

DISTRICT OF EASINGTON COUNCIL

SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2008/9

Scrutiny in Easington

Annual Report 2008/9

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Introduction

This annual report details the work of the District of Easington's Scrutiny function exercised via the Scrutiny Management Board and the three Scrutiny Committees. It highlights the impact of Scrutiny upon the Councils decision-making processes and ultimately the impact on those services provided either directly by the Council or in partnerships with other agencies to the people of Easington.

The report examines the work during 2008/9 of the Scrutiny Committees and highlights areas of continuing high priority that have been identified by the Scrutiny Committees and which shall be forwarded to Durham County Council for consideration as part of the development of its Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme for 2009/10.

Following the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act receiving royal assent, the Local Government Review process within County Durham has continued apace. In order to ensure that the residents of Easington continued to receive high quality public services, the Council's Scrutiny Committees have concentrated their efforts on ensuring that performance within the Council was improving in terms of service delivery.

The merger of eight local authorities into one Unitary Council for County Durham is a monumental task and has drawn heavily on the resources of the District Council, not least of which has been the amount of officer and member time spent on the transition. It would have been easy to "take our eye off the ball" when it came to maintaining service provision to our residents in the interim period. However, the Council has steadfastly remained true to its Corporate priorities and has ensured that those priority areas identified within the Council's Corporate Plan, and which have been the driver to the Scrutiny Committees work programme over the last year, have been delivered upon.

As a Scrutiny Management Board we are committed to the principles of strong scrutiny of those issues which we, as community representatives, know are of high importance to the residents of Easington. All of the Council's Scrutiny Committees welcome representatives and contributions from the community of Easington as an essential element of good scrutiny.

Sadly, this will be the final District of Easington Scrutiny Annual report. In producing this report, the Scrutiny Management Board and members of the Scrutiny Committees are proud of their contribution to the District of Easington Council achieving excellence. The Council has embraced the principle of robust Scrutiny since its introduction in 2000 and the way in which the Scrutiny function has complimented the leadership shown by the Council's Executive has demonstrated that non-executive members have retained a crucial role in the development and provision of effective, efficient and economic services to its residents.

We would finally wish to place on record our appreciation of the contribution made by officers of the Council and its Partners together with those members of the public who have engaged in the work of the Scrutiny Committees over the past nine years. We fervently hope that the new Council continues to engage these principles and that services in East Durham continue to improve.

Councillor Colin Patching
Chair of Community Services Scrutiny
Committee

Councillor Richard Burnip
Vice Chair of Community Services
Scrutiny Committee

Councillor A Burnip
Chair of Resources Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Joyce Maitland
Vice Chair of Resources Scrutiny
Committee

Councillor Dennis Raine
Chair of Regeneration Services Scrutiny
Committee

Councillor Edna Connor
Vice Chair of Regeneration Services
Scrutiny Committee

Key Elements of Scrutiny

Scrutiny is an important part of the Government's drive to modernise local government – the way in which decisions are made and public services are improved. Government legislation required the Council to replace the old Committee system with a new decision making process. This process is set out under the Council's Constitution which was amended in May 2007 and consists of:

- An Executive, chaired by the Leader of the Council and elected by the Council who make policy and service delivery decisions.
- Three Scrutiny Committees
- Regulatory Committees dealing with issues such as Development Control, Licensing and Standards
- An Audit Committee independent of the Executive and Scrutiny functions.

The Scrutiny Committees' key roles are to:-

- Review and/or scrutinise decisions made or actions taken in connection with the discharge of any Council functions.
- Make reports and/or recommendations to the Council and/or the Executive in connection with the discharge of any functions.
- Consider any matter affecting the District of Easington or its inhabitants.
- Exercise the right to ask the Executive to think again about decisions made but not yet implemented (Call-in).

The Scrutiny Committees assist the Council in developing and reviewing its policies by:

- Conducting research, community and other consultation into policy issues and proposals
- Engaging with members of the local community in examining policies.
- Questioning other Councillors and Officers about their views on issues and proposals affecting the district.
- Liaising with other organisations to try and improve the services provided to the residents of Easington.

The committees also review and scrutinise the performance of the Council in terms of the success of its policies against its priorities and objectives, its performance indicators and measures and how well Council services are received.

The Scrutiny Committees decide which areas they wish to examine and may investigate particular issues in depth. The issues examined may arise following representations from the public, concerns of Councillors or follow on from reports about the Council's activities or the Best Value Inspectorate.

In short, the Scrutiny process is about improving services for people by being responsive to their needs and making the Council's decision-making processes more open, accountable and inclusive to residents.

The Scrutiny Management Board

The Scrutiny Management Board meetings continue to provide the Scrutiny Committee Chairs and Vice Chairs, with the information and deliberations of the Executive, when they had made their decisions at their previous meeting. This gives members of the Board an opportunity to pre-empt any potential call-in references or requests for further information when the minutes of the Executive are formally reported to the Scrutiny Committees.

The Scrutiny Management Board acts as a sounding board for policy development and changes to service delivery at an early stage and will refer issues down to the appropriate Scrutiny Committee. This serves two purposes:-

- Firstly, it gives non-executive members a chance to view policy development and service delivery proposals prior to their being agreed by the Executive, hence giving these members a sense of ownership to the end of the decision of the Executive.
- Secondly, it provides both report authors and the Executive with a valuable mechanism for feedback and challenge regarding their proposals.

The Management Board has formulated responses to 2 Department of Communities and Local Government during the past year. These related to:-

- (i) Local Petitions and Calls for Action
- (ii) Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power

Both of the consultations related to proposals for the development of Overview and Scrutiny as highlighted in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The responses pressed for the development of guidance prior to the introduction of the Petitions and Calls for Actions processes so as to ensure a consistency of approach and to establish some associated timescales for dealing with the said processes.

The Board has also referred the NHS County Durham consultation entitled “Seizing the Future” to the Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee as part of the ongoing involvement in the development of Healthcare services in and around the District and which impact on the residents of East Durham.

As part of the Board’s work programme for 2008/9, it examined the production of the East Durham LSP Community Strategy. A previous Scrutiny Review had agreed the need for the Council to monitor the performance of the LSP and to this end quarterly performance reports had been provided to the Management Board. As a supplementary report, the Board also received presentations from the LSP Manager regarding the revised East Durham Community Strategy. Later in the year, the Board received a report from the LSP Manager, which detailed the results of an independent assessment of the East Durham LSP. The assessment highlighted a number of areas of positive feedback given in respect of the LSP’s performance and its contribution to improving the quality of life for residents of East Durham.

The Board was given updates on a number of interventions undertaken via the LSP that had dramatically improved IMD stats in areas such as Health Improvement, Worklessness, Educational Attainment, Community Safety. The document was described as a legacy for the Unitary Council's Area Action Partnership proposals and the Board considered the methodology behind East Durham LSP as an example of best practice in how multi-agency working can benefit communities at a local level.

As part of the transitional arrangements for the move to Unitary Local Government, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Management Board liaised with their colleagues in Durham County Council and the Durham Districts, to share work programmes for 2008/9 to ensure that areas of best practice could be shared and also to avoid duplication in scrutiny work.

Community Services Scrutiny Committee

As part of the Council's transitional plan for local Government Review, the 2008/09 work programme for the Community Services Scrutiny Committee concentrated on periodic Service Unit Position statements in respect of:-

- Environmental Services
- Neighbourhood Initiatives
- Marketing and Communications
- Leisure
- Revenues and Benefits
- Energy Efficiency/LA 21

In accordance with the approach agreed by the Scrutiny Management Board, the Community Services Scrutiny Committee received performance reports from the Managers of the aforementioned service units. The reports detailed:-

- Priority areas of work identified in the Unit Service Plan
- Progress made on delivering against these areas
- Performance Indicators relevant to the services
- The potential impact of Local Government Review upon the service areas and the steps being taken to mitigate against those LGR risks identified.

The Committee specifically sought information regarding how service would ensure that high levels of performance were carried into the new Authority and in particular that existing contractual arrangements would continue on in the new Unitary Authority and, where assurances were still awaited, that these issues were being examined in the LGR Officer Workstreams.

The Committee responded to two Area Plan proposal consultations undertaken by Post Office Ltd, namely:-

- Cleveland with South Durham and Richmond
- Tyne and Wear with Northumberland and Durham

In both instances, the Committee engaged with local Councillors, Parish Councils and the postmasters themselves to establish the background to the proposed Branch Closures and the potential impact upon local communities. In responding to both consultations the Committee re-stated the Council's previously adopted position of opposing any Post Office Closures due to the detrimental effect that they would have on the more vulnerable members of the community such as Pensioners and benefit recipients.

The Committee was disappointed that in both consultations, the proposed closures were agreed although evidence received from the Postmasters of the affected facilities suggested that the branches concerned were not financially viable.

During the afore-mentioned processes, Members expressed concern about the viability of the network which remained within the District after speculation regarding the future of the Post Office Card Account. This was a vital service which allowed pensioners and benefit recipients to receive monies from Post Offices rather than having Bank Accounts. Members lobbied the Government and Post Office Ltd seeking assurances that the Account would be retained and that this would ensure that no further reductions in the Post Office Branch network would be necessary. Subsequent press articles and an official announcement from Government ministers confirmed this to be the case.

Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee

As part of the 2008/09 work programme for the Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee considered periodic Service Unit Position statements in respect of:-

- Housing Services
- Planning and Building Control
- Regeneration and Partnerships
- East Durham Business Service
- Environmental Health and Licensing
- Asset Management and Estates

In accordance with the approach agreed by the Scrutiny Management Board, the Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee received performance reports from the Managers of the aforementioned service units. The reports detailed:-

- Priority areas of work identified in the Unit Service Plan
- Progress made on delivering against these areas
- Performance Indicators relevant to the services
- The potential impact of Local Government Review upon the service areas and the steps being taken to mitigate against those LGR risks identified.

The Committee specifically sought information regarding how service would ensure that high levels of performance were carried into the new Authority and in particular that existing contractual arrangements would continue on in the new Unitary Authority and, where assurances were still awaited, that these issues were being examined in the LGR Officer Workstreams.

The Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee has taken part in three NHS Consultation exercises which potentially impact upon the residents of the District.

Representatives of the Momentum Project attended a meeting to discuss proposals for the development of a new hospital facility at Wynyard. Whilst the Committee expressed no preference to either site, the formal response to the consultation sought assurances that no services would be displaced at University Hospital Hartlepool prior to the new facility opening. The Committee also stressed the need for a robust transport infrastructure to be in place to enable residents to access services. Finally, the Committee to the Trust's commitment that acute health services at the new hospital would be supported by a wide range of community based healthcare services. In welcoming this stance, the Committee sought assurances that North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust would engage in meaningful dialogue with their colleagues in County Durham to ensure that community based healthcare services are provided within Easington, with specific reference to Peterlee Hospital.

Representatives of County Durham PCT also attended the Committee to discuss its proposals for improving access to G.P.Services. This project involved the development of a G.P. led health centre at Easington which aimed to improve access to services; reduce health inequalities and increase health promotion. The Committee fully supported the development but once again reiterated the need for the PCT to ensure the development of robust community based healthcare provision which supported acute hospital services and were accessible to all. This linked with the Momentum project. David Gallagher allayed members concerns by confirming that County Durham PCT was in discussions with the Momentum team in this respect.

The final consultation exercise entitled “Seizing the future” detailed the County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust’s proposals to review future hospital services delivered from Bishop Auckland General hospital, Darlington Memorial hospital and University Hospital North Durham. Whilst not directly affecting residents of East Durham, the proposals, which included the cessation of an A &E service at Bishop Auckland and the concentration of acute services (including A & E) at Darlington and Durham Hospitals, could increase waiting times at University Hospital North Durham. This could have an adverse impact on East Durham residents who attend A&E via University Hospital North Durham.

The Committee accepted the clinical reasons for the proposed changes but once again emphasised the importance of the health service being accessible via public transport. This was of particular importance in an area such as Easington where car ownership levels are low and there is a heavy reliance on public transport to access services. The Committee responded to the consultation exercise in this respect.

During the course of the year, the Committee also revised the methodology by which it undertakes the monitoring of East Durham Homes. This was prioritised as an area of concern, particularly in the lead up to a further inspection by the housing inspectorate. The Committee have focussed their attention on the priority areas identified in the East Durham Homes Business Plan. To this end, initial results have been encouraging with a number of service improvements having been demonstrated over the past 12 months.

The Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee has also dealt with a number of enquiries raised by members of the public regarding specific regeneration issues in Seaham.

Resources Scrutiny Committee

As part of the 2008/09 work programme for the Resources Scrutiny Committee considered periodic Service Unit Position statements in respect of:-

- Corporate Development Unit
- Customer Services
- Personnel and Payroll
- Democratic Services
- Finance
- Information Technology

In accordance with the approach agreed by the Scrutiny Management Board, the Resources Scrutiny Committee received performance reports from the Managers of the aforementioned service units. The reports detailed:-

- Priority areas of work identified in the Unit Service Plan
- Progress made on delivering against these areas
- Performance Indicators relevant to the services
- The potential impact of Local Government Review upon the service areas and the steps being taken to mitigate against those LGR risks identified.

The Committee specifically sought information regarding how service would ensure that high levels of performance were carried into the new Authority and in particular that existing contractual arrangements would continue on in the new Unitary Authority and, where assurances were still awaited, that these issues were being examined in the LGR Officer Workstreams.

During 2007/8 the Resources Scrutiny Committee a programme of Value for Money service reviews was established to examine those services perceived as being high cost services. Two Value for Money reports were considered by the Committee in 2008/9 in respect of:-

- Concessionary Fares Scheme
- Horticultural Services

In respect of the Concessionary Fares scheme, on a purely cost basis it could be considered that the service did not deliver Value for Money. However, public satisfaction with the County Durham Concessionary Fares scheme is high with the scheme providing benefits over and above the national scheme introduced by Government.

When examining the Horticultural Service the Resources Scrutiny Committee were initially advised that the service was one of high cost, average performance and average satisfaction. However, the final Value for Money report demonstrated that horticultural services were a high priority for the Council and that costs compared favourably with other Councils. Outputs for the service were rated as good with a high level of satisfaction being achieved amongst fee-paying customers.

Whilst the Value for Money programme was initially developed over a three-year period, the Resources Scrutiny Committee recommended that the programme be discontinued given the workloads being generated by the Local Government Review process.

Priority Issues identified for consideration by Durham County Council

In view of the fact that this is the last District of Easington Scrutiny Annual Report and that the new Durham County Council will establish its own Scrutiny Work Programmes for 2009/10 and beyond, the Council's Scrutiny Committees have identified a number of issues which they would like to see considered by that Council as part of its work programme.

The first is a general issue regarding how the new Council will monitor service performance at a local level. It is acknowledged that the County Council will assume responsibility for the collection and monitoring of Performance Indicators at a corporate level and as part of the Local Area Agreement. The District of Easington Scrutiny Committees hope that the new Authority strives to ensure that all residents of County Durham receive an equitable standard of service countywide. A robust system for managing such performance is essential and needs to provide Councillors with performance data with which they can address their constituents queries.

More specific issues of priority for East Durham are those issues identified within this report that impact on the health and well being of residents. East Durham has for many years suffered from acute health deprivation problems. A number of NHS Consultation exercises have been undertaken which promote the development of community based healthcare services which would support acute hospital services and at the same time reduce the need for patients accessing hospitals. The District's Regeneration Scrutiny Committee has campaigned fervently for dialogue across NHS boundaries when changes in healthcare services are proposed as they invariably impact upon local communities regardless of local government or public authority boundaries. The County Council's Health Scrutiny Sub Committee has operated very well since its inception in 2003 – a fact that could be attributed to the Committee having membership from across the County, thus ensuring that local communities could engage in discussions around health services. We hope that whatever mechanisms for Scrutiny at the local level are introduced, they will be as effective as the Health Scrutiny Sub Committee.

As an area blighted by the decline of the Coal industry, East Durham has embarked upon a transformational programme of regeneration to improve the physical, social and economic well being of the area. This is not yet complete with a number of high profile initiatives being transferred over to the Unitary County Council. Again, the District of Easington Scrutiny Committees urge the County Council to continue the legacy left by District of Easington Council.

The Council's Regeneration Scrutiny Committee has worked closely with East Durham homes in monitoring that Company's progress towards achieving three-star status as an Arms Length Management Organisation looking after the Council's housing stock. The Stock has deteriorated at a rate far in excess of the availability of resources to bring the stock up to "Decent Homes" standard. It is vital that the ALMO is given the support through and beyond the coming Inspection in the anticipation that Decent Homes monies can be accessed to regenerate the Housing stock. This would have a tremendous impact upon East Durham in terms of securing work in the Housing Sector which is suffering under the current economic climate.

The final priority identified within this report is the vital role that partnership working will play in the continued regeneration of County Durham, an area of high performance within East Durham, led by the East Durham Local Strategic Partnership. The Council's Scrutiny Management Board have referenced earlier in this report, the positive assessment of East Durham LSP that has been published within a report

independently commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The report highlighted a number of interventions undertaken via the LSP that had dramatically improved IMD stats in areas such as Health Improvement, Worklessness, Educational Attainment, and Community Safety. Recent legislation places great emphasis on the need for public sector partners to work collectively to improve the quality of life for their communities. The proposed Area Action Partnership (AAP) for Easington will have to deliver against the legacy of improvements passed on by the East Durham Local Strategic Partnership. In doing so, it is essential that local communities are empowered to work with the AAP and shape future service improvements in East Durham.

As a supplementary to this, the Council has been piloting Neighbourhood Forums in the Seaham, Murton and South Hetton areas. Based upon the delivery of initiatives to address local community priorities identified within an “Agenda for Action”, the Forum pilots have been evaluated and the results passed to the Areas and Participation workstream lead officers. The Council would wish for these to provide a model for community engagement and involvement in the decision making and service delivery processes which could operate below the AAP’s.

Scrutiny Committee Membership

Members of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee are:

Councillor B Burn
Councillor R Burnip
Councillor Mrs A Laing
Councillor R Liddle
Councillor T Longstaff
Councillor Mrs S Mason
Councillor D Milsom
Councillor C Patching
Councillor T Unsworth

Members of the Regeneration Services Scrutiny Committee are:

Councillor S Bishop
Councillor Mrs E Connor
Councillor Mrs S Forster
Councillor H High
Councillor A J Holmes
Councillor D Raine
Councillor M Routledge
Councillor Mrs B Sloan
Councillor D J Taylor-Gooby
Councillor C Walker

Members of the Resources Scrutiny Committee are:

Councillor Mrs M Baird
Councillor A Burnip
Councillor A Collinson
Councillor J Haggan
Councillor A J Holmes
Councillor R Liddle
Councillor D Maddison
Councillor Mrs J Maitland
Councillor M Nicholls
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For further information regarding the Scrutiny Annual Report, please contact any of the above.

key documents/draftworkingdocuments/Scrutiny Annual Report 2008-09