



St. Helens
Council

Overview & Scrutiny

Annual Report 2012

Contact us

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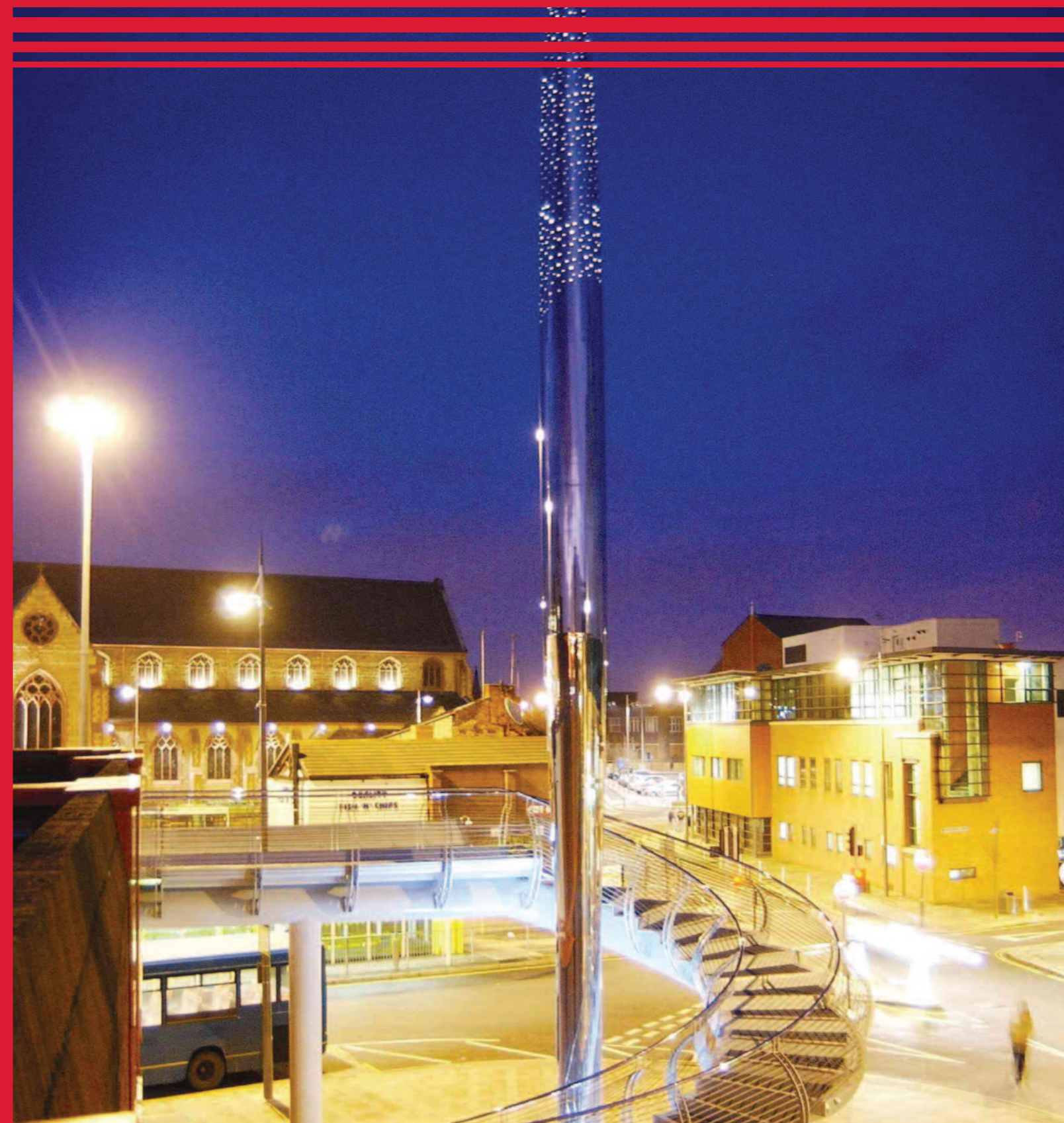
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Chairman's Foreword



Councillor Jeff Fletcher
Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny
Commission 2012/2013

As the current Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, I am pleased to introduce our 2011/2012 Scrutiny Annual Report which has been prepared to give an insight into the work undertaken by Scrutiny on behalf of the people of St.Helens.

Scrutiny continues to improve year on year and the Panels have continued to support the work of the Council through their diverse work programmes and have provided opportunities for local people to have their say regarding issues that they feel are important and affect them.

Looking back over the year, our work was varied and wide-ranging from the review of Allotments to working with our neighbouring authorities, Halton and Warrington, on a joint health task group looking at proposals for Cheshire and Merseyside Vascular Services. We have delivered a full work programme and have continued to monitor progress on work that we have completed in previous years to ensure our recommendations and actions are being carried out.

I would like to place on record our gratitude to the Councillors, co-opted members and officers - from both within the Council and from partner organisations that have helped us to complete these reviews. I would also like to thank all those former Councillors who contributed so much to the work of Scrutiny in 2011/12 by chairing the Commission and Panels and by working on Task Groups. There is no doubt that the work of the various Panels can be time-consuming, because it not only requires attendance at meetings but also there are site visits and a great deal of research to be undertaken. Without this enthusiasm and commitment, we would not have been able to come to our informed conclusions which help make our recommendations for the improvement of services in St.Helens achievable.

We are now looking forward to the coming year, where we expect to carry on with the same high standard of review. We are planning, amongst other things, to look at issues such as young carers, pastoral care in schools, town centre parking and the Council's recycling arrangements.

Some questions answered

What is Overview and Scrutiny?

Often referred to as Scrutiny, the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function looks closely at services and issues that affect local people and ways to improve them.

Scrutiny Councillors have a responsibility as community leaders to involve local people in identifying issues of concern. They can then review these concerns by gathering information and making recommendations based on what they've found out. They are not restricted to Council services - they can look at anything that

has an impact on the quality of life of people in St.Helens.

Overview and Scrutiny Councillors also keep an eye on how the Council's services are performing and whether targets are being met, and are able to make recommendations as to whether new policies or changes to existing policies would lead to better outcomes.

The Cabinet is the Council's main decision-making body and Scrutiny Councillors have a responsibility to oversee its work and can challenge its decisions. Unlike the Cabinet, Scrutiny Councillors do not hold any decision-making powers.

How many Overview and Scrutiny Committees are there and who sits on them?

There is an overarching Overview and Scrutiny Commission and five Scrutiny Panels. Any Council member who is not a member of the Cabinet can undertake scrutiny. During 2011/12, the following Councillors and co-opted members have served on the Scrutiny Panels:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Remit in Brief	Membership 2011/12
Overview and Scrutiny Commission	Acts as the general interface with the Cabinet for all Overview and Scrutiny issues, reviews the Council's Budget, Forward Plan and identifies possible policy or strategy reviews	Cllr Brian Spencer (Ch) Cllrs D Banks, J Banks, G Cross, K Deakin, J Fletcher, J Fulham, L Glover, S Glover, P Ireland, A Johnson, L Maloney, S Knight, Cllr Steph Topping and W Ashcroft Co-opted Members Rev D Hall, Rev T Neylon, A Welland-Heron
Adult Social Care and Health	Covers the provision, planning and performance of social and health care in services for older people and vulnerable adults across the Borough	Cllr Suzanne Knight (Ch) Cllrs A Burns, S Dyer, J Johnson, P Martinez-Williams, L McGuire, P McQuade and B Lowe Co-opted Members Brenda Smith, St.Helens LINKs
Audit and Financial Monitoring	Scrutinises internal and external audit activity and monitors and scrutinises the financial performance of the Council	Cllr Steph Topping (Ch) Cllrs D Banks, G Cross, K Deakin, J Fletcher, J Fulham, P Ireland and D Monk

Children and Young People's Services	Covers the whole range of services relating to the provision of children and young people's services	Cllr Jeff Fletcher (Ch) Cllrs G Almond, L Glover, P McQuade, S Seddon, S Knight, T Sims and A Jones Co-opted Members Rev D Hall, Rev T Neylon, A Welland-Heron
Environment and Safer Communities	Considers items relating to waste management, parks and open spaces, highways and crime & disorder issues	Cllr W Ashcroft (Ch) Cllrs G Almond, D Banks, J De'Asha, P Ireland, K Roberts, T Shields and T Sims
Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure	Considers items relating to Boroughwide economic development, regeneration, housing, culture, leisure and libraries	Cllr G Cross (Ch) Cllrs G Almond, B Anderton, C A Gill, S Glover, J Beirne, M Haw and A Jones

How do we decide what work to do?

Each Panel develops its own work programme for the year, which is then subject to agreement by the Scrutiny Commission. The sort of work we get involved in aims to reflect the issues that matter most to local people. It should also match the Council's priorities. Each year we invite suggestions from key partners such as the Police, local Health Trusts, local business representatives, school head teachers and governors, parish and town councils, voluntary and community organisations, the Community Empowerment Network and, of course, members of the public. This is to find out if there are any issues of concern that could benefit from a Scrutiny Review.

Once all the suggestions have been gathered, the Scrutiny Commission and the Scrutiny Panels decide which issues have the highest priority. Carrying out Scrutiny Reviews can be very time-consuming and it is impossible to address all the issues that are suggested.

As Scrutiny Councillors, we try to choose only those issues where we believe we can make a real difference.



How you can get involved in Scrutiny

There are many ways in which you can get involved:

- Attending meetings - Scrutiny meetings are open to the public (details of meetings can be found on the Council's website, www.sthelens.gov.uk)
- By responding to questionnaires or providing written evidence in relation to a particular Scrutiny Review
- By offering to appear as 'expert witnesses' during Scrutiny Review meetings, when invited to do so

- Applying to be a co-opted member – by taking part in Scrutiny through co-option onto Task and Finish Groups. Task and Finish Groups are fact-finding forums and are invaluable for members of the public to raise concerns and issues, to allow Councillors to make evidence-based recommendations (details of how to apply can be found on the Council's website, www.sthelens.gov.uk)

- Suggesting a topic – You can suggest a topic for scrutiny in several ways. Firstly, there's a form at the back of this report that you can complete and return. Alternatively, forms are available at most Council reception areas or you can complete the online forms at www.sthelens.gov.uk. If you would like to speak to us then please contact us on 01744 676277 or email us at scrutiny@sthelens.gov.uk

Please note that Scrutiny cannot deal with individual complaints (to complain, please call 01744 676789) or look at decisions taken by Licensing or Planning, unless the issue concerns policy.

Key Messages from this Year's Scrutiny Reviews

Adult Social Care and Health Scrutiny Panel



Former Councillor Suzanne Knight (Chairman 2011/12)

Joint Review of Cardio-Vascular Services Reconfiguration for South Mersey

Who sat on the Task Group

Former Councillors:
Suzanne Knight and Betty Lowe,
Councillor Terry Shields

St.Helens, together with Warrington and Halton, established a statutory joint committee to scrutinise substantial variation proposals from the NHS to improve outcomes for patients engaging in vascular services in Halton, St.Helens and Warrington.

The Joint Committee held a number of pre-meetings to discuss questioning strategies and consider appropriate expert witnesses to call, a series of public meetings where the public and expert witnesses attended, and a number of workshops to talk to members of the public and their

representatives. In addition, members of the Joint Committee and supporting officers attended three consultation events held by the NHS, and used these events as an opportunity to talk to local residents, experts and public representatives.

A final report has been submitted to the NHS and a response to our recommendations is expected shortly.

Employment of People with Learning Disabilities

Who sat on the Task Group

Former Councillors:
Suzanne Knight (Chair)
Brian Spencer
Leon McGuire
Co-optee:
Emma Rodriguez Dos Santos – LINKs

What we wanted to do

Disabled people, including those with learning difficulties, can often face considerable barriers to employment and this review focused specifically on exploring the Council's work to increase job opportunities for people with learning difficulties.

These people are often more excluded from the workplace than any other group of disabled people. We wanted to enable all people with learning difficulties who want paid work in St.Helens to be given the opportunity and support to be able to do so.

How we did it

- We carried out the review by meeting with various

organisations involved in working with people with learning difficulties, including M and Y Joinery, Making Space and The Coalition of Disabled People.

- We undertook site visits to different locations and looked at and discussed how services worked at New Ventures, Sherdley Park and Hardshaw Brook Depot. We also met and spoke with service users and employees themselves.

What we found out

- We spoke with several employers in the Borough who had adults with a learning disability working for them. Overall, these employers were extremely positive about the opportunity and felt that it was not just a good experience for the individual but for their other staff and, where applicable, their customers. We felt that other employers in the Borough need to understand the genuine business benefits of employing people with learning difficulties and the public sector needs to lead by example.
- We heard that public transport is not generally accessible for many people with learning difficulties and many rely on expensive taxi journeys. We were pleased to learn that Supported Employment undertake travel training and would encourage further work with schools, police and transport providers to tackle harassment of people

with learning disabilities on public transport.

We witnessed the excellent work being done across the Borough by New Ventures, Supporting Employment Services, St.Helens College and The Coalition of Disabled People to help access employment opportunities for adults with a learning disability. However, we felt that more could be done to increase the number of Council jobs made available to people with learning disabilities and that there is scope for the Council to do more with its partner organisations and other local employers to increase the employment rate for local people with learning disabilities.

What happens next

We have recently submitted our report to Cabinet which included recommendations for each Council department to consider how it can effectively support children and adults with learning disabilities to have appropriate employment and work experience. We also would like to see our Supporting Employment Services present at a Local Strategic Partnership meeting to share good practice amongst partners on employing people with learning disabilities

and identify what further steps might be taken across local employers to increase the number of jobs for them.

Cabinet will respond to our recommendations shortly, commenting on each of them and stating what action, if any, they propose to take.

Review of 5 Boroughs Partnership Trust: Later Life and Memory Services and the Relocation of Stewart Assessment Unit

Who sat on the Task Group

Former Councillors:
Suzanne Knight (Chair)
Betty Lowe
Leon McGuire
Brian Spencer

What we wanted to do

During December 2011, the 5 Boroughs Trust and NHS Merseyside Commissioners presented the Council with a series of proposals relating to later life and memory services and the Stewart Assessment Unit.

The Council wanted to consider the details of the implications and a small Task Group made up of Scrutiny members and the Portfolio Holder was established to consider these issues in detail and report back to both the Scrutiny Panel and Cabinet.

How we did it

- We enlisted the help of Mike Wyatt, St.Helens Council's Director of Adult Social Care and Health, to provide us with the information and expertise that we needed.
- The Task Group invited a number of witnesses to attend a series of meetings. In addition, site visits were held at Rydal Ward at Knowsley Resource &

Recovery Centre, Kingsley Ward at Hollins Park, Warrington, and Stewart Assessment at Peasley Cross. A number of documents/ reports prepared by 5 Boroughs Trust were also submitted to the Task Group for their consideration (Proposals for a New Model of Care – Later Life Memory Services and Relocation Plan – Later Life Memory Services).

- A set of questions were submitted to LINKs and their response was fed back to the Task Group and amalgamated into the final report.

What we found out

- We welcomed the intention of the proposals to improve access to services for people with dementia and the assurance that, at an early stage, appropriate diagnosis would be undertaken and patients would be given the most beneficial treatment. We also were pleased to hear about proposed reductions in the time that assessment processes take.
- The fact that all service users at Kingsley and Rydal Ward are offered an individual room, most with en-suite, offers significantly better physical environment for the patients.
- Communal areas at Kingsley and Rydal also seem to be of a better design and quality than Stewart Assessment Unit.
- The quality of the care provided by staff on Stewart Assessment Unit (Treatment Regime) was complimented by all the witnesses interviewed and we were impressed by the expertise that staff displayed and the

sensitive way that they went about their duties.

- We did have some concerns in relation to the transport to Kingsley and Rydal Ward, particularly for relatives and carers wishing to visit patients at the new units, and recommended that the 5 Boroughs Trust should make particular arrangements for transporting/or facilitating visits to patients on a 7 day a week basis at both venues.
- These concerns were also highlighted in the feedback from LINKs and service users, particularly for residents with relatives to be placed in the Kingsley Wards at Hollins Park. The bus service available on a weekday changes in the early evening and people travelling from St.Helens (without their own car) trying to see their relatives in 'visiting hours' after work would find this difficult.

What happened next

We submitted our joint report setting out a number of recommendations to the 5 Boroughs Trust. Both Scrutiny and Cabinet were satisfied with the Trust's response – however, we did raise concerns regarding the consultation process itself. Due to the time restraints imposed by the Trust, the process had failed to allow the Council time to provide a more in-depth response to the consultation. It was hoped that this concern would be taken on board by the Trust for all future service redesign proposals.

Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Panel



Councillor Jeff Fletcher (Chairman 2011/12)

Review of Schools Library Service

Who sat on the Task Group

Councillors:
Jeff Fletcher
Teresa Sims

What we wanted to do

The Schools Library Service (SLS) is part of the Council's main Library provision and plays a part in raising pupil's literacy levels by providing a comprehensive service to primary, special and secondary schools within St.Helens. Scrutiny wanted to look at how schools within our Borough utilised the Schools Library Service and how its usage could be increased.

How we did it

- We looked at background information with regards to other local authorities' Schools Library Service.
- We enrolled the help of Kathryn Boothroyd – Community Development Manager, and Judith Lilley – Team Librarian, who explained the role of the Schools Library Service and how it was financed.

- We visited the Schools Library Service at Park Road and saw the various book packages and learning material available to schools.
- We held various site visits to Rainford C of E Primary and Merton Bank Primary, Rainhill Media Arts College and Cowley International College and spoke with those responsible for the Schools Library Service and with various head teachers.



What we found out

- We felt that the Schools Library Service was clearly well-run and much appreciated by schools, and a measure of its success was that all primary schools in St.Helens were using the Service. However, whilst all primary schools did utilise the Service, the level of usage did vary amongst them.
- The Schools Library Service is far more than a simple book and other material purchasing service. One of its great strengths is the provision of project loan material and the invaluable advice on the most appropriate books to loan or purchase.

- The Schools Library Service could be a cost-effective way of ensuring that all schools, but particularly primary schools, have access to the expertise and resources they may not have on site or may not be able to afford in the future. However, we recognise that the delegation of school library service funds to schools has focused the business model on the drive for buy back.
- There is 100% buy-in across primary schools in the Borough.
- The Schools Library Service provides advisory visits to schools; they are currently working with 14 primary schools.
- Storytelling is used by the Schools Library Service to promote the Fiction Loan Service; this is very popular but constrained by capacity both within the SLS and also the schools.
- Many primary school book stocks are not of a high quality, although some are. The Service assists by sifting the collections, when requested, removing redundant and out-of-date items.
- High Schools have small "devolved" budgets (approximately £300) that they can choose to spend on the SLS or for other purposes. Subscribers are Cowley International College; Haydock Sports College; Rainford High Technology College; Rainhill High; St.Augustine of Canterbury; St.Cuthbert's Catholic Community High. Non-subscribers are De La Salle; Hope Academy; Sutton Academy.

What happens next

We are in the process of submitting our report to the Council's Cabinet, who will respond to the Panel's recommendations. We have asked for all Local Authority Governors to promote the usage of the Schools Library Service within their own schools. Any actions to be taken will be reported back to the Panel shortly.

Environment and Safer Communities Scrutiny Panel



Former Councillor Wally Ashcroft (Chairman 2011/12)

Review of Allotments

Who sat on the Task Group

Councillors:
Wally Ashcroft (Chair)
Terry Shields
Keith Roberts
Joe De'Asha

Co-optees:

Alan Hull - National Allotments Federation
Reg Massey - Ashtons Green Community Allotments

What we wanted to do

Renting allotments is becoming increasingly popular and Scrutiny wanted to look at the criteria, take-up and process of renting an allotment in St.Helens. We also wanted to examine the advantages and disadvantages

of self-managed allotments and whether we felt this was a suitable way forward for the allotment service in St.Helens.

How we did it

- We enlisted the help of Terry Deveney, St.Helens Council's Principal Parks and Open Spaces Officer, Allan Hull, a representative from the National Allotments Federation, and Reg Massey, a plot holder from Ashtons Green Community Allotments to provide us with the information and expertise that we needed.
- Various site visits were carried out to Trafford, Blackpool and a number of allotment sites throughout the Borough whereby the Task Group spoke with various allotment holders.
- Task Group members attended a number of allotment site committee meetings with allotment holders and reported back their findings.

What we found out

- St.Helens has a total of 17 allotment sites owned by the Council, 14 of which are managed directly by the Council and the remaining 3 are self-managed (devolved management responsibility).
- The rent is £25.85 p.a. for a full plot on the 11 sites. Rents range from £1 to £25.85 for Elm Road, Milton Street and Sexton Avenue sites. A concession of up to 50% is offered to those who are on certain benefits.
- For self-managed sites such as the Harlow allotment, the full rent is £60 per year. The rent for Rainford is £31 per year and Rob Lane currently stands at £25.85 per year.
- We felt that allotments should be financially accessible to all

residents of St.Helens and there was no doubt that the rent should reflect this – however, we believed an increase in rental charges would generate the revenue needed to make some of the necessary much-needed improvements to the various sites. Many local authorities were now charging per sq m rather than standard plot rates, and from the evidence gathered we believed this to be a more equitable way of charging.

- We saw that the demand for allotments was at its highest level for a generation with all the sites full and waiting times in some areas running at a number of years. We felt it was unlikely that tenancy levels would increase without greater plot splitting. We saw in some self-managed sites, the move towards smaller and mini plots has been highly successful. Large plots could be split as a plot becomes vacant to create more flexibility in plot provision, reflect public demand for smaller plots and ease the pressure on waiting-lists.
- We recognised the benefits of self-management and ideally would look to encourage all existing Council-managed sites the opportunity to take this forward – however, devolved management needed commitment from the Council, the Allotment Federation and plot holders themselves.

What happened next

A report was submitted to the Cabinet outlining a number of recommendations. Cabinet have since responded and, as a result of the Scrutiny Review, the Council is currently revising the Tenancy Agreements and

reviewing fees and charges for April 2013 onwards. The policy and rules for allotments are also being revised and the Council will maximise the number of smaller plots available when they become vacant. Funding previously used on providing skips to sites will now be used for site improvements.

Problem Debts and Loan Sharks

Who sat on the Task Group

Councillors:
Geoff Almond (Chair)
Pat Ireland
Teresa Sims

Co-optees:
Karl Pearce – CAB
Darrell Wilson – Trading Standards
Liz Howse – Helena Partnerships

What we wanted to do

In today's society, financial wellbeing is vitally important. Scrutiny was concerned that there were large numbers of residents in our Borough who were financially excluded and facing serious debt issues. We recognised that this was a national problem for many – however, we wanted to look at the issue of illegal money lending and problem debts, and to consider the Council's role and the role of Credit Unions in tackling those issues.

How we did it

- We enlisted the help of Rod Jones, the Safer and Stronger Communities Manager; Peter Mallet, the Crime and Justice Co-ordinator; Darrell Wilson, the Chief Trading Standards Officer; Karl Pearce, Manager CAB; and Liz Howse, the Financial Wellbeing Officer from the Money Matters Team at Helena Partnerships to provide us with the

information and expertise that we needed.

- We met with Vernon Fuller from Money Art and discussed financial capability in St.Helens and the functions of Credit Unions.
- We met with representatives from Helena Partnerships' 'Money Matters' Team and heard about their experiences and what services Helena offered to tenants.
- We heard from Gordon Lee, the Revenues and Benefits Manager, about the Council's Debt Recovery policies.
- We also invited representatives from Christians Against Poverty (CAP) to talk to us about their experiences and the service they provided.
- We were keen to hear about any best practice in neighbouring authorities so we invited Debra Lee, the Assistant Borough Treasurer from Knowsley, to inform us about Knowsley's approach to financial inclusion and the service it provides.
- Finally, we met with Richard Ferry from St.Helens Credit Union to discuss how it was working in the St.Helens area and what improvements could be made.

What we found out

- We found that a great deal of good work was already taking place in support of financial wellbeing across St.Helens. Individuals could get access, advice and support through a variety of public and voluntary sector agencies in person, by telephone or online.
- Credit Unions needed to be made more accessible and there was a need for people

to know how and where they could access affordable, cheaper loans and advice. The more members a Credit Union had, the more self-sufficient and healthier it became. However, we recognised that a possible barrier could be the 3-month wait after joining before a loan could be taken out. These criteria did not help those who needed instant cash.

- During the review, we were pleased to hear that the Council had formalised arrangements which allowed partners such as the CAB to liaise directly on behalf of their clients where bailiffs recovering Council Tax arrears were involved with a named Council officer.

What happens next

As a result of the Scrutiny Review, we made several recommendations including the inclusion of problem debt as a focal point for action in the forthcoming St.Helens Plan and integral to objectives of the Local Strategic Partnership.

We felt it was important that the Council embed Financial Inclusion as a crosscutting priority into all the main Council and Strategic Partnership strategies, action plans and policies.

In addition to this, we would like to see the Council look towards establishing or being part of an existing Financial Wellbeing Partnership with all agencies and neighbouring authorities to develop a more joined up and sustainable approach to assist with the Financial Inclusion agenda.

A copy of our report and subsequent recommendations has been submitted to Cabinet for consideration. We expect a response shortly.



Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Panel



Councillor Gareth Cross (Chairman 2011/12)

Review of Community Use of Schools' Sports Facilities

Who sat on the Task Group

Councillors:
Alan Jones (Chair)
Gareth Cross
Mike Haw

What we wanted to do

Developing effective community use of school facilities involves much more than simply opening the doors. The Scrutiny Panel wanted to find out how community use of school playing-fields and associated facilities might be increased and to uncover any barriers which sport clubs/groups faced when trying to access school facilities.

How we did it

- We enlisted the help of David Boocock, the Council's Head of Sports Development, to provide us with the information and expertise that we needed.
- Various site visits were carried out to Failsworth School in Oldham, The Radclyffe School in Oldham, St.Cuthbert's School, St.Helens, and Lowton High School in Wigan.
- Consideration was given to how other areas approach the promotion of community use of sports facilities.

What we found out

- Some schools sell space to local clubs on a long let basis and do little to promote access by the wider community. However, it is recognised that a block booked facility is potentially easier to administer than pay & play and may reduce the need for site supervision, thereby potentially saving further costs.
- Ideally, school facility bookings should be balanced by both courses or classes and opportunities for casual participation. Some people did not want to be members of clubs and for some sports such as swimming, badminton, keep fit etc., opportunities for casual use were vitally important.

- During the review, we found good examples of schools complementing other local sports facilities – however, there were one or two examples where community groups were simply out-priced and discouraged from using school facilities. We felt that where school sports facilities are located in close proximity to other similar facilities, whoever is operating them should seek to work in partnership with these to ensure their programmes are complementary and mutually-beneficial.

What happened next

As a result of our review, we have made several recommendations which include use of the Council's online booking system for the management of school facilities be encouraged and this facility be offered to schools when it becomes available in early 2012/13. We would also like to see that the community use of school sports facilities be placed as an agenda item on the next appropriate School Governors' Forum to encourage schools. Hopefully, this will encourage schools to open up their doors.

Review of The Evening Economy in St.Helens Town Centre

Who sat on the Task Group

Councillors:
Steve Glover (Chair)
Bill Anderton
Carole Ann Gill
Gareth Cross

What we wanted to do

We were aware of the current economic constraints we face as a Council and the effects this has had on local businesses. Many are struggling to make ends meet and, nationally, pubs

and shops are closing at an alarming rate. The aim of this review was to investigate the evening economy in St.Helens Town Centre and make any appropriate recommendations which might enhance its vitality. We defined the evening timeframe as activities between 5.00pm and 9.00pm.



How we did it

- We attended a meeting of St.Helens PubWatch to gather the views of licensees.
- We held a focus group with key stakeholders including the Police, Taxi Operators and local students to get their views of what they thought about the evening economy, what worked well and what could be improved.
- We met with the Council's Events Manager to discuss the town centre events programme for 2012.
- We held a site visit at Langtree Park, the new Saints Stadium, prior to its official opening and discussed access, parking, and the facilities which would be on offer.

What we found out

- Car parking within the town centre was considered to be reasonable and there was the opportunity to park for free for those who arrive in the town

centre after 3.00pm. Most car parks are surface level (which make them more accessible for people with mobility difficulties).

- Licensees referred to recent events which had been organised by St.Helens Council over recent months in order to attract people into the town centre. The licensees felt that while such events 'pull in the crowds', they noted that they usually take place on a Saturday afternoon and felt that the evening and nighttime economies of St.Helens did not benefit from these events. The licensees felt that the town centre was at its busiest during Saturday afternoons and events should be arranged for quieter times where possible.
- Various unused spaces were highlighted as a problem for the evening economy in the town centre, notably, the vacant building on Bridge Street, land opposite the cinema, and the area between Westfield Street and Duke Street. Licensees felt that these spaces could be better utilised to encourage more activity within the town centre.



- The evening economy in St.Helens is small and like other similar towns is struggling to compete with those centres able to offer a more diverse range of evening activities. As the Council owns very few sites/premises in the town centre, it has very little control over what proposals can come forward and be subject of planning and licensing regulation, i.e. the Council's role is reactive rather than proactive in terms of its statutory functions. Premises' usage is open to market forces but the Council has a facilitation and promotional role.
- A great deal of work has been undertaken by the Council over a number of years to relocate St.Helens Stadium into the town centre. We feel that this is a great achievement and unique in that most new stadiums are usually built away from a town centre. The new stadium has increased footfall around the town and the centre, and fixtures could potentially see up to 18,000 additional visitors. The Council has invested heavily in, and facilitated improvements to, the railway station, bus station, off-site highway improvements, clearer signage etc. which has helped to manage and alleviate pressure from the outskirts of town.

What happens next

A copy of our report and subsequent recommendations has been submitted to Cabinet and a response will be provided shortly. Whilst undertaking this review, the Council was developing a Town Centre Strategy - we look forward to seeing how the findings of this review could be incorporated into this.

Overview and Scrutiny Commission



Former Councillor Brian Spencer (Chairman 2011/12)

Review of Budget Setting Process 2012/13

In the current economic climate, members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission wanted to make sure that they could continue to deliver the services which are most important to the Council and St.Helens' residents. Each Chairman met with Portfolio Holders and Chief Officers and examined the Draft Portfolio Spending Plans as part of its scrutiny of the 2012/13 budget setting process.

We recognised the difficult financial climate against which the spending plans had been developed and acknowledged the detailed work that has been undertaken in order to review all aspects of spending and to identify scope for savings and efficiencies.

It was apparent from the discussions that, whilst clear action was already being taken to ensure that spending plans remained within cash limits, service reviews were ongoing and the full implications of such reviews on the financial position, on jobs, and on service delivery remained to be quantified.

During the meetings with Portfolio Holders, the role of

Scrutiny was recognised as a valuable resource in reviewing approaches to service delivery. We believe that we have a key role to play in promoting effective and efficient service delivery against a backdrop of reduced funding, and looked forward to working with the Cabinet in supporting service reviews.

Audit and Financial Monitoring Scrutiny Panel



Councillor Stephanie Topping (Chairman 2011/12)

The Audit and Financial Monitoring Scrutiny Panel, which was chaired by Councillor Stephanie Topping, has scrutinised the Budget Monitoring reports and the Corporate Financial reports on a frequent basis and sought information and explanations in respect of any issues of concern identified. The Panel has also reviewed and scrutinised all Internal Audit reports and requested explanations in respect of outstanding Audit recommendations and internal control weaknesses. Progress on outstanding actions is checked at regular intervals.

The Panel regularly reports to the Audit and Governance Committee on its work and highlights, where necessary, any areas of concern.

Update on progress with previous reviews

Care of People with Mental Health Problems in Times of Crisis

Following our review above, 5 Boroughs Partnership Trust is in the process of developing an acute care pathway for Adult Mental Health Services by reviewing with partners the way in which Mental Health services across St.Helens work. Extended 24-hour opening has been agreed. We are hoping that these extended hours together with other detailed proposals will lead to a shorter length of stay for inpatient settings, a reduction in re-admission rates, and improved outcomes for service users and carers.

Private Landlords

During 2010, Scrutiny undertook a review of private rented sector accommodation and one of our recommendations was to continue to build on the existing accreditation scheme and seek to build better and closer partnership-working with landlord associations. We are pleased to report that the Council continues to work with the National Landlords' Association, which is now represented on St.Helens Private Landlords' Forum. In addition to this, the Landlord Accreditation Scheme has also been extended which will enable further development of landlord skills around the letting and management of properties. This goes a long way in promoting better joint working amongst the sector and an improved private rented sector offer for our residents.



St.Mary's Market

Scrutiny were keen to see St.Mary's Market thrive once more – however, we did acknowledge the economic constraints faced by both the Council and market stallholders themselves. Despite this, we wanted to reduce costs and try making the market more appealing for visitors and potential stallholders. One of our recommendations was to remove the empty stalls at the Chalon Way entrance to avoid unnecessary costs and create an open, flexible space. We are pleased to report that Cabinet agreed with us and that a new, flexible event space has been created within the market. Stalls in the newly created area are now available for traders, old and new, who either have a business they wish to promote and grow or want to launch. Most stalls currently qualify for full Business Rates relief.

Dignity in Residential and Nursing Care Homes

Following our review of Dignity in Residential and Nursing Care Homes, we felt that it was important that any new contracts with care home providers contained explicitly set out

standards which needed to be achieved in relation to dignity. We are pleased to report that all new outcome-based contracts to the care homes have been enhanced to include new standards which must be achieved. We are also very pleased to hear that our recommendation to re-establish the Provider Forum which shares best practice has been agreed, and Dignity was raised at the first two meetings. A copy of our report and action plan was circulated to all care homes.

The Year Ahead

This year we received around 20 suggestions for topics which should be the subject of scrutiny during the coming year. Some of these suggestions came from members of our community, which was really helpful in making sure that we address the concerns of people in St.Helens. Unfortunately, because the work is very time-consuming, we cannot pursue every suggestion via the Scrutiny process, so the Scrutiny Commission has prioritised the issues and agreed that the following areas will be looked at during 2012/13. We will allow for flexibility within the programme which will enable us to consider any issues that arise throughout the year.

Scrutiny Work Programme 2012/13

Overview and Scrutiny Panel	Initial Topics Selected for Review
Adult Social Care and Health	Joint review with CYPS - Young Carers
Children and Young People's Services	Joint review with ASC&H - Young Carers, Managing School Exclusions
Environment and Safer Communities	Recycling, Domestic Violence
Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure	Parking in St.Helens Town Centre

Contact us

If you think there's a service or an issue that is in need of scrutiny, please complete the form below and return it FREEPOST.

The following issue/service is in need of scrutiny:

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Please state why:

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Name:.....

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