



Overview and Scrutiny Committee



**People and Place Overview and Scrutiny
Committee**

Annual Report 2008/2009

February 2009

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Foreword of the Chair and Lead Member

In April 2008 Chester-le-Street District Council will no longer exist. A new unitary authority known as Durham County Council will be created.

It is therefore fast approaching the end of the world as we know it. At least it is the end of the scrutiny world as we know. It is with some sadness that I present this final Annual Overview and Scrutiny Report. However this sadness is eclipsed by the pride I feel about the work we have undertaken over the last five or so years in delivering a challenge to the services our council provides.

There is no doubt that we have helped bring the customer voice to service delivery. Implementation of our recommendations has seen service improve and attitudes change.

During the current year we reshaped and refocused to help the council deliver its single priority of *'People and Place'*. Through our Task and Finish Group approach we have undertaken three important reviews which we hope will effect improvement of the futures. This has been done in difficult circumstances.

As this is our final Annual Report I would like to thank those people who have contributed. Firstly I would like to thank the officers of this council who have supported scrutiny directly and those who have presented evidence to us. Secondly I wish to than the Executive for listening to us and for their consideration of our recommendations. Thirdly I would like to thank Scrutiny members for all their hard work and efforts which have resulted in us being able to develop those recommendations. Finally and most importantly, those members of the community who have provided evidence or challenged our witnesses. Without their contribution we would not have made the progress we have achieved.

Clr Geoff Armstrong

Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Panel Committee

People and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Annual Report 2008/2009

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is principally to provide a summary of the work undertaken by the People and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee between April 2008 and March 2009. It is the Committee's final Annual report and in view of this it is considered appropriate to trace a brief history of Scrutiny over the last 5 or so years to mark the progress of this important part of governance.
- 1.2 The report starts with that history. It then summarises the three key Scrutiny reviews over the last year and concludes by identifying the other work it has undertaken.

2 The Background – Our Scrutiny Journey

- 2.1 In March 2004 the Audit Commission published their first Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) judgement for the council. It considered that the council was a 'poor' council, the worst categorisation possible. There were a number of reasons for this and they were largely to do with senior management and lack of a performance management framework which led to capacity issues which were not managed. Scrutiny, they felt, was 'under-developed'.
- 2.2 This spurred the Council to undergo a clear transformational programme through an Improvement and Recovery Plan. Improvement to the scrutiny function was a key part of the improvement programme. For the first time the council appointed a dedicated Scrutiny support officer, Kelly Brook, who developed a clear work and improvement programme. By engaging with the I&DeA and securing Member peer support, scrutiny embarked on a journey of sustained change. The foundation was set for Members to become experienced scrutineers. Engagement with the I&DeA helped the council go on to be the first District in the region to achieve the Members Charter in July 2006.
- 2.3 Unfortunately Kelly moved on to another role in another organisation and it took time to secure a replacement. Members felt a little undervalued in that time but a new officer, Nigel Cummings restored Member's confidence following his arrival. During the intervening period the opportunity was taken to restructure Overview and Scrutiny. A series of workshops were held which resulted in a shift in the nature of committees to panels which directly supported the then new council priorities.

- 2.4 Nigel Cummings brought real meaning to the phrase 'getting out more'. Members began and sustained the habit of getting out, visiting other providers and service deliverers as well as customers. The quality of reporting improved further. The council's improvement began to be acknowledged nationally and the Centre for Public Scrutiny took an interest in our progress. The council has since appeared in a series of their documents and officers have presented at their national conferences.
- 2.5 In March 2007, the Audit Commission inspected the council to consider their second CPA judgement. Members of Scrutiny were themselves scrutinised by the Inspectors during that process. The result was that in June 2007 the council became the first in the country to become a 'good' council and make the shift from a 'poor' one. Scrutiny was now judged by the Audit commission to be 'effective'.
- 2.6 A month later the government announced that the District Council would cease to exist on 31st March 2009. The council had to then consider its focus for what was to be its final year. In October 2008 the Executive and Corporate Management Team started work on considering the council's exit strategy. In February 2008 the council's budget was set, based on a single priority of '**People and Place**'. In March 2008 the Council agreed its Transition plan which replaced the Corporate Plan and set out what was meant by the new single priority. In the following months the delivery plan for '**People and Place**' was developed. It was felt that in order to focus on the final year it was agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny process needed to change. Following a joint officer and Member workshop in April 2008 the Council, at its meeting in May 2009, agreed to alter its Constitution to move towards a single '**People and Place**' Scrutiny Committee to replace the previous three Scrutiny Panels.
- 2.7 The first meeting was held in June 2008. At that meeting members agreed their work programme for the year. That work programme has been successfully delivered. This has been against a background of reduced officer capacity. Nigel Cummings left the council in June 2009 and Colin Turnbull was seconded to the County Council in December. Shelley Marshall has made a major contribution to supporting the Committee during the course of the year.
- 2.8 It is considered that Overview and Scrutiny at Chester-le-Street has been on a significant journey of change and improvement. It has been a significant feature in the overall improvement of the council.

3 Scrutiny Reviews 2008/2009

3.1 In support of the single priority of **'People and Place'** the Overview Committee has delivered three formal reviews. These were delivered only slightly behind target. All reviews were agreed by the Executive on 2nd February 2009. The reviews were:

- Review into the Future of the Market
- Review of the Future of the Unparished Areas of the Chester-le-Street
- Review into the marketing of activities for young people.

Review into the Future of the Market

3.2 This review supported the work of the 'Investing in the Town Centre' component of **'People and Place'**. The review was led by Councillor Geoff Armstrong with the support of Rob McMullen, Town Centre Development Manager. The council engaged a consultant to undertake research, visit and reporting work. Members visited a range of different markets in the region. A focus group of traders helped ensure the community were involved in the review. The recommendations put forward proposals for an improvement plan for the market as a first phase. It further recommended that should the implementation of this plan not secure the necessary change then consideration ought to be given to outsourcing. The recommendations within the review are to be incorporated into the handing over the Baton Report.

Review of the Future of the unparished areas of Chester-le-Street.

3.3 This review supported the work of the 'Strengthening Partnerships' component of the **'People and Place'** priority. It actually carried out a piece of work the Action Learning Set originally proposed to do. The review was led by Councillor David Holding and was supported by Ian Forster, Director of Corporate Services. The review involved visiting a range of developing and existing Town and Parish Councils including some with 'Quality' status. The community were engaged through a sample questionnaire extending to 1,000 homes in the unparished areas of the District. The questionnaire was also provided to existing parish councils and residents and community associations throughout the district. There was a 12% return rate. In addition a focus group of interested residents and members was undertaken.

3.4 The results showed that whilst there were more people who felt the district ought to be parished than not there was no significant majority. Cost was clearly an issue for individuals. The community engagement proved that there was sufficient interest in the community for the County Council to consider a 'Community Governance Review ' and the final report made

recommendations to this effect. Again these recommendations will be incorporated into the 'Handing over the Baton' Report.

Review into the Marketing of activities for Young People

- 3.5 This review resulted from direct feedback to the member Champion for Sport that parents did not understand what activities were available for young people. The review supported both the 'Strengthening Partnerships' and 'Neighbourhoods' components of the **'People and Place'** priority. It was led by councillor Tracey Smith, Member Champion for Sport and supported by Simon High, Acting Head of Leisure Services. The review secured evidence by visiting a number of different providers in the region. The Final Report made recommendations based on the learning from these visits and will be built into the 'Handing Over the Baton Report'.

4 Other Work 2008/2009

- 4.1 Due to limited capacity and workload in the last year there was not a significant amount of work undertaken. However the Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

- Scrutinised Executive Decisions;
- reviewed the annual corporate performance of the Council for 2007/2008;
- received evidence from Cestria Community Housing on their performance since their creation;
- scrutinised the performance of the council's recycling contract;
- scrutinised the council's use of Section 106 monies; and
- received updates on the implementation of the council's Bonfire Policy

- 4.2 There were no 'call ins' during the year.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 It is considered that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has effectively delivered its work programme during 2008/2009. This has been due to the hard work and commitment of Members and officers working to achieve the council's single priority of **'People and Place'**.

- 5.2 This is Chester-le-Street's final Annual Scrutiny Report.

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