

# **CORPORATE GOVERNANCE**

## **WORKING GROUP**

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### **FINAL REPORT**

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**Councillor Ian Haszeldine**  
**Chair**  
**March 2008**

At the Council meeting on 19th July 2007, a report was presented to Members entitled a Progress Update on Community Engagement. The report made a set of detailed recommendations about closer working relationships; improved communications and the way the Council works. As a result of this last area of work Members agreed to ask the Monitoring and Co-Ordination group to establish a working group to:-

‘examine opportunities to ensure that Darlington Borough Council functions in a way that is open and inclusive, with processes accessible to residents and stakeholders and with opportunities for wide involvement in its policy and decision making. The effective use of the scrutiny function would form a part of the review scope’

## Members of the Group

Councillor Barker,  
Councillor Chapman,  
Councillor Haszeldine (Chair),  
Councillor Hughes,  
Councillor Johnson,  
Councillor Swift,  
Councillor Mrs D. Jones,  
Councillor S Jones,  
Councillor Robson  
Councillor Williams.

## Meetings

3rd September 2007  
9th October 2007  
7th November 2007 (Joint meeting with Planning Applications Committee)  
22nd November 2007  
20th December 2007  
11th February 2008  
19th February 2008 (visit to Gateshead Civic Centre)  
6th March 2008

1. Based on this remit the group established its own terms of reference attached at **Appendix 1**.
2. The timetable of meetings is attached at **Appendix 2**.

### **Community Events**

3. A number of events have taken place since the meeting on 19th July designed to encourage understanding and awareness of local democracy. The following are some examples of these events:
4. The Council has run two 'How your Council Works' sessions which are designed to enable Members of the public interested in how the Council works to attend the Town Hall and take part in activities and speak to officers about how the Council makes decisions.
5. Members of the Democratic Services Section attended a Red Hall Community Event (24th October 2007) to conduct a 'Local Democracy Roadshow' event.
6. Following a request from the Queen Elizabeth Sixth-Form College, a 'Local Democracy/Question Time' event was arranged for Wednesday, 5th March, 2008 at the College for Politics and Citizenship students. The students received a presentation on local democracy, followed by an opportunity to question leading Members of the three main political groups on the Council in a session similar to the BBC television programme 'Question Time'. From this a list of questions raised by the students was prepared following the questions. There were over one hundred students who attended the event. Councillor Long represented the Labour Group, Councillor Armstrong represented the Conservative Group, with Councillor Barker representing the Liberal Democrats. Questions were asked on a wide range of issues from turnout at local elections to local projects (e.g. bowling alley, cinema, pedestrianisation of town centre, traffic congestion, etc.). The response was very positive and it has been agreed to hold a future Cabinet at the college as part of the initiative of Cabinet in the Community.
7. The Health and Well Being Scrutiny Committee held its Ordinary Meeting on the 12th February 2008, in the Staff Meeting Room, West Park Hospital, Darlington. Unfortunately, no Members of the public attended the meeting.
8. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held a Special Meeting of the Committee at Longfield School on Thursday, 28th February 2008, to discuss the projects and work being conducted in schools in relation to Climate Change. Representatives from every school in the Borough were invited, and eight schools sent representatives.

### **Engagement with Schools**

9. A number of activities have been arranged specifically with schools in the Borough to help ensure that future voters engage in and understand local democracy. These include:
  - (a) On 15th October 2007 as part of Local Democracy Week a Special Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Meeting was held which was attended by school

children. A letter has been sent to all schools involved in the thanking them for their attendance and highlighting that the Council would be more than happy for schools to use the Council Chamber for their School Council Meetings. Further publicity will be undertaken as part of the ongoing work in developing linkages with schools, with the intention of establishing a timetable from responses.

- (b) Officers have attended the Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College (11th October 2007) and the Darlington College (18th October 2007) to conduct a 'Local Democracy Roadshow' event. Students were invited to discuss their views on local democracy, and what activities they felt the Council could provide to increase young people's involvement in the democratic process.
- (c) Three, A-Level Politics students from the Queen Elizabeth Sixth-Form College, have each been given the opportunity to 'shadow' Councillor McEwan whilst he conducted his Council business (5th October, 14th November, and 30th November, 2007). The feedback from the Queen Elizabeth Sixth-Form College, and the students themselves, has been extremely positive, and this is an initiative that could be extended to other Cabinet Members/Scrutiny Chairs and other Members of Council.
- (d) All Primary, Junior and Secondary Schools were contacted on Tuesday, 6th November 2007, in relation to an on-going programme of events and activities aimed at raising the profile of local democracy in children and young people. Such activities include 'Town Hall Treasure Hunts', 'I'm a Councillor, Get me out of here!' Mock/School Elections, 'Democracy Blockbusters', 'Build a Councillor'. The Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Children and Young People also wrote a letter to all Schools and Colleges on Friday, 16th November, 2007, encouraging schools involvement in such activities, and it is hoped that every Primary, Junior and Secondary schools and Colleges, will participate in this programme of events on an annual basis.
- (e) 32 Year four pupils from Alderman Leach Primary School attended the initial 'Town Hall Treasure Hunt' event on Monday, 26th November, 2007. Pupils had the opportunity to meet The Mayor and two Councillors, received a tour of the Council Chamber and the Mayor's Parlour, and undertook a series of activities to promote awareness of local democracy and the democratic process, the importance of voting and the role of a Councillor. The event was very successful and the staff from the school involved were very positive about the event, and commented that they would take part in similar events in the future. A further school has approached the Democratic Services Section, and it is hoped that, as more schools become aware of the event, a programme can be developed so that Year four pupils from every primary and Junior School visit the Town Hall each year and undertake a series of activities to develop their knowledge of local democracy.

## **Other Developments**

### **Website Update**

10. A detailed proposal has now been developed for the Connecting with Communities web project involving two work strands:

- (a) The development of an accessible web portal giving easy to use access to important community news and information, searchable details of events and key contacts for all users. This website will help to deliver the community engagement strategy's aim of further exploiting electronic modes of communication to increase levels of interaction with the public.
  - (b) A consultation events management system which will enable the authority to get to grips with the intelligence that arises from the Council's extensive consultation and engagement work which has not previously been properly "joined up". It will also make sure that the Council closes the feedback loop in a consistent way by helping to maintain an overview of all engagement activity and enable a structured view of outcomes of consultation programmes and lessons learned about the process.
11. The graphic designs for the website are almost complete and technical development is about to start. Web content authors have been identified and dates are being scheduled for training to enable the team to implement the consultation events management system.

### **Enhancing Public Involvement in Council Decision Making**

12. There is a clear obligation on Councils and pressure from the recent legislation to actively look at ways in which we can help the public to take an active role in local decision making. In many cases the public are reluctant to engage in formal decision making, and this problem is exacerbated by some traditional Council procedures which appear to be a barrier between the public and the decision making processes.
13. The Group received a number of reports and presentations on the legislative framework, research into new political structures and information from other authorities. The group has examined all the key areas of the Council's decision making processes and has made some significant recommendations for ways in which we can take steps to encourage public involvement and remove barriers that may exist for those who do want to play a role. . A number of the recommendations were agreed to following the interim report to Council on 31st January 2008, and a number are included as recommendations as part of this final report.

### **Changes to Planning Committee**

14. The group identified at its first meeting that engagement in Council decision making was strongest in the area of planning. It is therefore important that our Planning arrangements are as open and inclusive as possible to encourage future involvement in other areas. It is particularly important that those who took part in Planning Application Committee (PAC) meetings felt that whatever the result they had a good chance to have their say.
15. It was recognised that Darlington already compared well in relation to the arrangements that it had in place for PAC meetings when considered alongside The Planning Officers Society Good Practice Note on Public Speaking in Planning Committees and the arrangements in other authorities. However the Working Group were keen to ensure that the review would provide the opportunity to look beyond good practice and consider innovative options for improvement.

16. On 9th October 2007 the Corporate Governance Group considered a report including various options for improving public speaking, and involvement, at PAC. The Group agreed that the third of these options should be taken forward. This involved the division of PAC into two separate meetings one for the major proposals attracting extensive public interest and another for householder applications which receive only a small number of objections. The new option also included the opportunity for up to three objectors to speak for five minutes, and for a further right of reply for objectors after the officers have presented their report. The same opportunities are also available to the applicant.
17. It was agreed that a joint meeting with PAC be held to discuss the option and its implications. On 7th November the joint meeting considered the proposed changes in detail and PAC representatives agreed to support Option 3 which included enhanced rights for the public to speak at Planning Committee, and the creation of a sub-committee to ensure that the Planning Applications Committee could focus on those applications which attract most public interest.
18. The changes were approved at Council on 31st January 2008 and the first meeting under the new arrangements was held on 6th February.

### The New Procedure

#### Option 3: Greater public involvement – Leading the Way

19. PAC agenda items are split according to defined criteria. The complex/controversial applications are now dealt with by the full committee. Householder applications are now dealt with by a separate Planning Applications Sub-Committee. There is scope for the Chair to agree to certain householder applications going to full Committee, where the level of interest warrants it.
20. Two meetings are held, with the full PAC at 1.30pm on Wednesday, every 4 weeks as now. The sub-Committee meets on the same day, starting at 5pm.
21. The Planning Applications Committee procedures include the following running order :
  - (a) Chair introduces agenda item.
  - (b) Officer describes proposal.
  - (c) Applicant/agent speaks (up to 5 mins).
  - (d) Members question applicant/agent.
  - (e) Up to 3 objectors speak (each for up to 5 mins).
  - (f) Members question objector(s).
  - (g) Parish Council rep (up to 5 mins).
  - (h) Members question Parish Council rep.
  - (i) Ward Councillor (up to 5 mins).
  - (j) Officer summarises key planning issues.
  - (k) Members question officers.
  - (l) Right to reply – Objector(s).
  - (m) Right to reply – applicant/agent.
  - (n) Officer final comments.
  - (o) Members debate and vote.

- (p) Chair announces decision.
22. Speakers can have visual material added to the power point presentation up to the date of the committee, and other documents can be distributed on the day, provided that they are made available to the applicant and other objectors who are present.
23. Arrangements for the new Sub-Committee are set out in the terms of reference in **Appendix 3** and details are set out below:-
- (a) The Sub-Committee includes 5 Members of PAC, with support provided by a Planning officer, legal officer and committee clerk.
  - (b) Applicants/objectors are invited in one application at a time to sit round the table.
  - (c) Public and press can attend.
  - (d) The purpose of this panel is to provide a more informal setting for applicants/objectors and remove the need to go through a full committee process.
  - (e) For both meetings, it is proposed to assess the most appropriate venue and room layout to ensure that everyone present can easily hear and see what is going on, which should help them to better understand the processes and procedures involved.
  - (f) A Procedure Note has been produced to inform people of their right to speak, including details of the processes involved, and an explanation of what are, and are not, material planning considerations. This is available on the Council's website.
  - (g) Changes have been made to the Protocol for Councillors and Officers Dealing with Planning Matters. The changes are set out in **Appendix 4**.
24. Members and officers received training on the new procedures prior to them going 'live'.
25. The new form of Planning Applications Committee took place on 6th February 2008.
26. A sixth month trial will be followed by a review report, including a survey of Members, officers and public feedback from individuals and organisations who have taken part at PAC over the previous 6 months.

## **Changes to Full Council**

### Council Question Time

27. Appropriate literature has been revised and distributed during both the 'How Your Council Works for You' and 'Talking Together' events. The webpage 'How you can ask a question at Council Meetings' has been updated.

### Public Questions At Council

28. Although it has always been possible for Members of the public to ask questions at Council meetings, this has not happened and therefore publicity was provided in the Town Crier and at all 'Talking Together' events attended by the Democratic Services Team to let people know. Despite publicity there has been no public question at Council to date.

### Reducing Notice for Public Questions

29. The public are currently entitled to ask questions at Council and this is set out in Council Procedure Rule 14 as follows:-

*A question may only be asked if notice has been given by delivering it in writing or by electronic mail to the Director of Corporate Services no later than 12 noon, seven clear working days (that is not counting the day of the meeting or the day of delivery) before the day of the meeting. Each Question must give the name and address of the questioner and must name the Member of the Council to whom it is to be put.*

30. To alter this requirement a change to the Council Procedure Rules will need to be approved by Council at its meeting on 26th March 2008. The change can be 24 hours or 3 clear days. As Council meetings are mostly on a Thursday then 24 hours would give all of Thursday as a minimum to seek an answer to the question, 3 days would give Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. The Working Group agreed to recommend to Council that the notice period should be reduced to 24 hours to give maximum opportunity for the public to ask a question.

### Changes to the Agenda

31. The wording and appearance of the Agenda will be updated to ensure that it provides information that a person attending the meeting will require, but is also intended to be easier to read.
32. The Agenda itself will be changed to reduce the number of items on the agenda, to focus the meeting on the business rather than the surrounding administration. The order will be changed to put the decisions earlier in the agenda. More information will be provided to the public about the practicalities of how to attend a meeting. A statement which makes it clear that the public are welcome to attend will appear prominently on the front of the agenda.

### Enabling opposition Members to ask Cabinet Member about whole Portfolio

33. The current Council Procedure Rules state that when a Cabinet Member or Scrutiny chair present an update report question and comments from other members are limited to the content of the update report prepared by the Cabinet Member or Scrutiny Chair. To enable members to put to Cabinet Members and Scrutiny Chairs any questions which are relevant to the area of their relevant Portfolio or Scrutiny Committee the Council Procedure Rules can be amended to allow any question to be put.

### Changes to Rules of Debate

34. The current rules of debate require that as soon as an amendment is put, the debate must move to the amendment only, and the substantive motion is put as soon as an amendment has fallen. This has the potential to close down debate, and many members are confused about the requirement to speak on the amendment only. A simpler format which allows free debate and at the end an amendment to be put, followed by the substantive motion, if the amendment falls, would make it easier for new members, and clearer to the public. It is proposed that debate is allowed on the amendment and the



substantive motion at the same time, and at the end the amendment will be put, and then the substantive motion. Because this is currently governed by the Mayor under rule 75 Council Procedure Rules which states that Members must confine remarks to the question under discussion, there is no need to amend the rules, however there will be a change in advice to the Mayor which will allow Members to speak on either the amendment or the substantive motion during debate.

35. A copy of the Council Procedure Rules with the proposed amendments marked is attached as **Appendix 5**.

### Council Chamber

36. The group has also received presentations on the Council Chamber. It was acknowledged that the council chamber is not friendly for public involvement and also that planning committee and potentially Cabinet if there is large public interest in an item (such as the recent budget meeting), are not currently held in venues which allow for significant public attendance. It is also hoped that screens could be included which could be used for Planning Committee in the usual way, but could be used in Council and Cabinet to help the public attending receive information about the progress of the meeting. A proposal is therefore being considered to remove the current seating and dais, with a view to providing a flexible room which allows the public to view meetings from the main chamber, but which still enable a degree of formality for the Council meetings. The proposal will also look at an audio system that obviates the need for hand held microphones, and provides screens which can be viewed by Members and the public alike. A brief is now being prepared for our framework partners to take this work forward. Detailed consultation with the wider membership of the authority will take place as part of the preparation of the brief.

### Leaflet

37. Members requested that a user friendly leaflet about Council meetings be made available for the public as part of the publicity for Council meetings, in addition to the leaflet about "How to ask a question at Council". The proposed leaflet is designed to be informative and welcoming. Copies of the leaflet can be made available at all Council buildings and other delivery points for Council leaflets, as well as online. The leaflets can also be made available at events such as Talking together, How Your council Works for You and Ward Surgeries. They can be made available for Members to distribute or refer to in Ward Newsletters. A launch of the leaflet is planned to co-incide with a new style Council meeting with a full article in the Town Crier.

### Publicity

38. Currently details of all meetings are sent to the press together with agenda for meetings. The Northern Echo pick up on these and advertise meeting dates on the Darlington pages. In addition an advertisement appears in the Town Crier stating the dates and times of meetings. They are also displayed on the website. The Group agreed the need for further publicity to ensure that everyone was aware of the dates and times of meetings, and that more importantly they were aware that anyone can ask a question at a Council meeting. A statement to that effect has been included in the Town Crier.

## Podcasting and Webcasts

39. Podcasts following Council and other meetings can be arranged. This involves an individual member being filmed to explain a Council issue or event, and posting this on the website. This was used in relation to the Tesco debate. Equipment to do this is already available but has to be hired in from a private company at a cost of £500 per podcast.
40. The group considered webcasting of Council and other meetings, and observed webcasts from another authority. The group considered that costs of webcasting would be significant as a private company would need to be employed with a number of cameras situated around the chamber together with sound equipment. On the whole it was felt that the public would not make extensive use of the webcasts of ordinary meetings, although the option was not ruled out if it could be provided on a one off basis for meetings on a key issue which would have a significant public interest.

## **Changes to Cabinet**

### Public Questions at Cabinet about how the Public can ask Questions at Council

41. A standard item is now included on all Cabinet agendas to allow members of the public to attend and ask Questions at meetings of the Cabinet. At the meeting of Cabinet on 13th November 2007 two members of the public chose to take advantage of this new opportunity to attend the meeting and asked a number of questions specifically in relation to speed bumps and traffic calming generally, and the Eastern Transport Corridor capital project. Non Executive members have also taken advantage of the right of anyone to ask a question at Cabinet, to ask a range of questions on a regular basis at meetings of Cabinet. Cabinet has also been visited by a group of Journalism students. Meetings of the Cabinet will also be held in the Community as part of the 'Talking Together' events, on a quarterly basis, the first of which was held on 15th January, 2008.

### Cabinet Portfolios

42. Cabinet portfolios have been revised to align them with the key themes within the Community Strategy and Local Strategic Partnership. The new portfolios are also designed to ensure that they are more readily understood by residents, that they reflect the proposed legislative changes and changes made to organisational delivery arrangements and that they are better able to address locality issues. There is now a specific Cabinet Portfolio in relation to community engagement.

### Attendance at Cabinet Meetings

43. Cabinet has extended an invitation to the Leaders of the other political parties, the Independent member, the Chair of the Darlington Partnership and the Chair of Monitoring and Co-ordination Group to attend Cabinet meetings, receive all Cabinet papers, and to ask questions and take part in discussion on items. Those invited sit alongside Cabinet members and join in the debate. A range of questions have been raised and the discussion has resulted in changes to the recommendations to Cabinet.

44. Scrutiny Chairs are also invited to Cabinet to present the reports of their committees. This took place for the first time at the meeting on 15th January 2008. Councillor Hughes, Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee presented a report to Cabinet in the community in relation to Health and Safety in Schools and Councillor Mrs. D. Jones, Chair of Neighbourhood Services Scrutiny Committee presented a report on Flooding.
45. At the meeting on 13th November, it was noted that Committee Room 1 did not offer sufficient accommodation for the public. At the meeting on 16th January, 2008 on the MTFP, Committee Room 2 was used. The meeting was well attended by staff, Members, and the press who made several detailed representations as part of the budget consultation process. At that meeting a petition was presented to Cabinet on car parking permits who were accommodated well in the public seating area.

#### Cabinet in the Community

46. The first meeting of the Cabinet in the Community was held on Tuesday, 15th January, 2008, at Holy Family School, as part of the 'Talking Together' event. The meeting was advertised in the December and January editions of the Town Crier. The meeting was well attended by Members of the public. A group of school children was also invited to the meeting and given an opportunity to put a range of questions to Members of Cabinet. The question session was challenging with the children asking some searching questions and keeping the Cabinet Members on their toes. At the end the children were presented with certificates by the portfolio holder for Community Engagement and thanked Cabinet for the opportunity to put their questions. After the children other Members of the public and Councillors present had an opportunity to ask questions.

#### Public/interested group to be able to speak on an issue to make representations

47. The ability for a member of the public to ask a question is already available, but this could be extended to representational groups to come and speak on a particular issue relevant to the work of Cabinet. There is no formal change required to the Cabinet Procedure Rules to allow this to happen.

#### Public/interested group able to present a petition to Cabinet

48. This would enable one or more persons who have collected signatures to come to Cabinet and formally present the petition to the Leader or relevant Portfolio Holder at that meeting. Unless a motion has been tabled it will not be possible to debate the proposal there and then. However once a petition has been presented, this could trigger an item on the following agenda of Cabinet to 'Respond to the Petition presented at the previous meeting'. The Council does receive a high volume of petitions so the Cabinet would also have scope for deciding that the matter should be dealt with through an officer response. A minor change to the Cabinet Procedure Rules under the heading What Business? – to include this as a possible item of business would be made for those petitions which are referred to Cabinet for a response.
49. A copy of the Cabinet Procedure Rules with the proposed amendments marked is attached as **Appendix 6**.

## Leaflet

50. To enable those Members of the public attending Cabinet meetings to understand the roles, who is who, and what is happening, a leaflet has been prepared which can be made available in the entrance to the Town Hall, and in the Cabinet meeting room on chairs for the public. It could also be made available with other publicity material in venues throughout the Borough. Spare copies of the Agenda will also be made available for members of the public attending meetings.

## **Changes to Scrutiny**

### Leaflet

51. Members of the public may also benefit from the distribution of a leaflet by Scrutiny which has been prepared to raise awareness about the role of Scrutiny and the way it works. This can be made available to the public at Scrutiny meetings and in other ways.

### Scrutiny Remit

52. Scrutiny remits have altered to strengthen the linkages with LSP theme groups and with the revised Cabinet portfolios. The changes to the titles and themes of the revised Scrutiny Committees were also designed to ensure that they were more readily understood by residents, that they reflected the proposed legislative changes and changes made to organisational delivery arrangements and that they were better able to address locality issues. The revised Scrutiny Committees have been running successfully now for over six months.

### Scrutiny in the Community

53. Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, Children and Young People and Resources Scrutiny Committees have all recently held meetings out of the Town Hall and in relevant venues. Public attendance at some of these meetings has been limited. Pupils from the Education Village attended the Ordinary Meeting of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, held on 14th January 2008 at the Education Village. The pupils in attendance were given the opportunity throughout the meeting to ask questions and comment on the issues being discussed.

### Public invited to present evidence to Task and Finish Groups/Scrutiny by invitation

54. Members of the public can already present evidence to Scrutiny meetings as ‘witnesses’, but greater encouragement could be given for ordinary people to do so, rather than those who have a particular involvement or expertise which is relevant to the role of the Scrutiny Committee. This does not require a change to the Scrutiny Procedure Rules

### Co-optees to be allowed to sit on Scrutiny (other than mandatory)

55. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has mandatory co-optees. The Constitution does not allow other Scrutiny Committees to have co-optees, other than for Task and Finish Groups. Paragraph 7 of the current Scrutiny Procedure Rules states :-

- (a) With the exception of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, co-optees be only appointed to Review Groups and Task and Finish Reviews. It is proposed that this clause be deleted and replaced with a statement that

‘In addition to the mandatory co-optees on Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, other Scrutiny Committees can appoint co-optees to the Scrutiny Committee or the Task and Finish Review Groups to assist in the work of the committee, non statutory co-optees have no voting powers.’

#### Requirement for only one scrutiny report to go to cabinet every 6 months be relaxed

56. The rules currently provide that once Scrutiny Committee have prepared a formal report with recommendations it should be referred to Cabinet for consideration, however there is a requirement in Rule 31 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules as follows:-

*Only one report every six months may be submitted by each Scrutiny Committee to Cabinet.*

57. This limits the work of the Committee. The rules also suggest that all members are encouraged to take part in one major and two task and finish reviews each Municipal year. It is proposed that Rule 31 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules should be deleted.

#### Exceptions clause

58. Clause 48 of the Scrutiny Procedure rules provides that :-

‘In order to ensure that call –in is not abused, nor causes unreasonable delay, certain limitations may be place on its use.’

59. This is not specific and appears restrictive. It has never been necessary to use the rule, and generally there are no abuses of the call-in arrangements. It is recommended that rule 48 be deleted.

#### Leader and Portfolio Holder power to refer some decisions to Scrutiny for consideration before Cabinet

60. Although Cabinet have referred decisions to Scrutiny before consideration, this requires a meeting of Cabinet which can delay decisions. If the Leader and relevant Portfolio Holder had the power to refer matters to Scrutiny without a formal meeting there would be scope for this to happen more often giving Scrutiny the opportunity to comment on key issues being considered before a decision is made. There is scope for doing this more regularly and ensuring that consultation on a decision is overseen by Scrutiny rather than officers and with the benefit of public meetings and briefings.
61. A copy of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules with the proposed amendments marked is attached as **Appendix 7**.

## Summary Reports

62. A new summary report has been prepared which will be used with all Council reports. The summary report would enable someone picking it up to have a good understanding of what the report was saying and proposing before going on to read the detail of the report. It will enable Members to quickly grasp the significance of the decision proposed and know what is proposed without searching for the recommendation in the body of the report which can be buried between the report and the appendices. A summary report will make this information accessible in a single page on the front of each report. .

## Specialist Paragraphs

63. The Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, the Health Improvement and Social Inclusion Group (a partnership within the LSP), and the Environment Scrutiny Committee, have identified the need for the Council to demonstrate that it considers issues such as Health, Equalities and Sustainability implications of all proposals within committee reports. With the development of the new Sustainable Community Strategy which is being considered for approval at this meeting the linkage with the objectives of the strategy could also be highlighted in the report.
64. The standard report already includes a number of special paragraphs for consideration some of these are cross cutting themes such as Crime and Disorder implications and others are practical checks which must be made to ensure that reports are ready for consideration. There are some statements which are designed to help Members know the nature of the decision and the status for call in, and consideration of changes to the budget and policy framework.
65. The introduction of the summary report will make reports more accessible to those who have difficulty with reading quantities of text whether because of learning difficulties, visual impairment or because English is not their first language. The production of the summary report will necessitate the production of a page of text in addition to the report. However this is offset by the table for special paragraphs which will reduce the need for standard paragraphs within each report and hopefully reduce the pages required for each report.
66. The financial implications are usually considered within the context of the report but there is no specific paragraph which identifies the impact on the Council's budget. The law requires that Cabinet cannot make decisions outside the budget and policy framework so it is important that the implications for the budget are considered in each Cabinet report. There is a risk if a number of additional paragraphs are added to reports that the report will be largely standard paragraphs reproduced which will add to the paperwork and distract from the report. A copy of a sample summary report is attached at **Appendix 8**.

## Area Working

67. The group received a detailed paper about area working which explored in some detail the range of options available in which the Council could better engage with the community through area working. The report also included costings for the three options based on similar criteria which showed that removing the formality of the decision

making processes lowered the costs. There was some debate about area committees with devolved budgets, and planning decision making powers, and the cost, and possible geographical spread of these committees. There was also consideration of informal area forums, which could consider and consult on issues, but would not have devolved budgets or decision making functions. The group however decided that informal arrangements were most likely to maximise community engagement and that they would be the most cost effective form of community engagement.

68. The group looked at some of the new informal arrangements that the Council has put in place for enhancing community engagement including the community events, work with schools and some of the practical steps such as podcasting that the Council has explored. In particular the group considered reports on the effectiveness of Talking Together and its future. Although the group acknowledged that there was scope for further development there was (almost) unanimous agreement that Talking Together was the preferred way forward for effective area working. There was particular support also for formal meetings to take place within the community such as Cabinet in the community which were a better way of ensuring that Council decision making was delivered locally then establishing area committees with the practical difficulties and costs involved.

### **Talking Together**

69. The delivery of Talking Together is a key part of the Council's commitment to improving the way that it engages with the people it serves. Delivery is supported by the involvement of Darlington PCT, Durham Constabulary, Darlington Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, Durham Police Authority, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service.
70. Talking Together is an informal community engagement initiative focused on reaching those who would not normally turn up for a formal meeting. In summary, the aims of Talking Together are fourfold.
- (a) provide local opportunities for residents to raise concerns about service provision;
  - (b) consult and involve residents in running services and help shape the service planning process;
  - (c) inform residents about the quality of services in their area and consult on priorities for service improvements;
  - (d) inform and consult residents on other developments, either specific to the locality or borough-wide.
71. There have been two rounds of Talking Together, the first round was held in October/November, the second was held in January/beginning of February 2008. At the last round of Talking Together the Council took the opportunity to consult on the budget proposals, the draft Sustainable Community Strategy and the Core Issues document. Over 400 adults have attended these events.
72. Talking Together comprises an exhibition by key council services and a Talk Time session where residents can raise issues with Cabinet members, CMT, ward councillors and senior staff within the Council, Police and PCT. Feedback to the first round of Talking Together was given via the Talk Back leaflet. Many more residents took the

opportunity to attend the Talk Back sessions during the second round of meetings.

73. The second Talk Back leaflet will address issues raised at the meetings held in Middleton-St- George, Albert Hill, Lingfield, Whinfield, Ravensdale Road and Cockerton Village. Over 400 adults have attended the second round of Talking Together in total.
74. Cabinet in the Community was linked into the last round of Talking Together and children from Holy Family School Council were able to put their questions to Cabinet. In addition children from School Councils at Gurney Pease and Heathfield Primary schools have attended Talk Time sessions to ask questions of councillors and senior staff.
75. The dates and venues for the next round of Talking Together have been prepared and will include six more events scattered through the town.

## **Conclusion**

76. The group has conducted wide ranging enquiries into all aspects of Council decision making and has focused throughout on the public perception and involvement in those processes. Although there was a realism that the majority of people are content to allow elected Councillors to make decisions and do not wish to become involved in decision making, it was recognised that when issues do affect people directly, they want to know how to raise them and how they can be heard. It is important that the experience should be a positive one which ensures that they can speak without formality and be listened to directly by those responsible for making the decisions. The decision making processes can be off putting and there is an obligation to ensure that Council processes do not exclude or intimidate people, to an extent that those who want to speak are prevented from doing so.
77. The group has made some significant changes to the way Council operates, and has recognised that in order to ensure that processes are accessible it is sometimes necessary, without losing the ceremony of the occasion, to relax existing procedures and change the way we do things.
78. It is recognised that work in this area is ongoing and that there will be further improvements that can be made. The important change has been an acknowledgement across political divides that the Council is accountable to the people of Darlington and that, whether or not they chose to attend, the decision making processes must allow them to hold the decision makers to account.