
OVERVIEW OF LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work that have been undertaken under the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee:-
 - (a) **Modern Foreign Languages** – The Committee enjoyed a lively and participative presentation by Ms. Vicky Stewart, Teaching and Learning Adviser for Early Language Learning. It was very pleasing to note that Darlington is in the forefront for the teaching of modern foreign languages to primary school pupils. Some of the initiatives involved the launch, in conjunction with the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and Department for Education and Skills during 2003/04 of Primary Languages; participating in a pilot Post Graduate Certificate of Education with a modern foreign language specialism with Sunderland University for the TTA; piloting Continuing Professional Development training for existing primary teachers, which has been rolled out nationally; piloting a videoconferencing project for the TTA; whole school training for modern foreign languages in most of Darlington’s primary schools; a exchange scheme with Teachers from Avignon; and the production and sale nationally of a DVD to support teaching of languages to Year 3.
 - (b) **Access to Employment for ‘Looked After’ Children** – As a follow-up to a Task and Finish Review undertaken by Members of the Committee on the Educational Attainment of ‘Looked After’ Children, the Committee received a further update report on the work carried out by the Council to develop a programme of assistance and opportunities to help ‘looked after’ children gain access to employment, primarily through the provision of work placements and associated support. The Committee was pleased to note the progress made with this initiative, which has included sharing best practice and with Rotherham Borough Council; and the provision of two work placements for ‘looked after’, facilitated by the Community Services Department, from which positive feedback had been received.
 - (c) **Use of Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) in Schools** – Following the lifting of the ban on the use of Medium Density Fibreboard (MDF) in Schools and the recommendations of the Task and Finish Review Group set up to consider this matter, consideration was given to the results of a survey of five schools in the Borough on the monitoring of dust levels and exhaust ventilation at each school. The report highlighted areas, which required attention, before Schools should be allowed to use MDF, and the proposals to liaise with individual schools and Governing bodies on the improvements required to enable the safe use of MDF. The endeavours of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee and, in particular those involved in the Task and Finish Review were acknowledged for the very significant contribution made to this matter.

- (d) **Darlington Education Welfare Service – Attendance Strategy** – The Committee received a update report on progress made to the development of the Darlington Attendance Strategy and to the measures taken by the Authority to improve attendance and reduce truancy levels in the Borough’s schools. The Attendance Strategy has three key strands of work, i.e. publicity; preventative work and performance monitoring. Following consideration of the many initiatives developed to improve attendance and reduce truancy, the Committee decided to set up a Task and Finish Review Group to consider in more detail the statistical data relating absences from school.
- (e) **Special Educational Needs in Darlington** – A report was considered on how well the Authority is doing in provision for Special Education Needs (SEN) in both a national and local context of significant change and development. The report included the outcome of a self-evaluation of the SEN Service, using an OFSTED LEA inspection self review documentation; information from a recent consultant lead analysis of SEN services in Darlington and a recent Audit Commission School Survey which analysed schools’ perceptions of services. The strengths and positive achievements of the SEN Service were highlighted and also areas for further development and improvement.
- (f) **Draft Work Programme 2005/06** – Work is ongoing to involve all Members of the Committee in the development of a Work Programme for 2005/06, which it is hoped will make a positive and proactive contribution to Lifelong Learning provision in the Borough.

I also attended the following meetings as Chair of Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee:

Branksome Governing Bodies,
Briefing meeting on Children’s Services with Alison Walton, Assistant Director,
School Organisation Committee,
Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE),
Briefing meeting with Children’s Services Portfolio Holder and Director and
Attended First Year Anniversary of the Parkside Neighbourhood Nursery Party.

Councillor Cyndi Hughes
Chair of Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee