



Keeping an eye on  
Maidstone

# **Overview & Scrutiny Annual Report**

## **2008-09**

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## **Introduction to Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2008-09**

This has been another successful year for Overview and Scrutiny at Maidstone which continues to lead the way and improve on its national and local reputation for best practice - a tribute to the work undertaken by members and our excellent scrutiny officers. Members and officers of the borough council are committed to scrutiny and see it as very important that all council policies and services to our residents are regularly scrutinised and reviewed, to ensure that they are the best that the public would expect from an excellent rated council.

It has been a challenging and interesting year for all four committees as you will see from this report. The Leader of the council, cabinet members and executive officers have all been called to account at committees for their respective portfolio areas. There have been very successful reviews of service provision and some fourteen decisions have been called in for Scrutiny. After discussion some have resulted in changes or improvements to Council services.

Apart from the important overview of the Council's Plans, Strategies and Budgets, the committees have undertaken eight major reviews and 29 one-off topics including CCTV provision, Public Conveniences, Section 106 agreements, Whole Council Elections (4-yearly), and have reviewed all past reports. Health scrutiny remains an important issue in Maidstone, looking at local service provision and making an important input to the Kent Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, where Maidstone Borough Council is represented.

The Scrutiny Partnership with neighbouring Tunbridge Wells continues to work well, not only in terms of financial savings to both Councils and sharing best practice but also the value of engaging in joint training sessions and workshops, and importantly Joint Reviews of Service. A national scrutiny award from the Centre for Public Scrutiny was given to Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells Borough Councils for their innovative joint working and use of resources - well deserved national recognition.

There have been a number of training sessions and workshops over the year embracing budget scrutiny, the strategic plan and section 106 agreements, and the council will again be involved in the Kent and Medway Scrutiny Conference to be held in Maidstone in November.

The Youth Scrutiny Committee presented its final report on Sex and Relationships Education to Full Council in December, receiving the full support of members. The report has been sent to all secondary schools in the borough, and a number of schools have already responded to confirm their intentions to implement many of the recommendations.

Scrutiny at Maidstone could not operate without the advice and expertise of our excellent scrutiny team of officers, who organise and service the committees at the highest level. Our sincere thanks go to them for all the work that they have done over the years.

Councillor Paulina Stockell  
Chairman - Corporate Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

# Overview and Scrutiny at Maidstone Borough Council

## Vision for Scrutiny

To have an effective and well respected service that ensures the council's services are delivered equitably, effectively and efficiently for our residents.



## Centre for Public Scrutiny Principles of Effective Scrutiny

1. Ensures scrutiny provides 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy-makers and decision makers
2. Enables the voice and concerns of the public and its communities
3. Drives improvement in public services
4. Is carried out by independent minded governors who lead and own the scrutiny role



Four Overview and Scrutiny Committees supported by 2.5 officers

## Overview and Scrutiny 2008-09 – A Summary

- 51 formal meetings
  - 53 councillors
  - 48 officers
- 55 external witnesses
  - 8 major reviews
  - 29 one-off topics
  - 5 working groups
    - 14 call-ins

## **Ensures scrutiny provides 'critical friend' challenge to executive policy-makers.**

This year, the call-in function has been used more than ever before, showing that scrutiny is prepared to challenge the executive, whilst the delivery of road safety, health services and community safety by both the council and external providers have all been challenged.

### **Companion Pass for Disabled Travellers**

Following a detailed and well-informed call-in meeting, the Regeneration & Sustainable Communities OSC recommended that that free companion passes be reintroduced to enable disabled residents requiring companions to make use of public transport – a reversal of the cabinet's original decision. This was subsequently agreed by cabinet, with the Leader highlighting the scrutiny meeting as an example of "scrutiny at its best".

### **Road Safety**



Scrutiny at Maidstone has never been afraid to look beyond the council and its powers when

challenging policy makers. The review of road safety looked at the roles of all agencies involved in promoting road safety. Internally the review has recommended that all essential users at the Council undertake an e-learning driver skills course. The group has also recommended that the legal blood alcohol level be reduced and that the police should be given powers to do on-the-spot breathalyser tests using intelligence.

### **CCTV**

Consideration of a call-in by the External OSC led to confirmation by the Cabinet that a decision on the CCTV control room would be deferred pending further investigations. This ensured that findings from the Best Value Review of CCTV, national best practice and concern amongst members over health and safety issues in the CCTV control room could be addressed satisfactorily.

### **Health**

In November 2008, the External OSC interviewed the Chief Executives of NHS West Kent and the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Primary Care Trust. Recommendations arising from the meeting focussed on the development of policy in relation to Pembury Hospital and maternity services.

## Enables the Voice and Concerns of the Public and Its Communities

This year has seen excellent public involvement in the scrutiny process, with a number of well-attended meetings held outside of the Town Hall, petitions, public speakers and strong press coverage.

### Corben Close



Residents of Corben Close and Beaver Road in Allington submitted a petition to scrutiny regarding the enforcement of a Section 106 Agreement. Over 30 residents attended the meeting to hear the Leader and officers explain the action taken in relation to the S106, and were pleased to hear that the council would act to adopt the land and that the play area would be maintained by the council with costs charged to the developer.

### Youth Scrutiny

The Youth Scrutiny Committee was made up of 13-17 year olds from the Youth Forum to investigate issues of concern to young people in Maidstone. The committee agreed to review sex and relationships education and interviewed a range of expert witnesses, from teachers to sexual health outreach workers. The report was presented by the youth



scrutiny members to full council and resulted in radio and local press coverage. The recommendations will be pursued in 2009-10 but a number of schools have already confirmed their intentions to implement many of the recommendations.

### Diverse Communities



During their investigation into community cohesion and the integration of ethnic minorities in the borough, members of the External OSC met with representatives of many of Maidstone's ethnic minority groups – even joining the Greek Community Group for lunch! The review has made recommendations to improve access to council services whilst recognising the vast amount of work carried out across the council to support all communities.

## Drives Improvement in Public Services

Overview and Scrutiny, in 2008-09, has impacted on the delivery of a number of public services in Maidstone. The committees have looked at a range of public services, plans and strategies and made recommendations for improvement.

### Section 106 Agreements and Planning Enforcement

The Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the council's approach to enforcing section 106 agreements and planning conditions. The committee held a workshop with parish councils to identify any problems and consider improvements that could be made to the present process, and as a result of the review, parish councils are now fully briefed on enforcement matters including confidential information.

### Public Conveniences



After residents' surveys and consultation exercises highlighted dissatisfaction with public

conveniences provided by the Council, the Environment and Leisure OSC decided to carry out an in-depth review. Councillors interviewed expert witnesses and carried out site visits to loos across the borough to make recommendations to improve the service offered to residents. The committee has recommended that the council operates and leads a community toilet scheme, phases out those toilets that are not used frequently and improves the public toilets in the borough's parks. If agreed, the committee's recommendations will save the council £160,300 per year from 2011/12.

### Review of Past Reports

A team of councillors has been reviewing scrutiny reports from the previous 8 years to identify outstanding recommendations, key achievements, and which reviews we can officially close. The group has identified that there have been significant achievements across a number of areas. This report will be available next municipal year.

### Litter

Following concern raised by members regarding the destruction of plastic litter bins due to arson, it was agreed that the purchase of plastic litter bins would cease and metal litter bins would be used instead.



## **Carried out by independent-minded governors who lead and own the scrutiny process**

Scrutiny in Maidstone has a national reputation for best practice and an integral part of this is the ownership members have of the scrutiny committees and the work they carry out.

### **Balance of Power**

After a councillor spotted a call for evidence for the Communities and Local Government Parliamentary Select Committee's review into the balance of power between central and local government, a cross-party scrutiny working group was set up to put forward evidence for the review. A range of officers and councillors was interviewed, and each working group member produced a case study for the report. Maidstone was the only district council asked to give evidence at a subsequent committee meeting, and was the only council represented by a scrutiny member. The Chairman of the Select Committee commented that the scrutiny approach to producing evidence was "a very interesting example" and that the "the Committee was very grateful [we] took this seriously".

### **Working Groups**

Member working groups have given councillors the opportunity to lead and own the scrutiny process by carrying out their own research and review work in small groups. Working groups have covered road safety, choice based lettings, mental health services, a review of past reports and the balance of power between central and local government.

### **Elections**

The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee has reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of whole and partial council elections in order to inform a decision of full council. When the report was presented to full council, it was agreed that the council should consult the public on the potential change, using the evidence within the report to inform that consultation.

### **Work Programme Setting**



This year for the first time we held a work programming workshop with all councillors to gather ideas for the scrutiny work programmes for 2008-09. Councillors had the opportunity to speak with officers and representatives of external organisations, as well as reviewing scrutiny suggestions from the public and community organisations. A full list of ideas put forward for reviews was researched by the scrutiny team prior to each committee agreeing its work programme for the year.



## Partnership Working

Maidstone Borough Council formed a scrutiny partnership with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council in April 2007. The management of the scrutiny function is shared between the two authorities. There are many benefits to sharing the service that equate to a better use of resources including:

- Shared scrutiny reviews – where support is pooled;
- Briefing papers – rather than duplicating resources briefing papers can be shared and adapted; and
- Shared scrutiny best practice.

The motto for the partnership is to achieve more together than we could alone - this has been the case for both councils, which led to the councils being "Highly Commended" in the "Best Use of Resources" category at the Centre for Public Scrutiny Awards 2008.



Above: The team is congratulated on Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells's award nomination by the Local Government Minister, John Healey MP.

### Joint Working at a Member and Officer Level

This year there have been several examples of joint working between the two authorities including work on road safety, member training events, a joint review of mental health services and joint chairmen's meetings.

The review of mental health services has been supported by the senior scrutiny officers at both councils with three members from each authority forming the working group. As the two councils cover the same health economy, it was felt to be helpful to carry out a joint review and has made working with the relevant service providers simpler and more productive.

Both councils conducted reviews of road safety during 2008-09 and rather than duplicate resources and effort, held a joint meeting to interview national experts and the police on road safety. The fact that the councils were working together added weight to the request for assistance from national experts and county-level partners, ensuring that key witnesses were involved in the reviews.



## Looking Forward

### 2009-10 Work Programme

The Overview and Scrutiny Function has now been in operation at Maidstone Borough Council for 8 years. The Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be taking the opportunity in 2009-10 to review how it operates to make sure it is working as effectively as it can and to ensure that Maidstone maintains its national reputation for best practice.

In addition to the review of the Overview and Scrutiny Function, major reviews for 2009-10 will include rail services in the borough, disabled facilities grants, contaminated land and involvement in the Best Value Review of Waste.

### Overview, Scrutiny and Policy

The staff restructure in February 2009 brought the Overview and Scrutiny and Policy and Performance teams together under one Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Manager. This has provided much stronger links between scrutiny, policy development and performance management, keeping overview and scrutiny at the forefront of the council's work.

### New Legislation

The "Councillor Call for Action" provisions within the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 have now come into force, giving *all* councillors the opportunity to bring an issue of local concern to scrutiny where all other avenues for resolution of that issue have been exhausted.

The sections within the Police and Justice Act 2006 relating to scrutiny also came into force in April 2009 and require an overview and scrutiny committee at every local authority to act as the "Crime and Disorder Committee" to scrutinise the work of the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. The External Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be carrying out this role for Maidstone and will look to scrutinise the Safer Maidstone Partnership around twice a year to ensure that it is operating effectively to make Maidstone's residents feel safer.

### Contacting Scrutiny

Any scrutiny member can ask for an issue to be placed on a scrutiny agenda if they feel that it needs looking into, and the scrutiny team always welcomes feedback and ideas to keep improving.

Members of the public, representatives of partner organisations, and groups from the public, private, voluntary and community sectors can also contribute to scrutiny reviews and suggest items for the work programme.

The team can be contacted at [osc@maidstone.gov.uk](mailto:osc@maidstone.gov.uk) or on 01622 602524, and more information and past reports are available at:

[www.digitalmaidstone.co.uk/osc](http://www.digitalmaidstone.co.uk/osc)