



ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES 2010/11

“Since 2000, Northumberland County Council has operated executive arrangements that place the decision-making powers in the hands of an Executive. The Executive in this Council is made up of 10 councillors. The overview and scrutiny function ensures that the Executive is held accountable for its decisions, that its decision-making process is clear and accessible to the public and that there are opportunities for the public and their representatives to influence and improve Council Policy.”

Both nationally and locally, Overview and Scrutiny has begun to move into another era with community-led scrutiny of local decisions. This is where the public's involvement in challenging local authorities and public service providers on service improvement and delivery is actively sought by elected representatives (councillors), or appointed non-executives on governing bodies (such as school governors or non-executive directors of hospital trusts). Constructive and ongoing engagement with stakeholders, from experts to the general public, helps to achieve genuine accountability for the use of public resources.

In recent years, the role and responsibilities of scrutiny have expanded significantly. Starting with the health service, scrutiny now has responsibility for investigating the delivery of services provided by a wide range of public, private and third-sector partners. Scrutiny's unique remit to do this means that it is an excellent position to examine the links between these organisations. It can also see where joint working could deliver enhanced services for local people.

Scrutiny therefore provides a unique perspective on how well public services are being delivered and how they could be improved, from the point of view of those receiving and using those services.”

Councillor Peter Jackson
Chairman: Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen's Working Group

1. NORTHUMBERLAND OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES ANNUAL REPORT 2010-2011

- 1.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committees have had another challenging year following the creation of the unitary authority in 2009 with its increased responsibilities.
- 1.2 Monitoring reports can be made available which detail the work carried out by each Committee over the year, the recommendations made to the Executive and their current status. Copies are available on the Council's website.

2. KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- 2.1 **The Overview and Scrutiny CHAIRMEN'S WORKING GROUP** has proved valuable in leading the scrutiny process, acting as a sounding board for ideas and providing a co-ordinated means of discussion with officers. They have continued to review all scrutiny procedures and monitored the lessons learned from the recent series of member training.
- 2.2 **Court Services Working Group**
 - 2.2.1 In June 2010, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) announced a consultation on the provision of Court Services in Cleveland, Durham and Northumbria. Northumberland County Council decided to submit a response focussing on the proposed closure of Alnwick and Tynedale Magistrates' Courts, which are within its administrative area.
 - 2.2.2 An Overview and Scrutiny Court Services Working Group consisting of elected Members from the whole County was set up to prepare a draft response. A number of expert witnesses were invited to participate, including local Members of Parliament, Chairmen of the Benches, serving and retired magistrates, as well as senior Police and Probation Service Officers, Victim Support, and others. These witnesses helped determine the appropriate response, and several also contributed to the ensuing research effort. The approach adopted was to focus on the accuracy of information within the consultation document and the potential impact upon Northumberland residents. The result was a strong argument refuting key evidence upon which HM Court Service's (HMCS) proposal was founded. The Council's Executive agreed and fully supported the proposed response.
 - 2.2.3 While the bid to save the two Northumberland courts was unsuccessful, the scrutiny process brought many community leaders together to work jointly in the interests of the people served by this Unitary Council. Similar outcomes are being contested elsewhere in England.
 - 2.2.4 What stood out about this work was the effectiveness of the consultation

process and the sense of community among the consultees. The 'local justice for local people' press quotation truly reflected the Working Group's sense of common cause. The closure of Magistrates' Courts is typical of the type of community issue that Overview and Scrutiny can seek to address through interaction with other agencies and the public. Along with other recent cases, the closure of post offices, flooding events, and provision of winter services in bad weather, this project brought the Overview and Scrutiny process closer to the Alnwick and Hexham communities as well as the professionals who represent them.

2.2.5 This experience has demonstrated that joint working with the right people is essential when tackling a complex issue with widespread implications. We will certainly continue to use this strategy. There is also regular interaction between Scrutiny and the Executive, as demonstrated in this case by two members of the Executive acting as witnesses at the Court Services Working Group meeting.

2.2.6 At the time of writing, members of the Magistrates' Association are reported to be planning judicial review proceedings against the Justice Minister's decision in respect of 10 courts, mainly in the South of England. If successful this will in some measure bring about a positive change resulting from the national consultation to which Northumberland contributed.

2.2.7 This work has been submitted for a "Good Scrutiny Award"

2.3 The **Chairmen's Group Asset Management Working Group** – is continuing a structured review of the Council's extensive portfolio of land and buildings in order to rationalise those assets no longer needed and identify those which are most suitable to retain from a service delivery perspective. This will ensure capital receipts can be maximised and future running costs are minimised.

3. Economic Prosperity and Strategic Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

	<p>3.1 This committee has a wide remit to examine the role of NCC in promoting Northumberland's economy and to review the operation of its major front line services to ensure efficiency and value for money. Apart from the working groups mentioned below, the committee regularly monitors the budget management process and reviews and guides essential front end services such as Revenues and Benefits, whose officers have made exceptional efforts to bring together and operate as one entity the range of separate systems and procedures of the 7 former District Councils. It is presently also reviewing the value for money aspects of the recent management review and restructuring exercise that has made radical changes to the way the council is run.</p>
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**Councillor Gordon Castle
Chairman**

- 3.2 **The Procurement Working Group** – was re-established in 2010 to examine the appropriate mechanisms available to the authority to achieve value for money for the Council and to consider ways in which the local economy could be stimulated by making it easier for local firms to compete for the smaller contracts. The Executive accepted the Working Groups recommendations at their meeting on 7 February 2011.
- 3.3 **Highways and Transport Winter Services Working Group** – was established following the severe winter weather of 2009/10 to consider the impact the adverse conditions had on highways services and subsequently, customer services. The Group reviewed the Council's the existing winter services policy and made a number of recommendations which were accepted by the Executive on 6 September 2010. The Working Group continued to meet on an ad hoc basis throughout the winter of 2010/11 to monitor the effect the amended policy had on services during two bouts of heavy snow and extreme cold conditions in November and December 2010.
- 3.3 **The Bus Subsidy Working Group** has been established to update the County's Bus Subsidy Policy and to agree a formula for granting public travel subsidies to ensure value for money for the limited resources available. It is anticipated that the Working Group will present its finds to the Executive in late spring 2011.
- 3.4 The Committee have received a number of presentations from Giles Ingram, Chief Executive of Northumberland Tourism regarding the future of tourism structures in Northumberland, particularly the implications of the loss of the £495,000 funding and support services to Northumberland Tourism from One North East in 2011/12. The Chairman wrote to John Penrose, MP, Minister for Tourism and Heritage on two occasions, expressing the Committee's concern that adequate funding arrangements needed to be in place, to ensure that tourism continues to develop in the county. He wrote that tourism was crucial to the economy in Northumberland, as it provided 13,000 jobs in the area and any proposal which had the effect of reducing our capacity to attract visitors to the county, would have a devastating impact on local communities and businesses. He urged the Minister to examine every opportunity to maintain government funding for Northumberland Tourism in 2011/12 and beyond, to both grow the local economy in the county and to ensure that visitors continue to enjoy Northumberland. The committee has continuing concerns about the future of tourism marketing for Northumberland and is arranging a forum where local providers can express their views and consider alternative ways of promoting this vital component of the county's economy.
- 3.5 The Committee have considered a number of reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Executive and have made recommendations and suggested amendments on the following:
- Sustainable Community Strategy
 - Stronger Together – The Council's Medium Term Strategy
 - Changes in Revenues and Benefits
 - Market Strategy

- Redundancy and Severance Scheme
- Budget 2011/12

3.6 The Committee continued to monitoring issues across its remit, including:

- LTP
- Car Park Strategy
- Revenue and Benefits Systems
- ICT Investment Programme
- Rural Access to Broadband
- Regional Growth Fund
- Local Enterprise Partnerships
- Budget and Performance Monitoring - regularly consider reports on the capital programme and revenue budget which allows them to make informed referrals back to the Executive and the other Scrutiny Committees
- Outstanding Debts

4. Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

	<p>4.1 In 2010/2011, the Committee’s Work Programme has been informed by its thematic approach to overview and scrutiny of Council Services within the Committee remit, and again by a survey of its Members for research topics that address needs expressed by residents in their areas, as well as direct requests from the public and referrals from other forums. Input to corporate policy formation and/or issues arising during the year have contributed a significant proportion of the Work Programme. As in 2009/2010, Affordable Housing, Antisocial Behaviour and Community matters have been accorded high priority. The Council’s strategic objectives for addressing Environmental issues also have a high profile in the Committee’s Work Programme.</p>
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**Councillor Glen Sanderson
Chairman**

4.2 In seeking to deal effectively with all of these issues during the year, the Committee has developed a procedure which involves reviewing the relevant performance information for the Service theme as the basis for each debate. The Committee has also continued to develop a process begun in 2009/2010 of conducting its business at suitable venues around the County. A number of meetings have been held with invited representatives of Parish and Town Councils as well as members of the public, with attendance of over 75 on some occasions. This engagement with the community has helped to ensure that the Work Programme remains relevant and topical. Committee debate at its themed meetings, involving the call-in procedure on an exception basis, has led to the submission of 16 reports with recommendations, comments and suggestions to the Executive, the vast majority of which have been supported by the

Executive. Once those recommendations are agreed, the ensuing actions are monitored and reported to the Committee six monthly until completed.

4.3 **Housing** - there have been three housing themed meetings in 2010/2011, reviewing Housing Service performance, the Service Plan, and the Audit Commission Inspection Recommendations Action Plan. The Committee also considered the Isos Housing Group's consolidation proposals, which involved the call-in process, and is currently participating in the annual Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy Review, through a Working Group convened for the purpose and involving Members of the Housing and Care Services Working Group.

4.4 **Customer Services** - two meetings were devoted to aspects of Customer Services. The Committee has been monitoring the process of addressing issues around the Council's Single Phone Number since last year and will receive information on the latest position in April 2011. Customer Services performance and the related development of the Council's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system have also been monitored regularly.

	<p>4.5 Community Safety - Community Safety themed meetings have been held on two occasions, at the Northumberland Area Command Headquarters of Northumbria Police and the West Hartford Community Fire Station. Reports covered a wide range of issues in this important area. In September 2010, they included the successful Local Multi Agency Problem Solving (LMAPS) group activities, Public Protection Service Structure, Alcohol Needs Assessment, current Policing issues, the Migration Matters project and the Consultation on the Proposed Closure of Magistrates' Courts. In March 2011, Fire and Rescue Service External Assessments, the Northumberland County Council Fire and Rescue Plan 2011/2014 and Private Finance Initiative, as well as the recent Transformation of the Public Protection Structure, Safer Northumberland Partnership, Policing issues and an update from the Northumbria Police Authority provided an opportunity for services and partners to network.</p>
	

4.6 **Communities** - the Committee hosted an update on outcomes from the Post Office Network Reorganisation at a meeting with Parish and Town Council representatives in January last year. In June 2010, a further update was received at the Corn Exchange in Morpeth, again with Parish and Town Council representation. This very productive meeting also looked at Locality Working, the Libraries Review and Community Asset Transfer Policy. In January 2011 a special meeting was held jointly with the Economic Prosperity and Strategic Services O & S Committee to consider the impact of the unusually severe weather on Winter Services. The Communities and Place and Family and Children's Services O & S Committees participated in a joint scrutiny project led by an Economic Prosperity and Strategic Services Working Group. Recommendations to the Executive arising from that project informed targeted adjustments to the policy for provision of winter services in future.

4.7 **Environment** - the Committee has monitored the Council's involvement in and commitment to the climate change agenda through the Nottingham Declaration and the Covenant of Mayors. Reports on the Council's Climate Change Policy Statement and Action Plan have been considered as well as, most recently, the Sustainable Energy Action Plan. Further developments will be reported to the Committee next year. The Environment Agency addressed Members on their Strategic Planning for Flood Risk Management in the light of recent budget cuts, and they will provide the Committee with an update on the Morpeth Flood Alleviation Scheme at the April 2011 Meeting.

5. Care and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

 Councillor Margaret Richards Chairman	<p>5.1 NHS White Paper – Equity and Excellence The Committee have received regular briefings on the proposals and implications of the massive restructure of the NHS and recognise their increased involvement as further guidance is received regarding HealthWatch, Health and Wellbeing Boards and the implications for scrutiny.</p> <p>5.2 North East Regional Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee</p> <p>5.2.1 The 12 local authorities in the North East have a long history of close co-operation across local authorities and in sub-regional groups. They have now formed a single regional Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee in</p>
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recognition of the common interests of citizens across the North East.

5.2.2 A joint bid to the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) to become a Scrutiny Development Area in the field of health inequalities was successful and the Centre provided support of £5,000 and an expert advisor to agree a protocol, terms of reference and governance arrangements, which will be of value in any future joint scrutiny. The Joint Committee has delegated powers to consider

regional issues.

5.3 Regional Review of the Health Needs of the Ex-Service Community

5.3.1 An innovative piece of work by the above regional committee culminated in March with the launch of the 'Regional Review of the Health Needs of the Ex-Service Community report.

5.3.2 This 12 month long piece of work conducted specific inquiries into the physical health, mental health and socio-economic wellbeing of the ex-service community. It was produced after extensive discussions with the armed forces and ex-forces personnel, the NHS, other public bodies and voluntary organisations and states that armed forces veterans have a range of unique needs that need to be met by public bodies who manage everything from housing to health.

5.3.3 Councillors from each of the 12 Local Authorities met in with representatives of the, armed forces, the Royal British Legion and other veterans' support groups, the NHS, Job Centre Plus, housing organisations and others to work on the action plan which aims to take forward the 42 recommendations in the report.



The launch of the report in March 2011

5.3.4 The recommendations are aimed at achieving a 'joined up' approach across the North East to serve the need of the Ex-Services Community. Among the recommendations there is a clear drive for the armed forces to work more closely with local authorities to provide information on the numbers of people leaving the forces and their likely demand for such things as employment and skills, housing and social care.

5.3.5 Other recommendations include: better communication and information sharing to ensure that the ex-service community are aware of the range of services currently available; further research into the needs of ex-servicemen and women; raising awareness among local authorities and other organisations of the type of help that is needed; improving access to affordable housing and the prioritisation of veterans' physical and mental health issues.

5.3.6 This work represents the first time that all 12 Councils' Health Overview and Scrutiny Committees have come together to focus on one key issue. The initiative is backed by the Government-funded Centre for Public Scrutiny as part of a nationwide programme to tackle health inequalities. Six monthly reviews will be held to assess progress against the recommendations. This work has been submitted for a "Good Scrutiny Award".

5.4 Emergency Care Project

5.4.1 Extensive work has been carried out over the past few years with Newcastle and North Tyneside Overview and Scrutiny Committees to scrutinise in detail Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust's proposals to:

- build a new specialist emergency hospital close to the North Tyneside and Northumberland Border;
- improve facilities at Wansbeck and North Tyneside General Hospitals, and
- rebuild community hospitals in Berwick, Haltwhistle and Morpeth.

5.4.2 Now that the planning application has been submitted, discussions are ongoing with the Trust regarding possible services to be provided at the new hospitals.

	<p>5.5 The Healthy Communities Collaborative is aimed at raising awareness of the symptoms of breast, bowel and lung cancer to encourage people to present earlier for diagnosis and treatment. To date, the communities in Northumberland have been the Blyth Valley, Wansbeck and Morpeth, but thanks to a recommendation of the Committee, NHS North of Tyne was successful in a bid for funding to allow the initiative to be extended throughout Northumberland. £57,000 from the</p>
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Department of Health in partnership with Cancer Research UK, will allow work with rural communities within the Berwick, Tynedale and Alnwick areas. Initiatives included a cancer awareness event in Berwick which, although not well attended, allowed organisations to make important contacts and was informative and useful to those who did. Also, a mobile information unit is currently touring the rural areas giving advice and support.

5.6 Repeat Prescriptions

5.6.1 The committee discussed concerns expressed regarding changes to the repeat prescriptions service with local pharmacies. A senior GP attended the meeting to explain the reasons behind the change.

- 5.6.2 The committee were surprised to learn that when local pharmacies order repeat prescriptions on behalf of patients, they didn't actually have to contact the surgery to verify the current medication. Pharmacists order medication from the right hand side of the previous prescription which will be at a minimum one month old. This system does not ensure any changes made to medication since the previous prescriptions have been notified to the pharmacy in order that they can amend their records.
- 5.6.3 The issue was highlighted after it had been noticed by a local doctor that medicines marked with an 'as required' basis were being requested every month and often patients were also receiving drugs that had been discontinued by GP's as pharmacies were using historic records which had not been amended accordingly. The pharmacy ordering of prescriptions was therefore stopped immediately on the grounds of patient safety. Now, patients must order their prescriptions each time rather than a third party being allowed to do so.
- 5.6.4 During discussions, Members were extremely concerned about the enormous amounts of unwanted drugs which were stockpiled in many homes which not only pose a serious safety risk but cost the NHS an enormous amount of money unnecessarily.
- 5.6.5 Given the present financial pressures within the public sector any savings through improved practices must be supported. The committee felt their grave concerns should be raised at national level, giving their support to Practise Based Commissioning leads across Northumberland to seek a prescription policy which provides a safe and structured service. Following discussion, it was agreed that introduction of the electronic Prescription Service to support repeat dispensing would provide this reassurance.
- 5.6.6 Accordingly, the Executive, at their meeting on the 6th of September agreed that Members' concerns be raised at a national level regarding both safety and budgetary reasons and a letter was sent to the relevant Ministers, all Northumberland GP's and the Local Government Association, pledging the council's support to the early introduction of an electronic prescription services.

5.7 Consultations

The Committee have responded to a number of important consultations over the year and provided valuable input into national and regional Strategies and Plans:

- Northumberland Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Strategy
- Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment
- Care Trust organisational arrangements for Adult Social Care and Community Health Services
- Northumberland Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy
- Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

- NHS White Paper – Equity and Excellence – Commissioning routes for Public Health
- NHS White Paper – Equity and Excellence – Transparency in Outcomes
- Access to IAPT services
- Disability Living Allowances
- National Review of Children’s Heart Surgery Services
- Dementia Services

6. Family and Children’s SERVICES Overview and Scrutiny Committee

 <p>Councillor Richard Dodd Chairman</p>	<p>6.1 Following the closure of another rural school due to falling numbers, the Population Trends Working Group was established to look at declining school numbers, population trends and school rolls in Northumberland. The Working Group made a number of recommendations to the Executive to help address population issues in rural areas, including future demand for school places, when deciding upon place shaping policies such as the local development framework, housing and employment strategies, and sustainable community strategy. The aim is to work with all interested parties to make rural communities sustainable as places in which all age ranges can live and work. This work will be carried forward by the Executive Member and</p>
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officers over the next year and progress monitored by scrutiny.

- 6.2 The **Youth Services Provision Working Group** have considered the options available for a model for the delivery of a Northumberland Youth Service and recommended their preference to the Executive, which was accepted.
- 6.3 Following consideration of the **School Admission arrangements**, Members successfully recommended that siblings be given a higher priority in the admissions criteria. This has had the effect of significantly reducing the number of appeals.
- 6.4 **Young People’s Sexual Health:** The Committee were concerned at the increase of Chlamydia and other sexually transmitted diseases in Northumberland. A letter was circulated to all High Schools, encouraging them to work with available services and participate in health sessions that provide advice and support to young people in relation to their sexual health. The schools were also asked to ensure that alternative provision is made available to young people when services are not available within a school setting.
- 6.5 The Committee have considered the current arrangements for the delivery of **Careers education, information and guidance** and have asked a working group to consider the issue in more detail, including the best way to deliver the service in the future.

- 6.6 Members recognise the importance of **e-safety and online child protection** in schools and recommended that the Executive ensure that a core service is in place with necessary resources to continue the work being done on e-safety and training be facilitated where and when necessary in order to ensure all possible steps are being undertaken to protect the young people of Northumberland.

7. NATIONAL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS – IMPACT ON SCRUTINY

- 7.1 There have been significant national policy developments since the last Annual Report with the publication of the Localism Bill, the Education Act, the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill and the Public Health White Paper, “Healthy Lives, Healthy People” being published and most recently, the issuing of the Government’s response to the public consultation on NHS reform, “Liberating the NHS – Legislative Framework and Next Steps”.
- 7.2 The Overview and Scrutiny function will play an important role in subjecting the proposals to independent analysis and help the Executive and its Partners consider the long term implications of the decisions being taken. Scrutiny can also provide valuable assurance to the public and stakeholders that their views and concerns will be taken into account in the way the new measures are shaped and implemented.
- 7.3 To retain public confidence, it is important that all existing and new forms of service delivery are subject to robust and public accountability. Scrutiny can harness the challenging and investigative aspects of its work together with its positive role in contributing to policy development and the restructuring of local services.

8. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY PROCEDURES AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 8.1 During the year, we have carried out a substantial review of procedures to ensure that the scrutiny function is operating effectively and assists the work of the Council. Revised procedures, including Call-in have been agreed.
- 8.2 The structures of our Overview and Scrutiny committees are formally aligned to the Sustainable Communities Strategy thematic blocks and relevant performance indicators. The Overview and Scrutiny work programme for next year and beyond will continue to reflect the priorities contained in the Council's Medium Term Strategy and Corporate Plan, Forward Plan of decisions, the Sustainable Communities Strategy and other plans and strategies, recognising the strong links between them. Increased challenge to performance through robust review of themed performance reports and budget monitoring will also continue to be built into our work.
- 8.3 **The work programme** will continue to be delivered through a number of mechanisms, for example:
- * Revisiting previous reviews and issues considered, focusing on progress made with recommendations contained in the reports;
 - * Light touch reviews on particular issues;
 - * Task and Finish Working Groups to look at in depth investigations, and
 - * Receiving information on policy/strategy areas as part of their overview function.
- 8.4 It is envisaged that the scrutiny function will continue to contribute positively to policy development, community engagement and participation, performance monitoring and scrutiny of partners and improvements in services provided.

9. PARTNERSHIP WORKING

- 9.1 The Committees continue to examine the way in which external partner organisations contribute to the achievement of the Council's priorities. For example, as discussed above, Giles Ingram, Chief Executive of **Northumberland Tourism** has attended meetings of Economic Prosperity Overview and Scrutiny Committee to advise Members of the work of the organisation and to seek the support of the Committee in lobbying the Government at a time when, through cuts in central and regional funding, there are genuine concerns for the future of tourism in Northumberland. The Chairman, Gordon Castle has twice written to John Penrose MP, Minister for Tourism and Culture expressing the Committee's concerns.
- 9.2 The **NHS Trusts**, which provide health services to people in Northumberland, regularly attend the Care and Wellbeing meetings to discuss the key issues facing them, their priorities and budget pressures; health inequalities; potential change and performance. The Trusts and **NHS North of Tyne** have involved members in a number of service changes, and given regular feedback on their future plans. Also, Northumberland Local Involvement Network works closely with the Committee and was commissioned to

undertake a review on behalf of the Committee. The Committee will support them evolving into HealthWatch.

10. CALL-INS

10.1 There have been five “call-ins” over the year. These were:

- Habitual and Vexatious Complaints Policy;
- Proposals for ISOS Housing consolidation;
- Funding for Voluntary and Community Sector;
- Transformation Programme, and
- Provision of services in association with other bodies.

11. VISITS

11.1 **Care and Wellbeing** members held their October meeting at **St. Georges Park, Morpeth** and were extremely impressed with the services available and the dedication of the staff. A number of mental health issues were discussed, including: the closure of Woodlands in Hexham; Older People’s Mental Health Services; NHS Campus Closures and the relocation of adult Acute Inpatient services.

11.2 A number of members visited **Bell View Day Care Centre in Belford** to see the services provided at the Centre and to hear how the project evolved. Members were impressed with the range of services provided as well as the constant use of the facility by both individual members of the community as well as organised meetings by other user groups and recommended that the Council actively supports this model of service by the voluntary sector and promotes it as best practice across the County.

11.3 Family and Children’s Services members have visited schools throughout Northumberland.

12. BRIEFING SESSIONS

12.1 Briefing sessions for members continue to be a useful way of providing information on a range of important issues. This year, presentations have included the implications of the Education Act, Supporting People Programme; Northumberland’s Approach to tackling child poverty; and proposals for narrowing the gap for children with Special Educational Needs.

12.2 As well as helping inform the Committee’s work programme, the briefings are often extended to all members of the County Council in order to improve general knowledge and understanding of issues and how proposals will affect local communities.

13. CHALLENGES/AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 13.1 The key challenge for both members and officers this year is to make scrutiny more effective and outcome focused.
- 13.2 To maintain and build on the current levels of member engagement and attendance by focusing on priority issues of concern to members, providing concise information in appropriate formats and offering a range of training and development opportunities which meet member requirements. In addition to the usual induction training, options include targeted sessions for Chairs and Vice-Chairs, practical, awareness raising briefings before or after meetings and coaching on specific topics chosen by individual committees.
- 13.3 To raise the profile of and interest in scrutiny both within the Council and Partner organisations and among the general public, a communications protocol is being discussed and a plain English handbook of the scrutiny process is being compiled.
- 13.4 To take on board the increased powers and responsibilities of the relevant legislation.
- 13.5 The Scrutiny committees will continue to monitor the status of their recommendations to Executive. The aim, as always, will be to achieve best practice standards and to make a positive contribution to partnership working and service improvement.

14. SCRUTINY TEAM

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14.1 Further Information

Feedback on scrutiny work or suggestions for possible issues to be included in the work programmes is always welcome. Members are invited to contact the Chairs, Vice-Chairs or any member of the Scrutiny Team.

COUNCILLOR PETER JACKSON

CHAIRMAN: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY CHAIRMEN'S WORKING GROUP