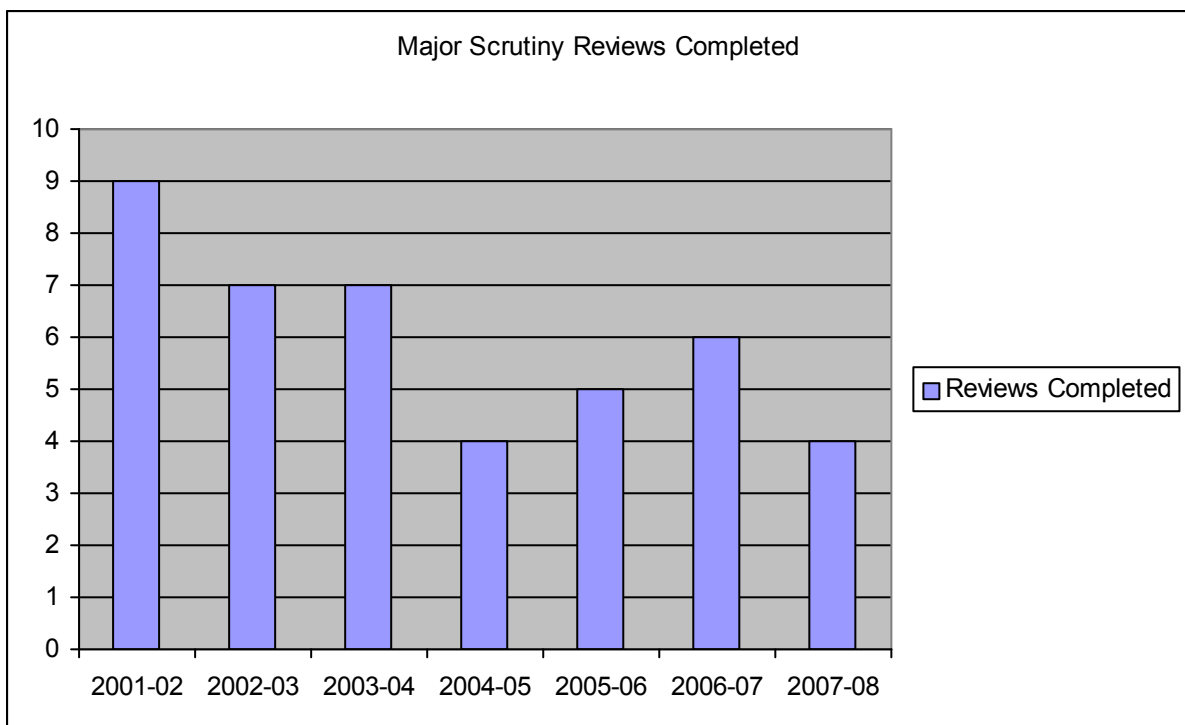
When the team was asked to consider if the resources provided were adequate they argued that as well as councillor ownership it was very much dependent on committee expectation and workload management. It was also identified that there should not be an expectation on the manager as a head of service to be regularly servicing scrutiny meetings, whilst this had happened in the past the number of committees had been reduced at Maidstone and the management workload of the manager significantly increased as a result of the partnership. Both Senior Officers identified that time could be more usefully spent carrying out scrutiny roles such as research rather than the traditional committee clerk role of minutes and meeting administration. Originally a part-time support officer post had been included as part of setting up the partnership to ensure that there was back-filling for the loss of the manager's time. This post was however put forward during 2007-08 when the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services requested savings. At Maidstone there was £4,000 of unallocated savings created as a result of the partnership, which could be usefully used to support meetings. By using this resource to free up officers from committee tasks there would be greater capacity for research. The Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager is currently pursuing the creation of an additional part-time post resourced from the savings.

It was also acknowledged that the team at Maidstone had been requested to do more than just support their usual work with the creation of the youth scrutiny committee. Youth scrutiny has been supported by the Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer at Maidstone and has required at least 10 hours of their time every month. During 2008-09 as the Committees have all requested two major reviews plus the usual committee work the scrutiny team will not be supporting youth scrutiny following the completion of the sexual health scrutiny review in September 2008. If this committee is to continue to be supported then additional resources would have to be sought.

At Tunbridge Wells additional support could be sought from the democratic services team or from within the team as the overview and scrutiny officer only has one committee to support. The democratic services team at Tunbridge Wells is already significantly stretched in terms of capacity so this would not be a viable option at present. The team at Maidstone identified that the professional support budget had not been used in previous years and that this could usefully be used to provide additional research support for scrutiny. This year some of the budget would be allocated to support the most complex scrutiny review – diverse communities.

With regard to the amount of work the teams support, two major reviews plus a number of short studies and one-offs at committee meetings have been identified as an appropriate workload by the scrutiny team. Below is

a graph of workloads charting completed scrutiny reviews at Maidstone since scrutiny's inception in 2001. This shows that scrutiny started off with a high number of reviews, which settled to seven reviews per year in 2002-03 and 2003-04 but dipped significantly to four reviews in 2004-05 peaked to 6 the following year and dipped again in 2007. The team has identified in 2007-08 there was a difficulty in gaining member ownership of committees and the work programmes set did not identify a significant number of major reviews. Instead committee's favoured using meetings for one-off topics for example the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee carried out only one study, which was with Tunbridge Wells on Highways, they did however scrutinise the Safer Maidstone Partnership, the best value review of CCTV and the NHS Trust. It should be noted that 8 major reviews and 1 member research study are now scheduled for 2008-09.



4.4 What do Councillors think?

4.4.1 Members at both Councils were sent a short survey asking if they felt the resources provided for scrutiny were adequate. It should be noted that some new members and some more experienced members who were new to scrutiny felt they could not comment on whether resources were adequate. It is recommended that that annual scrutiny member survey asks whether Members are satisfied with the resources available for overview and scrutiny and this is reported to the respective overview and scrutiny management and coordinating committee at each Council.

4.4.2 Maidstone

At Maidstone 10 responses were received to the survey. Councillors were asked to rate the service provided by the team in relation to the main service tasks. 2 declined to comment on the service provided as they felt

they didn't have sufficient experience, a further respondent only rated minutes and agendas.

Service	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
Minutes	0	0	4	4
Agendas	0	0	2	6
Research for Reviews	0	0	2	5
Briefing reports for Agendas	0	0	2	5
Review Reports	0	0.5	1.5	5

As evidenced above in relation to the service received nearly all responses were positive.

- 4.4.3 Councillors were asked if they were happy with the overall support and we had a 100% positive response. In relation to whether the resources to support scrutiny were adequate, 6 responded that they were and two made comment.

Comments on resources:

"On a few occasions I have been disappointed that information is not contained within our briefing notes and it makes it difficult to determine exactly what is going on. This is the rarity, not the norm and I'm not sure it's really the fault of the scrutiny team. An example would be when we had the AWC call in (ages ago I know!) where none of the financial figures were included, and yet this was given as the sole reason for choosing to scrap weekly collections."

"Yes. Scrutiny need to be careful not to do too much. More focus for better results. Maybe we push the officers too hard and risk ending up with more output of less quality?"

"Being a 'new-boy' it is difficult to quantify an answer but it appears to be very adequate."

The comments regarding information not being available reflects that the information is not always available to the scrutiny team so cannot be included in briefing reports. We do however endeavour to include as much information as we can and work with other officers at the Council to ensure we have all the information necessary. With regard to being careful on workload, appropriate workload management is crucial to achieving the best possible from the resources available to scrutiny.

Two Members identified that more could be done to improve the research support for scrutiny; this ties in with the findings of the scrutiny team and we hope the new part-time support officer will allow the team to do less committee administration and more research. The team from speaking to Councillors has identified that Councillors could also carry out more research to assist reviews. This year one committee has identified three major reviews and as there isn't enough capacity to fully support a third

review (or enough committee meetings!), Members will be carrying out the majority of research with assistance as and when requested from the team.

- 4.4.4 Finally Members were asked how they would improve the service provided by the team. The responses were generally positive but some concern was expressed regarding the level of information available prior to and at scrutiny meetings and the level of research support available.

"At Corporate O and S Committee the other evening it did appear that members did not have the relevant material in front of them to have informed discussion. This obviously needs addressing."

"Pre availability of some materials and the opportunity to ask for further particulars before the meeting."

"Employ a dedicated research officer or at least 0.5 FTE?"

"Good and prompt feedback to the team of scrutineers to enable us to have plenty of time to formulate our questions and ideas before meetings."

"Couldn't"

"Honestly guys – You're probably one of my favourite departments within the council and I'm really impressed with both what you do, and the way you go about it.

Without wishing to sound patronizing keep up the good work!"

"You may well appreciate that as I have only just become a Member of any scrutiny committee for the first time it is difficult for me to make any fine judgements as called for in the questionnaire. By this time next year I may well have many views. Currently I can only relate to what I saw from my position as a witness called to various committees during my time in Administration. It always seemed to me to be well-ordered, well reported and often made a considerable contribution to tailoring outcomes of Council Policy by producing good, cogent, well-researched reports on subjects which were not normally part of Council routine. The difficulty that I foresee in the immediate future is finding subjects which are sufficiently new. It may be that the committees could well go back over the past five or so years and see what reports now need UPDATING or, indeed, changing in outlook."

- 4.4.5 There does seem to be an issue with regard to the availability of information prior to scrutiny meetings. The team will continue to work with officers to get reports in a timely manner. We do appreciate that there has been an issue with reports being sent out after agendas but this is down to those putting the reports together not the scrutiny team. The final comment is the most interesting as that has been an issue in recent years, the team believes that the changes to work programme setting should lead to better member-led scrutiny with interesting reviews and

tangible outcomes. This year we hope will be a return to past form for scrutiny at Maidstone with strong reviews including diverse communities, public conveniences and planning enforcement.

4.4.6 Tunbridge Wells

For Tunbridge Wells a fully supported scrutiny system is relatively new. 10 completed survey responses were received and several other members commented on the service. The comments received outside of the survey responses were all positive please see example below:

“As far as I am concerned the service you provide is excellent. I have always found you fair minded and thorough.”

The first question asked was whether Members were happy with the support provided by the scrutiny team the responses were 100% positive.

In relation to services and tasks the response was overwhelmingly positive and it would appear that the majority of those who responded do believe scrutiny is well-resourced and providing a good or excellent service

Service	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent
Minutes			6	4
Agendas			6	4
Research for Reviews			4	4
Briefing reports for Agendas		1	4	4
Review Reports		2	3	4

A new Councillor who rated review reports as average responded that:

“My early view is that the limited resource is likely to restrict either the depth of research, or the number of projects that can be undertaken, or both.”

The same Councillor also commented that to improve the service there should be training in report writing skills. The team has discussed this issue and agreed to send out the four scrutiny reports from 07-08 to all Councillors; as far as the team was aware, as a new councillor only one report would have been seen. It should also be noted that a Councillor who does not have contact with scrutiny committees gave the additional ratings of average. More could therefore be done to publicise the work and achievements to all Members as only those with limited or no scrutiny experience responded negatively to the question on service.

4.4.6 The survey asked Members whether the resources provided to scrutiny committees were adequate; 3 Councillors responded 'yes' and one new councillor responded 'don't know'. The remaining submitted the following comments:

“Yes – they seem to be. The Team works very hard. They haven't complained about a lack of resources.”

“Not sure as I don’t know what else could be provided that isn’t in place.”

Finally the survey asked how the service provided could be improved and the following comments were received:

“I think the team is excellent for the provision of services”

“Don’t know how to answer this question. Officers have never said that resources are inadequate and I have never asked them the question. However I have noticed that, occasionally, I am asked for information or to attend meetings at quite short notice, which could be due to inadequate resources in terms of time.”

“The service provided is excellent and the three members of the team are all extremely hardworking, efficient, friendly and always willing to take time to explain things to us.”

- 4.4.7 Overall Councillors at Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone have given positive feedback regarding the resources available for scrutiny and the support provided by the team. The main problems identified by Members were the availability of information ahead of meetings and the need for improved research to support scrutiny. Three respondents only expressed the research element as a problem across the two councils. The teams believe that using resources within the current budget and work programme management will alleviate this issue, as more time will be available for research.

5. Findings

- 5.1 From reviewing the partnership objectives it is clear that in the first year of the partnership these have been met. The partnership has benefited both authorities. Members have worked together and joint review work has been carried out. The team identified that more could still be done and this year hopes to carry out a further joint review, more joint team meetings and a joint scrutiny member development day. One barrier to further joint working was the geographical distance not only between the two authorities but also officers’ homes as only one officer lived within the borough they worked for. This has meant that scrutiny team members have been reluctant to provide cross Council committee support at the Councils so the scrutiny manager has filled any gaps in terms of committee cover. Both teams have acknowledged the need to share workload across Councils to better manage sickness absence and turnover. It has been acknowledged that whilst this will not happen regularly all could offer support at least once or twice a year as needed.
- 5.2 With regard to national and local benchmarking it is evident that the resources provided compare very favourably with other district councils. The Council has more officers to support scrutiny than other districts across the country and locally. To ensure we are making best use of these resources there needs to be carefully planned work programmes.

- 5.3 The teams, through comparing resources pre-and post partnership, were able to identify that the most significant change had been to the manager's position which in turn had impacted upon capacity. The post previously had been half management and half committee support and now was solely management and supporting the scrutiny chairmen to aid the development of scrutiny. The scrutiny services had experienced capacity problems in the first year with staff turnover and sickness at both authorities resulting in eight months without full support across the two Councils, a gap filled by the manager and the senior officers. This had stretched resources significantly. When the team considered the resources for scrutiny both Senior Officers identified that time could be more usefully spent carrying out scrutiny roles such as research rather than the traditional committee clerk role of minutes and meeting administration. The partnership has created savings which the Overview and Scrutiny Partnership Manager is using to provide additional committee support through the creation of a part-time support post. This post is currently being evaluated and graded. The team at Maidstone identified that the professional support budget had not been used appropriately in the past and identified this budget as an additional way of providing additional research and support. Tunbridge Wells was disappointed to note that there was no professional support budget available and will seek additional support internally when required.
- 5.4 The response from Councillors was largely positive in relation to the resources survey. All were happy with the service provided by the team with the only concerns regarding the service and resources being from new councillors or those who had not long been involved with scrutiny. The team acknowledged that more should be done to promote the work of scrutiny and review past work to ensure recommendations and reviews have impact. Scrutiny review reports have now been put in the Members' areas at both councils and are available on the scrutiny web pages. The annual survey of members will include a section on resources and will provide a regular review of the resources available. Scrutiny support will be included on all overview and scrutiny co-ordinating and management group meetings to allow the Chairs to feedback any concerns on the support they have or are being given.
- 5.5 The overwhelming outcome from the team and scrutiny chairmen was a need to ensure that scrutiny committees have well-planned workloads and realistic expectations. It may well be that with the potential changes to scrutiny to more area-based short neighbourhood scrutiny reviews taking one- to two meetings involving petitions that only one major review is possible per committee. The team will have to work with the chairmen to ensure that scrutiny engages with the public and acts as the community champion.