
LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ANNUAL REPORT 2006/07

1. I am pleased to present the Annual Report of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee to Council on behalf of the Members of that Committee.
2. In the first instance I would like to thank all the Elected Members and Co-opted Members on the Committee for their input into its work over the past year, especially those who have devoted time to our Task and Finish Reviews. I would also like to thank the very able and talented Officer support given to us over the last year by Paul Dalton who joined our team following the retirement in 2006 of Christine Bates, Democratic Support Officer. Christine provided this Committee with invaluable assistance for many years.

Proposed Academy for Darlington

3. Yet again, this has been an extremely important, and challenging, year in terms of educational development in Darlington, with vast changes in terms of service provision and service delivery. During the year the Committee have continued to monitor the proposals for transforming Secondary Education in Darlington. Special attention has been devoted to the ongoing proposal to open a City Academy in Darlington to replace Eastbourne School. Committee Members have continued to receive regular update reports outlining the submission of the Expression of Interest to the Department for Education and Skills in June 2006, the subsequent ministerial approval obtained for the Expression of Interest in September 2006, the move into the Feasibility Stage and the key tasks involved therein, and the appointment the Project Manager, Mouchel Parkman. Members of the Committee engaged in in-depth discussion on these subjects, and related matters.
4. The Committee welcomed Mrs. Elaine Richardson, Head Teacher of Eastbourne Comprehensive School, to a meeting of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee, held on the 11th December 2006. Members received a summary of Mrs. Richardson's background and highlighted her drive to raise the image and the profile of Eastbourne School in the community. Mrs. Richardson outlined the key priorities for improvement in attainment, attendance and behaviour, and answered concerns on the behaviour of school children off site during the lunchtime period, exclusions and staff morale.
5. At the ordinary meeting of this Committee held on 5th February 2007, the Members received an overview from Richard Joynt, Representative of David and Anne Crossland, the co-sponsors of the proposed Academy. Richard spoke of the Crossland's vision for the proposed Academy for Darlington. Members learned a bit about the reasons why Mr. and Mrs. Crossland wish to be sponsors, their desire that the proposed Academy lead in moral and spiritual learning, and how the Crosslands and the Church of England see their future work together as joint sponsors. Committee Members understand that the ethos and vision for the proposed Academy will be issued shortly, and are keen to receive information on how this will be transferred into practice.

6. Overall, the Committee are satisfied with the progress made to date and are committed to continuous monitoring of the project.

National Tests and Examinations 2006

7. Members of the Committee received a report detailing an analysis of performance in the national tests and examinations in 2006. At some levels, pupils from Darlington exceeded the national average, however in other areas pupils fell below the national average. Overall Darlington's GCSE results in 2006, at A* - C are 57.9%, which is an increase of 1.1% on 2005. It was pleasing to note that Darlington rank first in order amongst Tees Valley authorities, and fourth in the whole of the North East.

School Attendance

8. School Attendance in Darlington has continued to be monitored by the Committee, who received the final School Attendance figures for the Academic Year 2005/06, and updates on the Attendance Strategy have also been received. Members examined the three main sections of the strategy – publicity, preventative working and performance monitoring. Unfortunately, despite the ongoing, noticeable hard work of many Officers, the Committee expressed great concern at the overall increase in the numbers of days lost in both Primary and Secondary Schools, especially the large increase in unauthorised absence, and were disappointed to hear of Darlington's low position in the national School Attendance league table. The Committee resolved to continue to monitor school attendance as an ongoing issue, however accepted that many factors outside the remit of the Council affect school attendance. It is hoped that the work conducted by the School Attendance Task and Finish Review Group in 2005 may be reviewed and updated in the forthcoming Municipal Year.

Task and Finish Review Groups

9. Members of the Committee were pleased to receive the final report of the Behaviour Support Task and Finish Review Group in October 2006. The report reflected an extensive piece of work conducted by the Review Group, and produced a number of recommendations. The Review Group were pleased to note the number of people and organisations available to provide support in attempting to resolve children's and young peoples behavioural and learning difficulties, and acknowledged the large amount of work conducted by the Children's Services Department in relation to behavioural support. Many of the issues uncovered by the Task and Finish Review Group had also been identified by the Children's Services Department and it was pleasing to learn that measures were being put into place to resolve the key issues. The final report of the Review Group, and the recommendations contained therein, were accepted by the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee, and the report was submitted to Cabinet accordingly.
10. Following a report to the Committee on the 30th October 2006, a Task and Finish Review Group was also convened to examine Health and Safety issues in schools. Members of the Task and Finish Review Group have met with the Health and Safety Manager on three occasions to monitor the progress of the ongoing 'Schools Health Check' and investigate methods of raising the awareness of Health and Safety issues within schools. The final

report of the Task and Finish Review Group will be submitted to the Committee in due course.

11. A Task and Finish Review Group established by this Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 5th February 2007 to review the current situation in relation to the Pupil Referral Unit, and its relocation to the Rise Carr site. The Pupil Referral Unit Task and Finish Review Group submitted its final report to the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee, at the Committee meeting held on the 26th March 2007. The report was well received by the Committee, and although the Pupil Referral Unit remained in special measures, it was reassuring to learn that the Unit had received a positive report following a recent monitoring visit from HMI. The inspectors particularly commented on the availability of Local Authority staff and acknowledged that there had been improvements in other areas. The inspection team will be visiting the Pupil Referral Unit again in May 2007 to examine further progress, and the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee have resolved to revisit the work conducted by this Task and Finish Review Group in the forthcoming Municipal Year.

Exclusions

12. As part of the Behaviour Support Task and Finish Review Group Final Report, Members scrutinised the amount of school exclusions in the Academic Years 2004/05 and 2005/06. It was disappointing to note the number of days lost as a result of exclusions during this period and the Committee resolved to monitor the situation more closely. Figures recently provided to the Committee for the period September 2006 to February 2007 indicate a reduction in exclusions compared to the same time last year, however the high level of exclusions in the Key Stage 3 Year Group continue to give rise for concern. The Committee will continue to monitor the levels of exclusion on a six monthly basis.

National Healthy Schools Programme

13. Committee Members received a report outlining the National Healthy Schools Programme and the requirements for schools to achieve National Healthy Schools Status. A healthy school promotes physical and emotional health by providing accessible and relevant information, and equipping pupils with the understanding, skills and attitudes to make informed decisions about their health. As children's healthy eating is a particularly topical subject, Committee Members were pleased to hear that Darlington is currently exceeding progress toward its target.

Creative Partnerships

14. The Education Village continued to progress from strength to strength this year and the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee were pleased to welcome Carolyn Barker, Head of Phase Two at the Education Village, on Creative Partnerships and the Art College. Information was provided in relation to the need for education in creative thinking, due to the lack of innovation skills, and inventive and original thought processes, possessed by students upon leaving education. Consideration was given to creative thinking in a number of subjects including languages, Physical Education and Mathematics, the methodology in engaging students in thinking and working creatively, facilitating partnership working, and key skills and competencies.

Language for Learning Service

15. A report was submitted to the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee informing Members of the work of the Language for Learning Service. It was disappointing to learn that, although the number of languages, other than English, being spoken by pupils in Schools in Darlington is increasing, the funding for the service is sharply decreasing. This is particularly worrying considering the large numbers of migrants from outside the UK deciding to make their homes in the Borough of Darlington.

BookStart

16. Members received a report highlighting the BookStart initiative, which is run by the charity Booktrust, with funding from the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Sure Start Unit. The report outlined how BookStart packs are distributed, and the involvement of this Council in the scheme. It was extremely heartening to hear that funding had been made available to employ a BookStart Co-ordinator, whose role will be to work with the Council's partners, and families, within the town to increase the number of BookStart packs given to children and to ensure that events at the library fit in with BookStart activities. The BookStart Co-ordinator commenced in post on the 2nd January 2007.

Access to Employment for Looked After Children

17. Members continued to receive updates on the Access to Employment for Looked After Children initiative. It was reported that the 2005/06 outturn for care leavers in education, training or employment (PAF A4) was excellent, at 91%, which placed this Council as one of the top performing local authorities in achieving this positive outcome for care leavers. It is pleasing to note that the 2006/07 outturn for care leavers in education, training or employment remains in the top band for (PAF A4), as excellent, and this means that we remain one of the top performing authorities.

Racist Incidents in Schools

18. The Committee received a report providing Members with information about the number, nature and outcomes of racist incidents in schools during the Academic Year 2005/06. The submitted report informed Members of workshops hosted by Language for Learning, Connexions and Darlington and Durham Racial Equality Council, where images and slogans were developed to create posters for display in schools and for public display in areas of the town. The report outlined the total number of incidents on a month-by-month basis, together with the time of day in which each incident took place, the ethnicity and gender of the suspected perpetrators and victims, and the nature of the incidents. Members were informed of the further action taken, which encompassed a number of responses appropriate to the individual circumstances. Overall, in comparison to the previous year, the number of reported incidents had risen slightly, which was disappointing to note, however this may be attributed to increased awareness toward reporting incidents.

Musical Learning Opportunities in Darlington

19. The Committee had the pleasure of welcoming David Cox, owner of the Forum Music Centre in Darlington, to its meeting in September. David provided the Committee with a passionate and highly informative presentation on the musical learning opportunities and facilities available at the Forum. A number of areas were discussed, including the vast diversity of courses, from studying both traditional and contemporary musical styles, to more practical disciplines, such as Stage Management and Sound Engineering. The Committee were also informed of the programmes that the Forum are providing in partnership with the Northern School of Contemporary Music (NSCM). It was extremely welcoming, and important to note, that such learning opportunities are available to anyone of any age.
20. Following the presentation on musical learning opportunities provided by David Cox, the Committee were pleased to welcome Katherine Zeserson, the Director of the Learning Participation Team from the Sage in Gateshead, to its October meeting. Katherine provided the Committee with an overview of the outreach programme and musical learning opportunities facilitated by the Sage, which are available in Darlington. Katherine reported on the success of the 'Pure Drumming' initiative being conducted in partnership with Skerne Park Primary School, and the partnership working that has developed with Hummersknott School and Language College to provide joint music making activities. It was heartening to hear that such learning programmes are attracting children from diverse areas of the town.

'Outside In' Programme

21. The Committee received an overview on the 26th March 2007, from Deborah Hall, Park Ranger at the South Park, on the 'Outside In' programme. 'Outside In' is an educational initiative, based at the Clock Tower Lodge at South Park, that allows pupils to learn about the park and such subjects as nature, food webs and habitats. The programme is provided in an informal manner and commences at Key Stage 1. It was reported that the programme is adaptable to the National Curriculum and has been incorporated into such subjects as Mathematics and English. The programme is aimed at Primary School children, however has also been accessed by some Secondary Schools. The Committee were pleased to note that the programme is fully booked until August 2007.

Committee Events and Visits

22. To coincide with the European Day of Languages on the 26th September 2006, Members of the Scrutiny Committee were delighted to visit Longfield School to see language training in progress. The Members spoke to the Head Teacher and pupils, and participated in French language lessons. It was very reassuring to note the good work being carried out at the school in relation to language tuition.
23. A Special Meeting of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee was held on Tuesday, 17th October 2006 as part of Darlington Borough Council's commitment to Local Democracy Week (16th–22nd October 2006). An invitation was issued to all Primary Head Teachers in the Borough inviting them to send two pupils and an escort to participate in the meeting, and 24 children attended in total. The children enjoyed a healthy buffet reception prior to the

meeting, where they were able to meet the Deputy Mayor, the Chief Executive, Members of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee and other senior Members and Officers of the Council. At the meeting the children received an overview of the Committee structure and meeting protocols, before receiving overviews from Officers on School Attendance, School Transport Issues and Healthy Schools. The children and Members of the Committee then participated in discussions and workshops on these issues, and it was pleasing to witness the enthusiasm of all involved.

24. Members of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee visited the Darlington College on Wednesday, 21st March 2007, and received a tour of the facilities with specific focus on the Skills + programme. The variety of courses available and the facilities provided, particularly in relation to vocational qualifications, were extremely impressive.

**Councillor Cyndi Hughes,
Chair of Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee**