

# successful scrutiny 2008

## Cambridgeshire County Council integrated planning process

Winner: Financial Scrutiny Award

*In a difficult category to assess the judges selected Cambridgeshire County Council as their approach to budget scrutiny was innovative ensuring that clear lines were drawn between financial scrutiny and policy development.*

### A new approach

Cambridgeshire's Scrutiny Management Group introduced a new method of budget scrutiny in 2007/08 that enabled Members to engage earlier in the budget setting process, and thereby have a greater impact. This included:

#### Budget Pairings:

Members from the Council's four Scrutiny Committees met with individual Directors to scrutinise the emerging directorate budgets and the alignment between priorities, performance and expenditure. These pairings were an informal opportunity to learn about the pressures facing each service, and to consider the proposals for coping with these pressures.

#### Formal Scrutiny Committees:

Scrutiny Members shared their learning from the pairings with the whole committee and were able to draw out strategic themes that gave a focus to scrutiny of both departmental and the overall Council budget in meetings in November and January.

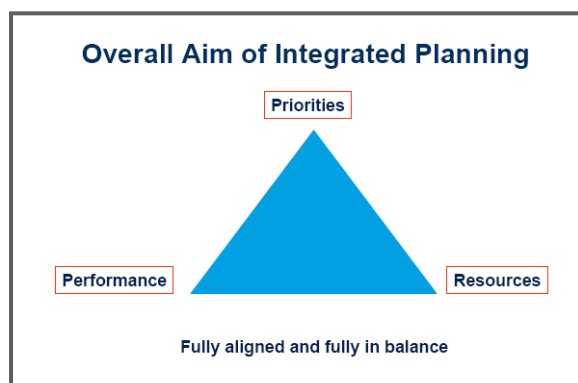
#### Integrated Planning Process (IPP) Sub Group:

A new budget scrutiny sub group was setup, comprising representatives from each of the four Scrutiny committees to ensure that key points and good practice could be shared at key stages of the budget-setting process.

Training seminars, briefings and pre-meetings: The Scrutiny team ran a number of seminars and briefings on the Integrated Planning Process, to enable Members to challenge this process effectively. Extended pre-meetings before formal opportunities to challenge the budget were arranged to enable the committees to agree and focus on key lines of inquiry.

#### Scrutiny of the Opposition Budget:

A special Scrutiny Committee meeting was also convened to consider the 'Opposition's budget'. These proposals were presented by a Shadow Cabinet, and Scrutiny challenged the assumptions and rationale behind these proposals. This alternative perspective was scrutinised in the same fashion as the administration budget and helped 'depoliticize' the process.



*For me, the winners needed to demonstrate both public engagement and a 'critical friend' approach, which is tough in this category. Cambridgeshire stood out as particularly strong on public involvement.*

Ian Carruthers, CIPFA and Good Scrutiny Awards Judge



## How it worked

Each Scrutiny Committee reviewed the work conducted over the year, with particular reference to Member Led Reviews that had resulted in recommendations adopted by Cabinet. In addition, every Scrutiny Member was invited to a development day, which enabled Members to consider areas of focus, questioning techniques and how to focus on the links between priorities, performance and expenditure. This provided Scrutiny Members with the necessary information both to challenge the budget proposals from the perspective of their individual committee and to interrogate the broader budget strategy cutting across the whole Council's activities.

Scrutiny had the opportunity to utilise this learning via the 'Directors pairings' where emerging budgets and a number of options could be discussed and challenged with service Directors. This gave Members the latest intelligence on the budget situation, and the thought process of Directors as they prepared their budgets for consideration by Cabinet.

## Safe-guarding public involvement

The Council undertook a consultation exercise with Cambridgeshire citizens as part of the budget setting process. Scrutiny was involved in both challenging the robustness and validity of this exercise, and in challenging how the priorities identified by the public were reflected in the budget proposals. Scrutiny wanted evidence that consultation and public engagement had been meaningful and not just a box ticking exercise

Cambridgeshire identified that there was sometimes a mismatch between the results from the consultation and the actual prioritisation evident within the budget proposals. For example, it was noted that the condition of Highways was a particular concern highlighted by the public, but this was not reflected in the budget as it included a real terms cut to the Highways budget. It was also questioned whether Cabinet Members were taking the necessary tough decisions about which services should not be prioritised, and being sufficiently

realistic about what could be achieved within resource constraints.

## Getting members involved

The Chairmen of Cambridgeshire's four Scrutiny steered their committees to adopt a style of budget scrutiny covering themes including:

- working through influence
- the ability to be positive and constructive
- being willing to challenge
- being informed of priorities and risks
- being focused on outcomes for service users

Members engaged across the political parties by volunteering to take part in the programme of Director pairings.

## Early involvement = greater impact

The Integrated Planning Process introduced by the authority means Cambridgeshire Members have become involved in scrutinising the budget process at a much earlier stage. Prior to this system, Members had focused their attention on proposals in February, which had left little leeway to amend proposals and so the impact was reduced. The implementation of Director pairings, where budget proposals are very much in development, ensured Member influence the budget and facilitated the drawing out of strategic themes for consideration by the rest of the committee. The new IPP sub group ensures that this learning and expertise is developed, and now provides a focus for Scrutiny to engage with the administration as the new financial year unfolds.

A review by the sub group about the new scrutiny arrangements has resulted in positive feedback, specifically that the pairings and scrutiny of the opposition budget have been especially useful, both in terms of the budget process and the wider work programme.

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