



## Durham County Council

Sustainability within the new political structure

Durham county council has 10 members on its cabinet (including a member with the 'Sustainability' portfolio). The council has adopted 4 corporate aims (building a strong economy, developing lifelong learning, promoting strong, healthy and safe communities, and looking after the environment) with sustainability as one of five 'underpinning values'.

The council has a single over-arching overview and scrutiny committee. This is split into five sub-committees – one for each of the four corporate aims and an additional one to cover corporate issues. Each sub-committees has working groups that look in depth at selected topics.

LA21 partnership's representation on overview and scrutiny

The chair of the overview and scrutiny committee was keen to make the link between the scrutiny process and county Durham's well-established and successful Local Agenda 21 partnership. All members of the LA21 partnership were offered the chance to take part in the work of overview and scrutiny committee, although at present only one LA21 representative has volunteered to be co-opted (onto the 'Sustainability' group).

Overview and scrutiny review of the Durham county council sustainable environment policy

The *looking after the environment* overview and scrutiny sub-group opted to review Durham county council's sustainable environment policy as one of its first priorities. The policy was adopted in 1998, with the aim of improving the council's environmental performance as an organisation, and covers 10 areas (energy, transport, waste, water, paper, land management, resource-efficient IT, sustainable purchasing, raising awareness, and monitoring progress). A specific *sustainability* overview and scrutiny working group was established to carry out this review. Members of the group were supported by a senior officer from the council's corporate and legal services department, and the sustainable development officer from the environment and technical services department.



The overview and scrutiny *sustainability* group received an initial presentation on sustainable development, and a brief overview of Durham county council's environmental performance to date. The group decided to send out a questionnaire to all chief officers asking what specifically each department was doing, or planning to do, under each of the ten headings of the sustainable environment policy. The results of the survey revealed some positive actions, but overall demonstrated a general lack of awareness and a lack of a co-ordinated approach (with sustainability often being seen as an optional consideration which could easily be overlooked). It was also clear that there was no adequate monitoring and reporting of performance.

In addition to the survey, the group have requested and received detailed presentations on energy management, financial issues, and the role of IT. A researcher from the University of Northumbria was commissioned to assess good practice from other local authorities. At the time of writing the review is still underway (purchasing will be the next topic to be examined in more detail).

A final report was compiled and presented to cabinet in Autumn 2002. This included a number of specific recommendations including increased training and awareness on sustainability and environmental issues, significantly increased investment in energy-efficiency measures, and a more formal system of monitoring and reporting Durham county council's environmental performance. An interim report, highlighting the issues of lack of awareness, co-ordination and monitoring has already been presented to cabinet.

The decision by the overview and scrutiny committee to review the council's sustainable environment policy has in itself raised the profile of sustainability issues within the authority. Even before the review is complete, the chief officers management team agreed a formal set of sustainable environment performance indicators which will be monitored and published annually. They have also agreed to sign up to the Nottingham declaration on climate change and the government's *Making a corporate commitment 2* initiative. The initial focus on 'internal' sustainability issues has helped to develop the members' understanding of the issue and will provide a sound basis for the overview and scrutiny committee to consider sustainability in their other reviews, and to move from a purely 'environmental' perspective to a more integrated approach.

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