

Scrutiny Board

(Environment and Neighbourhoods)



*Cllr Barry Anderson
Chair of Scrutiny Board (Environment and Neighbourhoods)*

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The Chair's Summary

I am very pleased to present the 2008/09 annual report of the Scrutiny Board (Environment and Neighbourhoods). The Environment and Neighbourhoods portfolio encompasses a wide range of services which strive to meet the Council's ambitions for Leeds in terms of creating neighbourhoods that are inclusive, varied and vibrant within an environment that is clean, green, attractive and above all, sustainable. As a Scrutiny Board we continue to oversee those issues which remain key priorities for local people, such as offering affordable and decent housing; tackling crime and anti-social behaviour; reducing worklessness; and improving the quality and sustainability of the built and natural environment. At the beginning of the year, we challenged ourselves to conduct a number of high profile inquiries focusing on the provision of street cleaning services in Leeds; the provision, management and regulation of private rented sector housing; the development of older people's housing; and the impact and management of the Asylum Seeker Case Resolution Programme in Leeds. The details of our inquiries are set out within this report, including our final recommendations, which I hope will add value towards the development of policy and service delivery around these particular issues. I therefore look forward to receiving the initial response to our recommendations and monitoring progress against these over the coming months.

In addition to our main inquiries, we conducted a review of dog fouling enforcement in Leeds in recognition of the fact that this remains to be one of the highest sources of complaints by the public both locally and nationally. In February 2009, we published a Statement setting out our findings and recommendations and were pleased to note that the Council's Executive welcomed and supported the findings of our review. This year we also provided formal comments on the proposed changes to the Council's Lettings Policy. As many of the changes reflected the recommendations arising from the Scrutiny inquiry into Housing Lettings Pressures last year, we were very supportive of these.

In March 2009, we commenced an inquiry into the East and South East Leeds (EASEL) regeneration project following a request for Scrutiny. This inquiry aims to ensure that the objectives of this regeneration project continue to remain a priority for all key partners and that the residents of the EASEL area are informed and consulted effectively throughout the project. This inquiry will continue into the new municipal year.

I am proud of what we have achieved this year and would like to sincerely thank my fellow Board Members, officers, and other witnesses for their commitment and contribution to the Board's work.

Councillor Barry Anderson, Chair of Scrutiny Board (Environment and Neighbourhoods)

Inquiry into Street Cleaning

In September 2008, we commenced our inquiry into street cleaning services in Leeds. The primary focus of our inquiry was around the statutory duty of the Council in keeping land clear from litter and refuse and exploring opportunities for further improvements in the way that street cleaning services are delivered to the residents of Leeds.

However, we also acknowledged the need to educate individuals and influence behaviour towards littering as we all play a part in the quality of the local environment and therefore have a responsibility to deal with litter in an acceptable way.

Research by ENCAMS (Environmental Campaigns) reported an estimated cost of £547 million to local authorities in 2005-2006 to clean and clear streets of litter and refuse.

During our inquiry, we sought the views of a wide range of stakeholders, including ENCAMS who provided a professional and independent opinion based around their experiences of working with other local authorities in addressing issues around street cleaning.

As part of our inquiry, we also acknowledged the need to gather opinions of local residents. We therefore invited residents to write in and share their experiences and opinions on the standards of cleanliness across the city and the provision of street cleaning services. We received numerous letters, which formed part of our evidence base and helped us to identify common issues and potential hotspot areas across the city.

Leeds' performance in terms of street cleanliness standards is considered average when compared to other comparable core cities, yet Leeds has one of the lowest spends per head of population. Our inquiry clearly demonstrated the high level of importance placed upon this issue by all stakeholders, including the public, and the demand for this issue to become a priority for the Council.

We believe that the key elements to success are around the development of a co-ordinated and coherent street cleaning service across the city; robust monitoring and recording mechanisms; more local baseline data around street cleanliness needs; targeted enforcement and education campaigns; and identifying and maximising on all available resources.

In view of this, the key recommendations arising from our inquiry were as follows:

To be added once approved by the Board on 11th May 2009.

Review of Dog Fouling Enforcement

The issue of dog fouling was the subject of an earlier Scrutiny inquiry in December 2001 by the former Neighbourhoods and Regeneration Scrutiny Board. However, dog fouling still remains to be one of the highest sources of complaints by the public both locally and nationally. In view of this, we agreed to revisit this issue again and review the Council's current responsibilities and resources for the enforcement of dog fouling in Leeds.

During our review, we acknowledged that dog fouling was just one of a range of dog control and enforcement duties of the Council which needed to be taken into consideration. Particular reference was made to the Council's statutory duty for stray dogs. Since this responsibility was transferred completely to local authorities from the Police in April 2008, the number of strays that the service was dealing with had increased by approximately 25% in less than a year. In view of the existing pressures on the Dog Warden Service, we recognised the need to maximise available enforcement resources, which would involve working more closely with local parish and town councils too. We also recognised the need for more flexible working hours for Dog Wardens and other enforcement officers in order to tackle dog fouling offences more effectively.

At present, Leeds has only one Dog Control Order and this relates to dog fouling. There are five Dog Control Orders for local authorities to enforce and we believe that the introduction of additional Dog Control Orders can provide real benefits in terms of easier controls of dogs, particularly in areas such as parks and children play areas, and therefore recommended a review of the options available to the Council to extend these Orders in Leeds.



There were ten recommendations arising from our review. These were as follows:

- That the Council works in close partnership with local parish and town councils to ensure the effective use of Dog Control Orders across the city and maximise available enforcement resources.
- That the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods determines a suitable figure for Leeds that will be enforced in relation to the maximum number of dogs that any one person can walk at any onetime.
- That the Director of Environment & Neighbourhoods carries out a review within the next 4 months of the options available to the Council to extend Dog Control Orders in Leeds.
- That an action plan is drawn up on how the Dog Control Orders agreed upon following the review can be progressed. This action plan will be brought back to the Scrutiny Board for consideration by June/July 2009.
- That the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods will roll out the training programme for issuing Fixed Penalty Notices for litter and dog fouling over the next 12 months to all Neighbourhood Wardens and Park Ranger staff and recommend that this involves any other enforcement staff who may be able to carry out such works.
- That the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods conducts a review of existing staffing resources within the Dog Warden Team to determine whether it is adequate enough to meet current service demands.
- That the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods ensures that the full budget provision for the Dog Warden Service each year, which includes the additional funding from West Yorkshire Police, is spent on improving that service.
- That the contract specification for the provision of stray dog kennels is reviewed prior to its renewal and that further opportunities are explored to help generate greater interest from local suppliers.
- That the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods reviews an out of hours flexible working scheme for the Dog Warden Service and explores opportunities to utilise other relevant enforcement staff working out of hours to assist with the enforcement of dog fouling.
- That the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods produces a Dog Control Strategy for Leeds by September 2009 setting out the duties of the Dog Warden Service; the current and potential role of other officers in enforcing Dog Control Orders; strategies for future education campaigns; and the implications of having additional Dog Control Orders for Leeds.

Inquiry into Asylum Seeker Case Resolution

In July 2006, the Home Secretary made a statement to clear a backlog of 450,000 legacy records relating to pre April 2007 unresolved asylum cases by July 2011. The priorities for this case resolution programme was to focus on those who pose a risk to the public, those who could more easily be removed, those in receipt of UK Border Agency (UKBA) support and those who may be granted leave to remain.

However, concerns about the overall management and potential impact of the case resolution programme on Council services and on the city as a whole were brought to the attention of the Scrutiny Board by the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and Housing at the beginning of the municipal year. We therefore agreed to investigate this matter further.

As well as meeting with internal officers to discuss the impact of the case resolution programme from the Council's perspective, we also recognised the need to meet with other key external partners involved in driving forward and managing the programme on a wider scale. This would enable Scrutiny to understand their roles and also allow them the opportunity to raise any particular issues.

We therefore welcomed the involvement of the UK Border Agency and the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Migration Partnership in our inquiry. We were also pleased to learn that, to their knowledge, Leeds is the first local authority in the region to conduct an inquiry into the case resolution programme. Our inquiry was therefore welcomed.

The target set by the government to clear the backlog of legacy records by July 2011 clearly places additional pressures on local authorities to respond accordingly. Whilst we are very confident in the skills and commitment of officers within the Council to manage such pressures, our inquiry has demonstrated a wider need for all key partners to work more closely together in order to achieve this for Leeds and across the region and therefore many of our recommendations are focused around strengthening such partnership work in the future.

The recommendations arising from our inquiry were as follows:

“As well as receiving accurate baseline data and projection details from the UK Border Agency on cases to be resolved as part of the case resolution programme, the Council should also be given sufficient time and, where necessary, additional resources to manage any referred cases effectively.

Partnership working is vital if we are to deliver on the case resolution programme, or any other initiatives, as a region”.

Councillor Barry Anderson - Chair

To be added once approved by the Board on 11th May 2009.

Inquiry into Private Rented Sector Housing

The private rented sector in Leeds now represents approximately 13% of the total housing stock and as such provides accommodation for a significant number of Leeds households, some of whom are amongst the most vulnerable members of society.

Many people will have some experience of renting privately during the course of their lives and therefore we set out to explore the current provision, management and regulation of private rented housing in Leeds. As part of our inquiry, we considered evidence from the various Council services involved in the management and regulation of the private rented sector and also sought the views of a number of private landlords from local landlord representative bodies and Unipol Student Homes. During our inquiry, we noted that there was a lack of representative bodies specifically for private sector tenants in Leeds outside of the student market. We therefore explored opportunities for the Council to help develop such a representative body, as this would also aid communication links with private tenants in future.

We also learned of a national review of the private rented sector in October 2008, undertaken by the University of York, and found that there were a lot of common issues raised about the capacity of this sector to meet a range of housing needs. In particular, we too acknowledged the danger of describing the private rented sector as one homogenous tenure given the different variations available. In view of this, we recognised that the Council's approach in dealing with this sector will need to be multi-dimensional to meet the needs of the various sub-markets within the sector.

“The complexity of the sector has to be appreciated in any policy development, and underpins discussion of the obstacles and issues that attach to the private rented sector fulfilling its potential”.

Julie Rugg and David Rhodes, Centre for Housing Policy, The University of York.

Our inquiry highlighted a clear need to improve professionalism within this sector by improving the quality and condition of private rented sector housing; driving up standards of management; providing effective advice, information and support to the sector; and putting in place effective regulatory and enforcement mechanisms to target and sanction the small minority of wilfully bad landlords. Many of our recommendations therefore focused around these specific issues.

At the time of conducting our inquiry, we acknowledged that the Council was in the process of updating both its Leeds Housing Strategy and Private Rented Sector Strategy. We therefore hope that our findings and recommendations have contributed towards the development of these Strategies.

Our key recommendations arising from this inquiry were as follows:

To be added once approved by the Board on 11th May 2009.

Inquiry into Older People's Housing

The expectations and aspirations of older people are evolving and therefore the Council will need to ensure that service delivery is reconfigured so that it responds to these changing needs. In view of this, we agreed to conduct an inquiry into Older People's Housing in Leeds.

Some of the key aspirations of older people, now and in the future, are highlighted in the Government Strategy 'Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods'. The Government's vision is now focused around supporting older people to live independently within their own homes and exercise greater choice and control over their lives. The Lifetime Homes standard therefore provides flexible housing design that reflects the changes that occur over the lifetime and so people are not excluded by design as they grow older and more frail.

During our inquiry, we were pleased to learn that the Council is responding accordingly in trying to meet the Government's vision. We learned that a jointly sponsored project between the Environment and Neighbourhoods and Adult Social Care Directorates has been developed with the aim of creating a network of extra care and affordable lifetime homes in the city to meet primarily the needs of older people, but which will also make a significant contribution to neighbourhood regeneration and achieving affordable housing targets. To help progress with this project, the Council has submitted a bid to Central Government for £271 million of Private Finance Initiative (PFI) credits. This bid includes proposals for the development of 600 units of extra-care housing and 510 units of Lifetime Homes housing.

During our inquiry, we were particularly interested in the extra-care housing model. We therefore held our February 2009 meeting at the Moor Allerton Care Centre, which is based on the extra-care model, and combined this with a tour of the Centre. We also conducted a visit to Sheffield's Brunswick Gardens Retirement Village, which opened in March 2008 and consists of 217 one and two bedroom units of mixed tenure. As this is one of only a few extra care 'villages' in England, we were keen to learn more about the benefits of developing a scheme of this size and to take back any lessons for future developments in Leeds.



The 'village centre' at Sheffield's Brunswick Gardens Retirement Village



Meeting with senior officers and relevant Cabinet Members from Sheffield Council

As part of our inquiry, we recognised that the development of housing related services for older people also needs to be rooted in the evolving national 'personalisation' agenda: that recipients of social care services should play an integral role in shaping or choosing the services they use, so that they can be empowered to live independently. We therefore explored the use of Assistive Technology, Telecare and Telehealth services to support people to live as independently as possible.

We have now concluded our inquiry and in the process of producing a final report setting out our findings and recommendations. We hope to publish our report early in the new municipal year.

Changes to the Council's Lettings Policy

Last year the Environment and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board carried out an inquiry into Housing Lettings Pressures and recommended that Scrutiny be consulted on the proposed changes to the Council's Lettings Policy. We contributed to the consultation process in August 2008 and provided our formal comments in the form of a Statement, which was published in September 2008.

We were pleased to note that the recommendations arising from last year's inquiry were taken on board and covered by the proposed changes in the Lettings Policy. We therefore supported all the proposed changes to the Lettings Policy, as detailed in the consultation document.

Observing Yorkshire Water's £43 million upgrade of Waste Water Treatment Works

In December 2008, we were pleased to be invited to visit Yorkshire Water's Knostrop Waste Water Treatment Works to observe the ongoing work being carried out as part of its £43 million investment to provide more modern and efficient treatment processes that will help to ensure the water returned to the River Aire meets the standards required by the European Fresh Water Fish Directive, which becomes law in the UK in 2010.



Leeds Materials Recycling Facility

In February 2009, we visited the Leeds Materials Recycling Facility, which is operated by Martin Waste Limited. We met with the Council's Contracts Manager within Recycling and Waste Services and also the Marketing Manager and Materials Recycling Manager from Martin Waste Ltd. As part of our visit, we were shown around the site to observe how the recycling facility operates.

In March 2009, we also considered the outcome of a recent external Eco Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) audit. This audit focused on a broad range of environmental aspects relating to Leeds City Council operations and services, but specific focus on recycled waste was considered appropriate in light of media speculation around municipal recyclate destinations. We were pleased to note that the audit concluded that the Council and its contractor have robust systems in place to ensure the effective and responsible management of municipal recyclates.

The Board's full work programme 2008/09

Requests for Scrutiny

Inquiry into EASEL Regeneration Project (to be continued into 2009/10)

Review of existing policy

Review of Dog Fouling Enforcement in Leeds
Street Cleaning Inquiry
Asylum Seeker Case Resolution Inquiry
Private Rented Sector Housing Inquiry
Older People's Housing Inquiry (to be finalised in 2009/10)
Review of Miscellaneous Properties

Development of new policy

Draft Leeds Housing Strategy
Grounds Maintenance Draft Service Improvement Plan
Sustainable Communities Act
Revised Lettings Policy

Monitoring Scrutiny Recommendations

Quarterly Recommendation Tracking
Formal response to previous Inquiry into Housing Lettings Pressures
Formal response to previous Inquiry into CO2 Emissions

Performance Management

Quarterly performance reports
Monthly performance updates on the Dog Warden Service and the enforcement of dog fouling
Quarterly updates on the Supporting People Programme

Briefing

The role of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs)