
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 2013/14

2. We have given consideration to the Work Programme for this Scrutiny Committee for the Municipal Year 2013/14 and possible review topics. Following discussion we agreed to update the Work Programme to reflect the decisions of the Committee. We will seek specific updates on on-going projects particularly the Economic Strategy, the Car Parking Strategy and the Local Plan in this Municipal Year. We have contributed to work on the Medium Term Financial Plan and held three Special meetings of Scrutiny to give consideration to the proposals which fall within the remit of Place Scrutiny Committee.

Private Sector Housing

3. Following consideration of the Housing Strategy Annual Monitoring Report in October, we were keen to learn more about the Private Sector Housing Service and in that respect the Private Sector Housing Manager gave a presentation on Private Landlords, Housing Conditions and Empty Homes Projects.
4. The presentation covered the roles and responsibilities of the Section, the types of landlords present in Darlington, some of the conditions encountered by the most vulnerable tenants in the private rented sector, the powers and regulations available to the Council together with the enforcement legal process followed and the Empty Property Projects that were currently aiming to reduce the amount of empty homes in Darlington.

Economic Strategy Annual Monitoring Report

5. The Committee gave consideration to the first Annual Monitoring Report for the Economic Strategy, approved in September 2012, which contained a commitment to annually review and assess progress against the targets.
6. Members were advised that good progress had been made in the first year of implementing the Strategy across the four themes of Place, People, Infrastructure and Business Conditions. Ten priority actions had been identified to deliver the four themed headings which in turn led to 35 sub-actions that would contribute either individually or collectively towards delivering a priority action. Committee were informed that six actions had been completed, 21 were on target, four were behind schedule and four had been deleted where events had overtaken them.

7. The Committee had a detailed discussion which included the following issues :-
- (a) Promotion of Darlington as a place for new businesses to invest;
 - (b) The success in attracting and fostering businesses such as subsea and biologics;
 - (c) The public sector 'hub' idea;
 - (d) The value, or otherwise, of the contribution of national chains to the local economy;
 - (e) Concerns that there was a need for Darlington to attract people in to work, not just live here and work outside the Borough;
 - (f) Concerns that disposable household income is still the lowest in the Tees Valley, though this is levelling out;
 - (g) Inequalities in income; and
 - (h) The need to retain and enhance our cultural offer as a contribution to economic regeneration as well as to the well-being of residents.
8. It was suggested that more prominence could be given to the opportunities presented by Hitachi and its supply chain. Members wished to explore further different forms of enterprise, including social enterprise and small and microbusinesses. The Senior Management restructure and the creation of the post of Director of Regeneration was welcomed.

Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)

9. We have held three Special meetings to consider proposals in the MTFP which fall under the remit of Place Scrutiny. The three meetings gave consideration to:-
- (a) Alternate Weekly collections where the implications were discussed and our findings reported to cabinet. Option 3 was broadly welcomed as was Option 1 in certain areas. It was felt the scheme would have the potential to increase recycling rates and achieve the necessary savings. It was suggested that new housing be designed with bin storage in mind.
 - (b) Street Cleaning and Grounds Maintenance which was discussed in the context of the MTFP. Members received an update on the two year project to deliver savings. Innovative ideas are being explored including heightening public awareness of the cost of litter removal and greater involvement by the community in maintaining the environment. Scrutiny has agreed to establish a Task and Finish Review Group to monitor and assist with the Litter Reduction and Grounds Maintenance Projects detailed at the meeting.
 - (c) Cockerton Library and Head of Steam were discussed in the context of the MTFP. Members were advised of proposals to ensure the continued operation of the Cockerton Library on a Community run basis, with professional support from the Council, due to the withdrawal of Council subsidy. Scrutiny was advised that several parties have expressed an interest and that a robust business model was required to ensure continued success of the Library. With regard to the Head of Steam Scrutiny were advised that subsidy of £260k was to be withdrawn in two years' time and that a sustainable solution needed to be found. The Council are currently working with Partners to develop a

sustainable business model which includes investment on site, diversification of exhibitions and use of the site including a Heritage Campus model. Scrutiny has agreed to monitor and assist with the preparation and implementation of the business model through its Cultural Provision Review Group.

10. Feedback from those meetings was given to the Efficiency and Resources Scrutiny on 30th January 2014 to enable it to collate a comprehensive response on behalf of all Scrutiny Committees to forward to Cabinet.

Local Plan: Making and Growing Places Preferred Options 2013 – Consultation Responses

11. Scrutiny Committee held a Special meeting to give consideration to the outcome of public consultation on the Local Plan: Making and Growing Places Preferred Options which was undertaken during the period 21 June to 9 August 2013.
12. Members were impressed with the Consultation Process and the level of response. Responses totalling 350 written and 600 comments by attendees of the public events were received and covered a variety of planning (and non-planning) issues with the majority objecting to proposed housing allocations.
13. We were advised that specific actions were proposed to take forward the development of policies for the Local Plan taking into account the responses to consultations. Additional studies undertaken since the Preferred Options were drafted needed to be taken into account and this could result in policies that were different from the draft policies presented in the Preferred Options document and further consultations would need to be programmed prior to finalising the plan for publication.
14. Discussion on the provision of new housing including new applications since the publication of the document was the biggest single issue. The Committee also discussed the Town Centre Fringe, the town centre itself particularly the future of retail and parking provision, Gypsy and Traveller sites and the use and protection of informal open space. The importance of heritage and the industrial archaeology of the Borough was also stressed.

**Councillor Dorothy Long
Chair of Place Scrutiny Committee**