

SCRUTINISING COMMUNITY SAFETY

In June I attended a Conference in London at Local Government House on the subject of scrutinising safety in the community. The conference objectives were to look in depth at the provisions of the Crime and Disorder (Overview and Scrutiny) Regulations 2009, which came into force at the end of April this year and to examine the changing structure and accountability of the Crime and Disorder Reduction partnerships (CDRPs). In particular the conference aimed to provide knowledge of the key issues including scrutiny arrangements, the development and implementation of scrutiny programmes and the change in responsibilities of members, officers and CDRP partners.

The thrust of the presentations and discussion was, as on previous occasions where scrutiny has been the fulcrum for stressing the need for partnerships with bodies outside the council, was to emphasise the role of the 'critical friend' challenge to policy-makers and decision-makers. This was intended to enable the voice and concerns of the public and its communities to be heard, should be carried out by 'independent minded governors' and drive forward improvement in public services.

With particular reference to crime and disorder, it was suggested that partnerships between councils and the police could be seen as either a 'holding to account' or a way of improving services. Some methods might involve discussion of public concern as and when they arise, working with local people to discuss their needs and concerns, and collecting and interpreting evidence around local community issues. Various examples of such issues were quoted e.g. fear of crime, alcohol related crime and strengthening community safety.

The Councillors' 'Call for Action' (CCfA) was also addressed. The prime aim of the CCfA, which is enacted under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, is to support elected members in achieving improvements and raising standards for their local areas with local policies and solutions.

The Act envisages that councillors first identify issues of significant concern to their communities, talk to the local authority and other service providers and then, if still unresolved, refer them to their overview and scrutiny committee. The powers of O and S are thus extended so that they include matters which the Council and its partners are delivering through the Local Area Agreement and 'local crime and disorder' matters.

The conference was attended by about 100 individuals, most of whom were Scrutiny Officers or members of the Police Force: only eight of us were elected Members. One piece of information provided me with extra food for thought. An officer from the Redditch Council - part of a two-tier council like ourselves, with a total of 29 elected members and a scrutiny committee of nine - who sat next to me during the plenary sessions, informed me that she was one of TWO officers responsible for their O and S committee.

It seems to me that with the increasing responsibilities for O and S members, should Ryedale not be receiving the attention of at least ONE specifically dedicated officer?

All in all, a very useful and interesting day.

Elizabeth Shields

21st June, 2009.