
ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
ANNUAL REPORT 2006/07

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. 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. In order to prepare for the forthcoming Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in March 2008 a Task and Finish Review Group was established and had a very good and interesting meeting with Policy Advisors on the way forward for Service Planning.

5. During June we were advised of the process involved by which this Council was to undertake for the production of its first Rights of Way Improvement Plan in accordance with requirements made on all Highway Authorities by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
6. 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. We have moved the visits to April to coincide with the activities around the reserves during this time.
7. Again, on the countryside theme, we received details of the process to be undertaken to carry out a major review of the Countryside Strategy entitled 'People and Nature in Darlington'. This review is being undertaken as it is ten years since the publication of 'People and Nature in Darlington' and some major changes, which affect the Councils' delivery of services affecting the green infrastructure of towns and countryside, have taken place.
8. The main Review for Environment Scrutiny during 2006/07 was Financial Incentives to Business. All Members of the Committee took part in the Review the aim of which was to investigate the various schemes available through the Council in order to give financial assistance to businesses and to measure the success of those schemes. Our findings were reported to Cabinet during January 2007 and we continue to monitor the progress of the Action Plan arising out of our findings with great interest.
9. A Review Group of Grass Verges comprising Councillors Armstrong, Mrs. Hart, Hartley, Lawton, Lewis, Maybrey, Ruck and myself was established to investigate the condition of the Borough's grass verges with particular reference being made to areas where verges were constantly abused by residents, treatments available and the cost of applying those treatments, practices of neighbouring local authorities and available by-laws to prevent abuse and how they could be implemented. Whilst undertaking the Review the Group had to give consideration to opportunities for hardening of verges to ensure safe parking for vehicles. Our findings were reported to Cabinet during March and we will monitor the progress of the Action Plan arising out of our findings with great interest.
10. Following a request by a Member we undertook a Task and Finish Review of Swimming Safety and Early Years Classes which concluded that the service provided by the Dolphin Centre was adequate for the teaching of young children.
11. We continue to monitor the Action Plans of other reviews we have completed which include Conservation, Tourism and Neglected Land and are pleased with the progress made on all of the Plans. It is especially pleasing to see that Conservation Area Appraisals are now being prepared and we look forward to all of Darlington's Conservation Areas undergoing appraisals.

12. Pedestrian Guardrailing in the Town Centre has been one of the things which Environment Scrutiny has been requesting a review of for a long time and it is excellent to see that work has begun on removal of some of the guardrailing. We look forward to seeing the removal and upgrade of guardrailing around the Town Centre.
 13. We also continue to undertake street furniture inspections at which we highlight small maintenance works, general tidying and cleaning of areas.
 14. The refurbishment works at the Dolphin Centre are now completed and Environment Scrutiny Committee took great pride in monitoring the progress of the works and seeing the final outcome of all the hard work undertaken.
 15. The Darlington Events Strategy was developed with stakeholders from private and public sectors and supported the Council's corporate aims and objectives and determined the Council's role in delivering events for Darlington. Environment Scrutiny welcomed the opportunity to have an input into the Strategy and enjoy seeing the events being enjoyed by the residents of Darlington.
 16. Arts Centre refurbishment works are on-going and Environment Scrutiny welcomed the opportunity to be advised of the programme of works for the Arts Centre and continue to monitor the progress of the works.
 17. Environment Scrutiny welcomed the news that Darlington was one of just two local authorities to be accredited with the National Cycling Training Standard and have received good news reports on the Town on the Move initiative.
 18. Again on a transport issue, Environment Scrutiny were invited to comment on a proposed Car Club for Darlington which was a new initiative and not meant to be seen as a competition to the taxi trade.
 19. The Climate Change Strategy for Darlington has been produced in order to develop a local response to climate change. As this subject affects everybody, young and old, I hope to undertake a cross-cutting Review of Climate Change for the 2007/08 Municipal Year and look forward to keeping you all informed of progress.
 20. The 'Let's Get Cracking' Campaign was well received by both Members and residents of Darlington, with residents actually having a say on where they would like to repair works undertaken. Let's Get Cracking also featured in our Grass Verges Review where many works have been undertaken as part of the Campaign.
 21. Work is continuing on the Open Space and Playing Pitch Strategies, both of which we were consulted on and look forward to giving the Strategies full consideration during 2007/08 Municipal Year.
 22. As the provisional date for this Council's next CPA assessment has been set for mid-June, Environment Scrutiny undertook a small Task and Finish Review Group to investigate Service Plans and how Scrutiny has had an input into the revision of those plans which
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needed to show how they linked into Leading Edge and the Community Strategy.

23. As part of the Local Area Agreement 'Increasing Community Capacity Through Street Scene' we received information on the consultations undertaken by Street Scene and the aspirations of Officers to engage the Community in their area and for members of the public to take part in projects such as Pride in Your Street, Street Champions and Parks for All.
24. 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.
25. Other areas of work undertaken by this Scrutiny during the Municipal Year 2005/06 are detailed at **Appendix 1**.
26. 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 the Neglected Land and Financial Assistance to Business Review Groups, both of which involved outside consultations and the views of others.
27. Environment Scrutiny Committee looks forward to receiving progress reports and having further input into the Darlington Transport Corridor within the next Municipal Year.
28. 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.

Councillor Stella Robson
Environment Scrutiny Committee