
RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – ANNUAL REPORT 2004/05

I am pleased to present the Annual report of the Resources Scrutiny Committee to Council on behalf of the Members of that Committee. Although I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the Members for their input into the work of the Committee over the past year, I would particularly like to thank 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 have not been as effective without their support and commitment. I would also like to thank all the Officer support given to us over the last year and to convey a special thanks to Councillor Bristow, the Cabinet Member with Resource Management Portfolio who has attended and contributed to all of our meetings. His contribution to debate and discussion has enhanced the work we have undertaken.

We have, as a Committee, strived continuously to improve the way the scrutiny process can contribute to the work of the Council and have again been a leading authority in the training we undertook with Mel Nixon from Aware UK. The recording of ‘scrutiny in action’ and the feedback sessions were invaluable to our learning process.

A lot of the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Committee, both at ordinary scheduled meetings and special meetings has surrounded the Council’s Revenue and Capital Medium-term Financial Plans. Detailed discussions and questioning have taken place on these plans and recommendations have been forwarded to Cabinet. Regularly monitoring of these plans is also now undertaken.

We have also looked at the implementation of a new software package, *PerformancePlus*, which will enable us to undertake better performance management within the Authority and this is something we will be developing and undertaking in the future. Recommendations from the Resources Scrutiny Committee have resulted in this area being included in the Members’ Training and Development Programme.

Corporate Governance has also featured highly on our agendas and it is pleasing to report that at the last reporting stage in January 2005, the Council’s Auditors, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC), recognised the Local Code as a key management tool for strengthening and improving the Council’s corporate governance arrangements and again awarded this Council the maximum score of four for Corporate Governance arrangements under the Auditor Scored Judgements through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. Further monitoring of the Local Code will continue to be undertaken.

Members will be aware that one of the major pieces of work undertaken by this Scrutiny Committee over the last few Municipal Years has been in relation to sickness absence within the Authority. A lot of time and effort has been put into this review by Councillors FS Robson, Johnson, Richmond and GB Walker and it is extremely pleasing to report that, at the last review of sickness absence levels, the figures were showing an improvement and the predicted end of year out-turn for 2004.05 was 10.18 days which is performing well against the target of 10.47

days. This Review Group has achieved its aims and will continue to monitor to ensure a downward trend in the levels of sickness absence of the Authority's employees.

Another piece of work which was undertaken by a Task and Finish Review Group, established by this Scrutiny Committee, was to look at this Council's Procurement Strategy. The Group comprised myself, Councillors Johnson, Richmond and GB Walker, and again, I would like to thank those Members for their support. The Group will continue to meet and review the action plan included in the Strategy.

All Members of the Scrutiny Committee became involved in seeking information from the Director of Community Services in relation to how his Department procures and manages contracts with local schools. It was an extremely interesting process and Members requested further information in respect of a paper trail of a specific contract. This was undertaken and reported back to Members at a subsequent meeting.

Although it is a number of years since the Allotment Review Group concluded its findings, we are still receiving progress reports in relation to that service. This review was cited, as good practice in co-opting external members to undertake a review, and from the progress reports we are receiving is a good example of how effective scrutiny can be.

We were also given the opportunity to comment in detail on the draft assessment document to be supplied to the Audit Commission to support this Council's Corporate Assessment as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process for 2004 and our comments were taken on board and included in the final document. You will be aware of the outcome of the assessment!

Other issues we have looked at, as have all the Scrutiny Committees, are the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and the Social Inclusion Strategy.

We have had a call-in of Cabinet's decision in relation to the funding implications of the Darlington Pedestrian Heart and following detailed questions no further action was taken in respect of that call in.

Members have also requested that information be provided on several other subjects linked to the Forward Plan. I have undertaken initial enquiries and reported to Members on my findings, they, in turn, have been satisfied with this information and no further action by the Committee has been required.

I have had meetings and discussions with leading Officers and staff in respect of the work of the Resources Scrutiny Committee and reported back to Members on these meetings.

The work programme for the next year will include a review of Voluntary Sector Funding and Implementation and Monitoring of the delivering of Efficiency in local services (the Gershon report).

As Members will see from my report, we have been extremely busy and once again may I extend my thanks to the Members and Officers involved with the Resources Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Ian Haszeldine
Chair Resources Scrutiny Committee