

Democratic Renewal
**South Derbyshire
District Council**

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DISTRICT AUDIT

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Introduction

The Local Government Act 2000 requires Councils to adopt new decision-making, scrutiny and ethical arrangements and sets out four possible forms of political management that are designed to facilitate more open and accountable governance:

- Mayor and Cabinet
- Mayor and Council Manager
- Leader and Cabinet
- Alternative Arrangements

The fourth option above, sometimes referred to as a 'streamlined committee system', is only available to Shire District Councils with populations below 85 000. Central to all four options is the new requirement for effective overview and scrutiny arrangements.

South Derbyshire District Council opted for the streamlined committee system and implemented its new political management arrangements in interim form in July 2001. These comprise 3 Policy Committees, 2 Scrutiny Committees, an Overview Committee, 2 Regulatory Committees and a Standards Committee. The Council is planning to formally operate the new arrangements from May 2002.

Between January and March 2002 District Audit undertook an overview of the Council's new arrangements and this report contains our findings and recommendations from that study.

Background

Democratic renewal represents a major challenge and a significant risk to local government in England and Wales. Along with Best Value, it forms an integral part of the Government's modernising agenda and requires local authorities to undergo significant cultural and organisational change. Key themes of this agenda are:

- new decision making systems
- separation of decision-making and Overview/Scrutiny functions
- greater openness and accountability for decision-making
- new responsibility to promote and lead improvements in economic, social and environmental well being
- new ethical framework including new Codes of Conduct for members and officers
- new mechanisms for improving services through Best Value
- changes to the way in which elections are held, designed to improve turnout
- financial reforms designed to give local authorities greater financial autonomy

All the modernising initiatives are inter-linked. For example:

- without effective political decision-making systems, it is unlikely that authorities will be able to deliver Best Value. If the democratic process is not aligned with corporate priorities and underpinned by effective corporate governance systems, the authority will not be operating effectively
- the strengthened ethical framework will help to ensure that the new powers which members gain in the new structures are not abused

- many of the initiatives share a common goal of making local authorities more outward looking, whether through greater electoral turnout, participation of stakeholders in Best Value reviews, more accountable decision-making or the new community leadership role.

Scope and audit approach

We have examined the Council's new political management arrangements including the new constitution, decision making, overview & scrutiny, member support and working relationships. We have also carried out an overview of arrangements for implementing the new ethical framework, and have briefly reviewed the response to the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel (on members' allowances). We have not looked at the publicity requirements regarding members' allowances.

We have carried out this audit by:

- Reviewing various documents, such as the constitution and committee minutes
- Observing meetings of Community Services Committee, the Scrutiny and Overview Committees and full Council
- Speaking to the Leader and the Chair of Corporate Scrutiny Committee
- Speaking to the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Legal & Member Services Manager, Policy Manager and the Senior Member Services Officer
- Sending a questionnaire to all members and senior managers

We would like to thank all the members and officers who participated in this work and for the help and courtesy extended to us, particularly in attending meetings.

In this report we make some comments regarding the constitution. Please note that these comments are not legal opinions and they should not be relied upon as an assurance that the constitution complies with all legal requirements. The Council retains the responsibility to ensure that its political arrangements and constitution comply with the law and should take such steps it thinks fit to satisfy itself that this is the case. The involvement of District Audit in this review is without prejudice to our responsibilities and duties as auditors in the event that an issue affecting the accounts should arise.

Main conclusions

The Council has responded positively to the modernisation agenda by introducing its new arrangements in interim form prior to their formal adoption, planned for May 2002. This is enabling the Council to 'learn by doing'.

We are very impressed by the extent of innovation in developing the overview & scrutiny function. There is much to commend here and we would encourage the Council to continue to build on these foundations.

There is perhaps some way to go in developing a more streamlined decision-making process. The Council needs to think about developing more of a strategic, policy-orientated role for the Policy Committees.

The Council is currently reviewing its new political management arrangements. We would encourage the Council to continue with this reflective approach, and from time to time ask itself: "How are we doing?".

Findings and recommendations

Decision-making

1. There are three decision-making Policy Committees, namely Finance & Management Committee, Environmental Services Committee and Community Services Committee. Taking into account the additional regulatory and overview & scrutiny committees, the Council now has more committees, with more meetings, than before it introduced the streamlined committee structure. This said, members are broadly positive in their views of the new Policy Committee structure – 82%, for example, believe that the Policy Committees are operating effectively. Senior officers are more equivocal in their views – only 50% take the view that the Policy Committees operate effectively. As to whether decision-making is now more streamlined, most senior officers say it isn't and only a small majority of members (55%) say it is.
2. The Policy Committees are operating very much in a traditional committee style, often with very weighty and full agendas. Some of the agenda items could more appropriately be delegated. There is at present a pressure to transact the business and this reduces the opportunity for members to concentrate on policy-orientated issues. We are of course conscious that it takes time to become accustomed to new ways of working and that traditional approaches can be comfortable for both members and officers. We are also sensitive to the context of the recent financial crisis and the caution felt towards more delegation, however we would encourage the Council to give this area careful thought.
It is interesting to note that a majority of members feel that Policy Committees should concentrate more on key, strategic issues, although most also feel that the right balance has been struck between decisions made at Committee and decisions delegated to officers. All of the officers who returned questionnaires took the view that Policy Committees should be more strategic in focus and most felt that the balance on delegations is not right.
3. The Council needs to ask itself the questions: Is the new structure providing clear and accountable leadership? Will the arrangements facilitate the new community leadership role? These issues will of course be relevant to the whole structure, but decision-making is a key part. We note that the Leader is a full member of all Policy Committees, in line with statutory guidance. Most members take the view that the public are clear about who is responsible and accountable for decisions. Members are less convinced that the new structure will make the Council more accessible to the public. 59% of members, and only 40% of senior officers, think that the new structure will enable the Council to develop an effective community leadership role.
4. A brief summary of all decisions at Policy Committees is published, usually by the following day, and distributed to all members. This seems to be working well. The Council is aiming to put all minutes (back 6 years) on to its Intranet, although we note that not all members have ready access to an 'on-line' PC.
5. There is much to commend in the way that the Council goes about consulting on setting its budget. The approach includes significant consultation with the Overview and Scrutiny Committees and with the District's 6 Area Meetings, and is helping to nurture a more transparent, inclusive and consultative culture.
6. Some additional observations regarding the Policy Committee processes:

- members at Policy Committees sit within their named seats in the Council Chamber. This makes for a rather formal, and perhaps adversarial, atmosphere. The Committees may wish to give some thought to seating arrangements
 - it was commented to us that reports to Policy Committees might, where appropriate, usefully contain options for decision, rather than just a single recommendation
 - there is a standing slot on Policy Committee agendas for items from Overview & Scrutiny Committees, which facilitates communication/reporting, and we commend this.
7. The Council is currently setting up a regular meeting of the Corporate Management Team, the Leader, Deputy Leader, and Policy and Regulatory Committee Chairs, to be held every 4 weeks. These meetings will provide an opportunity for discussing strategic issues and nurturing a corporate approach to Council strategy. We see this as a positive step. The Council will need to be clear about how this arrangement links to the political management structures and will also need to ensure that the process is a transparent one.

Recommendations

R1. Review the scheme of delegations

R2. Review the reporting arrangements for Policy Committees

Role of Full Council

8. There are regular presentations at full Council from external stakeholders (e.g. the Probation Service, the Youth Information Shop). This external focus will help to facilitate the new ways of working, however in most respects full Council continues to operate in a traditional way, with a full agenda of business. Statutory guidance encourages authorities operating the streamlined committee system to think about how the role of full Council could be changed, in particular with regard to:
- allowing more debate on the policy framework
 - enabling more open and informed debate on reports from overview and scrutiny, and
 - encouraging public participation in the Council meeting.

Recommendation

R3. Review the ways in which full Council operates

Overview and Scrutiny

9. There are 2 Scrutiny Committees (Community Scrutiny and Corporate Scrutiny) and 1 Overview Committee. They are all politically balanced and meet in public. The Overview Committee comprises the Chair and Vice-Chair plus 1 opposition member from each Scrutiny Committee. The Overview Committee members do not sit on any Policy Committees, i.e. they are 'dedicated scrutineers', and this accords with statutory guidance. The principle of members not scrutinising their own decision is clearly understood, and this is catered for by ensuring no corresponding membership between a Policy Committee and its Scrutiny Committee. The terms of reference and rules of proceedings for the committees are set out clearly in the constitution. The Overview Committee takes an oversight role and co-ordinates the workplans of the 2 Scrutiny Committees.
10. We are very impressed with the ways in which the overview & scrutiny role is being developed at South Derbyshire. There is a lot to commend here, for example:

- developing clear, rolling workplans for the Scrutiny Committees covering Progress in Best Value reviews, the Policy framework, Special Projects (e.g. abandoned vehicles, 'How green is the Council?') and Responsive Issues. These provide a structured, focused approach and are followed through with an action plan.
 - some excellent work is being done by the Scrutiny Committees in examining and reporting on sensitive and thorny issues (e.g. on the Sheltered Housing proposals and on the way forward with public toilets) and they are adding value in the process
 - Scrutiny members are writing and presenting their own reports to Policy Committees
 - visits by Scrutiny Committees to departments to meet staff and gain a first-hand perspective
 - members of the Scrutiny Committees are engaged in the work of their committees, e.g. in contributing to the workplans
11. The Scrutiny Committees have a role in monitoring the progress of Best Value reviews and Best Value action plans. The Scrutiny Committees do not take part in the reviews themselves. The thinking behind this is clear – to ensure that Policy Committees and officers own and take responsibility for service delivery and improvement. The Scrutiny Committees carry out their questioning of officers in a non-confrontational and constructive way, helped by the 'round-the-table' seating and small committee size. The officers know in advance when they will be attending because of the rolling committee workplans. This approach is bearing fruit in other ways, for example officers are inviting the Scrutiny Committees to visit their sections and to date the committees have visited the Planning section and the Depot. Most senior officers are clear about the roles of scrutiny, however we would note that a sizeable minority of senior officers (40%) don't think that scrutiny is helping them to work more effectively.
 12. Scrutiny Committees have not yet developed the scrutiny of other aspects of Council performance, such as progress with Service Plans. This needs to be given some thought, in liaison with the Leadership and the Policy Committees to ensure that there is a coherent, corporate approach to monitoring and managing performance. There are practical considerations here, e.g. bearing in mind the number of Service Plans, how will the Scrutiny Committees prioritise and focus their workplans? We note that Scrutiny Committee Chairs observe at Policy Committee meetings and this facilitates communication and co-ordination.
 13. A majority of members and senior officers (a slightly smaller majority in the case of officers) believe that the Scrutiny Committees are proving effective in holding decision-makers to account. Most members and senior officers also think that the Scrutiny Committees have struck the right balance between challenge and consensus. We have seen only limited evidence of Policy Committees being called to account and we think that the Council needs to give some thought to how decision-making members can, appropriately, be held to account. We acknowledge the particular nature of Alternative Arrangements, where the decision-making committees conduct their business in public and are politically balanced, however one of the fundamental roles of the new overview & scrutiny function is to be effective in holding decision-makers to account and this needs to be adapted in a meaningful and constructive way to include members in a streamlined committee system.
 14. There have been some good and effective examples of Scrutiny engaging with external stakeholders, such as discussing the exit strategy on the Swadlincote Woodlands Forest Park with the Chair of the Regeneration Board, and consultation with tenants on the review of the Sheltered Housing proposals. The Scrutiny Committees are also being proactive in thinking about the scrutiny of wider issues affecting the District, such as health - the

Community Scrutiny Committee is planning to start liaison shortly with the County on health scrutiny.

This said, we think it is fair to comment that the focus so far has been on developing and embedding the new ways of working for the Scrutiny Committee members – trying to walk before running. This approach makes sense, however we would encourage the Scrutiny Committees to start to ask themselves: “how can we build on our progress and develop a more outward-looking focus?”.

15. The overview & scrutiny function is an entirely new role for Councils, and is a big change for both members and officers. The Council recognises that nurturing this change is a process. We would commend the ‘learning by doing’ approach being taken at South Derbyshire, e.g. in developing new ways of looking at issues such as the ‘How Green is the Council’ project which has involved a video presentation, a brainstorming session and a planned visit to another authority. It also helps that scrutiny members are researching and writing their own reports.
16. There is some indication that other members of the Council are a bit disengaged from overview & scrutiny, with some asking, “Who decides the scrutiny agenda?”. A sizeable minority (35%) of members indicated in the questionnaire that they were not clear about the roles of scrutiny and how it relates to the rest of the Council. Notwithstanding that most senior officers returning the questionnaire said they were clear about the roles of scrutiny, there is some evidence of lack of clarity among officers.
17. Overview & scrutiny is being well supported, in the main by the Policy Manager and her team. Most members think that reports to Scrutiny are clear, concise and are appropriate for the scrutiny role. We understand that the Council may move, in time, to having policy support provided more by service managers. This should help to share ownership and engage managers more in the scrutiny process.
18. We have not seen any evidence of conflicts of interest for officers in supporting the decision-making and scrutiny arms, perhaps largely because Overview & Scrutiny is working with the grain of decision-making and because of the ‘softer’ nature of Alternative Arrangements. The Council will need to keep this under review and be sensitive to the potential for conflicts.
19. There is provision in the constitution for the call-in of Policy Committee decisions, and this includes measures designed to minimise the risk of call-in being abused. Call-ins are dealt with by the Overview Committee and to date there has been 1 call-in, relating to pension fund monies. A particular learning-point from this was the need to close the loop back to the Policy Committee.

Called-in decisions may be referred to full council if they are outside the budget and policy frameworks, but otherwise they can only be referred back to the Policy Committee if the original decision is in breach of the principles of decision making set out in Article 12 of the constitution. This latter rule has been taken from the government’s modular constitution. The argument was made to us that under Alternative Arrangements call-in provisions are less relevant, bearing in mind that decisions are made at politically balanced committees. We understand this point but would also question whether the current rules fetter the scrutiny function. The real test for call-in is to ensure that it is used appropriately and is not abused.
20. Overview & Scrutiny does not appear to be operating in a party political way. The questionnaire returns showed that members and officers strongly share this view. Indeed, when observing the Overview Committee it was not possible to tell which member was from

which party. There is also a requirement in the constitution for relevant party whips to be declared at Scrutiny meetings.

- 21. The Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Scrutiny are all from the majority group and we note that statutory guidance suggests that authorities should consider whether members outside of the majority group should chair some or all of their scrutiny committees. We would comment that the Overview & Scrutiny Committees are presently working constructively and in a non-party political way.

Recommendations
R4. Review how performance can be effectively scrutinised
R5. Review the ways in which Scrutiny operates to hold the Policy Committees to account
R6. Review the ways in which Scrutiny operates, to further develop an outward-looking focus
R7. Ensure that officers and all members are clear about the roles and operation of Scrutiny
R8. Review the call-in rules

Area forums

- 22. The District has 6 Area Meetings, which have been in operation since 1997. They are based on the County electoral divisions and include District Councillors, the County Councillor and Parish representation. They meet 4 times a year. Their purpose is consultative and they do not have any decision-making or expenditure powers.

Quasi-judicial functions

- 23. There are 2 regulatory Committees – Development Control and Appeals & Licensing. The principle that individual regulatory decisions (such as planning applications) should not be subject to scrutiny by the Overview & Scrutiny Committees is clearly understood by scrutiny members, however the constitution does not say anything on this point. It may be helpful to set this principle out clearly in the constitution.

Recommendation
R9. Clarify, in the constitution, the rules governing the scrutiny of regulatory decisions

New Ethical Framework

- 24. The Council has established a Standards Committee, comprising 3 Council members (including the Chair of Council, who also Chairs the Committee), 3 members independent of the Council and 2 Parish members. The appointment of the Parish members was organised in association with the Derbyshire Association of Local Councils (DALC). Members of the Standards Committee attended training at Amber Valley DC in January 2002. At its meeting on 19 December 2001 the Committee agreed a workplan to take it through to July 2002. This accords with government guidance, which encourages Standards Committees to be proactive in setting out their workplans.
- 25. In addition to the Parish representation on the Standards Committee, the Council has worked to engage the Parishes in the new framework:
 - training for Parishes on the Code of Conduct was organised in association with DALC on 19 February 2002 and another session is planned

- the Legal & Member Services Manager has written on a number of occasions to the Parish clerks, unfortunately with limited response
 - the Parishes were invited to comment on the Code of Conduct
 - Parishes receive copies of all Standards Committee agendas
26. The Council adopted its Members' Code of Conduct on 21 March 2002, well within the 6-month deadline set by statute. This is the national model Code applicable to authorities operating alternative arrangements, but also incorporates provisions relating to overview & scrutiny (which were accidentally omitted from the model code). The Code will be applied to any co-opted members. Training for all SDDC members on the new Code of Conduct was held on 26 February 2002, unfortunately not all members attended. It will be important that all members clearly understand their obligations under the new ethical arrangements.
- We understand the Council is planning to ensure that members sign up to the new Code of Conduct within 2 months of its adoption and that members' interests will be registered within 28 days of adoption (as required by statute). The Standards Committee was advised in January 2002 that the IT section were ready to proceed with work on a database for the register.
27. There are currently vacancies within the Council's legal team, including the Legal & Member Services Manager post. These come at an unfortunate time, when the Council is introducing some key governance arrangements. Steps have been taken to reallocate certain responsibilities (e.g. the Deputy Chief Executive is deputy Monitoring Officer, and legal support will be bought in from the County). The Council needs to ensure that it adequately manages the next steps in implementing its ethical arrangements.
28. It is perhaps too early to say whether the new ethical arrangements are working effectively. The Council is putting the basic infrastructure in place and it will need to ensure that these arrangements are understood and owned by all members. We would also comment that there is likely to be a resource impact on the Monitoring Officer role, particularly in respect of the Parish responsibilities, e.g. in maintaining the register of interests.

Recommendations

R10. The Council must ensure that it adequately manages the next phase in implementing its ethical arrangements

R11. Ensure that all members are clear about their obligations under the new ethical arrangements

R12. It is important that the operational effectiveness of the new ethical arrangements is not unduly constrained by inadequate resourcing.

Other matters

29. The report of the Council's Independent Remuneration Panel (regarding members' allowances) was published in October 2001. Consideration of the report by Council was put back pending discussions between the Leader of the Council, Leader of the Opposition, Chair of Development Control Committee and the Panel to discuss points of clarification. The Council resolved to adopt its new scheme of members' allowances (to take effect in May 2002) at the Council meeting on 31 January 2002. The Panel's recommendation regarding the basic allowance was accepted. The special responsibility allowances adopted by Council differ slightly from the Panel's recommendations.

Rationales for the adopted scheme are set out in the minutes of Council from 31 January, although no argument is recorded for the proposal to increase special responsibility

allowances by 3.5%, rather than the average of 1.89% recommended by the Panel. It would be helpful, to aid transparency, if the rationale for this had been set out.

30. We note that the Council has been 'learning-by-doing' with its new arrangements, and there is much to commend in this approach. The Council does need to ensure, however, that this is complemented where necessary with appropriate training.
31. The Council has a constitution for its new political structures. The constitution is not quite complete and the following items will need to be included:
- details of members of the various committees and bodies
 - rules governing the conduct and proceedings for the Policy Committees, Standards Committee and Joint Arrangements (NB. the terms of reference of the Joint Arrangements may also need to be included)
 - scheme of delegations
 - code of conduct for employees (when published)
 - members' code of conduct
 - description of the members' register of interests and procedures for publicising, maintaining and updating the register
 - protocol for officer/member relations
 - rules governing the recruitment, appointment, dismissal and disciplinary action for officers
 - rules and procedures in respect of legal proceedings
 - protocol on monitoring and review of the constitution
 - the standing orders
 - update the details of the members' scheme of allowances (when applicable).

Recommendations

R13. Ensure that members and officers have the necessary knowledge and skills to enable them to carry out their roles effectively

R14. Ensure that the constitution is complete

Questionnaire analysis

Members' questionnaire

Questionnaires were sent to all **34** members of the Council. **22** questionnaires were returned, representing a return rate of **65%**. 16 of the replies were from Labour group members and 6 were from Conservative group members.

Members were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements and the results are shown below. The percentage figures in the brackets are the proportion of all those replying who gave that answer. The percentages have been rounded up or down to give a whole figure and avoid decimal points.

In the main report, where we have referred to the proportion of members holding a particular view, we have grouped together the figures for Strongly Agree/Agree and Disagree/Strongly Disagree. For example, in the report we say that 82% of members believe that Policy Committees are operating effectively - this is made up of the 3 who Strongly Agree with this statement and the 15 who Agree with it, giving a total of 18 members, representing 82% of the returned questionnaires.

We have provided below the written comments made by members returning the questionnaire.

Table 1 – Members' data

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not answered
Decision-making					
1. Decision-making at SDDC is open and transparent	6 (27%)	10 (45%)	6 (27%)	0	0
2. It is clear to members of the public who is responsible and accountable for decisions	3 (14%)	11 (50%)	8 (36%)	0	0
3. The role of the Policy Committees is clear	4 (18%)	16 (73%)	2 (9%)	0	0
4. The Policy Committees are operating effectively	3 (14%)	15 (68%)	4 (18%)	0	0
5. Decision-making is now more streamlined	2 (9%)	10 (45%)	8 (36%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)
6. Policy Committees should concentrate more on key, strategic issues	6 (27%)	9 (41%)	4 (18%)	1 (5%)	2 (9%)
7. We have got the right balance between decisions made at Policy Committee and decisions delegated to officers	1 (5%)	13 (59%)	7 (32%)	0	1 (5%)

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not answered
8. Reports to Policy Committees are clear, concise and provide the information members need to take decisions	1 (5%)	13 (59%)	7 (32%)	1 (5%)	0
Overview & Scrutiny					
9. I am clear about the roles of Scrutiny and how it relates to the rest of the Council	5 (23%)	7 (32%)	8 (36%)	0	2 (9%)
10. The Scrutiny Committees are operating effectively	4 (18%)	9 (41%)	5 (23%)	1 (5%)	3 (14%)
11. The Overview & Scrutiny Committees are proving effective in holding decision-makers to account	3 (14%)	11 (50%)	3 (14%)	1 (5%)	4 (18%)
12. The Scrutiny Committees have struck the right balance between challenge and consensus	1 (5%)	12 (55%)	5 (23%)	0	4 (18%)
13. The Scrutiny Committees operate free of undue party political influence	4 (18%)	12 (55%)	3 (14%)	0	3 (14%)
14. Reports to Scrutiny are clear, concise and appropriate for the scrutiny role	1 (5%)	13 (59%)	6 (27%)	0	2 (9%)
General					
15. The new system makes it easier for members to consider wider issues, which cut across a number of service areas	1 (5%)	12 (55%)	8 (36%)	1 (5%)	0
16. The new structure will help the public understand the work we do and make the Council more accessible	2 (9%)	9 (41%)	9 (41%)	2 (9%)	0
17. The new structure will enable the Council to develop an effective Community Leadership role	3 (14%)	10 (45%)	7 (32%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)
Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly	Not

				Disagree	answered
18. I am clear and confident about my roles in the new structure	5 (23%)	9 (41%)	8 (36%)	0	0
19. I have received adequate training and support to carry out my roles in the new structure	4 (18%)	13 (59%)	5 (23%)	0	0

Members also made a variety of written comments in the questionnaire replies:

Decision-making

"The operating effectiveness (of Policy Committees) has become more apparent since the restructuring, and where they are not effective these are being addressed, and are in the minority. Also the services provided are being improved and updated through closer scrutiny by committees and Scrutiny".

(Decision-making is) "open, but community are not flocking to meetings".

Regarding the balance on delegation:

"Policy committees are operating effectively in their current role. It is the role of Policy Committees which need to be developed and more emphasis placed on policy development, whilst still fulfilling a decision-making role. It follows that delegated powers to officers needs also to be developed".

"The Council has a policy direction on delegation which has been agreed and signed up to by all the Council. It is not, however, "written in stone", but currently appears adequate and strikes the "correct" balance".

"My disagreement (with the statement regarding the balance on delegation) is only slight: I feel that delegation arrangements could be improved and it is up to members of individual committees to suggest ways of doing this".

"We still have too many minor items on (Policy) committee agendas that should be delegated to Chair/V-Chair or officers, where policy is clear".

"In my opinion members rely too much on officer delegation".

Regarding reports to Policy Committees:

"Not all officers' reports are as yet concise as they could be - especially on financial matters, but matters have improved considerably over last 7 years".

"Contentious issues and items likely to create disquiet should be highlighted"

"Many reports are unnecessarily verbose".

Other comments:

"As a member of the minority group I am pleased that SDDC can (and has) adopted the 4th option which ensures that politically balanced committees are the policy groups for the Council".

"We have far too many working parties and sub-groups. Although recommendations made by the sub-groups come back to the main committee for ratification, those members who have not been part of the sub-group may not be fully informed of the details of some issues".

"I do not feel modernisation of Council is altogether a good idea".

Overview & Scrutiny

"The Overview & Scrutiny function is new to members (and officers) and as such is still evolving. Various scrutiny functions have been tested and Policy Committees now recognise the role scrutiny can play in aiding the decision-making and policy development roles".

"I think it is simply still too early to make a firm judgement, hence my disagreement" (with the statement that scrutiny has struck the right balance between challenge and consensus).

"To operate effectively will take time".

"My knowledge of committees where I don't have a seat is not very great. I do find that, being in the minority party, a lot of decisions are taken in group discussions and we are told at a later date which I find very frustrating".

"I find this section difficult to complete. I think scrutiny take action before policy committee finalises decisions, therefore usurping policy committee. I thought scrutiny was to double-check on doubtful decisions. I also thought that Council was the supreme body".

"I don't think scrutiny fits well with a committee system. It seems somewhat superfluous to me".

"The Conservative group asked for the Chair of at least one of the scrutiny or overview committees. Nevertheless the 4/2 party split works amicably and everyone is consulted and listened to. However, as yet no 'party' problem has arisen. The question of party whip has been evaded and no declarations made".

"It is a pity that the majority group on the Council cannot bring themselves to allow opposition members to chair scrutiny committees, in spite of advice in that direction from government".

Regarding reports to overview & scrutiny

"The wording of reports that come before the Corporate Scrutiny Committee are often written in fashionable 'office language' and not plain English".

"Reports are in office-speak, not English"

"Most scrutiny reports do not seem to be available to other members prior to committee and are not circulated afterwards".

General

On whether the new structure will make the Council more accessible to the public

"The new arrangements will not necessarily engage the general public any more than the previous arrangements. The basic Council structure is the same but the addition of scrutiny gives members an opportunity for acquiring more detailed information to assist decision-making and to have an input into monitoring Best Value and plans and strategies".

"The Council has always had public meetings. There are now fewer meetings for the public to attend. Therefore, they have less opportunity to observe the Council at work".

"The public will see no change".