
ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
ANNUAL REPORT 2004/05

1. I am delighted to present the Annual Report of Environment Scrutiny Committee to Council on behalf of Members of that Committee. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the Members for their contribution to the work of this Committee, with particular thanks to those Members who participated in Scrutiny Reviews and who are referred to later on in this report. Their support to the scrutiny process is invaluable and the work of the Committee would not have been as effective without their support and commitment over the last year. I also wish to acknowledge the effort and the help of the several Officers who support the Committee, in particular Elizabeth Creighton and Ian Thompson, from Community Services, both of whom have been lead Officers for Environment Scrutiny and Karen Graves from Democratic Services. Special thanks are extended to the following Cabinet Members for their continued support - Councillors D.A. Lyonette, Regeneration and Planning portfolio, N. Wallis, Highways and Transport portfolio and L. Vasey, Leisure and Arts portfolio.
2. Over the year, as seen in the appended work programme, the Committee has handled all the elements of scrutiny, including policy development, Best Value Reviews and inspections, progress, consultation and monitoring functions and studies of particular services. We have gained in experience and confidence using various techniques as appropriate.
3. As a Committee we continue to look at ways in which we can, through the Scrutiny process, contribute to the work of the Council and enable all our Members to analyse, contribute and comment on ways of developing the scrutiny process further.
4. An active year on the part of the Committee has been spent in advising on strategies examining particular topics, monitoring Best Value Action Plans and taking part in scoping Best Value Reviews.
5. As part of our role we monitored the four Service Plans in which Environment Scrutiny were involved in relation to the Development and Environment and Community Services Departments. We have also looked at the implementation of a new software package, *PerformancePlus*, which will enable us to undertake better performance management within the Authority. Members of Environment Scrutiny attended a special training session designed for Environment Scrutiny Committee Members on 24th March, 2005.

6. During September 2004 this Committee published its findings on the Review undertaken on Conservation. All Members of the Committee took part in the Review the aim of which was to examine and investigate the existence of a Conservation Policy within this Authority, compile an Action Plan arising from our findings and increase public awareness of conservation issues. In order to assist with the Review we consulted with English Heritage, Darlington Civic Trust, North East Civic Trust, Chris Lloyd of the Northern Echo and George Flynn, Local Historian. Cabinet gave consideration to our findings and requested that an Action Plan be drawn up. This has now been completed and we will monitor its progress with great interest.
7. Following completion of the Review on Conservation the Committee undertook a further major review on the subject of tourism. The aim of the Review was to investigate how the tourism strategy could be improved in the light of regeneration and all Members of the Committee participated. In order to assist us we have undertaken visits to Tourist Information Centres at Chesterfield and more locally, Barnard Castle, Bishop Auckland, Thirsk and Richmond. We are nearing completion of the Review and hope to publish our findings within the current Municipal Year.
8. A Task and Finish Group comprising Councillors Hartley, Long, Lewis, Ruck and S.J. Jones was established to investigate derelict sites with the Town paying particular attention to 'deprived Wards' benefiting from community partnership work. The Group chose at random four sites, both Council and private-owned, with various and very different problems and sought solutions to improve them within the Council legal powers and constraints. After several meetings the Group decided that the scope of the task was large enough to warrant a full Review and made recommendation that Environment Committee undertake this as its next major Review subject.
9. A further Task and Finish established by this Committee is to give consideration to Business Start-Ups in Darlington with Councillors Heaney, Ruck, Armstrong and Lewis being nominated to serve. The Group is due to have its first meeting at the end of April and the Committee awaits the findings of the Group.
10. Another Task and Finish undertaken by this Committee was to investigate a purchasing policy for the purchase of works of art and comprised Councillors Long, Hartley and myself. The Group met on two occasions and presented its final report to Committee on 28th April with the recommendation that no further action be taken in relation to the Council's Art Collection until the proposed audit is complete and the issues highlighted in the report be considered at that time.
11. We were asked to nominate Members to serve on a Joint Task and Finish Review Group with Public Protection and Community Partnerships Scrutiny Committee which was established to investigate problems associated with gully cleaning. Councillors Ruck, Long and J. Vasey have agreed to participate and the Group will examine issues surrounding the types of gullies, cleaning and inspection regimes, the number of complaints received, priorities and recurring problems with gullies. The first meeting has taken place on 5th April and Environment Scrutiny look forward to receiving the Final report once the

Group has concluded its findings.

12. In order to see the work in progress which was aimed at improving areas of wild open space, the countryside access and levels of bio-diversity we undertook site visits to Countryside Wild Spaces and the Council's nature reserves. The visits proved highly successful and we agreed to undertake annual visits to monitor further progress.
13. We have continued to monitor the 'white light' conversion programme of street lighting and Committee are delighted that Cabinet decided to accelerate the white light installation programme.
14. We also continue to undertake street furniture inspections at which we highlight small maintenance works, general tidying and cleaning of areas.
15. The Parks and Open Spaces Strategy is due to be completed during February 2006 and Environment Scrutiny are continuing to monitor its progress. Due to a new requirement to produce an open land supplementary planning document to fit into the new Local Development Framework, to ensure that the Council can justify any planning decisions for applications on existing areas of open space, its completion is not now expected until February 2006 and we will continue to monitor its progress.
16. Our views have been taken into consideration for the development of a charging policy for leisure and arts services bearing in mind those sections of the Community whose needs were highlighted in the draft Social Inclusion Strategy and we will continue to monitor its progress.
17. The Local Development Framework, which is to replace the Darlington Local Plan, continues to progress and Environment Scrutiny are continuing to monitor its development with particular emphasis on the Statement of Community Involvement. The Statement of Community Involvement has been through a rigorous consultation process and fully explains to the public the planning process, particularly at pre-application stage.
18. On planning issues, we are pleased to note the improvements achieved through the Development Control Action Plan. Although not every target has yet been reached, there has been a step change in the department, and the public has expressed a lot of satisfaction as a result.
19. Still on planning matters we undertook a site visit, along with Members of Planning Applications Committee, to several previously determined planning application developments within the Borough in order for Environment Scrutiny to fulfil its monitoring role of the Development Control Best Value Review.
20. We have had a call-in of Cabinet's decision to allow cycles within the Town Centre Pedestrian Heart and following detailed questions no further action was taken in respect of that call-in and the decision was therefore supported.

21. Environment Committee Members have, along with all other Scrutiny Committees, given consideration to issues appropriate to the environment within both the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and the Social Inclusion Strategy
22. Other areas of work undertaken by this Scrutiny during the Municipal Year 2004/05 are detailed at **Appendix 1**.
23. I would like to express my thanks to Members of the Committee who have brought so much zest and commitment to the work of the Committee. We are determined to develop the Scrutiny functions using good practice and harnessing the experience and interests of all our Members, to the benefit of the town's population in the drive to improve services and look after our environment for everyone. We are working more effectively on behalf of the people of Darlington.

Environment Scrutiny Committee