

Case Study - Overview and Scrutiny (O & S) Committee Working Groups

Overview and Scrutiny committees were established after the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000 as a means of checking and challenging decisions made by the Council's Executive Committee and assisting in policy development.

Dartford set up two Overview and Scrutiny Committees and established a Work Programme and Working Groups to undertake specific reviews. Committees select their own topics for review or are asked by the Cabinet to undertake a review. Most are 'task and finish' groups with the general approach to review being set out in the Overview and Scrutiny Protocol.

While the character of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is acknowledged as being highly politically charged the working groups are effective in investigating and developing policy.

One of the aims of the new O & S Committees was to encourage backbench involvement in the development of Council policy.

Subjects considered by Working Groups are diverse and range from E-government to Travellers.

An excellent illustration of this approach is the Youth Services Working Group which initiated a review of the Council's Youth Services Provision.

Terms of Reference were to:

- consider the relationship between the Dartford Youth Council (DYC) and the Borough Council
- consider how the DYC can provide a communication link between the Council and young people
- consider how DYC might fulfil a role in the Council's community consultation framework
- investigate ways of encouraging effective communication between the Council, Members, Officers and young people

The O & S Committee (Corporate) considered a report from the Youth Services Working Group (YSWG), supported its recommendations and agreed that it should go to Cabinet for consideration. Members adopted the recommendations on 2 May 2002 (attached as Appendix 1).

Dartford Borough Council established a working arrangement with KCC Youth and Community to oversee the election process and to promote Dartford Youth Council by involving all the secondary schools in the Borough. This was funded from an Identified Initiative "Youth Development Budget".

The first meeting of the Youth Council was on 15 November 2002 consisting of 26 elected representatives. It now meets on a regular basis with an average of 19 young people attending. Sub-groups have been set up to work on specific projects including the DYC website and a consultation survey on Community Safety.

Achievements include the launch of the Citizencard Youth ID in partnership with Kent Trading Standards, Kent County Constabulary, Dartford, Gravesham & Swanley Primary

Care Trust. A Youth ID card with discounts was one of the first requests that the young people made at their early meetings held in January 2000.

Other O & S Working Groups include:

Tourism and Heritage

The group looked at tourism and heritage in the Borough, resulting in a new introductory leaflet - Discover Dartford - which was launched at the Dartford Festival in 2003. The Group is planning an audit of Dartford's heritage and how it should be promoted.

Travellers

Members visited a transit site in Bridgewater, Somerset on 23 October 2002, and the permanent caravan site at Claywood Lane, Dartford on 21 January 2003.

The Group is looking at transit sites as part of a regional solution to unlawful encampments, the role of the Unauthorised Encampment Officer and communications about traveller encampments.

Role of the Mayoralty and backbenchers in the New Political Structure.

This group considered the role of Members outside Cabinet together with the role of a Civic Mayor and the support required by each. It highlighted the needs of new Members and helped develop an Induction Training Programme. A review of allowances paid to the Mayor and Deputy Mayor followed and changes recommended. These were accepted by Cabinet and the GAC and have been implemented.

E-Government Working Group

The Working Group reviewed the Implementing Electronic Government (IEG) Statement prior to consideration and adoption by the General Assembly of the Council (GAC) and submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM). It is also overseeing development of the Council website and online services. IT provision and training for Members is also under consideration.

Appendix 1

Members of the Youth Services Working Group have considered the structure and working of the Dartford Youth Council as currently organised and propose the following recommendations for Overview & Scrutiny Committee (Corporate) to consider and recommend to Cabinet for consideration and approval:

1. That the Dartford Youth Council (DYC) is reconstituted and its Terms of Reference (approved by Cabinet 7th September 2000) revisited to include the following: *The DYC will comprise of four elected representatives from each secondary school in the Borough of Dartford (Two representatives from years 8-10 and two representatives from year 11-13).*
2. That a Youth Services Steering Group is established and comprises of Council Members (all parties); and DYC representatives. It is proposed that the group be co-chaired by a Council Member and DYC Member to enable joint agenda setting and personal development of the young person. The purpose of the Youth Services Steering Group will be to provide:
 - a mechanism for reporting progress of the DYC on a regular basis to the Council (bi-monthly).
 - regular two-way communication between the Council and the DYC
 - a recognised process for the Council to consult the DYC and young people within the Borough (Council Members and representatives of the public, private and voluntary sectors may be invited to the Steering group to discuss appropriate agenda items).
3. To consider resourcing implications to ensure that the reconstituted DYC is fully supported and developed. An option for consideration is that the DYC are supported initially for one year with a full-time Dartford Youth Council Development Officer to be employed by the Council and part time thereafter.
4. That the support of all secondary schools within the Borough should be canvassed by the end of June (through the Head Teacher and the Chairman of Governors) to:
 - emphasise the importance Dartford Borough Council and Kent County Council attach to the Dartford Youth Council;
 - to enable students to attend regular meetings; and
 - discuss the arrangements for holding elections to the Dartford Youth Council in the early part of the Autumn Term 2002.