

ANNUAL REPORT

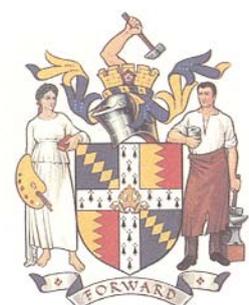
OF

**THE CHAIR OF THE CO-ORDINATING
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
COUNCILLOR ALISTAIR DOW**

TO

CITY COUNCIL

TUESDAY 6TH DECEMBER 2011



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Preface

I am delighted to introduce my sixth Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Annual Report. The report summarises Committee Members' work over the past twelve months and maps out issues for the forthcoming year. In particular, this report demonstrates where Scrutiny has contributed to the development of policy as well as service improvements. The annual report reflects the value of the work we all do and I am grateful to all who have played a part in it.

There have been a number of new additions to our strong team of O&S Chairmen. Cllr Anne Underwood has become the Chairman of Vulnerable Children's O&S Committee and we have been pleased to welcome Cllr Karen Hamilton's return to an O&S Chair role, this time as Chair of the Children's and Education O&S Committee. Cllr Robert Alden has taken on the Chairmanship of Equalities and Human Resources O&S Committee while Cllr Roger Harmer has taken on the mantle for Housing and Urban Renewal and Cllr Philip Parkin leads for Leisure, Sport and Culture.

Within this Report you will find examples of Scrutiny bringing influence to bear on a range of important issues from the economy to the lives of our young people; from improving the Council's relationship with customers of its services to searching for ways to meet local needs more quickly and sensitively. Working with partners in Birmingham – once an activity limited to the field of Health – has continued to strengthen through this past year. This enables more Members to develop relationships with the partner agencies, again bringing opportunities to represent the needs and aspirations of our constituents and influence the ways in which the partner organisations deliver their services.

We have sought to bring to City Council meetings some shorter reports dealing with more topical issues – such as safeguarding adults, preparing the housing service for the forthcoming winter, and corporate parenting of vulnerable children. These reports particularly highlight actions which elected Members personally can take to improve these services.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alistair Dow', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Alistair Dow

INTRODUCTION

Overview and Scrutiny

Local government consistently faces changes and challenges. In order to cope with these, local authority Members and managers have to decide: what needs to be done, how do we best cope under such pressures and deliver high quality services as well as improve value for money. In this respect, the role of Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) is to act as a critical friend to Cabinet by establishing and analysing Council performance across these areas. The focus of O&S is very much on strategic issues rather than day-to-day operations. Every scrutiny review suggests ways to improve how services are planned, delivered and managed whilst giving greater support to the Council's wider corporate objectives along with those of the Council's major partners.

O&S is also a powerful tool in supporting the Council's community leadership role, by reviewing matters of concern to communities, and giving an opportunity for local people and organisations to inform its work through petitions and representations to meetings. Members of O&S Committees work to promote an open and transparent City Council and drive for democratic accountability.

O&S balances ongoing overview through a number of committee workstreams with more specific or in-depth reviews which are reported to Council. Given Birmingham's size and interests, there is potentially so much that could be considered that we have to choose topics for both types of scrutiny work with care to ensure we are always contributing to Birmingham's top priorities. These continue to be generating recovery and sustainable growth, alongside delivering essential services, while managing the challenge of unprecedented savings requirements for local government resulting from increasing national debt pressures.

This report gives headlines of the work we have carried out during 2011 and what is currently underway. It is structured under the themes of: Responding to People's Concerns, Making the Most of Resources and New Ways of Working which have underpinned our work this year.

Overview of the year

O&S Committees have reported on eleven major inquiries during 2011. These have included: overviews with a primarily strategic focus considering plans which have yet to be implemented; reviews with more of an operational focus usually examining things that have happened and new style short reports intended to prompt Council debate. From these reports Scrutiny has made a total of 78 recommendations and other suggestions to City Council. In addition to their regular work programmes, nine reviews and overviews are currently underway across the O&S Committees.

Review recommendations are tracked for progress once they are accepted by City Council to ensure that the Executive is acting on the guidance given. Of the recommendations tracked this year, 57 were signed off as having been achieved, and 22 were achieved by the deadline given.

Occasionally Members have considered that there may be a case for asking the Executive to reconsider a specific decision via Call-In Requests. There have been 5 occasions this calendar year when an O&S Committee has considered whether a decision should be referred back. In only 1 of these 5 instances did the Committee decide to ask Cabinet Members to reassess their position.

While figures help to illustrate, in part, the quantity of scrutiny work undertaken by Members, they cannot convey the breadth of subjects considered or the depth of enquiries undertaken in scrutiny working. This report gives some specific examples of key investigations and approaches O&S Members have undertaken this year and the difference they have made.

RESPONDING TO PEOPLE'S CONCERNS

A wide range of scrutiny work has sought to respond to Members' and residents' concerns that, this year more than ever, Birmingham fulfils its responsibilities to provide the best quality services it can for those who need them most. At the same time scrutiny enquiries have met the parallel concerns of how the city can create the best conditions for sustainable growth and renewal.

Youth Services

In March 2011 the Children and Education O&S Committee received a petition expressing concerns about the future provision of Youth Services in the City signed by approximately 15,000 young people in the city. Our response has been to undertake a focused piece of work exploring the future remodelling of the service with a particular emphasis on considering the quality of the current and future consultation with young people.

The key questions being explored are:

- What is the role and purpose of the City Council's Youth Service in Birmingham and how will it be delivered in future, given the reduction in resources available?
- How does the service link up with and complement the youth activities provided by other organisations?

- How will young people be engaged and involved in the development and evolution of the service going forward?

As part of this project Members have carried out a series of visits to youth facilities across Birmingham where they have met both youth workers and young people. We have gained a valuable insight into the huge amount of work the service undertakes. Alongside this, a number of focus groups with young people are being conducted to explore what young people wish to see from the service. In addition, several evidence gathering sessions have been held to discuss the value of youth work with national academics, the local voluntary sector and other statutory organisations such as the police and schools. Our final report will be presented to City Council in spring 2012.

Health

A substantial concern, most associated with older adults but which also affects children and young people, is the problem of delayed transfers of care from hospital. It is not a new issue or unique to Birmingham, but it has been raised consistently by external agencies, including the Audit Commission and the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) as an area needing improvement in the city. The delays affect the quality of care and quality of life of a wide range of patients, including some of Birmingham's most vulnerable residents, and their carers. Setbacks in transfers also carry significant costs to the City Council and to the NHS. Ultimately minimising delayed transfers of care is fundamental to a person-centred approach to health and social care that treats individuals with dignity and respect as well as meeting their needs to secure the best outcomes possible.

Given the intractable nature of the problem, Members needed to make clear recommendations for improvement in planning and sharing learning and good practice. Health and Adults O&S Committee presented their report on Delayed Transfers of Care to Council in January 2011. This highlighted policy gaps where collective efforts can be better focused.

There has been much worry expressed by the public and by Birmingham Councillors about the most effective course of action to prevent the spread of tuberculosis. This was demonstrated by the motion to City Council in October 2010 and two petitions to Council (December 2010 and March 2011). Responding to these concerns, Members of the Health and Adults O&S Committee are currently undertaking a scrutiny review on TB in Birmingham which will be presented to City Council at its meeting in January 2012.

Committee Members have considered and influenced several city strategic consultations. A specific example of this work is the committee's engagement at various stages in the consultation on the move towards Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Trust gaining

Foundation Trust status. A response to the latest stage, making comments and suggestions on how the proposed governance arrangements might be improved, will be considered at our December meeting.

Patient concerns about nutrition in University Hospitals Birmingham (UHB) were raised with the Chairman of the Committee. As a result, the UHB Chief Nurse was invited to attend the Committee in April 2011 to respond to these concerns and explain the actions which were being taken to address them.

Safeguarding Adults

Birmingham City Council has the statutory lead role for safeguarding adults who are vulnerable to abuse within its area, but adult safeguarding is of concern to the whole community. Following extensive media coverage highlighting concerns about the treatment of older adults, Committee Members decided to take a new style of short, focused scrutiny report to City Council. We aimed to raise awareness and encourage all elected Members to be vigilant in identifying and reporting potential or suspected abuse of vulnerable adults. Care Quality Commission (CQC) staff were in attendance with leaflets, information and staff available to speak to Councillors. The Health and Adults O&S Committee was the first scrutiny committee to pilot this new style of report to Council. The report was not a review and did not make recommendations to the Executive, but instead highlighted an area of public concern and its key aspects to inform and engage all Councillors.

Vulnerable Children

Corporate Parenting is the term used to describe the responsibilities of a Local Authority relating to children in its care. All elected Members share a responsibility for Looked After children and young people and should ensure that the Council performs well, championing and promoting Looked After children and young people's rights. In Scrutiny we have sought to raise the profile of Corporate Parenting by examining how Members, Council staff and our partners can improve their commitment to supporting vulnerable young people. Following the success of the new style Safeguarding Adults report, Vulnerable Children's O&S Committee submitted a report on Corporate Parenting in the same style to City Council in November 2011. This focused on sharing key findings with Council in a timely way and promoting debate.

Community Safety

The Local Services Committee takes a close interest in issues of Community Safety with support from the West Midlands Police Authority given the huge impact crime and anti-social behaviour has on residents' lives. We have been closely involved in the development of the city's new alcohol strategy, led by the Drugs and Alcohol Action Team, following a recommendation from our 2010 Drugs and Alcohol Review, as well as examining the new

operating model of the Community Safety Partnership. Committee Members have been tracking the recommendations from their review of *Project Champion*, the West Midlands Police Counter Terrorism Initiative using Automatic Number Plate recognition (ANPR) cameras along with CCTV cameras. We have ensured that lessons learned in Birmingham have been considered by the Home Office. In addition we supported the introduction of a new Domestic Homicides Review process for local authorities to use when domestic violence regrettably ends in murder. However we are concerned about the lack of additional funding to support the Review procedure.

Customer Services

All Members spend considerable amounts of time dealing with constituents who have not received the service they desire from the City Council. Sometimes it has to be explained that they are not entitled to that. But sometimes something has gone wrong. While Scrutiny Committees cannot deal with individual complaints, we can and do look at how the City Council deals with its customers – the customer service function.

The Co-ordinating O&S Committee has now been undertaking a major inquiry for more than a year. We have been looking at some priority aspects of customer service to assess the degree to which the investment made through the business transformation programme is delivering improvements to service users. Members want to understand how the service looks to our customers – those who phone our customer contact centre to request a service or to report a problem. To begin with, we viewed the whole process, from customer contact centre to the “back offices” where requests for help are processed, from initial phone call by a customer to resolution.

We agreed an interim report in April 2011. The introduction of the contact centre, with an annual operating cost of nearly £11 million, had brought benefits in consistency, and improved standards for customers and in management information for the City Council. Customer satisfaction with how calls were handled and dealt with had risen from 59% before the business transformation programme to 95% in February this year. But the picture was not so good when we looked at the “end to end” service tracking – the period between a customer requesting a service through the contact centre to the customer actually receiving that service from a Directorate. There were numerous examples when this process had broken down, and a key customer service failing was that customers were often not being informed when things went wrong or were delayed. This was both exacerbated, and highlighted, by the extreme cold weather last winter.

From April we have continued the inquiry. New management is now in place for both the Customer Services function and the Customer First business transformation programme, and we are looking to see that these responsibilities are clearer than in the past. We are also considering the analysis of calls to the contact centre, to understand how many (and

what type) of “avoidable” calls are made. Speaking to both senior officers from relevant services areas and those within Customer Services, we are seeking to identify where the blockages are and how they can be resolved.

Most recently we have considered a summary of an external report, commissioned by the Deputy Leader from the consultants Grant Thornton. Their conclusions bear a strong similarity to our own findings. We eagerly anticipate the Deputy Leader’s promised action plan responding to the report.

Housing

As an example of a specific area of customer service of concern to both City Councillors and residents, in early 2011 a written question was raised at Council to the Chair of the Housing and Urban Renewal Overview and Scrutiny Committee expressing concern about the number of heating and hot water systems that had failed in tenants’ homes during the winter cold snap. The Committee was asked to explore the reasons for the problems and what could be done to resolve them.

From late November 2010 through to January 2011, snow was on the ground in Birmingham and at its worst, night time temperatures in the city were between minus 12C and minus 18C. This extreme weather event led to BCC’s Contact Centre and repairs contractors receiving an unprecedented number of calls for assistance because heating systems failed as they froze and pipes burst when they thawed.

Although Committee Members have monitored regularly the overall performance of repairs and maintenance contractors in recent months, we have specifically focused on exploring the range of solutions proposed for resolving the problems faced last winter. This included actions taken to move or lag the external condensing pipes on the boilers and to improve communications between the Contact Centre and repairs contractors to ensure that customers do not have to make repeat calls to progress chase their repair requests.

Committee Members agreed that all Councillors should be informed about what has been done to ensure that plans are in place to respond to an increase in demand over this winter period and a report was presented to Council on the 1st November by the Committee Chairman, Cllr Roger Harmer. Councillors are now equipped with the knowledge of what to expect from services and who to contact if problems arise again. We will continue to monitor performance and tenant satisfaction in this area.

We have also responded to people’s concerns about rising energy prices by examining the issue of fuel poverty. Members felt that it was important to examine this given its wide-

ranging implications on both mental and physical health and the need for partners to work together to respond effectively. National Energy Action and Birmingham Social Housing Partnership were engaged in the Committee's discussions and shared best practice with both Council officers and Members.

Growth and Sustainability

The majority of people's concerns relate to day-to-day life or to the immediate future. But they also have views – and worries – about the longer term future, and whether they can have confidence in the plans of the City Council and key partners for the future of Birmingham. An important part of our work consists of probing these plans and considering the aims for the city in 2026 (as the end point of the city's current Sustainable Community Strategy).

Early in the municipal year, the Co-ordinating O&S Committee holds separate sessions to hear from the Leader, the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive. These allow Members to discuss matters directly with the City Council's senior postholders, and to hold them to account for their decisions.

Not surprisingly, given the world economic situation, much of the discussions this year concerned the economy, and also sustainability. Birmingham has clear ambitions for the "green" agenda, and initiatives such as Combined Heat and Power, electric vehicles and Birmingham Energy Savers promise important economic benefits as well as environmental gains.

But our strategic concern regarding sustainability and climate change, which we brought to the Deputy Leader's attention, is that the City Council does not have good information to assess whether, and to what degree, it is making progress towards its stated goals in this area. We will be pursuing this issue early in 2012.

With the formation of the Local Economic Partnership, progress on capital projects such as New Street Station, and the prospect of further initiatives such as the Enterprise Zone and High Speed 2, the City Council and its partners are undoubtedly pursuing economic growth with some energy. The Co-ordinating O&S Committee wishes to be certain that strategic policy here is up-to-date and coherent, and again will be pursuing this early in the New Year. In the meantime, other Committees have been looking at related issues in more detail.

Planning Strategy

An example of where we have looked at specific strategy in more detail and reflected a range of concerns is through the oversight Members of the Transport, Environment and Regeneration O&S Committee have of planning strategy (though not of individual planning decisions). Input into the Core Strategy is fundamental to this role as the Core Strategy will set out a clear spatial framework for the growth of Birmingham up to 2028. The strategy will set out how much new housing should be provided in the city and identify the general locations for this. It will also identify the key sites for employment provision, and for other activities, such as shopping, waste management, leisure and sport, education and health in order to support the city's growing population.

We helped to shape the draft Core Strategy both before and after it went out to public consultation. As a result, provisions to strengthen the protection of employment land (within Government guidelines) and to ensure the right mix of housing in the city will be included.

Supporting the Recovery

Access to employment continues to be a central concern for Birmingham's citizens. The Transport, Environment and Regeneration O&S Committee commenced the in-depth Scrutiny Review of Supporting the Recovery in 2010. This Review has assisted the Council in responding to businesses and people's concerns as it explored how the City Council could encourage private investment in Birmingham to increase employment.

Review evidence showed that Birmingham has adapted better to the industrial changes of the last 30 years than most of our West Midland counterparts with Birmingham having a strong total Gross Value Added (GVA) of £30,182 million in 2008 and a GVA per head of £19,802 which is close to the national average. However our main findings were that the city has a major weakness in its relatively low skills levels, particularly amongst the long term unemployed. There was also a need to engender a collaborative and supportive environment that enables business to grow, including access to business support.

The business support landscape is rapidly changing as part of Government reforms. Therefore it was recognised that the City Council needed to set up a single point of contact to provide greater clarity to businesses on where they can go to for advice and assistance. Also by the City Council working with Marketing Birmingham, information would be made available about living and working in Birmingham, for businesses to use in their own promotional/recruitment campaigns. This, together with new means being established for regular discussions with major heads of businesses and senior personnel within the Council, will facilitate the sharing of information and the ability to exploit opportunities to expand local employment.

We have also addressed issues around the need for: high quality infrastructure to enable business to grow; access to good housing and cultural activities, among others, that mean a good quality of life for employees and ensure Birmingham continues to be viewed as a place to do business. While access to finance for businesses continues to be a problem, increasing publicity of the finance opportunities available from Finance Birmingham should greatly assist some businesses.

MAKING THE MOST OF RESOURCES

Reflecting the challenges already outlined, difficult decisions continue to be taken with regard to council services and how necessary savings can be made. Scrutiny committees have focused on ensuring that these decisions are: sound, based on appropriate impact assessment, communicated clearly and will realise the benefits identified.

Controlling the City Council's Spending

In March this year the City Council agreed its business plan and budget. This was a controversial and difficult budget, requiring as it did savings of £212.8 million on previous plans to accommodate both reductions in resources and budget pressures.

In taking this decision, the Council recognised some key risks to keeping within budget. These are varied, ranging from the possibility that planned savings did not arise to the possible effects of unforeseen budget pressures, from equal pay liabilities to the affordability of the Council's borrowing.

The Finance O&S Committee has played a key role in ensuring that the Council's budget is being adhered to, through the regular consideration and questioning of the overall revenue position each month. We are not the only such mechanism, but through involving a wider group of Members we complement the work of the Executive, led by the Cabinet Member for Finance.

Income Generation

We need to be sure that the City Council is controlling its expenditure, but it also needs to take opportunities to raise income. The Finance O&S Committee has looked in detail at the £47 million of income from rents on property (apart from Council housing) and also £58 million coming in from fees and charges in those areas where the City Council has discretion to set the charging level.

Having considered a quantity of very specific information, we were satisfied with the standards operated by Birmingham Property Services regarding the land and property

which they manage. In particular they obtain a good rate of return on the commercial portfolio. A surprising finding was the size of the income from room and facilities hire (excluding schools) - £3m p.a. The rates and hiring procedures are set locally by service areas with little guidance, and there are risks that users could establish property rights through long-standing, fairly informal arrangements.

We were able to consider and comment on draft revisions to the corporate charging policy. The Cabinet Member for Finance has subsequently agreed the new policy. We support its principles, and will be looking to check how it is being implemented in practice.

Pressure on Primary School Places

With the increase in birth rates across the city, there has been a growing pressure for additional primary school places. The City Council has a statutory duty to provide each child with a school place, but there are too few suitable sites available to create new schools in the areas of greatest demand for additional places. There is no funding available from government to acquire land for this purpose, so the only other option is that existing schools are expanded.

As a result of concerns raised about the impact of creating these larger primary schools, the Children and Education O&S Committee decided to explore both the pressures and challenges that arise from this rapid expansion of primary schools in the city. The review explored in detail not only the impact on the existing physical space available within these schools but also the implications for workforce remodelling and for the senior leadership teams within the schools. In particular, we wanted to assess what support needs to be in place to help the children adjust to the “larger” school environment and how any concerns raised by parents and the wider community have been resolved.

In undertaking this review, we wrote to all of the primary schools included in the current phase of the expansion programme to establish their concerns. In addition we issued an invitation to all City Councillors to highlight any local matters on the topic that had been brought to their attention. A call for evidence was issued in the press to seek parents’ views and a series of six targeted visits were organised to a selection of the primary schools affected by the programme. A visit was also undertaken to a school that had already increased its pupil intake, so we could speak directly to school staff, governors and pupils about the impact of expansion on them. Finally, the Committee held evidence hearings to explore their findings with range of officers within relevant City Council Strategic Directorates.

We did not find any conclusive evidence from looking at research that the size of a school is a determining factor in success, indeed most research points to the quality of school leadership as being the most important issue. Members found that careful thought needs to be given to ensuring that parents and local Members as well as residents living near a school are engaged and informed about expansion plans as early as possible and as they progress. Ultimately some conflicts of interest will arise, such as those caused by the increased congestion experienced by local residents near the school, as a larger number of parents seek to drop off and pick up their children each day. Creative solutions to mitigate some of these impacts need to be identified.

Targeted Support for Children's Critical Social Care Services

The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is a shared assessment and planning framework for use across all children's services for identifying a child's level of need, how to meet that need and crucially to better co-ordinate multi agency support and shared understanding. The scrutiny review report *Everyone's Business* presented to City Council in April 2011 clearly articulated the pivotal role of the CAF in the new model of children's services and the urgent need to strengthen the overstretched central CAF team.

Review evidence highlighted the many benefits to: individual professionals, agencies, children, young people and their families which would follow from embedding the CAF process in Birmingham. Significantly, the review identified that using the CAF process can result in significant long-term financial savings. Since the publication of the report the CAF team has secured additional recurring funding which has enabled the recruitment of additional staff. This will allow increased support to be offered to frontline staff in dealing with the CAF process and, for the first time, the CAF team will be able to offer administrative support in arranging the first multi-agency planning meetings.

Impact of Housing Benefit Changes

The Committee continues to be concerned about provision for homelessness and vulnerable people. We have been exploring the impact of Housing Benefit changes on the Council and individuals as a Focused Inquiry. The Committee has been examining ways in which the Council works to prevent homelessness. With colleagues from the Vulnerable Children's O&S Committee, Members have visited the Young People's Hub, which supports young people at risk of homelessness. This is an innovative facility, combining the services of a third sector organisation (St Basil's) and the Council's children's services and housing services. Members had the opportunity to listen to the experiences of the young people who use the service and identify ways in which services could be aligned to improve support and reduce duplication.

Leisure Services

With the current emphasis on Council efficiencies, the Leisure, Sport and Culture O&S Committee is looking at key service areas within the portfolio in more detail. Each session is an opportunity for Members to consider the overall health of the service, the prospects for achieving saving targets and the opportunities for income maximisation.

However, the sessions also looked at alternative ways of delivering services. For example, the City Council's policy on community asset transfer has been considered, resulting in some suggestions for more effective delivery in the future. Museums, libraries, parks and sports and leisure facilities are some of the services that are involved in exploring these issues with us.

Destination Birmingham: Birmingham, A Music City

Earlier this year UK Music published *Destination: Music* – the first study of its kind to scope the economic contribution of music festivals and major concerts to tourism throughout the UK. The aim of the research was to understand the huge financial contribution made by music tourists to the economy, thought to be at least £864 million in the UK, and to put in place a strategy to increase overseas visitor numbers. Following the impetus of this report, the Leisure, Sport and Culture O&S Committee is undertaking an in-depth piece of work to look at the role of popular music in improving perceptions of Birmingham to attract visitors and specifically what role the City Council could play in developing this. We have also been keen to understand the importance of music in promoting a sense of place to residents in the city, including looking at its musical heritage.

This is not an area where the City Council has much direct influence, so the review group of Committee Members have heard from a number of different external groups and organisations involved in making and promoting music. The report will make recommendations as to how the City Council can best promote Birmingham as a city of music by using its influence and position to support the independent music industry.

Council Staffing

Given the anticipated changes in the City Council's workforce headcount, the Equalities and Human Resources O&S Committee has continued to focus on staffing this year, in order to ensure that the workforce meets the necessary requirements of directorates, without exceeding available budget and is a balanced representation of the people the Council serves. Members continue to receive a regular workforce profile update, which tracks the number of people employed, including starters and leavers, alongside diversity information such as gender, age and ethnicity. To complement this, the Committee has brought in line its other reports relating to the workforce, such as consultancy use, and more recently, voluntary redundancy figures, to ensure that as full a picture as possible is presented.

One issue which has been raised regularly by the Committee is that of the use of agency workers, with Members seeking to ensure two outcomes: that vacancies which would normally be filled by agency workers are being prioritised for those Council employees who are at risk of redundancy and that staffing budgets are not exceeded as a result of hiring agency staff. We received an overview of a newly developed process which aims to create greater control over the appointment of agency workers and monitor more closely levels of spend and types of vacancies which are being filled. Members also learnt about the Agency Workers Directive which has recently come into force and the effect this will have on the organisation. As a result of this, it is anticipated that the Committee will continue to examine the use of agency staff in the coming year.

Council Sickness Absence

In April of this year the Equalities and Human Resources O&S Committee presented the findings of its investigation into sickness absence. This review considered how much more the City Council is able to do to deliver realistic and sustained reductions in its staff sickness absence levels, given concerns that high levels of absence are likely to result in deteriorations in service delivery and quality. Work has built upon scrutiny already undertaken as part of the Executive's Joint Priority Review on sickness absence. Through evidence gathering, we met with a range of officers, including HR professionals and managers in directorates, to discuss the challenges the organisation faces and how these could be addressed.

We concluded that whilst it is inevitable that people will become ill and need to take time away from work, the City Council should rightly expect high levels of attendance from its employees and needs to strengthen its corporate position to support that. Our recommendations therefore focused on how managers can be further supported in their efforts to reduce sickness absence and how a more detailed picture of absence can be developed, from which appropriate interventions can be introduced. In particular, we hope to see the development of area-specific targets, which take into consideration the complexities of particular services, and provide a realistic goal for absence reduction. Tracking of these recommendations has now begun, in order for the Committee to check whether progress is being made. Any further areas of concern will be addressed in the coming year.

NEW WAYS OF WORKING AND NEW PARTNERSHIPS

As has been highlighted already, the depth of the current, national budget deficit has created new demands and pressures on local government requiring fundamental changes in working. With such changes there are clearly risks - sometimes significant risks.

Capacity to manage these successfully is dependent on the Council developing new partnerships to maintain its resilience, strategic approach and ability to innovate. Over the last year, Scrutiny work has highlighted key challenges and opportunities from many of these changes and the implications of related policy proposals. Members have debated a range of topics. Where possible we have invited those working across the city, whether businesses, community organisations or other partners of the City Council, to present their thoughts on what is happening in their areas of expertise and what the perceived pressures and possible solutions are in the current climate. Involving external partners and organisations more widely in scrutiny debate has proved to be a success this year, and will be an increasing feature of scrutiny work throughout the coming year.

We also took part in the City Council's formal procedure for assessing the governance arrangements for partnerships. This was designed in the previous decade, at the height of the Audit Commission's inspection regime. This experience showed us that, while the procedure appeared rational and comprehensive, it was over-bureaucratic and used too much officer and Member time to little effect. We are pleased that the Deputy Leader, through his officers, is searching for a sharper, less cumbersome process here.

Addressing Worklessness

Support for addressing skills and worklessness issues, alongside assistance for business advisory services, has changed considerably over the last year. Not only has there been a drastic reduction in dedicated resources, but the architecture of services has also been transformed. Government structures have changed dramatically (with the introduction of the Work Programme for the Long Term Unemployed) and the City Council, with the ending of the Working Neighbourhoods Fund in April 2011, no longer receives direct funding to tackle worklessness.

The Transport, Environment and Regeneration O&S Committee is considering the role the City Council should play in this new landscape. The Chair and Members of the Committee have met with: Work Programme and European Social Fund Providers, Skills Support Leads and senior representatives of Colleges across the West Midlands. We support the setting up of a provider forum to support these organisations in their objectives and to link them with City Council and Local Enterprise Partnership priorities. The aim is to ensure that the unemployed are able to access the right avenues to gain the necessary skills to find sustainable employment. The Committee is also considering the work of the Employment Access Team and the operation of the City Council's procurement processes, to ensure these are aligned to improving skills and employment opportunities for Birmingham's citizens.

Neighbourhood Management

Members of Local Services O&S Committee have been concerned with the impact of the loss of the Working Neighbourhoods Fund on Neighbourhood Management and presented a report on Neighbourhood Management to City Council in June 2011. Recommendations focused on embedding the good practice which has been developed across the city, including many successes in strengthening partnership working within the most deprived areas and associated improvements in services to residents. We are pleased that the Cabinet Member is committed to developing a sustainable approach to neighbourhood working based on mainstream working with partner agencies.

The Committee continues to be interested in sustainable local working. A report had been submitted previously as part of the Cabinet Committee 'Achieving Excellence with Communities' consultation on localism and localisation. Following the Cabinet Committee's confirmation in February 2011 that wards and constituencies were to remain key units of governance, we agreed to revisit this issue. It was felt that as the financial pressures, both on the council and its partners, are unprecedented it was essential to consider how locality working can be resourced sustainably. Relationships with partners, the third sector and residents are important elements of this and the report will consider local budgets, service delivery, and community engagement.

Supporting Birmingham's Voluntary and Community Sector

The work of the Coordinating O&S Committee has this year emphasised the value of bringing external partners and organisations into debate and helping shape the priorities for the Council and city as a whole. For example, Members, in examining the overall picture of growth and stability in the city, have looked at the impact of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). Birmingham Centre for Voluntary Action leads were invited to meet Members to provide an overview of the current state of the sector and to highlight what works well in the sector's relationship with the Council, as well as what can be improved. We have also ensured that Council officers with responsibility for the overall partnership framework with the VCS were included in this debate. Members were able to hear directly that the sector would like to see a move towards commissioning instead of procuring and that in the city currently, there has been a high level of spontaneous voluntary assistance yet the placement rate for volunteers has dropped. The overall discussion substantiated the need for more certainty, for clearer information to voluntary organisations particularly around cuts, and for more trusting partnership arrangements.

Most recently the Chairman of Health and Adults O&S Committee has met with the Chief Executive and project leads from Birmingham Centre for Voluntary Action to be updated on progress on their role as new host for Birmingham's Local Involvement Network and co-ordinator of the transition from LINK to HealthWatch.

A Budget for Birmingham

Third sector representatives are also involved in the exercise looking at the “Budget for Birmingham” – the idea (also referred to as “community budgets”) that the £7 billion spent by local public sector agencies in Birmingham every year would be more effective if those bodies could work more closely together. Through the BeBirmingham partnership, partners in the city are working not only together, but also with central government in taking this forward.

Representatives from the Police Authority, the voluntary sector and the private sector have joined a group of Members from the Co-ordinating O&S Committee to see what progress partners in Birmingham are making here. Whilst the idea sounds simple, there are all sorts of factors to overcome – stemming from the law, from financing, from different accountabilities as well as the culture of each partner organisation.

In the summer, we came to some initial conclusions and shared them with the Deputy Leader. The fundamental point is that, if partners are to work more co-operatively and determinedly to reach particular outcomes – such as those encapsulated in the phrase “cleaner, greener and safer” – then they need to agree a common, simple policy statement. Budgets can then be related to each policy objective, and that will provide the basis for looking at better use of the money spent across the partners. We have been assured that such a policy statement – which BeBirmingham has been preparing – would soon be presented to the City Council for formal agreement.

More recently, we heard from the Cabinet Member for Finance about his work encouraging finance executives in the partner organisations to work together to increase the value for money obtained from every public sector pound spent in Birmingham. We intend to hear from the partners on this. Our other concern is to ensure that in the important pilot exercises taking place in the city – such as the Families with Complex Needs pilot in Shard End – local Members, communities and voluntary organisations have a strong input in addition to the professionals.

Highways Partnership with Amey plc

One of the most significant, newly-established partnerships the City Council has is with Amey plc. The City Council entered into an agreement for the highway maintenance and management services in June 2010. The project is worth £2.7 billion over 25 years and gives Amey the responsibility for managing and maintaining all carriageways, footways and associated highway assets in Birmingham.

There are a number of benefits to this approach: as a result of this collaboration, over £350 million will be invested in rehabilitating the city’s highway infrastructure over five years. This work will provide local employment and support local supply chains. Some elements of the

project are particularly innovative, for example the use of LED street lighting which will reduce both costs and energy consumption.

However, it is a new way of working for the City Council in respect of highways. This necessitates the building and strengthening of key relationships. Members of the Transport, Environment and Regeneration O&S Committee have explored issues around communication and consultation, both with Councillors and the public. We have also reviewed the new approach to asset management and its implications. Our conclusions and recommendations will be published in the New Year.

Developing links with Private Sector and Other Social Landlords

Members are keen to explore how the Private Rented Sector and other Social Landlords work with the Council to provide residents within the city with a good choice of high quality affordable housing in this City. There is a huge demand for housing in the City and the Committee therefore wishes to ensure that all partners are working together effectively. The Committee is also scrutinising the impact and use of the new Home Options scheme and the Council's Housing Allocation Policy in terms of its contribution to this broad agenda.

Work with Trades Unions

The Equalities and Human Resources O&S Committee's contribution to assessing the value of partnerships and ways of working with other organisations has been through a review of how the City Council works with Trades Unions. We assessed how the Council ensures that the relationship is strong, effective, provides value for money, meets legal requirement and is of benefit to all involved. A wide range of officers and partners was involved in this review, including Trade Union representatives, HR professionals, Strategic Directors and external organisations. Given the nature of the topic, we also felt it important to engage with the wider workforce, both Union members and non-members, to discover how they view how the Council and Unions work together and support them in their day-to-day work. From a sample of council buildings, Members received over 300 responses which showed an overall support for Trades Unions, but raised some concerns which both the Trade Unions and the Council need to address. Overall, there was no doubt that those within the City Council recognised and valued the contribution Trades Unions are bringing to the workplace.

The recommendations proposed in the report are to encourage debate between the two parties – the City Council and the Trades Unions – on areas which Members believe could ensure stronger, more efficient partnership working and increase the benefits to those involved. We anticipate progress reports on recommendations early in 2012.

Developing Health links

In addition to recent work with BVSC, Health and Adults O&S Committee has been undertaking work around the radical planned changes to health structures and commissioning, with the City Council gaining new responsibilities for Public Health, as detailed in the 2011 Health and Social Care Bill. All of the main recommendations Committee made during summer 2010 in their consideration of the Health White Paper appear to have been reflected in the Bill and associated guidance. Moreover Committee Members have been building a relationship with the Care Quality Commission (CQC), both formally by inviting staff to attend Committee sessions and through informal meetings.

We have also liaised with the Regional Quality Observatory and other local authorities. The workshop aim was to share learning from other local authorities and to consider how best to address quality assurance through the work programme of the committee.

Community and Sport – A Cricket Case Study

In May 2011 the Leisure, Sport & Culture O&S Committee presented a report to the Cabinet Member on the issue of sports participation in priority areas in Birmingham. Using cricket as a case study, the report highlighted the need to increase the low level of sport and recreation taken in the city to improve mental and physical health and to create safer and stronger communities. Sport England and the Birmingham Sport & Physical Activity Partnership are working with the City Council to increase participation by children, young people and communities in physical activity.

The report noted the crucial role of community organisations in sports provision including their role as partners in developing new ways of managing playing pitches owned by the Council. The creation of initiatives such as Community Sports Hubs will be particularly important here. Also, we have asked that Birmingham Sport and Physical Activity Partnership work with the Birmingham Parks Cricket League to investigate the possibility of increasing the number of clubs formed from keen, informal players. Committee Members were updated on progress made against the report's recommended actions at their November 2011 meeting.

Work with Young People

Safeguarding children and promoting their welfare is one of our key statutory responsibilities. The term is used in this context to mean both child protection services and other activities designed to make children safer at home, at school and in their communities. It will never be possible to protect every child from harm or to be certain that things will never go wrong. However councils, with their partners, have a responsibility to do their utmost to ensure that the way they work is designed to achieve the best possible outcomes for the children they serve. All Councillors carry a general responsibility for safeguarding children.

On 13 October 2011 Members of the Vulnerable Children's O&S Committee attended an event to explore safeguarding and what it means to young people which included representatives from the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board and young people from a variety of groups and schools, notably Voice is Power (Birmingham Children and Young People's Parliament) and the Children in Care Council. The exercise included a session in the Council House, a visit to a youth service project and an 'open dialogue event' at Ladywood Youth Centre. Scrutiny staff will continue to work with young people from these organisations to explore the best ways for Scrutiny to support safeguarding and to share young people's perspectives on safeguarding with City Councillors.

Committee Members were invited to attend a Children in Care Council debate which took place in the Council Chamber on 27 October 2011. This was a first for the City Council and we hope it marks the start of increased engagement with the Children in Care Council in the future. Linked to this, the Committee's October meeting focused on fostering and, for the first time, Foster Carers were in attendance to discuss their experiences of caring with Members.

LOOKING AHEAD

Over the next few months, we plan to bring a number of major reports to the Council Chamber for Members to debate and decide. These include the conclusions of our inquiries into the Highways Private Finance Initiative and into Resourcing Devolution; into the role of popular music in improving perceptions of Birmingham and into the role and purpose of the City Council's Youth Service.

Other issues will undoubtedly arise which demand Scrutiny attention; for example, as this report was being put together, Cllr Jerry Evans has been fashioning the terms of reference for a review of the Municipal Waste Strategy, whilst Cllr Fergus Robinson, responding to issues raised by Members in full Council, has announced that the Finance O&S Committee will take evidence on the conduct of bailiffs used by the City Council.

In the longer term, new legislation and policy changes, whether led by central government or the City Council, will require us to reconsider both the subjects and the methods of our Scrutiny work. Examples include:

- the moves towards a commissioning Council, and legislative changes to increase the number of service providers – such as Academies – will involve forging new Scrutiny relationships;

- the Police and Social Responsibility Act 2011 introduces not only directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners, but also Police and Crime Panels – one Panel for each Police Force area – to hold the Commissioner to account. We will need to find ways so that the scrutiny of crime and disorder issues – conducted by Cllr Summerfield and the Local Services and Community Safety O&S Committee – can be related to the work of the Panel; and also consider how elected Members in future can resolve local policing problems;
- the Localism Act 2011 famously promotes the concept of elected Mayors, and foreshadows referenda on the subject in Birmingham and other large cities. The Government sees other provisions in the Act as removing current constraints on Scrutiny, allowing Members more scope to inquire and investigate matters affecting the quality of life in the city;
- the Health and Social Care Bill will substantially alter the arrangements for health care in England and create Health and Wellbeing Boards answerable to local authorities. The Bill also provides greater flexibility for local authorities to carry out scrutiny of the local health service as Members see fit.

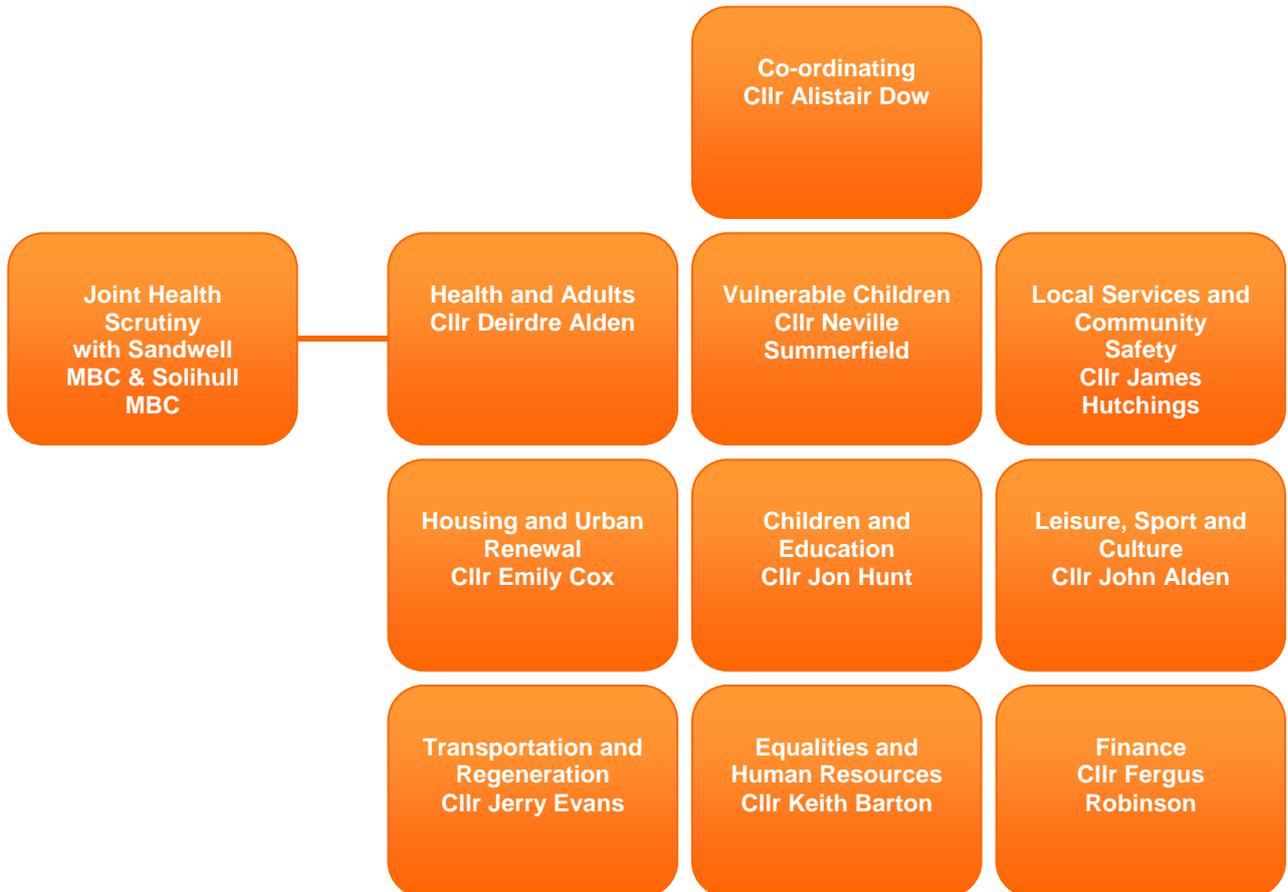
Whether changes will affect particular service areas or democratic governance underpinning all policy, O&S Committees will be helping to shape debate around them and assess their local impact. As prescriptive requirements and direct monitoring of local authorities by central government continue to decrease along with local government grant funding, strong local accountability mechanisms, such as the work of Overview and Scrutiny Members are increasingly important. At a time when partnership working and commissioning is now the norm, the need for local government's new partnerships to be accountable is also clear. O&S Members fulfil a unique role in considering in-depth these often complex arrangements and bringing additional perspectives to the Council's considerations. While the framework for our work continues to change, we are single-minded in our efforts to reflect concerns, to challenge and to improve services for the residents we represent.

MOTION

That the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2011 be received.

Appendices

Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Chairmen January – May 2011



Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Chairmen

May – December 2011

