

## Overview and Scrutiny



# Annual Report 2010/11

For further information contact:  
Josh Mynott  
Committee support Team Leader  
[josh.mynott@lancashire.gov.uk](mailto:josh.mynott@lancashire.gov.uk)  
01772534580



## **Foreword**

This last year has seen scrutiny in Lancashire undergo the biggest change in its 10 year history, with a restructure leading to the creation of three new committees in an entirely new way of doing things.

This has presented some real challenges to all of those involved in scrutiny, but, as this report shows, those challenges have been met and scrutiny in Lancashire has produced some really excellent pieces of work, demonstrating the importance of what it does.

In these challenging economic times, making sure that there is an effective critical friend working with decision makers is more important than ever. Our work with the NHS, utilities companies, the police and the council's own leaders has shown that there is a genuine constructive challenge from scrutiny, and, just as important, a real willingness by those being scrutinised to be subjected to questions and to take account of the views of the people elected to serve their communities.

I would like to thank all of those, both the scrutineers and the scrutinised, who have made this year another successful year,

County Councillor John Shedwick  
Chair, Scrutiny Committee

## Introduction

In May 2010, new scrutiny arrangements were introduced in Lancashire. The previous structure, with four service-based committees co-ordinated by a Management Committee, was replaced with a model of 3 separate committees: Scrutiny, Health Scrutiny and Education Scrutiny.

The changes were driven by the desire to create a more efficient and effective scrutiny function, focussed much more on the fundamental principle of holding decision makers to account, and dispensing with the reports "to note" or "for information" that had occupied too much of the agendas in the previous structure.

As with any major changes, there has been concern that a reduced number of formal committee meetings would reduce the effectiveness of scrutiny. However, a key guiding principle has been that "scrutiny is not measured by volume" – the important thing is not how many meetings, but the quality of those meetings and the impact they have on services. The high quality work done by small groups of members working intensively on a single issue via task groups also continued, and examples are included in this report

This report assesses the effectiveness of scrutiny in Lancashire in 2010-11, with case studies highlighting some of the achievements, in particular

focussing on whether scrutiny has met the objective of holding the key decision makers in Lancashire to account.

### **Chairs and deputies of the committees 2010 - 2011**

#### **Scrutiny Committee**

Chair – County Councillor John  
Shedwick

Deputy chair – County Councillor  
Kevin Ellard

#### **Health Scrutiny Committee**

Chair – County Councillor Maggie  
Skilling

Deputy Chair – County Councillor  
Keith Bailey

#### **Education Scrutiny Committee**

Chair – County Councillor Clive  
Grunshaw

Deputy Chair – County Councillor Pat  
Case

## Scrutiny committee

The Scrutiny Committee's remit is an extremely wide one.

The key to the effectiveness of the committee has been in careful and robust work planning. Many issues come to the attention of the committee, but it is only by careful selection of those issues, particularly taking account of where scrutiny can make a difference, that the impact of scrutiny can be truly felt.

One issue which had a significant impact was the report produced by scrutiny on Young People and Employability. Usual practice is to present reports just to the individual cabinet members responsible for the issue at stake. On this occasion, scrutiny members felt that it was an issue of such importance that it should be presented to a meeting of the full cabinet. This was the first time that this had happened, and indicated a willingness in scrutiny to have its voice heard, as well as a willingness of cabinet to listen. The report itself was positively received, and work is ongoing to meet its recommendations.

In October 2010, the Scrutiny Committee received a report on winter maintenance, reporting on performance in the previous year and plans for the coming year. Although it was originally intended as a one off report, scrutiny members recognised that this was an issue of major public concern, and so decided that there

should be a series of reports outlining preparations for the year ahead. Particular focus was on communications and working in partnership with districts, parishes and local people in a position to help such as farmers, and all of these things become important parts of the strategy for 2011.

The interest and influence of scrutiny extends beyond services provided by the county council itself. A major piece of work for the committee this year, which will extend into the next year, has been to look at the work of the utility companies in Lancashire. A meeting in February had representatives from United Utilities and Electricity North West. Topics under discussion included street lighting, last summer's hosepipe ban, and roadworks. Further work is planned on some of the issues in 2011/12. As well as demonstrating a willingness to address the real issues that affect people's day to day lives, this also showed how scrutiny was prepared to tackle other organisations, and also, crucially, how those other organisations recognised the value of participating fully in the scrutiny process. Both United Utilities and Electricity North West willingly submitted themselves to tough examination by elected representatives, gaining value from hearing the views of the public reflected by members. That willingness is both testimony to the value of scrutiny and reflects very positively on the companies themselves.

One of the first actions of the new committee in June 2010 was to hear a "Call In" request on the decision to close a number of Household Waste Recycling Centres in Lancashire. Representations were heard from district and parish councillors and members of the public at the meeting. Largely based on the findings of extensive scrutiny work on the issue in the previous year, the committee decided that the cabinet member should not be asked to reconsider (the "Call In"), but not before the decision had been subjected to a full and thorough challenge.

The committee is also the council's statutory crime and disorder committee, and this year its work on this area focussed on alcohol and drug misuse, reoffending rates, anti-social behaviour, and domestic violence. Representatives from the Police Service and the Police Authority attended to respond to the committee's questions. Significant work was also begun looking at arts and cultural issues, likely to lead to a full task group review of some of the issues in 2011/12

#### **Task Group – Museums**

This task group looked at the Museums service, and how to improve access and public use. The task group particularly looked at increasing the use of our museums by people with disabilities and from black and minority ethnic communities, as well as considering geographical reach and charging policies. The task group visited several major museums in Lancashire and beyond to compare the way services were offered. Many great examples of best practice were found, and the recommendations focussed on raising the profile of the service, making it more consistent and increasing the potential for commercial returns from our museums.

## Health Scrutiny Committee

Perhaps the most important power held by scrutiny is the power it has to refer decisions about major changes to the health service to the Secretary of State for Health for independent review. Until 2010/11, scrutiny at Lancashire County Council had not used this power since it was first granted in 2001. In 2010/11, the power was used not once, but twice. The first was the final stages of the "Meeting Patients' Needs" changes in east Lancashire, particularly the closure of the Deerplay children's ward in Burnley. The second was the decision to close the Wesham rehabilitation unit in Fylde. Although both of these referrals were subsequently not referred for full independent review by the Secretary of State, clear messages were sent to the NHS about the need to engage and consult as the programmes progress.

"Meeting Patients' Needs" (MPN) is a longstanding review of hospital services in east Lancashire, and has been one of the biggest reviews of its kind in the country. The review has come before scrutiny several times, but it was the closure of a children's ward in Burnley, one of the final pieces of the 4 year programme, that caused concern. Serious and lengthy debates were held, involving some of the most senior health service figures in the North West, before the committee finally took the decision that an independent review was necessary. This was obviously a step welcomed by many, especially in Burnley, but

even those in the health service promoting the MPN programme welcomed the fairness and thoroughness of the scrutiny process.

The Wesham unit was very different. This was a decision made and implemented very quickly by the Blackpool Wyre and Fylde Hospital Trust. The committee responded in equally quick time in giving the issue time on the agenda for proper consideration.

Both cases show how Lancashire County Council scrutiny is prepared to take firm action where it is required. The NHS is obviously undergoing massive changes at the moment with the proposed reforms and many trusts having to find financial savings. The committee has clearly demonstrated its determination not to let these changes affect the quality of patient care and the outcomes for members of the public, nor to become distracted away from those fundamental principles, whilst at the same time ensuring that members stay fully up to speed with the significant changes and challenges ahead.

### **Task Group – Safeguarding Adults**

This investigation looked at procedures in place to safeguard vulnerable adults and how partners could work better together to deliver joint outcomes. The Task Group concluded that whilst there were comprehensive systems in place to enable a thorough investigation of suspected instances of neglect or abuse there needed to be a consistent approach amongst partners with regard to the definition of a 'vulnerable adult' and also that central government should give consideration to putting the responsibility of ensuring the safeguarding of adults on a statutory footing, as is the case with children.

### **Education Scrutiny Committee**

In 2010/11, the Education Scrutiny Committee has focussed on the significant developments in education being introduced by the government, and the impact on Lancashire children. In particular, the question of academies has been subject to careful scrutiny, and the committee has also made time to examine the impact of the proposals for children with Special Educational Needs and how that will affect children and schools in Lancashire.

In October 2010, the committee considered a "Call In" request on the decision to introduce a parental contribution to costs of transport to denominational schools. Representations were heard from

parents, governors and headteachers, as well as from the cabinet member. After lengthy and detailed debate, the committee decided that the policy should not be reconsidered by the cabinet member.

### **Budget 2011-2014**

In 2010, Lancashire County Council took an unprecedented and unique step in setting its budget. Like all local authorities, Lancashire was faced with having to deliver services with greatly reduced resources. Recognising that dealing with the situation would require more than a simple one year plan, Lancashire decided to set a budget for three years, allowing everyone to see how Lancashire would manage its budget in the longer term and plan and adjust accordingly.

As in every other year, the initial proposals from cabinet were presented to scrutiny. All three committees were involved in questioning every single cabinet member, some of them twice, to hear the proposals explained, to challenge and to make recommendations back. This was a significant task, and, given the scale of the challenge, represented only the beginning. Scrutiny has committed to actively monitoring the budget over the next three years to make sure the decisions being made are the right ones for Lancashire.



## Partnership working

Lancashire County Council continues to lead the Lancashire Scrutiny Partners Forum (LSPF), a regular meeting of scrutiny members and officers to discuss best practice, developments in scrutiny, share ideas, and crucially share workplans and seek opportunities for joint work.

Through the LSPF, Lancashire has sought input from district councils into several pieces of work, including its crime and disorder scrutiny and the task group on Looked After Children, and has also participated in a joint review led by Blackpool into alcohol pricing.

In June 2010, Lancashire County Council's Scrutiny Manager was invited to lead a workshop on scrutiny in the current economic climate at the Centre for Public Scrutiny annual conference. The feedback was extremely positive, with the session being described as the most popular one of the entire two days of the conference. The expertise of scrutiny officers in Lancashire plays an important part in helping councillors deliver really strong scrutiny.

## Looking Ahead

The next year promises to be another very challenging one for scrutiny, as it will be for councils generally. The financial situation means councils face

increasing pressure to deliver services with a greatly reduced budget. The role of scrutiny in this will continue to be absolutely vital, subjecting decisions to challenge and bringing the voice of the public into the debate.

Again, this is not just about Lancashire County Council. The NHS is undergoing major reorganisation, and scrutiny will need to adapt to the new arrangements to make sure it continues to play a vital part in protecting services. Education Scrutiny has already looked at the impact of academies and free schools, and with these programmes likely to grow in the future, it will continue to be essential that the committee plays its part in ensuring the highest educational standards for Lancashire children.

Changes to the way the police are overseen will also impact on scrutiny, in terms of its current statutory duty to scrutinise crime and disorder partnerships. Whatever the arrangements in future, it is clear that an issue of such public concern must continue to be a priority for scrutiny.

The Localism Bill currently on its way through parliament may also have a significant impact. It seeks, amongst many other things, to bring all existing scrutiny legislation together in one place. This is an extremely welcome step, and it is hoped that the chance will also be taken to iron out one or two anomalies that have arisen over the years, mainly in those areas where legalisation concerning scrutiny has been introduced from different government departments.

Scrutiny itself must demonstrate value for money, both in its recommendations and in the way it works. Joint working opportunities with other councils will continue to be actively sought through the LSPF. A major training event is currently being planned for July 2011 involving all councils in Lancashire, delivering the training that is needed at a fraction of the cost of sending councillors to courses all over the country.

## **Conclusions**

Scrutiny in Lancashire is effective. Its main task – to hold to account the decision makers – has been amply demonstrated this year. The reduction in the number of scrutiny committees made in 2010 has encouraged a focus on this key purpose, and also on the key issues. Reports “to note” or “for information” are increasingly a thing of the past in Lancashire scrutiny,

meaning that time is spent on things that actually make a difference.

The reduction in the number of committees and meetings also appears to have helped scrutiny members demonstrate their ability to influence, and increased their determination to have their voice heard. This is partly because the work scrutiny is now doing is more obviously meaningful, but it is also a sign that there is a group of members who are committed to the principles of scrutiny and it showing off the work it does. It is also clear that decision makers in Lancashire want to engage with scrutiny, and are willing to be challenged. Cabinet members, senior council officers, NHS Chief Executives, the most senior police officers, even people from private companies such as the utilities have all shown commendable willingness to be openly challenged, and crucially, scrutiny in Lancashire has shown the capacity and ability to do it, and to do it well.