
OVERVIEW OF PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Place Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Work Programme 2012/13

2. We have given consideration to the Work Programme for this Committee for the Municipal Year 2012/13 and possible review topics and in doing so, we have taken into account the reduced resources available within the Authority 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. Following discussion Scrutiny Committee agreed to update its Work Programme to reflect the decisions of the Committee.

Town Centre Strategy

3. We were given the opportunity to comment on the engagement process and emerging outcomes on the Town Centre Strategy work. Following adoption of the Strategy by Cabinet on 4th December 2012 various issues were identified for further work during 2013 and another round of engagement has been planned around car parking, bus and coach facilities and the vision for the markets. Scrutiny were advised that the key principles guiding the regeneration of the Town Centre and of the vision for the Town Centre included a focus on leisure and office development in the Feethams area; further promotion of the larger shops for non-food retail; improvement and investment in the covered market; continued support of the independent retail sector to the south and west of the Town Centre; rationalisation/improvement of bus and coach facilities to improve access; improvements to the accessibility, convenience and quality of car parking facilities; and development of the evening economy and cultural life of the Town.
4. Members also had the opportunity to seek further detail on the proposed Leisure Complex on the Feethams site and were reassured on various points.
5. Members then had the opportunity to take part in the practical exercise employed in the public engagement process, which we agreed had been extensive.
6. As a result, the idea of a relatively small foodstore at the Garden Street site was generally welcomed in principle. Debate centred on the relative merits of a bus station compared with other options. The majority view was that points of access to shelter, toilets and refreshment for bus users and particularly for coach passengers was the more practical option.

Cultural Provision in the Borough

7. The Review Group have held a further meeting during January and were given the opportunity to comment on the Draft Creative Darlington Business Plan. A further meeting will be held on 14th March to which Mr. Matt Roche, representing Darlington for Culture, has been invited to discuss the democratic role of Darlington for Culture, its relationship to the Council and the public as a whole. A paper circulated by a Member was also discussed.

Waste Management (Wheeled Bins) Review Group

8. Following submission of our interim findings to Cabinet we have had a further meeting of the Group at which Gordon Pybus representing Darlington Association on Disability was invited. Mr. Pybus raised concerns to wheelchair users arising from the positioning of wheeled bins on narrow pavements. Officers reiterated the policy in relation to the positioning of the bins on pavements and assured Mr. Pybus that his concerns would be addressed. We will however continue to thoroughly investigate the introduction of Wheeled Bins in the Borough and advise Cabinet of the outcome of our final recommendation and findings in due course.

Street Walkabout

9. A 'walkabout' was held on 7th February to assess the issue of street furniture and whether it was excessive. Members heard that there had been the opportunity to rationalise signage in preparation for Civil Parking Enforcement and as a result 450 signs had been removed. However, most of what remains is hard to reduce further as it is prescribed by Highways law. Every effort is made to place signs on walls rather than on poles, but there is a need for constant encouragement to reduce obstruction. Improvements to guard railing on the Ring Road is still an issue, though improvements should be incorporated into the changes to the Stone Bridge junction.
10. Since the last meeting of Council, I have attended :-
 - (a) Various meetings with Officers.
 - (b) Joint briefings with Officers and Portfolio Holders.
 - (c) A street walkabout with Officers and Members to discuss any issues and concerns around the Town Centre.
 - (d) Darlington for Culture meeting held on 8th February.
 - (e) Conference on Climate change and Carbon Management in London on 11th March, 2013.

- (f) Opening of artwork by Students of Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College at Westbrook Villas.

Councillor Dorothy Long
Chair of Place Scrutiny Committee