
RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ANNUAL REPORT 2003/2004

I am pleased to present the Annual report of the Resources Scrutiny Committee to Council on behalf of the Members of that Committee. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Members for their input to the work of the Committee over the last year. Also I would wish to express this Committee's thanks to Officers in Democratic Services and, in particular, Shirley Burton and also to our Lead Officer, Brian Boggon, Assistant Director, Financial Services. We have, as a Committee, involved several Cabinet Members in the work we have undertaken and their contribution to the scrutiny process is valued. Councillor Don Bristow, Cabinet Member with Resource Management Portfolio has attended meetings regularly and his contribution to debate and discussion has enhanced the work we have undertaken.

Council will be aware that, in accordance with the Scrutiny Procedure Rules, contained in the Council's Constitution, the scrutiny process is subject to the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group's approval, and I would also like to thank the Scrutiny Committee Chairs and Vice-Chairs, and members of the Corporate Management Team for their input and advice on developing our work programme. Members' contribution to the development of the work programme has enabled this Committee to tackle issues that are core to the effective service delivery and continuous improvements in the standing of this Council within the communities locally and nationally.

We have, as a Committee, strived continuously to improve the way the scrutiny process can contribute to the work of the Council, in particular, the training programme has meant that we have taken an in depth look at the way we operate and sessions with Mel Nixon (Aware UK) has enabled all Members of this Committee to analyse, contribute and comment on ways of developing the scrutiny process further.

This last year has kept Members busy, task and finish groups and review work groups have met regularly.

The Capital and Revenue budgets have again this year undergone the review of the scrutiny process. Medium term plans in both of these subject areas have been reviewed also with several opportunities to challenge and make further recommendation to Cabinet. Detailed examination of capital spending plans lead to interesting and detailed discussions, with main recommendations and minority recommendations being made to Cabinet. These reviews have also meant that monitoring of budgetary spending is to feature regularly in the work programme.

Having the Forward Plan attached to the work programme does enable Members to be aware of future decisions of the Cabinet and Council and the training session, recommended on the Forward Plan by our Committee, has meant that a review of how the Forward Plan is presented

to Members is underway.

We also invited PriceWaterhouseCoopers, our External Auditors, to one of our meetings to give a presentation on the work undertaken by them and to give Members a clearer picture of their role. This meeting has also established links between the role of scrutiny and audit inspections. Our thanks go to PriceWaterhouseCoopers for attending and taking part in such interesting discussion.

The Access to Services Best Value Review involved the full Resources Scrutiny Committee and we supported the proposals of Cabinet in relation to this Review.

We have also, in accordance with the decision of Cabinet, monitored the Local Code of Corporate Governance within the Authority and it is pleasing to report that the Council's External Auditors have commented that they are impressed with the Council's arrangements to manage the financial aspects of Corporate Governance and we will be continuing our monitoring role in the future.

The Procurement Review Group has met on several occasions and we have been working in conjunction with the Corporate Management Team to improve Procurement practices within the Authority. However, it became apparent that some duplication of work would occur due to on going work by Officers and PriceWaterhouseCoopers. There are discussions as to the way forward with this review that maintains Members' involvement. This will enable this Review Group to be on-going and the Group will continue to meet in the next Municipal Year.

Some excellent work has been undertaken by a Task and Finish Review Group (Councillor F. S. Robson, G. B. Walker, Johnson and Richmond) and the Resources Scrutiny Committee itself into the management of sickness absence within the Authority. Despite a review by this Scrutiny Committee which was undertaken in 2003 into sickness absence levels, we were still concerned at the rising levels and interviews have been held with the Directors and the relevant Human Resource Officers to ascertain their individual departmental approach to sickness absence and to obtain information on the effect sickness absence was having, both in terms of service delivery and financially. A number of recommendations in relation to this will be forwarded to Cabinet and this work will continue in the future to ensure that the situation is closely monitored and managed.

A further piece of work which is still on-going is the Craft Apprentices Review, a joint review with the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee. To date, this Group has obtained information on what craft apprentice training is currently available with the Authority and the current and possible future situation in relation to the employment of craft apprentices within the Community Services Department. It was also of concern to Members the wider aspect for training for all staff wishing to obtain craft skills, and the review will look at these concerns within the review. A number of further interviews have been arranged with representatives of the various unions involved and it is also hoped that a representative of the Environment Scrutiny Committee will join us.

We also, as a Scrutiny Committee, undertook a Task and Finish Review into consultation methods within the Authority. At an initial meeting we considered the way in which the Authority consults externally and, following a detailed discussion and debate with the Head of

Policy and her Team, we were satisfied with the work being undertaken in relation to external consultation, however, Members did feel that further work needed to be undertaken into the internal forms of consultation. We therefore had a further meeting to which all Members of the Council were invited and a number of recommendations have been forwarded to Cabinet for approval.

Members also requested that the Resources Scrutiny Committee look at the proposals for Town Centre parking and a special joint meeting with the Environment Scrutiny Committee was held on the 13th May, 2004 to consider these proposals.

We have had two call-ins of Cabinet's decisions in relation to Darlington Borough Council's response to the Balance of Funding Review and the Housing Investment Programme 2004/05. In relation to the Balance of Funding Review, one positive outcome from that call-in was that all consultation papers which are received by the Authority are now posted onto Public Folders on Microsoft Exchange. In relation to the Housing Investment Programme call in, we interviewed the Director of Community Services and the Cabinet Member with Housing Portfolio and, following detailed questioning and debate we were happy to support the decision of Cabinet.

Resources Scrutiny Committee