



# ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES 2012/13

1. Northumberland County Council has four Overview and Scrutiny Committees to monitor the way that services are provided and to make recommendations as to whether new policies or changes to policies are needed. Issues of public concern are considered and changes to improve matters are recommended.

These Committees consider and, where necessary, question decisions made by the Executive. This is an essential part of the good governance of the authority and does rely on the participation of the Executive and of the Council's officers.

2. Successful scrutiny: *"Provides a 'critical friend' challenge to the executive as well as external agencies; reflects the concerns of the public and community (actively engage the public); takes the lead in scrutinising on behalf of the public (community leadership), and makes an impact on the delivery of public services (contributes to performance)."*
3. Over the last year, all of our four Scrutiny Committees have been very active in ensuring that the interests of our county's residents are being addressed, not just by the Council, but by the various organisations that provide the wide range of services that they rely upon. Scrutiny has made a difference through policy development such as the end of life care work, through engagement with residents on issues such as school closures and Berwick maternity services, and through pre-scrutiny or the occasional call-in when needed on important issues.
4. This report includes the key issues considered by the Committees over the year, some examples are:
  - 4.1 A lively public debate about the minimum unit price of alcohol, involving a wide range of partners and specialist interested groups with input from local and Scottish MPs, Police and Crime Commissioner candidates, Town and Parish councillors and residents;
  - 4.2 The examination of a wide range of housing issues including the social housing services available in Northumberland;

- 4.3 Highways and neighbourhood services, including the new civil parking enforcement regime, improvements to winter services and the Transport and Asset Management Plan;
  - 4.4 Ensuring member involvement in the Priority Schools Building Programme and proposed in new schools for Alnwick, Bedlington and Prudhoe;
  - 4.5 Communications, customer services and scrutinising plans for the introduction of high speed broadband, and
  - 4.6 following work started last year, examination of the main determinants and implications of health inequalities in Northumberland, with a focus on enabling all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives.
5. I would like to thank those who have contributed to our work, to the scrutiny members, officers and the Executive for their co-operation and present the key highlights of issues investigated over the past year.

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

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### 6. ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND STRATEGIC SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Councillor Gordon Castle  
Chairman

6.1 The Committee have continued to play a valuable and constructive role in the council's strategic policy making areas and has been heavily engaged in a wide cross section of work, principally when substantial financial resources are likely to be committed or affected. The committee's main purpose remains that of helping the council, through its Executive, to make sound decisions by undertaking close scrutiny of major policy proposals and then making recommendations to the executive. The success of the committee's work is reflected in the relatively infrequent number of occasions when these recommendations have not been acted upon and the rarity of call-ins, the latter pointing to a much-improved relationship with the Executive. Meetings continue to be well attended by

Executive members and officers, and outside bodies and organisations are frequently invited. The committee have now developed into a highly effective means of engaging members in decision making who are not otherwise on the Executive

6.2 I would like to thank my colleagues on the committee, particularly my Vice-Chairman, for their close cooperation and support over the past year and also the scrutiny officers who make it work as well as it does.

6.3 **The Transport Asset Management Plan (TAMP) Working Group** was re-established in 2011/12 to review the output from the previous Working Group and to gather evidence and where appropriate make recommendations with regard to: maintenance strategy for all assets; service standards to maintain that strategy, and performance measures to monitor strategy delivery. The Group's final recommendations were presented to the Executive on 17 September 2012. The Executive welcomed the work done by the Working Group and agreed their recommendations, albeit subject to a full analysis of the financial impact.

6.4 Many other issues have been covered during the last year:

6.4.1 **Implementation of Civil Parking Enforcement** – The Committee have monitored the implementation of the new parking enforcement regime. This included a review of the free parking initiative during the week before Christmas. At the review meeting in February, several representatives of Chambers of Trade throughout the county contributed to the discussion. Whilst they welcomed the initiative, they requested that if it was to be repeated in future years, they would be grateful if they could have much greater notice, so that they could plan complementary events.

- 6.4.2 **Welfare Reform** – The Committee continued to receive updates on the Governments proposals under the Welfare Reform Act which will come into effect from 1 April 2013, including:
- changes to Council Tax Support, and
  - the introduction of a Welfare Assistance Scheme which will be delivered by the Council. This will replace the discretionary Social Fund which was run by Jobcentre Plus.
- 6.4.3 This as an area of work which should be continually monitored as the changes will affect all residents.
- 6.4.4 **Local Elections: Scale of Fees for Parish Councils** - Full Council on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2012 approved the scale of fees for the county council elections in 2013. However in do so, it requested that this Committee examine the costs to parish councils. The Committee recommended that Council adopt a policy which would allow Democratic Services to negotiate on a case by case basis a satisfactory means of allowing small Parish Councils to repay any unbudgeted by-election expenses. The Council accepted this recommendation at its meeting on 3 December 2012.
- 6.4.5 **Bailiff Services** – The Committee continued to monitor the Council's effectiveness in recovering debt, including a comprehensive presentation given by a representative from "Rossendales" on the Bailiff Services provided to the County Council. The Council's Recovery Manager stressed to members that cases would only be referred to the bailiffs if there had been no response from the customer or no suitable alternative method of recovery. £1.3m had been collected on behalf of the Council by bailiffs since last year.
- 6.4.6 **Highways and Neighbourhood Winter Services** – The County has endured another difficult winter this year and the Committee have received regular updates on the Council's readiness to anticipate and respond to severe weather conditions as they arose. The Committee have continually expressed their gratitude to the Highways Services team for their improved performances in spite of recent budget pressures. The Committee will receive a further report in April which will set out to review the Council's performance over the last few months.
- 6.4.7 **Fleet Replacement Programme** – The Committee raised concerns last year regarding procurement processes for vehicle replacements, following revelations that gritting vehicles were ordered too late to be put into service last winter. Members have since been assured that improvements have been made to the fleet replacement programme, which includes clearly documenting and assigning responsibilities for each stage of the process and putting in place robust governance arrangements to regularly monitor and review progress.

6.4.8 **Estate Transformation** – The Committee have received details of progress made in respect of depot rationalisation and front office transformation in Cramlington, Seaton Delaval, Amble and Morpeth. Further improvements are anticipated in the development of property rationalisation for Alnwick, Morpeth and Hexham based on a robust business case for each individual Market Town. The Committee have requested further updates.

6.5 In addition, the Committee have considered a number of reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Executive and have made 16 recommendations and made comments and suggested amendments on the following:

- Budget 2013/14
- Northumberland County Council Public Transport Strategy 2011-2016
- Refinancing of Newcastle International Airport, Future Partnering Arrangements and Related shareholder Matters
- Footbridge – Beaconhill, Cramlington
- Transport Asset Management Plan (TAMP)
- Northumberland Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority

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

- North East Independent Economic Review
- ARCH
- Sickness Management
- Market Strategy – Annual Review
- Street Trading
- iNorthumberland Broadband Programme
- Northumberland Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority
- Equality and Diversity Issues
- Hackney Carriage and Private Licensing
- Senior Management Structure
- Highways and Neighbourhood Services Structure
- Department for Work and Pensions Work Programme
- Performance Overview

**Gordon Castle**

**Chairman – Economic Prosperity and Strategic Services OSC**

## 7. COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**Councillor Glen Sanderson  
Chairman**

7.1 As we approach the end of the fourth year since the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee was created under the new unitary Council, our Members can look back on a dynamic and varied Work Programme that has consistently reflected the wide scope of the Committee remit. We have maintained our themed approach to meetings, which we hold out in the community with public participation as often as appropriate for our annual work programme, this year including:

7.1.1 17 September 2012, at Morpeth Town Hall for a public debate on the proposed Minimum Unit Price for Alcohol under the Government's Alcohol Strategy, with 50 present from parishes/town councils and the local area.

7.1.2 10 October 2012, at Stannington Village Hall to discuss development control and road safety issues, with 20 present from parishes/town councils and the local area

7.1.3 14 November 2012, at Berwick Borough Housing to discuss a range of housing issues, with tenant representatives and local councillors present.



**Public Meeting at Morpeth Town Hall**

7.2 As shown above, the Committee aims to ensure that the public has an input to the Council's policy making, either through our Members or by word of mouth at our meetings. This input enters the policy making process through the Committee's recommendations to the Executive. An important mechanism for this is taking opportunities to pre-scrutinise reports to the Executive on key issues, and this has been a significant part of our 2012/2013 work programme. This year we have submitted a number of reports to the Executive, making a total of 43 recommendations,

the majority of which have been agreed. The biannual Monitoring Report on actions following agreement of our recommendations by the Executive is useful for keeping track of subsequent actions as well as informing future investigations under the Committee's wide remit of County Council services concerned with:

- community safety/crime, fear of crime and crime reduction
- antisocial behaviour and domestic violence
- emergency services and emergency planning
- trading standards
- community engagement and empowerment
- social inclusion
- equalities, diversity and community cohesion
- support to VCS organisations
- public service customer care/ neighbourhood services
- housing
- culture and leisure (libraries, parks, open spaces and play areas)
- streetscape and the local environment
- environment (Development Plans, conservation, countryside, waste management)
- land use planning
- climate change
- biodiversity and landscape quality
- energy use.

7.3 We receive a standard update on the Service Plan of the Department providing the service themed for each meeting, reviewing the relevant performance information and then the reports we have requested on particular aspects of the service. The following are the main outcomes from this year's Work Programme:

7.4 **Housing** - earlier in the day of each of our May and November 2012 meetings we made a visit to affordable housing developments and extra care facilities provided by social housing companies Bernicia and Berwick Borough Housing. On 10 April 2013 we plan to visit affordable housing managed for the Council by Homes for Northumberland. The visits and networking with our hosts informed discussion of reports at the meetings, where we made recommendations on a number of issues last year, including homeless applications, tenant satisfaction benchmarking, development of extra care facilities for the elderly, measuring carbon reduction and performance reporting on the monitoring of fuel poverty. We have also been receiving regular updates on the Council's approach to housing benefit issues arising in advance of the Welfare Reform affecting social housing tenants from 2013/2014. We informed the Executive that we would follow progress with tenant scrutiny. All recommendations made to the Executive so far have been agreed, and the actions are in progress. The Executive also asked our Committee to review the proposed Gypsy/Roma/Traveller transit site allocation process regarding sites in South East Northumberland and to provide feedback that would inform a final decision. The requisite timescale will take this work into 2013/2014.

7.5 **Customer and Cultural Services** - improvements to the Council's communications have been an ongoing element of our work programmes since 2009. Progress with the roll-out of the authority's new telephone system through the contact centres and the web has been reported regularly. Updates on library services and leisure services, with a particular focus on customer satisfaction, have been received this year, and the Committee participated in a review of the Council's leisure management arrangements. We offered suggestions to the Executive on aspects of the Customer Services Strategy adopted in 2012 and pre-scrutinised the proposed Customer Service Standards and Corporate Complaints Policy agreed by the Executive in March 2013. The Committee has also been following progress with the Council's annual corporate programme for engaging with the public, which includes the biannual People's Panel Surveys and the new biennial North East Perception Survey conducted (this time by Ipsos MORI) for participating local authorities in the region.

7.6 **Community Safety** - the Committee devotes at least one meeting each year to a general overview of performance in Public Health and Protection, Northumberland County Council Fire and Rescue Service and the Safer Northumberland Partnership and partners, principally Northumbria Police. One of the most significant events in our calendar this year was the September 2012 public debate on the



Committee visit to West Hartford Community Fire Station

Minimum Unit Price proposed under the Government's Alcohol Strategy. We ensured that the opposing views of specialist interests were heard and taken into account, and that our final recommendations reflected a true consensus of Members' views. The Council's final response to the Government Consultation on the five key issues addressed in the Alcohol Strategy took the scrutiny recommendations into account. Other Community Safety issues about which we submitted recommendations this year were underage sales, dog control and road safety.

7.7 **Planning** - the NCC Local Development Plan Core Strategy Issues and Options/Preferred Options Consultations were central to this year's planning themed meetings. Previous Members' concerns regarding communication with Town/Parish Councils as consultees for planning applications have been addressed by a dedicated page on the Council's website, which provides assistance with using the public access system.

7.8 **Localism** - the Committee seeks to engage with and to empower local communities at every opportunity. We have progressed this by taking our meetings out into community venues across the County, more so this year than in the previous three years. We have involved Town and Parish Councils, as well as the general public, in our work programmes as often as possible. Community orientated topics our Members



have looked at this year have included the NCC Commission for Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) Support Services and the NCC Community Chest.

**Glen Sanderson**  
**Chairman – Communities and Place OSC**

## **8. CARE AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**



**Councillor Margaret Richards**  
**Chairman**

**8.1 Health and Social Care Act** – The Committee have received regular briefings on the huge NHS structural reform and recognise their increased involvement and the implications for scrutiny. Following a year in shadow form, the Health and Wellbeing Board will become formally established on 1 April as will HealthWatch, which will replace the Northumberland LINKs and the Clinical Commissioning Groups. The Committee wish to pay tribute to the staff of the former NHS North of Tyne and Northumberland Care Trust who have provided tremendous support and expertise to the Committee's work. We wish them well in the future.

**8.2 Public Health Transition** - The Committee welcome the return of public health leadership to the Council. We believe we have the democratic mandate and local knowledge to improve the health and wellbeing of our population by working with our key partners to address the key determinants of health. The Committee welcome the public health team to the Council and to pay tribute to the Director and officers involved for their hard work behind the scenes which has led to a smooth transition.

**8.3 LINKs Update** - Northumberland LINK started in 2008 as an involvement network working across Northumberland to provide a voice for the public in health and social care. LINK has taken a proactive approach to involving seldom heard voices and commissioned a number of specific reviews, ranging from hospital parking to concerns for independent advocacy for people in distress.

**8.4** Recent work included activities on Continuing Healthcare and Direct Payments and a dentistry report regarding access and use of hygienists. The Committee would like to thank LINKs for their informative and useful work over the years and hope that the good work is carried forward by HealthWatch.

**8.5 Alcohol Issues** - The Committee have taken a special interest in alcohol issues this year. The responsibility for improving and protecting public health becomes the responsibility of the Council from 1 April 2013 including commissioning alcohol services, and all members were invited to a session to provide an increasing understanding of the key issues including the use and misuse of alcohol in

Northumberland; preventing harm for children and young people; current and future alcohol services; tackling alcohol related crime; licensing, community safety and minimum unit pricing.

- 8.6 Apart from the long term health implications of alcohol abuse, the Committee are mindful of the wider effects of alcohol misuse: crime and disorder; loss of economic productivity and the consequences for children of drinking parents, spouses and partners, communities, colleagues, victims of crime such as violence and damage to property.
- 8.7 The discussion led to a successful and well attended public debate on the issue of Minimum Unit Price (MUP), a mechanism to establish a base price per unit of alcohol, by the Communities and Place Scrutiny Committee and resulted in the Council supporting the adoption of an alcohol minimum unit price.
- 8.9 **Regional Review of the Health needs of the Armed Forces** - In 2011, the Joint Regional Health Scrutiny Committee carried out a review of the health needs of veterans and their families.
- 8.10 Recommendations from the review 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 training, housing and social care.
- 8.11 A great deal of progress has been made since then by local authorities.

Northumberland has appointed Councillor Roger Styring as the Armed Forces Champion and Councillor Dave Ledger as the Veteran's Champion. A dedicated webpage is in progress and the Council have adopted the Armed Forces Community Covenant which confirms the council's commitment to improving services to the Armed Forces and their families



**Jeff Reid, Leader of the Council, signs the Armed Forces Community Covenant**

- 8.12 Monitoring will now be passed to ANEC where the work will be mainstreamed to each local authority.
- 8.13 **Berwick Hospital – Temporary closure to Births** - The Committee have responded to a consultation surrounding the decision by Northumbria Healthcare NHS Trust to temporarily close Berwick Hospital to births. Members fully appreciate that following two serious incidents which highlighted concerns around midwifery skill maintenance,

the unit should close until a review of the service was undertaken. A full public consultation has been undertaken and the Trust will engage with this committee, other organisations and the public regarding the findings, prior to any changes in service provisions are agreed.

- 8.14 **Aging Well in Northumberland** - Councillor Veronica Jones, as chair of the Older People's Partnership Board, has provided the committee with regular progress reports on the Ageing Well programme in Northumberland which has been shortlisted for a national award. Ageing Well is about empowering older people to take responsibility in their communities for well-being rather than treatment or care services. This excellent service raises awareness among communities of existing services that older people are unaware of and encourages participation in activities and events. It is envisaged that the project will be extended throughout the County.
- 8.15 **Health Inequalities Working Group** - The Working Group, comprising members from this Committee and Family and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee, undertook a second review to scrutinise the approaches within Northumberland for tackling the main determinants of health inequalities in the context of the Marmot Review.
- 8.16 The first review focussed on the Policy Objective A of the Marmot Report - ***Give every child the best start in life.***
- 8.17 The second review focusses on Policy Objective B – ***Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives.*** The Group heard evidence from a range of professionals about preventive and health improving activities and have made a number of recommendations to the Executive which we feel will result in achievable outcomes. This approach concurs with Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy.
- 8.18 The detailed report should be read alongside the first and both can be made available on request. Implementation of the recommendations will be monitored by the Committee.
- 8.19 **End of Life Care Working Group** - End of Life Care in Northumberland was identified as an area in need of development and improvement. This, allied with the higher national profile afforded to End of Life by the publication of the first national strategy, led to the establishment of the Working Group last year.
- 8.20 End of life care is an emotive and sensitive topic to consider. The Working Group worked with a range of expert stakeholders and produced a deliverable action plan for patients and communities in Northumberland which has been regarded as best practice.

8.21 Key concerns included ensuring people's first choices were delivered, improving care pathways and ensuring rapid access to support across the system. Both an officer champion and elected member champion have been appointed to take the issues forward and the Council are the first local authority to adopt the 'Good Death Charter' and 'Carer's Strategy'



**Councillor Jim Smith, Chairman of the Council, signs the 'Good Death Charter' and 'Statement of Commitment to Carers'**

8.22 The implementation of the recommendations will be monitored by the Committee.

8.23 **Consultations** - The Committee have responded to a number of important consultations over the year. In particular, that regarding keeping Children's Congenital Heart Services at the RVI; and the Health Scrutiny consultation aimed at strengthening accountability of NHS services and supporting effective service change.

8.24 **Other Issues** - In addition, the Committee have been consulted or informed about a range of other services and initiatives over the year and have provided valuable input into national and regional strategies and plans:

- Safeguarding Adults Annual Report 2011-12
- Welfare Rights Annual Report 2011-12
- North East Ambulance Service Review
- Any Qualified Provider
- Implementation of 111 telephone number
- Role of the Quality Care Commission
- Northumberland LINK Annual Report: April 2011 - March 2012
- Regular performance reports
- Mental Health Inpatient Beds
- Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust specialist health improvement service
- Dentistry Update
- Progress Updates - Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Quality Accounts

**Margaret Richards**  
**Chairman – Care and Well-being OSC**



## 9. FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**Councillor Richard Dodd  
Chairman**

9.1 The Committee have been busy again this year, dealing with a wide range of issues from school closures to the Priority Schools Building Programme and the Music Plan to the Inspection of Fostering Services. Members have also received a number of regular monitoring reports including summaries of rota visits to children's services establishments and audit reports arising from the Climbie Inquiry. The Committee received a detailed presentation from Stuart Cutforth, the new Principal of Northumberland College on his plans for achieving excellence, and his vision for a further education learning and enterprise partnership for the community of Northumberland. Members were impressed with his enthusiasm and drive and looked forward to meeting him again to review his achievements in those areas. The Committee have made 7 recommendations and commented on a number of issues during the last year.

9.2 **School Partnership Reorganisation** – the Committee have advised the Executive on two major reorganisations in the County: Bedlington and Haydon Bridge. Members were warned in May that standards at the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) in Bedlingtonshire Junior High School had been below the Government's floor standards consistently over the last 6 years. The DfE required that any school falling below floor standards at the end of KS2 for five or more years should either convert to become an Academy or should close. In spite of several significant interventions to improve standards at Bedlingtonshire Junior High School over the last 8 years, including federation with Bedlingtonshire High School and relocation to the Bedlingtonshire High School site, no significant impact on standards at KS2 has been achieved. Following an extensive consultation, the Committee supported a structural solution in order to raise standards at the end of KS2 for pupils who currently feed into Bedlingtonshire Junior High School (agreed by the Executive on 3 July 2012), as follows:

9.2.1 the closure of Bedlingtonshire Junior High School;

9.2.2 the reorganisation of Bedlingtonshire High School to secondary status (expansion of age range from 13-18 to 11-18), and

9.2.3 the reorganisation of Bedlington Station, Bedlington Stead Lane and Cambois First Schools to primary status (expansion of age range from 3-9 to 3-11).

9.3 Consultations are currently being undertaken to reorganise the Haydon Bridge Partnership. Following that process the Committee will make final recommendations to the Executive in April.

9.4 The Committee have long been concerned with falling populations, particularly in rural areas, and their impact on school numbers. In June, members were advised that the

number of pupils on roll at Cornhill First School had fallen dramatically in the last 5 years. The school was small with only 1 pupil on roll in nursery, registered with the school. Furthermore, data from the Health Authority had shown that the number of pre-school children known to be living within the catchment area of Cornhill First School due to enter Reception was, 2 for September 2012, 0 for September 2013, 0 for September 2014 and 0 for September 2015. There had been a very significant decrease in population and the school was unlikely to attract any pupils at all. Following a comprehensive consultation, the Committee reluctantly recommended to the Executive that the school should close from the 31 August 2012. This recommendation was accepted by the Executive on 18 June 2012. The Committee will continue to keep the issue of falling school numbers under review.

- 9.5 **New formula Funding of Schools from April 2013** – The implications arising from the changes were presented to the Executive in October 2012. However, the Committee subsequently raised a number of concerns regarding the changes to the funding of schools and other education services from April 2013, which would have a significant impact on a number of schools. Members felt that the authority had been consistently underfunded for many years and that the new funding formula would be unfair to many schools, as it was based on pupil numbers and did not relate to campus size as it did in the past, which meant that rural schools would suffer larger financial cuts than more densely populated areas. The Committee agreed that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman meet regularly with the Executive Member on an informal basis, to consider the implications of the new funding arrangements and to update members on the implementation of the proposals as appropriate.
- 9.6 **Employability and Skills Service** - Transformation of the Employability and Skills Service provides an integrated approach across Children's Services with an emphasis on meeting the needs of vulnerable and at risk young people and families. This includes a focus on tackling youth employment through a range of interventions and projects including employability, enterprise, work related skills development, apprenticeships, personal and social development programmes, young people's leadership development, volunteering, a range of NEET interventions and Work Programme support. The Committee receives regular updates on the performance of the service.
- 9.7 Government legislation removed the statutory responsibility of Local Authorities to deliver universal Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) support to young people from April 2012. Consequently, the County Council decommissioned the Connexions Service and replaced it with targeted IAG support to vulnerable and at risk young people. Schools became responsible for provision of universal IAG to young people from September 2012. The County Council continues to support schools to enable them to meet their statutory responsibility through area meetings, training and advice.
- 9.8 **Academies** – there are currently eight academies in Northumberland, although that number is expected to rise in the coming years. As academies are funded centrally this will continue to impact on the scarce funding the Council receives for schools. Additionally, as the number of academies rises it could significantly affect the sustainability of providing services to the remaining maintained schools, even if they choose to buy some of those services back from the local authority. However, the

Council continues to be committed to supporting and working with those schools who wish to become academies and to seek to maintain effective working relationships for the benefit of children and young people.

- 9.9 **Inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children** - the Care Quality Commission in partnership with Ofsted had carried out an inspection of our safeguarding and looked after children services. It had been the toughest inspection ever and the Committee were delighted to learn that the Authority had been awarded 11 outstanding grades. Out of 150 authorities nationally, only 3 had received that grading. The Committee noted that there were still areas for further development and it was important not to become complacent. The authority had received a good statement in relation to how they were operating. A number of areas had been judged as outstanding and the inspection team had highlighted that within another 12 months, there would have been more progress made in the areas judged as good.
- 9.10 **Priority Schools Building Programme** – on 24 May the Secretary of State announced that the Council’s three bids for replacement new high schools in Alnwick, Bedlingtonshire and Prudhoe, under the government’s Priority Schools Building Programme (PSBP), had been successful. The Committee have since included a standing item on their agenda to receive regular updates on the implementation of the programme. Members are keen to be involved in this process and will continue to monitor progress.
- 9.11 **Inspection of Fostering Service** – the Fostering Service underwent a five day Ofsted inspection in June 2012. Ofsted judged the overall service to be “Good” with “Outstanding” leadership and management. In 2009, the service was considered to be “Adequate” by Ofsted, since then there has been significant changes in fostering arrangements in Northumberland and nationally. Ofsted states that the purpose of the inspection is to assure children and young people, parents and the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection is carried out under the Care standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards. The Committee welcomed the inspection report and expressed their gratitude to all staff and members involved.
- 9.12 **School Solar PV Installations** – as part of a wider programme of Solar PV installations across the Council’s property portfolio, 89 schools have now had panels fitted. Across the entire group of school installations, an estimated annual generation of around 550,000 kwh translates to potential savings, based on previous assumptions, in the region of £66,000 per annum. Although the Committee heard that some schools were not suitable for installation for a number of reasons, they were assured that other sustainable technologies were being considered to help “fill the gap”. The Committee will continue to monitor this issue.
- 9.13 **Monitoring Reports** – the Committee continues to receive regular reports on the following:
- SEN Implementation Plan



- Prevention Strategy
- Children's Centre Procurement/Improvement
- Children's Services Residential Homes Review and Relocation
- Finance and Performance
- Members Rota Visits to Children's Homes
- Climbie Inquiry – Audit Reports
- School Performance
- Youth Service
- Adoption Annual Report
- Child Poverty Issues

**Richard Dodd**  
**Chairman of the Family and Children's Services OSC**

## **10. POLICY DEVELOPMENTS – IMPACT ON SCRUTINY**

- 10.1 The Overview and Scrutiny function will play an important role in subjecting policy 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.
- 10.2 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.

## **11. WORK PROGRAMMES**

- 11.1 The work programmes 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;
  - Receiving information on policy/strategy areas as part of their overview function, and
  - Cross cutting issues will be considered by joint meetings
  - Referrals from the Executive or Full Council.
- 11.2 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.

## **12. CALL-INS**

- 12.1 There were two call-in's in 2012/2013, both by the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

12.1.1 the Customer Services Strategy, for which the Committee did not consider the original Report sufficiently detailed. The Committee received additional information and endorsed the Strategy, recommending a safeguard for service provision issues arising from any future private public partnership arrangements, which the Executive agreed

12.1.2 the Leisure Management Review, where again the Committee felt that the Report contained insufficient detail. The meeting received a full report and endorsed the original proposals subject to the involvement of a cross-party

Communities and Place Working Group in the leisure provision procurement process; also the Committee would pre-scrutinise a report in the event of any tender to be let by the Executive. The Executive agreed this recommendation.

### **13. VISITS**

#### **13.1 Communities and Place OSC** have held meetings at:

13.1.1 Bernicia Headquarters, Kingston Park (shortly before their move to Ashington), with visits to a local affordable housing scheme and extra care development

13.1.2 Tees Valley Energy from Waste plant, Billingham, with tour of facility prior to meeting

13.1.3 Ponteland Leisure Centre, Ponteland, with tour of facility prior to meeting

13.1.4 Corn Exchange, Morpeth, as central venue for MUP debate with all Councillors, Town and Parish Councils invited

13.1.5 Stannington Village Hall, Stannington, again with all Town and Parish Councils invited

13.1.6 Berwick Borough Housing, Berwick, with tour of local affordable housing schemes prior to meeting

13.1.7 West Hartford Community Fire Station, West Hartford, with tour of facility prior to meeting.

14.2 **Family and Children's Services OSC** visited Astley High School at the invitation of the local member who had expressed concerns regarding the poor maintenance and structural condition of the school. The Committee also took the opportunity to visit Cramlington Hareside Primary and Bedlington Stead Lane First schools.

14.3 **Care and Wellbeing OSC** visited the GP Out of Hours Headquarters at Gosforth and received a briefing on the service.

### **15. CHALLENGES/AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT**

15.1 The key challenge for both members and officers this year is to make scrutiny more effective and outcome focused.

15.2 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.

- 15.3 To take on board the increased powers and responsibilities of the relevant legislation.
- 15.4 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.

## **16. 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.

## **17. SCRUTINY TEAM**

Jackie Roll, Scrutiny Manager (01670 622603)  
[Jackie.Roll@northumberland.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:Jackie.Roll@northumberland.gcsx.gov.uk)

Paul Allen, Scrutiny Officer (01670 622604)  
[Paul.Allen01@northumberland.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:Paul.Allen01@northumberland.gcsx.gov.uk)

Sean Nicholson, Scrutiny Officer (01670 622605)  
[Sean.Nicholson@northumberland.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:Sean.Nicholson@northumberland.gcsx.gov.uk)

**COUNCILLOR PETER JACKSON**

**CHAIRMAN: OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY CHAIRMEN'S WORKING GROUP**