Measuring the effectiveness of scrutiny in Herts through outcomes and the impact on residents

By David Andrews and Seamus Quilty | 15 March 2019

In Hertfordshire, we pride ourselves on the independence of scrutiny. We have created a culture which allows scrutiny to operate effectively, with councillors from all parties being given an equal voice.

As with all large authorities – Hertfordshire has a population of 1.2m people – we are making thousands of important decisions a year, so scrutiny plays an integral role.

We have two scrutiny committees – overview and scrutiny committee which deals with the eight council portfolios, and health scrutiny committee which covers the NHS organisations that operate in the county. Each committee is challenged to be proactive, curious and forensic. But our methods are not set in stone and are refined to ensure the process works as effectively as possible. As one of the committee chairmen, I am always looking to innovate and evolve what we do – seeking feedback from councillors, Cabinet and external officers to develop scrutiny going forward.

Our individual committees’ decisions are reviewed, and our Head of Scrutiny provides advice and guidance to the chairs of both scrutiny committees. If it’s felt that an issue does merit scrutiny then it goes to the next committee meeting where councillors debate and decide an appropriate way forward – whether that’s a topic group, bulletin or seminar.

A key part of our work during the year is the annual budget scrutiny. The budget process (Integrated Plan) starts in December when the director of resources gives a broad overview of the council’s settlement for the next financial year. The reason it starts so early is to allow enough time for all departmental proposals to be thoroughly examined, with any recommendations to be considered before the full council meeting in March, where the year’s budget is agreed. This ensures that budget plans take into account councillors’ comments.

Each scrutiny committee engages in its own annual budget scrutiny process, taking two days to examine a portfolio or NHS organisation. As each budget proposal is considered, we ensure that these take into account residents’ needs and effectively plan for the future, including the pressure on public spending. Eight years ago we started involving officers on the council’s graduate scheme in the process, which has proved very successful for both us and them. It means the graduates get to experience a political environment which they would not always see, and they are able to view the accountability governance process closely.

For the council, it means that we are able to provide support to councillors through the process.

The graduates work with each of the chairs of the portfolio groups to develop key lines of enquiry which are then followed up on the first day of the scrutiny process.
Day one begins as an open meeting, before we adjourn to gather evidence and challenge our NHS or Cabinet witnesses in closed sessions. We have found that conducting the process in this way allows those being challenged to be more candid.

Day two reconvenes in public to debate the recommendations from the first day of enquiry. The Committee then confirms the recommendations, as well as identifying future scrutiny activities such as task and finish groups and seminars. Any recommendations made go to Cabinet and contribute to discussions at Full Council.

In Hertfordshire, we believe that scrutiny works because of the excellent relationship that councillors have with officers from both the council and the NHS. This is based on mutual trust and respect and there is open dialogue and exchanges of information. As a result, our scrutiny investigations are thorough and councillors do not feel restricted about the recommendations they make. The majority of recommendations are accepted, confirming our conviction that this is an effective process.

Scrutiny in Hertfordshire will always look to measure its effectiveness through outcomes and the impact on our residents. We know that this can only be achieved by ensuring that we do not become complacent. We are open to new approaches and innovations, drawing on practice elsewhere to adapt our methods and improve outcomes.

David Andrews is chairman of the overview and scrutiny committee at Hertfordshire CC

A health scrutiny perspective by Seamus Quilty – chairman of the health scrutiny committee, Hertfordshire CC

From conducting budget scrutiny in this way, we learned that we could increase councillor involvement and the democratic accountability of the NHS. It has definitely increased engagement with our NHS organisations in Hertfordshire, especially as NHS organisations are often viewed as being disconnected from the democratic processes.

We have evidenced this increased engagement by having chief executives, chairman and board directors attend from these organisations to respond directly to councillor challenges. Initially this process was used just to investigate the council budgets, but from the results, we used it as a template to work with our NHS colleagues.

I witnessed from these events how much was gained, not just by cabinet members and NHS colleagues, but more importantly by my fellow councillors hearing first-hand from decision-makers and influencing how decisions are made on the allocation of the budget, for the benefit of residents.