

# Item no

Report to: **Resources Scrutiny Committee**  
Date: **3 June 2008**  
Report of: **Head of Democratic Services**  
Subject: **Democratic Services – Performance Report**  
Ward: **All**

## 1 **Purpose of Report**

1.1 To update Members on the performance of the Democratic Services Unit.

## 2 **Consultation**

2.1 In preparing this report I have consulted with the Executive Member for Resources and staff within the Unit.

## 3 **Background**

3.1 The report provides an update for the previous six months on the progress of the Unit which comprises the following service areas:

- **Democratic and Member Services**
- **Elections and Electoral Registration**

## 4 **Position Statement**

4.1 In March this year, following the final report of the Best Value Review of Support Services the Executive approved the report of the Executive Members for Improvement and Resources which set out proposals for the restructuring of a number of corporate support services.

4.2 The report suggested that there should be a separation of the Democratic Services and Legal Services/Risk Management/Insurance functions to establish a clear focus for each. The Democratic Services function transferred to the Assistant Chief Executive's team so that there is a closer alignment between democracy and the agendas around community engagement and corporate development.

4.3 The Legal, Risk and Insurance functions have transferred to the Directorate of Finance and Corporate Services.

## 5 **Democratic and Member Services**

### 5.1 **Scrutiny**

- 5.1.1 The District of Easington Scrutiny Annual Report 2007/8 has been considered by the Scrutiny Management Board and appears separately on the agenda for today's meeting.
- 5.1.2 The Scrutiny Committees' work programmes in what is a transitional year to the new Unitary Council concentrates on Service Unit Performance reporting to ensure that Council Performance is maintained at the highest level together with monitoring of those priority issues identified within the Council's Transitional Plan. Key issues identified for each Committee are

#### *Regeneration Services*

- Momentum – Pathways to Healthcare project
- Support to East Durham Homes
- Developing entrepreneurship and Economic Participation

#### *Community Services*

- Implementing Neighbourhood working and community Engagement
- Recycling and Waste Services
- Post Office Ltd Network Change Programme – Area Plan proposal for Easington

#### *Resources*

- Development of Customer Services and IT support mechanisms
- Medium Term Financial Strategy to support the transitional Plan.

5.1.3 There are a number of county-wide Scrutiny initiatives in which the Council is involved by virtue of having members "at the table".

5.1.4 As well as having two elected member representatives on the County Council's Joint Health Scrutiny Committee, members of the Council have also worked on the following Countywide Scrutiny reviews:-

- Young People not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETS)
- Public Transport

5.1.5 The County Durham Overview and Scrutiny Officer Network has taken the opportunity to comprehensively evaluate Overview and Scrutiny in County Durham. Using the Centre for Public Scrutiny's Evaluation Toolkit a number of members have been either interviewed or surveyed as part of the process. The results of this work are being compiled into a comprehensive report which will be brought to the Scrutiny Committees when completed.

## **5.2 Member Training and Development**

5.2.1 As part of the adoption in February 2008 of the Council's transitional Plan for Local Government Reorganisation, organisational development work was refocused to support the needs of staff and members through the period of transition.

5.2.2 As part of this process member training and development activity will be concentrated on activities to support elected members through the transition. Notwithstanding this, learning opportunities will still be circulated to members from the usual sources including the North East Regional Employers' Organisation.

5.2.3 Within the ongoing Local Government Review workstreams, officers have been involved in developing Induction and Training activities for the newly elected County Councillors.

### 5.3 **Community Engagement**

5.3.1 The Unit has been heavily involved in the Neighbourhood Forum Pilots in Seaham, Murton and South Hetton. Working with East Durham Trust, the initial pilot meetings were held on 17, 18 and 19 March 2008. Collectively, over 100 residents took part in the pilot meetings with residents invited to leave contact details so that they could receive information regarding the ongoing pilots.

5.3.2 Arising from the meetings an "Agenda for Action" for each forum has been produced and will be presented to the Forums in May and June 2008 for approval. The new forums will be evaluated during August and September and a decision on whether the pilot arrangements will be extended to other parts of the District will be taken then.

## 6 **Electoral Services**

### 6.1 **Electoral Registration**

6.1.2 Members will recall that at a meeting of this Committee on 11 December 2007 I informed them that the annual canvass for the Electoral Register had been completed and resulted in an overall total household response rate of 95%. Of these 22% responded by telephone.

6.1.3 In February this year, prior to the County Council Elections a "Register Cleansing" exercise was undertaken. This involved writing to all households in the District asking if occupants were registered or whether any circumstances had changed.

6.1.4 The result of the exercise was as follows:-

492 additions to the Register  
772 deletions from the Register  
92 changes to the Register

6.1.5 This obviously proved to be a worthwhile exercise in preparation for the May elections.

### 6.2 **Review of Polling Districts and Polling Places**

6.2.1 Following last year's review District Council adopted final proposals at their meeting on 23 November 2007.

6.2.2 At that time there were a number of polling places with changing circumstances. Therefore in readiness for the County Council Elections a further review was undertaken in February and the District Council agreed at their meeting on 6 March 2007 to adopt further proposed changes to a small number of polling places.

### 6.3 **Durham County Council Elections**

6.3.1 Through February, March and April staff within the Unit were heavily involved in the management of the elections.

6.3.2 Through a joint procurement exercise with the other 7 District Councils, Sunderland City Print were contracted to produce poll cards, postal voting packs and ballot papers.

This arrangement proved to be successful with postal voting arrangements running very smoothly.

6.3.3 18,300 postal voter packs were despatched and 11,878 were returned giving a postal voter turnout of 65%.

6.3.4 The overall turnout for the District was 30.5%.

6.3.5 The recent Electoral Administration Act made significant changes to the way that the electoral process is administered. Staffing arrangements were reviewed 18 months ago to deal with the new provisions. These arrangements were made permanent this year following the structural review (see paragraph 4).

6.3.6 The new arrangements have allowed us to successfully meet the demands placed upon the Electoral Services Section.

## 7 **Local Government Review**

7.1 As part of the work being undertaken for Local Government Review Stephen Gwilym and I have been involved in sub-groups of the Legal and Democracy Workstream.

7.2 I am a member of the Decision Making Sub-Group which has looked at issues relating to the transitional constitution requirements in the run up to the Elections and the Durham County Council Annual Meeting. Work is now ongoing on constitutional and structural arrangements in preparation for vesting day in April 2009.

7.3 Stephen Gwilym is involved in the Behaviour Skills and Values Sub Group which has looked at Councillor development and support including an initial Member Induction Programme.

7.4 He is also involved in the Member Locality Working Group which has looked at support facilities such as office accommodation, meetings facilities, IT facilities, access to Council information etc.

## 8 **Sickness Monitoring**

8.1 Effective sickness monitoring continues to be carried out in the Unit.

8.2 The overall sickness rate for the Unit for the period 1 May 2007 to 30 April 2008 was 3.49 days. The Council's corporate target is 8 days.

## 9 **Implications**

9.1 Financial Legal, Policy

9.1.1 There are no financial, legal or policy implications arising from this report.

9.2 Risk

9.2.1 There are no risk implications arising from this report.

9.3 Communication

9.3.1 There are no communication implications arising from this report.

## 10 **Corporate Implications**

### 10.1 Corporate Plans and Priorities

10.1.1 It is considered that the proposals are consistent with the Council's mission, priorities and objectives. In particular, the proposals are consistent with:-

Priority 1: Quality Services for our people

QS1 To provide and promote accessible, customer focussed crosscutting services with achieve e-government targets.

Priority 2: Striving for excellence in the workplace

SFE1 To ensure effective recruitment, development motivation, recognition and rewarding of staff.

SFE2 To develop the capacity to achieve in the organisation.

### 10.2 Equality and Diversity Implications

10.2.1 There are no Equality and Diversity Implications arising from this report.

### 10.3 E-Government Implications

10.3.1 There are no E-Government Implications arising from this report.

### 10.4 Procurement Implications

10.4.1 There are no Procurement Implications arising from this report.

## 11 **Local Government Review Implications**

11.1 There are no proposals in this report which impact on Local Government Review. Reference to staff involvement is made in paragraph 7.

## 12 **Recommendations**

Members are requested to note the work of the Democratic Services Unit and note the progress made.

### **Background papers/documents referred to:**

Unit files  
Service Plan  
Work Plans  
Local Government Review documents