

TONY BALDRY, M.P.



APPENDIX 2A

HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Councillor John Donaldson  
Cherwell District Council  
Bodicote House  
Bodicote, Banbury OX15 4AA

14 May 2009

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Don John".

Thank you for your letter in your capacity as Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

My understanding is that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) performs a function not dissimilar from a Parliamentary Select Committee, i.e. it is there to scrutinise and monitor the work of the Council's "Cabinet" supported by the Executive Officers, and also to monitor and scrutinise the work of Executive Officers, including that of the Chief Executive as Accounting Officer.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to comment.

There was a time when Local Government was seen very much as carrying out a number of finite statutory functions with a Council committee dedicated to each function, i.e. a housing committee, planning committee, etc.

Increasingly Local Government is seen as having to deliver on a number of targets, and increasingly having to work in partnership with other Local Authorities, statutory bodies, and others.

So I think there is some merit in the OSC considering, and wherever possible, scrutinising processes which may cut across a range of responsibilities. so, for example, the District Council is increasingly working in partnerships, such as the Crime Reduction Partnership.

How effective is Cherwell's participation in these partnerships?

To what extent do District Councillors get involved in the partnerships?

How does one measure outcomes?

I think there may be some merit in a scrutiny enquiry on partnerships.



Funding for Local Government is going to become increasingly tight. Presumably the Overview and Scrutiny Committee each year undertakes a session on the Council's budget for the forthcoming year to seek to ensure that the budget is as cost-effective as possible, i.e. a bit like the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, does the OSC have the wherewithal and the ability to check and test Local Authorities' spending?

Thirdly, Local Government exists entirely by statute, i.e. the District Council has various duties given to it by statute, and various powers given to it by statute, but amongst those powers are a wide range of discretionary opportunities for funding and participating in non-statutory responsibilities – everything from helping fund the local Citizens Advice Bureau, to supporting clubs for pensioners.

But what are the guidelines for doing this? How is this approached? Is it done on an ad hoc basis? How is policy derived, and given that Local Authority funding is going to get tighter, who makes value judgements as to what non-statutory activities are supported and which are?

I suspect that the OSC could undertake an interesting and useful enquiry into just working out what work the District Council does as core statutory mandatory activity, and what is discretionary activity, and who makes value judgements as to whether that discretionary activity is appropriate and necessary, and should continue to be supported?

Lastly, it may well be worth the OSC undertaking an enquiry into how Cherwell is preparing for an increase in the ageing population. The country as a whole is having to confront an ageing population, but Cherwell I notice is a particularly heavily ageing population, largely as a consequence of the various families who moved to Banbury in the 1960's now reaching retirement age, and I would have thought there may well be some sense in some cost-cutting enquiry as to preparing the community with more elderly people.

I hope these might be some helpful suggestions.

Tony Baldry