
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.

Red Hall Regeneration Proposed Masterplan and Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

2. We had a special joint meeting with the Place Scrutiny Committee in November to consider the future proposals to regenerate Red Hall.
3. Members had a tour of the area and we were updated on the progress on the programme of regeneration which had commenced in January 2015. We also considered the Masterplan for Red Hall which set out the longer-term proposals for regeneration and which residents had been consulted on at a stakeholder event in September 2015.
4. We made a number of recommendations to Cabinet following the meeting and, as part of those recommendations, we have asked Officers to re-visit the proposals for the location of the local convenience shopping offer following the comments and feedback received from local residents and the local Ward Councillors; consider how the car parking for the schools and the community centre might be advanced ahead of the enabling development in order to support the early delivery of the Community Centre Business Plan; and look at the longer-term options to improve the existing football playing field and the re-instatement of the changing room facilities.
5. A Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy has also been developed to sit alongside the Masterplan which sets out a framework and action plan to develop a much more resilient community.

Welfare Reforms and Universal Credit

6. We received an update on the Government's welfare reforms, the implementation of Universal Credit and the potential impact on residents and Council services.
7. A number of significant reforms to welfare benefits have been implemented since April 2013 and a number of further reforms are proposed for 2015-16 onwards.
8. Universal Credit, which will replace six existing means tested benefits currently administered by a number of organisations, began its roll-out in Darlington in November 2015 with the full roll-out not expected to be completed until 2021 and we were made aware of a number of actions taken by the Council in preparation for the implementation, including signing a Partnership Delivery Agreement with the

Department for Works and Pensions, to enable residents receiving Universal Credit to access personal budgeting support.

9. At this stage, the number of people currently receiving Universal Credit in Darlington is low and this is expected to remain the case, however we have asked for an update report later in the year.
10. We were concerned about the cumulative impact some of these changes will have, particularly in relation to the introduction of the benefit cap and we have asked for case studies to be included in our next update report which demonstrate the impact of these reforms and evidence the support and advice given to any residents who are affected by these changes.

Housing Strategy Monitoring Report

11. We considered a report which sought views on the Housing Strategy 2012-17, which had been approved in July 2012. The Strategy contains a commitment to annually review and assess progress against targets and this is the second such review of the five year strategy.
12. We were advised that, overall, good progress has been made in the first three years of implementing the Housing Strategy, with 55 per cent of milestones being achieved in the first three years, a further 27 per cent of milestones being on schedule and the Council currently being on course to meet the six objectives.
13. There are three areas where the Council is falling short on the objectives namely, the provision of housing to meet local needs, the Town Centre Fringe and the delivery of the Making and Growing Places and we were advised of the actions being taken in relation to those areas.
14. Two of the six objectives within the Strategy are particularly relevant to our Scrutiny Committee and we were re-assured to note that those two objectives of providing good quality advice to prevent crisis and ensure access to appropriate housing and providing effective support and opportunities for vulnerable groups were being met.

Life Stages Service in Darlington

15. We received an update on the progress following a review of the Life Stages Service within Darlington. The Life Stages Service was launched in Darlington in 2011 and was developed to address some of the long standing national and local issues in relation to supporting young disabled people and their families who needed support make the transition from children's to adult services. The current service model, which is a single service for 13-25 year olds, which brings together current Council services for disabled children, including elements of education, children's health and adults with a learning disability under a single management structure, has now been in place for four years and a more formal evaluation of the service is planned for next year.
16. We noted that Officers within the service are convinced that the model is delivering better outcomes for both individuals and the organisation, however, we have asked

for further quantitative data to be provided to evidence this.

17. We will also be looking, at a future meeting, at services in relation to adults with learning difficulties, including autism.

Housing Revenue Account – MTFP 2016/17 – 2020/21

18. Cabinet has agreed to consult on proposals in relation for the revenue budget, rent levels and service charges for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the financial year 2016/17 in the context of the HRA Medium Term Financial Plan 2019/20 and the 30 year Business Plan and we have agreed to support those proposals.
19. We were advised that Cabinet's proposal was in line with Government policy to implement an average weekly rent reduction for 2016/17 of one per cent. This would give an average rent of £72.17; convert all social rents to affordable rents as properties became available to let where this would result in an increase in the overall charge, in order to offset the impact of that reduction in rental income; increase garage rents and service charges; and implement the standard charge from April 2016, for properties previously excluded from pavement crossing and hard-standing services.

Medium Term Financial Plan

20. As with all other Scrutiny Committees, we received a report in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 1 December 2015.
21. The report sets out the two-stage approach to revising the MTFP and we noted that the first stage was to set the Council Tax for 2016/17, along with the fees and charges and that the second stage, to be considered by Cabinet in February, would be to further revise the MTFP, following receipt of the Local Government Finance Settlement.
22. In relation to setting the Council Tax for 2016/17, we are aware that the Government is allowing Councils with responsibility for Adult Social Care to be able to levy a 'precept' of two per cent on top of the current Council Tax referendum limit to help fund the increasing cost of social care. In Darlington, Adult Social Care is the largest overall budget and the two per cent levy is required to help fund the on-going pressures within that area, such as the introduction of the National Living Wage, which it is expected will impact on the Council's own workforce, but more significantly on social care contracts.

Work Programme

23. We are continuing with our work in relation to Dementia as our major review this year. In addition, we are continuing with our programme of visits and recently visited the facilities at Rosemary Court where we looked at the facilities provided, met with residents, discussed the allocation process, catering and care

arrangements and received a demonstration of assistive technology.

24. We are going to review our current work programme and prioritise areas under key themes so we can ensure that better outcomes for residents are achieved and there is evidence to support this.

Councillor Sue Richmond
Chair of Adults and Housing Scrutiny Committee