

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

ECONOMY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of the **Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2 - County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 29 March 2012 at 10.00 am**

Present:

Councillor J Moran (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors A Naylor, J Armstrong, B Arthur, J Hunter, P Stradling and M Wilkes

Co-opted Members:

Mr T Batson, Mrs A Harrison and Mr D Lavin

Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor(s) A Barker, C Carr, P Jopling, Andy Turner, Mrs O Brown and Mr A Kitching

A1 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2012 were agreed by the Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chair. The Minutes of the meeting held 27 February 2012 were agreed by the Committee as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to an amendment for accuracy, put forward by Councillor M Wilkes, to the second paragraph on page 19 of the agenda pack so that it would read:

“Councillor M Wilkes added that at a budget meeting it was explained to Members that the Authority received around £1.3 Million in respect of the New Homes Bonus and that this was fed into the General Fund rather than ringfenced to Housing. Whilst recognising the financial position of the Council, Councillor M Wilkes added that he felt the Committee should recommend that the New Homes Bonus be ringfenced to Housing”.

Councillor J Armstrong added that any potential recommendation by Members on the subject would be discussed at future meetings of the Committee, or any Working Group set up by the Committee looking at those issues, and Members agreed the amendment to the Minutes as suggested.

A2 Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest.

A3 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

A4 Media Relations

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Diane Close referred Members to the recent prominent articles and news stories relating to the remit of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee (for copy of slide see file of minutes), namely articles relating to the ongoing Review of Library Services and the Council's Consultation; Housing Development at Cockfield; a visit by Year 7 students to Carillion highlighting career opportunities in the sector; and an apprenticeship scheme by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust that was providing training for 65 local young people.

The Chair noted that there had been approximately 5,000 responses to the Council's Consultation on Library Services to date.

Resolved:

That the presentation be noted.

A5 Quarter 3, 2011/12 Performance Management Report

The Chair introduced the Customer and Services Intelligence Manager, Graham Tebbutt who was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to the Quarter 3, 2011/12 Performance Management Report (for copy see file of minutes).

The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager noted the table set out on page 23 of the papers that highlighted the performance indicators and performance of actions against target, 25 actions being on track.

The Committee learned that the key achievements in Quarter 3 were:

- A steady reduction in the number of "non-decent" homes down to 31% from 34% the previous quarter, down from 39% the same period last year.
- The success of the Lumiere Festival in November 2011, set to exceed the £1.5 Million generated for the local economy in 2009.
- The number of private rented properties being improved by Local Authority intervention having exceeded target, 858 against a target of 366.

The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager explained that three key performance issues going forward were:

- A dip in the performance of the processing of major planning applications within a 13 week period, from 78.4% in Quarter 2 to 59.4% in Quarter 3 against a target of 79.9%. Members noted that during the restructuring of the section there had been a lot of staff moving offices; many applications were long term strategic issues which were unable to be determined within 13 weeks; and a revised approach to development management was to be introduced from April 2012.
- The number of empty properties being brought back into use as a result of Local Authority intervention being 27 against a target of 60, Members having had a recent meeting highlighting the associated issues.

- The percentage of bus services running on time, 88.1% with the target being 95%. It was explained that it was thought that was due to lower than average results at two of the bus stations, Durham and Bishop Auckland on the survey day.
- The occupancy rates of Council Owned Factories and Business Support Centres was at 75%, below the target of 78%. Members noted a Business Space Strategy was approved by Cabinet in December 2012 and future years funding would be considered for approval.
- The Council Plan Action relating to the marketing of the business park at Hawthorn, scheduled to be achieved in October 2011 was on hold due to economic conditions, however, the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) was very interested in the site due to its close proximity to the A19 and the LEP was keen to cooperate with the Council in this regard.
- The Cycling Strategy was open to consultation on the Council's website until 2 May 2012.
- The Review of Markets was delayed, implementation to scheduled for September 2012.

Members noted the Tracker Indicators set out at paragraph 7 of the report in relation to the rise in the number of 18-24 year olds claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA); the latest figures from the National Apprenticeship Service; the number of people claiming JSA for one year or more; a continued reduction in the employment rate an increase in the number of homelessness preventions; and the reduction in the number of homes completed near major settlements as a proportion of all completions. In respect of those receiving JSA for 1 year or more, it was noted that the figures were 1,645 of a total of 16,000 JSA claimants, the highest amount since the late 1990s even when adjusted for seasonality. The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager noted that as of February 2012 there were 2,300 vacancies for the County, of 14,000 for the wider region and this represented an increase of 600 for the County over the previous month albeit 200 less than the same period last year. It was explained to the Committee that the total number of "untaken" vacancies for the County was approximately 2,800 (16,000 for the region) and this was comparable to the figures from the previous year. Members noted that these did not necessarily represent full time jobs, and many could be part-time vacancies as little as 5 hours per week affecting the take up of the vacancies as they may not be suitable for all jobseekers. Members noted that the numbers of vacancies by occupation showed that a number were from traditional trades and manufacturing though 1,000 of the 2,300 were in finance, banking, administration and call centres. The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager explained that jobseekers did not value call centre jobs as highly as those within sales, administration, plant operation and manufacturing as it was often felt they were "better" jobs.

The Committee learned that the Park and Ride sites had demonstrated year on year increases with over 350,000 journeys recorded in the period October to December 2011, the highest volume being during the extended period around the Lumiere Festival and in December. Members were informed of the ringfenced interview process in relation to the rationalisation of the Care Connect service and that the process for the Regeneration and Economic Development (RED) Directorate in general would be around 98% completed by the end of April 2012. Members were reminded progress at the Amazon Park site, Newton Aycliffe, relating to the Hitachi development, had been delayed due to slippage of the signing off of the final contract, with further information to be given to Members in the Quarter 4 update.

The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager concluded by explaining that the significant risks to the delivery of the objectives of the Altogether Wealthier theme included the loss of Area Based Grant (ABG) funding as previously reported to Members; and an increased demand for the Housing Solution Service beyond the current staffing capacity as a result of changes in Government Welfare legislation. The Committee noted that other significant risks were as previously reported in Quarter 2, namely the worsening condition of private housing stock and the adverse economic implications of this; a reduced allocation of deprivation based grants due to the Council's new deprivations status; and diminishing capital resources, continuing depressed land values and slow growth in the private sector.

The Chair thanked the Customer and Services Intelligence Manager and asked Members for their questions.

Mr T Batson noted the decrease in the turnaround of major planning applications and asked whether opportunities were being missed in attracting investment in large scale businesses and infrastructure projects as a result. The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager noted that the types of application did not lend themselves to quick turnaround and that this coupled with the restructure for the planning section, had resulted in a drop in the Performance Indicator (PI). Members were also advised that the Durham County Council (DCC) target was a particularly high target when compared regionally, given the usual complex nature of those types of application, and that the Quarter 4 figures would show whether the drop was a "blip".

Councillor M Wilkes asked whether there was an issue relating to the relative business rates of DCC business unit compared to private business units and whether this was affecting the occupancy rates of the DCC units. The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager noted that there was the DCC Business Space Strategy that had been approved and this could be circulated to Members for information setting out around £2 million for capital projects. It was added that the NNDR database inferred an average occupancy rate in the County of around 80%, comparable to the PI presented. It was stressed that the types of business unit that DCC offered was quite different to those offered by the private sector. Councillor M Wilkes asked whether the increase in the number Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) Claimants was a genuine increase or linked to Welfare Reform, with a comparable number decreasing for benefits such as Incapacity Benefit, Employment Support Allowance and so on.

Mrs A Harrison, External Relations Manager, JobCentre Plus explained that there had been some move from other benefits onto JSA and that issues of lone parents and people having moved from full-time employment to only part-time employment was perhaps also an issue worth noting.

Councillor B Arthur asked as regards an Action Plan noted for completion in October 2011 for the proposed development at Hawthorn. The Customer and Services Intelligence Manager explained that it was not an "Action Plan", and as per the report plans were on hold pending an improvement in economic conditions.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

A6 Regeneration and Economic Development Service - Quarter 3 Revenue and Capital Forecast Outturn 2011/12

The Chair introduced the Principal Accountant, Strategic Finance, Ed Thompson who was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to the Quarter 3, Revenue and Capital Forecast Outturn 2011/12 Report (for copy see file of minutes).

Members noted that the RED General Fund had several adjustments as set out in the report, with the overall Revenue Budget being £43.166 Million revised from the original budget of £39.617 Million). Councillors noted that there was an effective underspend of around £1.319 Million against this new budget, with the year to date spend being £41.847 Million. The Principal Accountant explained that the main variances were associated with Economic Development and Transport, with the main savings having been made in relating to staffing, in line with the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) targets and the variances within Building Control and Business Services owing to the current economic climate.

The Committee learned that the Housing Revenue Account was broadly in line, with the main variances as set out in the report balancing out across the HRA. The Principal Accountant explained that the Capital Programme revised budget was £92.421 Million, £49.267 Million being in respect of the General Fund and £43.154 Million being for the HRA. Members noted the amendments to various schemes and that the projected outturn was such that there would be an approximate 89% spend for the year, leaving approximately 10-11% to be carried over to next year's budget.

The Chair thanked the Principal Accountant and asked Members for their questions.

Councillor M Wilkes asked whether the underspends on staff posts were unfilled posts and wondered whether the number of vacancies pointed to the reduction in staffing levels being carried out too quickly and if savings were being made early in respect of staffing savings, was the Authority at risk of not being able to deliver services effectively.

Councillor J Armstrong noted that the MTFP identified that around 1,600 posts would need to be deleted from the establishment and that when staff applied for Early Retirement or Voluntary Redundancy (ER/VR) then a business case must be proven before it can be granted, taking into account maintaining service levels.

The Head of Policy, RED, Andy Palmer explained that at the beginning of the year, RED had zero vacant posts and that there were around 170 posts to go under the MTFP, with a lot of those being associated with loss of funding such as ABG and so on. Members were also informed that the new structure for RED looked to remove duplication and make savings from management and the back office, not from frontline service provision.

Councillor M Wilkes asked how many posts were currently vacant within RED and whether it would be possible for Members to have information as regards which posts were vacant so Members may judge whether these vacancies were an issue effective services. The Head of Policy explained that finance would build in a factor of around 3% so the figure was around 20 posts and that posts that were critical were filled or extended wherever possible should ABG funding or such end.

Members were given the examples of a Capital Development Officer post being extended to oversee the completion of URRI projects and 2 posts associated with the Capital Programme.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

A7 Durham Key Options - Update of Choice Based Lettings

The Chair introduced the Core Team Manager, Housing Solutions, Andrew Burnip who was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to Durham Key Options (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Core Team Manager reminded that the last time the Committee had heard from Officers as regards the review of Durham Key Options (DKO) by the Housing Quality Network (HQN) and that now 100% of formal partner organisations advertised their properties via DKO.

Members were reminded of the Band system running from A to F, with A being the highest need, and F being a reduced priority and figures were set out within the presentation for the letting according to each band, which housing types these represented and which providers were letting in each band. The Committee noted that most lets were within Band C as per the quotas set out in policy, although Band B did not have many lets in comparison to its quota. Councillors noted 20,973 lets in total, with Derwentside homes being the single largest provider. It was explained that there were several methods for DKO bids to be submitted and that via the internet was the most used, followed by the telephone line and the Abritas automated system being the third most utilised, giving in total around 103,071 bids for the period April 2011 to March 2012.

The Committee noted the HQN Review of DKO had set out five main actions:

- Review and evaluation of the administration of DKO.
- Review the performance management framework.
- Ensure that policy complies with legislation and addresses local housing need.
- Extend the DKO scheme.
- Raise awareness and promote equal access.

In relation to the first action, The Core Team Manager explained that a Steering Group had been established, a mapping of functions had been completed and Options Report with cost analysis had been reported to the Housing Forum and the Forum had noted that no further actions were required in this regard, other than to ensure consistency across all partners such as in the Banding of applications. Members noted that the HQN noted that there could be scope to make improvements via centralisation of some administration tasks.

The Committee learned that a Project Group was established as regards Performance Management and that a Performance Framework was agreed with 13 DKO PIs, as set out within the presentation document.

The Core Team Manager explained that the third action related to the changes in Government legislation in respect of Localism and Welfare Reform and that the main issues were Tenure Reform; affordable rents; restricted access (Department for Communities and Local Government, DCLG criteria, i.e. if earning over £40,000 per annum); exclude transfers; inclusion of additional groups where skills were identified for economic growth; the exclusion of those registered on DKO, but who were not in housing need (approximately 8,000); homelessness duties and; the many complex issues associated with Welfare Reform.

Members were reminded that Welfare Reform would include reductions in Housing Benefit for those with “spare” bedrooms, with this to come into effect in April 2013, though it was known several private landlords had already begun to write to tenants as regards moving them so not to face a shortfall in the rents they were able to collect. Accordingly, DKO were making customers aware that changes were coming in relation to benefits and that they should be prepared in respect of how they may affect their circumstances.

The Core Team Manager noted that there would be consultation in the summer as regards a revised banding system that would run A – E, be simplified and would see the “underoccupiers” go into a new Band B. Members were asked to note direction from Government as regards preference for members of the Armed Forces and the potential to delete people from DKO if they did not bid within a 12 month period. Councillors noted that there would be consultation on a new Tenancy Strategy and that some changes may be brought forward in order to help customers that maybe facing issues associated with under-occupancy as described.

In relation to the extension of the DKO scheme, a pilot scheme will be ran from 1 April 2012 with Accent in the east of the County, approximately 1,700 properties, representing 100% of the allocations for Accent. Members noted a private sector pilot was being developed and would aim to stimulate the private sector in line with demand. The Core Team Manager explained that in respect of the fifth action, there was an update Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment and a review of the options for the weekly DKO paper was being undertaken to improve value for money and customer service. The Committee noted that via a Digital TV channel and a “smart phone” application, DKO had received over 17,500 hits and had received 552 bids, with 5 people being re-housed.

The Core Team Manager explained that DCC received £150,000 from DCLG to tackle under-occupancy by “older people” and that the funding had been used to help 45 “assisted moves” since August 2011, with help in moving furniture and appliances being part of the assistance offered.

The Chair thanked the Core Team Manager and asked Members for their questions.

Councillor M Wilkes noted he was impressed with how the various issues were being addressed and asked whether the large volume of telephone calls as stated, over 6,000, was a drain on staff time and if Officers had any ideas of how Members could help. The Core Team Manager thanked Councillor M Wilkes and noted that the figure of 6,000 included partner providers and therefore was not a direct drain on DCC resources as such. Members were also informed of plans to move a number of services, including DKO to the “Looking Local” digital channel for ease of reference for the public.

Councillor P Stradling noted that several of the changes that were taking place were imposed by central Government and there was a need to be careful in handling issues so that the Authority's reputation was not tarnished. The Core Team Manager agreed that there were several challenges facing housing, especially with matching the housing stock we have to the future demands and the transitional arrangements in moving to new legislation. Members were reminded of proposals for people to take in a lodger, however they were informed that some groups were exempt from some of the changes, such as pensioners. The Committee learned that should customers "stay and not pay" in larger properties there was potential lost income for providers, citing around £750,000 for East Durham Homes, perhaps leading to a return to the days of Rent Collectors going door-to-door.

Councillor J Hunter expressed concern as often older family members with a large property take on the role of child care for grandchildren in later life and changes may affect how they provide support for their children, allowing them to go to work. The Core Team Manager admitted that there were a number of scenarios in which people may be negatively impacted. An example was given where a divorced man in a rented 2 bedroom property, who has visits from his 2 daughters at weekends would have only approximately half-rent being paid to the landlord. It was noted that if the landlord suggested a lodger to be taken in to balance out the rent, the ex-wife could question whether her daughters should be staying in a house with a stranger possibly affecting custody arrangements, or affecting whether the father may be able to work and so on.

The Chair asked whether there would be any legal redress made available to people should changes have such negative impacts. The Core Team Manager explained that Courts would be in a difficult position as if Tenancy Agreements are in place, they are effectively a contract.

Councillor M Wilkes asked how the loss of income for providers as described would come about. The Core Team Manager explained that the figure as noted was a worse case scenario on the basis of from April 2012 not 1 person were to pay to make up any rent shortfall. Councillor M Wilkes asked what measures were being undertaken as regards the preparing and bolstering the DCC response to homelessness. The Core Team Manager explained that the issue had been raised and was now an item on the Risk Register, with Officers looking at the areas that would have the highest impact from Welfare Reform. Members noted that Officers from the Welfare Rights Section and Housing Solutions were liaising with the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) as regards options that may be available to help people that may be negatively affected by Welfare Reform changes. Councillors were also made aware of a discretionary fund that may be available via Revenue and Benefits for a defined period; £170,000 for DCC, increasing to £380,000 from April 2012 including a contribution from Housing Solutions of £100,000.

Councillor M Wilkes asked whether there was potential for migration to the County from other areas in the country. The Core Team Manager noted that the figure for under-occupancy was 52% for the Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in the North East compared to 30% in the south East, and 29% in London.

It was added that while there was potential for such migration, the issues of lack of family, friends and a support network could be a factor preventing such migration and that areas such as the East of the County and on the areas bordering other Authorities there could be a potential for a more transient population.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

A8 Progress Report on the Introduction of Multi-disciplinary Teams for dealing with Empty Homes

The Chair introduced the Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager, Kathryn Heathcote who was in attendance to speak to Members in relation to the introduction of Multi-disciplinary Teams for dealing with Empty Homes (for copy of presentation see file of minutes).

The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager thanked Members for the chance to speak and referred to the report within the Agenda papers. The Committee was reminded that performance relating to Empty Homes had been reported to Councillors in October 2011 and that information relating to how the move to Multi-disciplinary Teams had impacted upon performance would be explained.

Members were referred to staff structure diagrams and noted that for the period 2009/10 that with a staffing compliment of 4.5 full-time equivalents (FTEs), 20 empty homes were brought back into use (approximately 4 per member of staff) and for the period 2010/11, 48 empty homes were brought back into use (approximately 11 per member of staff). Councillors noted that this was against targets of 80 properties to be brought back into use each year.

The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager explained that following the adoption of the Durham Housing Strategy in November 2010 a lengthy review of how DCC dealt with private sector housing culminated in the adoption of a Private Sector Housing Strategy in 2011. Members were reminded that DCC had taken a brave decision to focus on the delivery of key services and not to continue offering of all services, taking into account staffing, deliverability and a need to prioritise those services. It was noted that a two-tier approach was utilised working to the understanding that there was a finite staffing resource and there was no reasonable way of providing a "blanket" service across the whole area. Councillors learned that the approach was to focus work in the 8 identified housing regeneration areas, those with the worst housing stock conditions and highest levels of deprivation. It was noted however, that a "safety net" provision would be maintained for those empty homes outside of the 8 regeneration areas, where properties reached a level that they were deemed to be contribution to issues of blight, anti-social behaviour (ASB) and so on. The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager explained that the target for 2011/12 was still 80 properties to be brought back into use, 67 within the 8 regeneration areas, 13 in the "safety net" category. Members noted the tension between the need to be reactive to issues that may occur and to be able to focus Officers' time on planned work to bring empty homes back into use.

The Committee were reminded of the needs under the MTFP to make savings, RED undertook a formal restructuring process to be implemented in April 2012, however, it was recognised that there had been a need to bring into effect an interim arrangement that would mirror as much as possible the proposed future structure in delivering area-based Housing Regeneration, as shown by further structure diagrams within the report.

Members noted that the area-based multi-disciplinary teams had been effectively in place since partway through Quarter 2 2011/12 and that figures showed that for Quarter 2, 9 properties had been brought back into use, and in Quarter 3, 7 properties had been brought back into use, 6 in regeneration areas, 1 being a “safety net” property. It was noted that this demonstrated that the policy and approach were working, giving a 6:1 ratio of regeneration area to “safety net” properties being brought back into use. Members noted that the projected performance was 8 properties being brought back into use per member of staff, though this was with there being 3 vacant posts within the section. The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager added that this showed a higher relative performance per member of staff and that the area in which a Project Manager was in post had the highest level of performance. It was noted that there was a need to ensure robust figures that were directly attributable to the actions of Officers so that the effectiveness and “value for money” of the teams could be measured. The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager added that attempts to benchmark performance against other Local Authorities had proven difficult as there was no “like-for-like” comparison.

The Committee were informed that work was being undertaken to fill the three vacant posts and to continue to embed the performance culture within the service. Members noted that performance equated to a cost to DCC of £4,000 per empty home brought back into use and that a funding from the Homes and Community Agency (HCA) had been secured to bringing empty homes back into use, a sum of £656,000 for the period 2012-2015. The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager explained that a comparative figure of other regeneration schemes carried out be that had brought empty homes showed that the cost per property was around £17,000 (a HCA figure), not as cost effective as those brought back into use by DCC.

Members learned that other funding was available for “clusters” of a minimum of 100 homes and in areas where vacancy rates were 10% or more, however, there was a requirement for 100% match funding from DCC. It was explained that areas of high vacancy had been looked at such as Easington Colliery, Chilton, Deans Bank, Craghead, Coundon Grange and so on.

The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager added that the private sector leasing scheme was ongoing, though little interest had been shown and that there had been 12 enquires as regards the DCC Financial Assistance loan, with one 1 loan actually going ahead. Members were informed that this could be seen as an area that would need reviewing.

The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager explained that 2 Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) had been applied for to the Residential Property Tribunal, which had prompted works on behalf of the owners. The Committee were informed of the Public Relations Strategy for the identified regeneration areas to highlight where DCC has improved housing stock and the street scene so that these areas attract more tenants, with Members being shown examples of properties at Craghead.

The Chair thanked the Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager and asked Members for their questions.

Councillor M Wilkes thanked the Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager for a very good presentation and asked whether targets were for 640 properties being brought back into use over 20 years, with the County Durham Plan (CDP) stating 2,000 empty properties back into use; whether the new structure had more management posts relative to Officers and when, or indeed if, the 3 vacant posts on the establishment would be filled. The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager explained that prior to the area based approach, there were 5 management positions, and this had reduced to 3 in the new approach. It was added that the three vacant posts were not being carried for future savings, they had been built into the new structure as posts required for the service and they were currently out to advert and hopefully all 3 posts would be filled presently.

Councillor M Wilkes added that as empty properties would now be eligible for a “full” council tax bill, would it be cost effective to send information as regards the financial assistance available via DCC together with the council tax bill. The Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager noted that this was a good idea, information regarding Housing Benefit, Council Tax and Financial Assistance could all be included in that mail out. As regards the CDP target of 2,000 empty homes being brought back into use, the Housing Renewal and Improvement Manager noted that the key to meeting this figure would be in achieving good levels of economic growth within the County which was partly an issue for DCC, partly due to larger economic forces.

Resolved:

- (i) That Members continue to monitor the performance of the “multi-disciplinary teams”, allowing more time for the new arrangements to fully bed-in before making a final determination as to whether or not they are improving the Council’s performance on empty homes.
- (ii) That Members direct Officers within the service to complete a robust benchmarking exercise to determine whether the current targets for empty homes are achievable, and to measure and report performance against that of other high performing authorities.
- (iii) That future reports include data on the vacancy rates in each of the Council’s priority regeneration areas (given that there is an indisputable link between vacancy rates and the sustainability of neighbourhoods) to determine whether the Council’s regeneration efforts are having a positive influence on vacancy rates in addition to continuing to measure the positive outcomes from direct intervention the Empty Homes and Private Landlord Initiatives Officers.

A9 Refresh of the Work Programme for the Committee, 2012-14

The Chair asked the Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Diane Close to speak as regards the Work Programme for the Committee for the period 2012-14 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer explained that the Work Programme report followed a similar format to that from the previous year and was aligned to the Altogether Wealthier theme.

Members noted the identification of cross-cutting issues over several themes and that the report looked for a steer from the Committee as regards areas Members would wish to focus their efforts.

The Chair noted that the topic of Empty Homes had already been noted as an area for review and asked in Members had any further thought regarding the Work Programme.

Councillor B Arthur added that issues of ASB and safety at Aged Miners Homes, and East Durham Homes properties in Seaham were of concern to local residents. Councillor J Armstrong noted that this was a cross-cutting issue with the Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor M Wilkes felt that the issue of the Adult Learning Strategy was vitally important as were all steps to encourage growth in the economy and supporting business. Councillor M Wilkes added that the DCC website appeared to have no information relating to Business Support and that emails he had sent to the County Durham Development Company (CDDC) e-mail address were "bouncing back" as undeliverable. The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Stephen Gwilym noted the point raised and Councillor J Armstrong noted that Members should be aware of the purdah period that would precede the elections next year and this should be taken into account when looking at being able to complete review timely.

Resolved:

- (i) That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the information contained in Appendix 2 to the report.
- (ii) That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee refresh the Work Programme for 2012-14 by discussing and considering those actions identified, under "Altogether Wealthier" priority theme of the Council Plan 2012-16.
- (iii) That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee at it's meeting on the 6 July 2012, receive a further report detailing the Committee's Work Programme for 2012-14.