
**ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
ANNUAL REPORT 2005/06**

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 Ian Thompson, from Community Services, Lead Officer 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 using *Performance Plus* which has enabled us to undertake better performance management. However, for this coming Municipal Year it has been agreed at Monitoring and Co-ordination Group that Service Plans and consultation documents will now appear on Public Folders providing a lead officer contact name and telephone number for Members to make any comments thereon.

6. During April 2005 this Committee published its findings on the Review undertaken on Tourism. All Members of the Committee took part in the Review the aim of which was to consider how the Tourism Strategy could be improved within the Borough and compile an Action Plan arising from our findings. In order to assist with the Review we consulted with, and undertook visits to Tourist Information Centres at Chesterfield and more locally, Barnard Castle, Bishop Auckland, Thirsk and Richmond. We continue to monitor the progress of the Action Plan arising out of our findings with great interest.
7. A Task and Finish Group comprising Councillors Hartley, Long, Lewis, Ruck and S.J. Jones was established to investigate derelict sites within 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 a recommendation that Environment Committee undertake this as its next major Review subject.
8. Following completion of the Review on Tourism the Committee undertook a further major review on the subject of Neglected Land Sites as detailed above. The aims of the Review were to investigate perceived problems associated with derelict/vacant sites and identify possible solutions. We are nearing completion of the Review and hope to publish our findings within the current Municipal Year.
9. A further Task and Finish established by this Committee was established to give consideration to Business Start-Ups in Darlington with Councillors Heaney, Ruck, Armstrong and Lewis being nominated to serve. After several meetings the Group decided that the scope of the task was large enough to warrant a full Review and made a recommendation that Environment Committee undertake this as its next major Review subject during the Municipal Year 2006/07.
10. 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 agreed to participate and the Group examined issues surrounding the types of gullies, cleaning and inspection regimes, the number of complaints received, priorities and recurring problems with gullies. The final report was presented to this Committee on 1st September, 2005 and to the Public Protection and Community Partnerships Scrutiny Committee on 16th August, 2005. A number of recommendations from this Review have been included in the Street Scene Design Project.
11. During July 2005 we gave consideration to the Second Local Transport Plan for Darlington which covered the period 2006 to 2011 and was based on an analysis of travel and transport in Darlington, the Darlington Community Strategy, consultations and best practice.

12. Michael Straugheir of Durham Constabulary attended a meeting of Environment Scrutiny during December and gave a detailed explanation of the policing and enforcement of the changed traffic movements, due to the Pedestrian Heart project, within the Town Centre.
13. 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 are now part of our Work Programme as an Annual Site Visit.
14. The Second Local Transport Plan had highlighted the importance of cycling in order to meet the Local Government Association's Shared Priorities for Transport of accessibility, tackling congestion, improving air quality and safer roads and as such we were advised of Darlington's Cycle Network and the future plans for Darlington as a Cycling Demonstration Town. We will monitor the progress of the Cycle Network with interest.
15. We also continue to undertake street furniture inspections at which we highlight small maintenance works, general tidying and cleaning of areas.
16. The refurbishment works at the Dolphin Centre have now commenced and Environment Scrutiny Committee looks forward to monitoring the progress of the works.
17. Work is continuing on the Open Space, Playing Pitch and Tree and Woodland Strategies and is due to be completed during June 2006. Environment Scrutiny Committee are continuing to monitor its progress and look forward to giving the Strategies full consideration during 2006/07 Municipal Year.
18. Our views were 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 continue to monitor its progress.
19. 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.
20. 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.
21. 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.

22. We have had a call-in of Cabinet's decision in relation to the eligibility criteria for the taxi voucher scheme and following detailed questions no further action was taken in respect of that call-in and the decision was therefore supported.
23. 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
24. Other areas of work undertaken by this Scrutiny during the Municipal Year 2005/06 are detailed at **Appendix 1**.
25. I am very pleased to advise you all that Environment Scrutiny Committee has made a real difference to the people of Darlington. We have seen our efforts rewarded through the Action Plans of both the Tourism and Conservation Review Groups, both of which involved outside consultations and the views of others. We also continue to have street inspections around the Borough and pass any concerns to the appropriate Officer for action, which again, is appreciated by the people of Darlington.
26. Finally, 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