

## **Durham County Council**

### **Overview and Scrutiny**

#### **Partners, People and Place Shaping**

– making a difference to the community we serve...improving local accountability.

### **NEXT STEPS REPORT**

#### **A) Background**

The purpose of the event (held on 31 October 2008) was to engage Local Area Agreement partners to support them develop a better understanding of:

- the role of overview and scrutiny in relation to the new Durham County Council, its partners and other bodies and;
- how Overview and Scrutiny can be used effectively to add value and make a difference to the delivery of public services and the well-being of communities.

The primary objectives were to ensure that by the end of the session participants will have a better understanding of the:

- roles of overview & scrutiny and the types of activity these roles encompass
- Centre for Public Scrutiny's Four Principles of Effective Scrutiny
- new legislative requirements in relation to the scrutiny of the Local Area Agreement
- opportunities for overview & scrutiny in the new Durham Council to add value to the delivery of public services

A number of parallel workshops aimed to explore the potential of overview and scrutiny adding real value to the work of the new Council, other agencies and to the communities they serve.

This would shape the next stage of development and dialogue between lead Overview and Scrutiny members, the County Durham Partnership and respective LAA boards.

#### **B) Key Issues From The Day:**

The Group session focussed on working with Overview and Scrutiny in order to add value and make a difference to public services within Durham. Working in groups participants were allocated a theme and asked to look at the challenges and the potential opportunities for Overview and Scrutiny and

what will be required within the new Council if Overview and Scrutiny is to make a real difference.

## **Theme 1 - Developing Effective Relationships**

Introduction:-

One of the lessons from Health Overview & Scrutiny nationally has been that more effective scrutiny has taken place where relationships are good between the scrutinisers and the scrutinized and the role of Overview and Scrutiny is understood and valued.

The challenge for parallel workshops was to identify how they would create a climate within which O&S of the LAA will be seen as influential and effective.

### **Workshop Discussion /Key Points:-**

- Existing working relationships and networks between the O/S process and partners should be built upon and barriers broken down so that the needs of County Durham are met and not put at risk.
- Chairs should meet with appropriate LAA block leads to better understand each others business and priorities. Smaller scale events should be used to engage boards and OS committees.
- Two way communication / dialogue is essential if a climate of mutual trust and confidence is to be created and maintained; The Overview and Scrutiny process needs to be open and honest built on trust. People need to believe it and see it making a difference. It must be a relationship that is responsive to understand rather than undermine.
- Effective partnerships can only be developed through transparent joint working arrangements where all partners are clear about their own objectives within the LAA but also supportive of shared partnership objectives.
- The public (community engagement) need to be more aware of how they can contribute to the LAA via the O/S process;
- O/S can add value by identifying areas of partnership performance / underperformance e.g. monitoring the progress and outcomes of LAA targets. It should aim to avoid duplication of other inspection bodies such as Government Office and the CAA;
- O/S should develop new strategies in terms of how it works with the media so that it can profile its work, keep local people informed of what it is doing and encourage local people to become involved in its work.
- O/S structure should be aligned to relevant LAA blocks.

## **Theme 2 - Communication and Engagement**

Effective Overview & Scrutiny is not just concerned with influencing service providers and holding them to account but also of engaging partners and the public in its work.

The challenge is how this might be achieved in Durham?

### **Workshop Discussion /Key Points:-**

- O/S needs to be aware of the partners roles and responsibilities and how these roles and responsibilities link into 'the bigger picture'.
- To ensure that partners and O/S are well informed of each other's activities and that each are not operating within their own silo there needs to be more face to face workshops and regular progress updates from the partnership to O/S and vice versa.
- O/S (ward councillor) can bring community involvement and participation to the fore in respect of the LAA / partners by engaging with e.g. community groups (residents associations, citizen's panel), hard to reach groups (Links) co-optee involvement and generally building on good relationships / networks without the need to 'reinvent the wheel'. It will be important to look at new ways of engaging with the public, using texting, video cams etc....The recent White Paper on Empowerment is crucial as this does put the local councillor forward as a place shaper and O/S has a significant role as part of this.
- Area based O/S reviews need to be developed to respond to local concerns. These should be considered in line with other issues for example Councillor Calls for Action.

## **Theme 3 – How Might O&S of the LAA Work?**

In order to be clear about roles and responsibilities in scrutinising the LAA, working arrangements will be needed which set out how it will operate and the obligations on Council members, officers and partners.

There may be existing good practice, procedures and protocols which can be built upon and developed.

### **Workshop Discussion /Key Points:-**

- O/S as critical friend should offer constructive challenge in issues such as performance monitoring.
- To avoid the risk of duplication and best use of resources there ought to be an information sharing protocol with sharing of plans and priorities, aims and objectives with good communication channels.

- Elected members' local knowledge and experience via the AAP's and O/S function is fundamentally important in that it provides the 'eyes and ears' of the community and community needs.
- O/S should be creative and innovative. It should work at both strategic level (county wide) and deal with local issues - filtering down responsibility (for O/S) to appropriate level using central O/S as an enabler.
- Integrate O/S into LAA working practices. For example O/S reflected in LAA governance arrangements.
- There is a role for O/S to look at performance and to monitor outcomes to ensure that targets are achieved and reasons why they have not achieved.
- Regular discussion/dialogue with LAA partners is essential. Communication, Communication, Communication.

### **C) Evaluation**

Please see Appendix 1.

### **D) Conclusion/ Next Steps**

1. A good working relationship needs to be established between the Chair of the County Durham Partnership, Chairs of LAA boards/themed groups and Chairs and Vice Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny in order to better understand respective roles, responsibilities, working arrangements, programme areas and priorities. Meetings with each of the LAA thematic partnerships will be arranged following a report to the County Durham Partnership on the outcome from the event.
2. The Overview and Scrutiny committee structure should reflect LAA themes. (Note: work is in progress through the County Councils Constitution Working group to do this namely a Overview and Scrutiny Management Board with 5 thematic overview and scrutiny committees – Adults, Well being and Health, Children and Young People, Economy and Enterprise, Environment and Sustainable Communities and Safer and Stronger Communities).
3. This report will be circulated to everyone who attended the event on 31 October 2008.
4. It will be reported on to the County Durham Partnership in the new year as part of its on going discussion on partnership governance suggesting that the Overview and Scrutiny function is reflected in its governance arrangements.

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November 2008.