
OVERVIEW OF ADULTS AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee has undertaken :-
 - (a) **Impact of the Housing Benefit Reforms** – Following the comprehensive overview that we received in September informing us of the reforms to the Housing Benefit and Council Tax scheme that were introduced by the Department for Work and Pensions in April 2011, we received an update on how these reforms were starting to impact on the residents of Darlington and Council services from the data that has been compiled from staff in the Revenues and Benefits and Housing Options teams. Many of the reforms have affected people living in privately rented accommodation and that the increase in the number of people claiming Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit over the few years due to the economic climate has also mainly been from people in privately rented sector. We will continue to monitor the impacts of the reforms and would like to see an action plan developed to help support Council services and the residents of Darlington.
 - (b) **Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives: The Strategy for Adults with Autism in England** – We considered and scrutinised the draft Adult Autism Strategy action plan that had been developed locally to meet the statutory guidance set out in the Adult Autism Strategy ‘Fulfilling and Rewarding Lives’ for Autism in in England. Dr. Helen Pearce from Tees Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust attended the meeting to present on the pathway of diagnosis of autism and explain the work that the NHS has done around autism. It was pleasing to note the progress Darlington has made so far in relation to delivering on the statutory guidance in terms of better training, diagnosis, transition to adult services and local planning and leadership and that in some of these elements we appear to be well ahead of other local authorities. We will continue to monitor the action plan and have recommended that an autism summit be arranged that will include key stakeholders and seek to understand the current position for people with autism and their carers and develop the action plan thereon. A market event has also been organised at the Dolphin Centre on 22nd May, 2012 for local providers of support for people with autism.
 - (c) **Darlington’s Draft Housing Strategy** – A special joint meeting with Place Scrutiny Committee was held to consider and approve Darlington’s Draft Housing Strategy, which is currently out for consultation. Twenty five Priority Actions, grouped under 6 objectives have been identified in the draft Strategy and will be implemented over the next two years to help deliver it. The Strategy is an evolving document and a further objective to increase the supply and choice of housing to meet identified local needs has been included within the Strategy. We have again raised our concerns in relation to setting a strict policy where fixed term tenancies might apply or not be reissued and have recommended that further work be explored in relation to brownfield sites and vacant land for housing development.

- (d) **Work Programme** - We have given consideration to the Work Programme for this Committee for the Municipal Year 2011/12 and possible review topics and in doing so, we have taken into account the reduced resources available and ensured that, in recommending our work programme to Monitoring and Co-ordination Group, that any work we undertake will have demonstrable outcomes and contribute to the work of the Council and its strategic aims and objectives.

Councillor Bryan Thistlethwaite
Chair of Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee