

COUNCIL
16 MAY 2024

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Tree and Woodland Strategy

2. The Committee received a report which contained updates on the delivery of the strategy, the proposed actions for 2024/25 and revised approach to risk management and climate declaration.
3. We were informed that the strategy covered issues such as: How the Council manages trees that they own, how the Council protected trees on private land and laid out an action plan for the next five years
4. Some highlights of the work completed so far include the planting of 37,571 trees since 2022 and eight successful funding applications since 2021 totalling £533,975.94.
5. Members discussed how the Council managed trees on land that is not owned by them, officers explained that the landowners were responsible for the management of those trees. Tree Preservation Orders were discussed by the Committee and at what stage is planning permission required.
6. Members queried the total numbers of trees in the borough the Council is responsible for and how tree inspections can be carried out due to the vast amount.
7. Members discussed the Ash Dieback disease, if there were any issues of this in the borough and the risk assessments in place for this. Members queried the risk assessments around the root lifting in roads and if this hazard had been identified for wheelchair users.
8. We noted the content of the report and the proposed action plan for 2024/25.

CCTV Camera Replacement Programme

9. We received a report to update the Committee on the Camera Replacement Programme. The report stated that the review of the CCTV was completed in May 2021 to determine whether the public space CCTV system in Darlington was fit for purpose and met operational requirements.
10. We were informed that the review established that the newer Internet Protocol (IP) cameras installed in the town centre produced high equality images and met operational requirements, however, the images from the legacy analogue cameras were a low resolution and compared poorly to the IP Cameras.

11. The review concluded that the analogue cameras should be replaced with the new technology and a delivery programme was agreed.
12. We were reminded that Darlington Borough Council operates a Public Space CCTV system throughout the Borough which primarily supports the objectives of keeping the Borough safe. The benefits of this service include: cameras acting as a crime deterrent, providing peace of mind for residents and providing the police with information and evidence.
13. The report stated that through the Home Office Safer Streets 2 Fund, the Council was awarded £230,400 to introduce 17 additional cameras in and around Darlington Town Centre. This also included £54,510 of match funding by the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner.
14. Members discussed how the CCTV Replacement Programme had been funded and how the location of mobile CCTV cameras was decided.
15. Members wanted to understand whether facial recognition is in use in Darlington, officers advised that this is something in the future that could be looked at. Members also wanted to understand if there were any risk assessments in place if a cyber-attack was to take place.
16. We noted the contents of this report.

Private Sector Housing

17. The Committee received a report which provided the Committee with an update on the Private Sector Housing Strategy and Service Area update.
18. We were informed of the strategy's three core aims: Aim 1: Decent quality homes in the private rented sector, Aim 2: Enable growth in the private rented sector and Aim 3: Working with and supporting all residents in Darlington.
19. During the presentation we were informed that that 10.45% of households in Darlington are rented from the local authority, 5.76% are rented from a housing association and that the majority of rented homes, at 18.47%, are from the private rented sector.
20. The report outlined a service area update on the Private Sector Housing, this included the national legislative changes to management of the Private rented sector, The increased demand and duties on the service area and the number of projects which contributed towards the aims of the strategy.
21. Members questioned the process for inspections on Private Rented Properties, and how landlords respond to the inspections, we were informed that the private rented sector team are mainly a reactive service, due to limited staff numbers. Members wanted to understand how empty properties are required to allow the network to move around, and the taxation on empty properties for private landlords.
22. We noted the contents of the report.

Council Plan

23. The Committee received the draft Council Plan to consider the long-term ambitions for Darlington, as well as the priorities of the Council to deliver and the strategic direction to the Council. We were informed that the draft plan aims to give clarity to residents, businesses and stakeholders on the Council's values.
24. We were notified that the draft plan was open for consultation until the 25 April to seek views from residents, businesses, charities and other key stakeholders. Once finalised the plan will go to Cabinet and Council in May for approval and adoption.
25. We were informed of the draft Council Plan's three core values of addressing inequalities, tackling climate change and efficient and effective use of resources. We were informed of the six priorities which show equal importance: Economy, Homes, Living Well, Children and Young People, Communities and Environment.
26. Discussion took place on how the new Council Plan will feature a collaborative approach with a Cabinet Member leading each priority, core values and working with relevant portfolio leads to deliver.
27. Councillors McCollom and Dr Riley explained the priorities within the Local Services and Stronger Communities Portfolio areas.
28. Members appreciated how the cross-portfolio approach will lead to better outcomes but wanted to see more measurable targets developed. Members discussed and gave comment and raised concerns around specific parts of the plan.
29. Members wanted to know how many responses had been received from the public, officers explained there has been 199 responses yet and how this is an improvement compared to previous consultations.

Councillor James McGill
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee