

RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ANNUAL REPORT 2010/11

I am pleased to again present the Annual report of the Resources Scrutiny Committee to Council on behalf of the Members of the Committee. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the Officers for their support over the last year and to convey my thanks to Councillor Chris McEwan, Cabinet Member with Efficiency and Resources Portfolio, who has attended and contributed to our meetings.

In thanking the Officers, I would like to pay particular tribute to David Hall, Assistant Director, Finance, who will be leaving the Authority in April 2011. David has been the Lead Officer for our Scrutiny Committee for the last few years and his support and assistance to us has been invaluable and very much appreciated – he will be greatly missed and we wish him well for the future.

Although we have scrutinised and challenged in a number of areas within our remit and details of these are briefly set out at the end of my report, I would like to focus on some of the areas which we have been heavily involved in this year and which are worthy of particular mention.

Medium-Term Financial Plan – We again have had an extremely busy and challenging year in view of the financial position of the Council and a great deal of time has been spent in looking at the Council's financial position and the majority of the work we have undertaken links into this. I would like to thank Members for their commitment to this important part of our Scrutiny Committee. We have, over the last few years, gained a considerable amount of knowledge and expertise in the financial planning processes and the knowledge gained has proved vital during the budget consultation process and final proposals. For the first time, all Scrutiny Committees have assisted with the budgetary process and special meetings were held to consider those elements of the proposals which were within their remit and make recommendations to Cabinet.

The work in this area will obviously continue into the next Municipal Year and it is anticipated that Scrutiny will be looking to evidence and monitor how the savings are being achieved throughout the year and any impact on service and financial performance. It is important that the regular monthly budget monitoring reports are monitored to ensure that the budget is 'on track' and being delivered and that arrangements are in place to scrutinise the plans for next years budget proposals.

Capital Project Monitoring and Project Position Statement – Members will be aware that, over the last few years, we have undertaken a great deal of work in relation to project management within the Authority. We have regularly received information on the current position of the Council's capital commitments and resources together with all the live construction projects being managed by the Council, either by its in-house management team, framework partners or by consultants, with individual projects being looked at in more detail as and when we thought necessary. This again, is an on-going piece of work and we feel that, project management arrangements within the Council have vastly improved and are well-

embedded within the Organisation, as a result of the scrutiny and the challenge we have undertaken over the last few years in this area.

Healthier Lives for Children and Young People in County Durham and Darlington – We were involved in a joint piece of work with all Scrutiny Committees in relation to scrutinising an area of work from the Director of Public Health’s Annual Report entitled ‘Healthier Lives for Children and Young People in County Durham and Darlington’. This work was a ‘first’ for Darlington both in terms of cross-cutting scrutiny working at its best and in scrutinising and challenging key messages and outcomes of a partner organisation. The area of work the Resources Scrutiny Committee focussed on was how the Council was supporting families in difficult financial circumstances and we scrutinised the effectiveness of the Council’s delivery of its benefits service to ensure that families were getting their assessed entitlement within required timescales. Following our review we were satisfied that the service was operating effectively and was working effectively with both its internal and partners to deliver the service and, at the six-monthly update we were pleased that the time taken to process new claims for benefits and changes of circumstances had reduced from 14 to eight days and that, over the same period, the number of employees in the team has been reduced and the number of people claiming Housing and Council Tax Benefits has increased.

This project was a time-bound piece of work and the outcomes achieved showed the dedication and commitment of Scrutiny Members and partner organisations to improving the wider determinants of health and well being for children and young people, the resulting lifestyle choices and fair access to services.

The Forum – Humantics – As Members will be aware, there was a great deal of public interest in the Summer of last year in relation to the future of ‘The Forum’ and Cabinet considered a number of options and implications to the Council in considering whether to support The Forum Music Centre and take forward the Council-owned premises, as a result of an announcement that it was to close on 1st September, 2010. Cabinet did agree to a number of proposals to support the Forum and to enable us to understand fully the issues around those decisions, we called the matter in to Scrutiny and questioned the Officers. Following a very detailed scrutiny inquiry we were satisfied that we understood the reasoning behind the decisions and we were happy to give our support.

Other Areas –

- (i) **Human Resource Function** - We have continued to monitor sickness absence within the Authority, received detailed statistical information in relation to the Council’s workforce and have reviewed the Council’s performance on health and safety against related performance indicators.
- (ii) **Xentrall Shared Services** – Following reports, we found that the performance of Xentrall Shared Service was generally good and that there were no major problems with the service in Darlington. We have also looked at the development and financial implications of providing the new computer room to serve both Darlington and Stockton Councils as part of the shared services arrangement;

- (iii) **Service Plans** – Following the management re-structure, Resources Scrutiny Committee is now responsible for the monitoring and challenging of two service plans and we have done this and sought further information on any areas where we thought necessary.
- (iv) **Arts and Leisure Accounts** – At Members’ requests, we have considered detailed service and financial information in relation to the Dolphin Centre, Arts Centre, Civic Theatre and Stressholme Golf Club.
- (v) **Allotments** – One of first areas of review in Scrutiny was the Allotments review and we continually receive updates on progress within this area. The self-managed sites are still running successfully and the Council sites have been streamlined with a decrease in the number of vacant or semi-vacant plots, a decrease in the time taken to re-let plots and a higher percentage in overall occupancy. An Allotments Strategy has been developed and will be submitted to Cabinet for approval.

In addition, I have had numerous meetings and discussions with leading Officers outside the formal scrutiny process and have reported back to Members of the outcomes of those meetings.

Councillor Ian Haszeldine on behalf of the Resources Scrutiny Committee