

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 26 October 2023

PRESENT – Councillors McGill (Chair), Coe, Mrs Culley, Garner, M Nicholson, Snedker and Walters.

APOLOGIES – Councillors Cossins, Keir and Mahmud.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors McCollom and Dr. Riley.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson (Assistant Director Community Services), Brian Graham (Head of Environmental Services), Mike Crawshaw (Head of Heritage and Culture), Colin Dobson (Licensing Manager) and Paul Dalton (Democratic and Elections Officer).

CLS14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

CLS15 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE ORDINARY MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 24 AUGUST 2023

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 24 August 2023.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 24 August 2023 be approved as a correct record.

CLS16 TO RECEIVE THE DRAFT MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TEES VALLEY COMBINED AUTHORITY TRANSPORT COMMITTEE - TUESDAY, 7TH FEBRUARY 2023

Submitted – The Draft Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of the Tees Valley Combined Authority Transport Committee held on 7 February 2023.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes be noted

CLS17 TAXIS IN DARLINGTON

The Group Director of Services submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide Members with an update on taxi provision (including wheelchair accessible vehicles) within Darlington.

The submitted report stated that Covid had impacted on many sectors of the economy, especially the hospitality sector, upon which Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicles, drivers and operators were heavily reliant. It was reported that during the Covid pandemic taxi drivers had sought other opportunities, and that following the relaxation of Covid-19 regulations the country was faced with a shortage of professional drivers and that the taxi trade had been slow to recover.

The submitted report informed Members that the current economic situation had also

significantly increased operating costs and that the recruitment of new drivers remained extremely challenging. The submitted report outlined the background to the taxi trade in Darlington, and highlighted the current issues and measures being taken both locally and nationally to assist the taxi trade and address the problems.

Discussion ensued on the fares charged in Darlington, with Members noting that fares in Darlington were the highest in the Tees Valley, and sixth highest in the North-East, for a two-mile journey, and enquired why Darlington's fares appeared expensive. Members were keen to establish whether there would be an increase in Private Hire Licenses during the lead in to Christmas, and were informed that whilst existing drivers may do more hours, it was not anticipated that there would be an increase in applications.

Members sought more information in relation to the incentives provided to assist with the costs of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAV), and the scope for further incentivisation.

Members entered into discussion on the differences in the fares charged in relation to Private Hire Vehicles and Hackney Carriages, and requested further information as regard the number of registered taxi buses within the Darlington fleet.

Focus shifted to the measures and controls in place to ensure that drivers sanctioned in one area were prohibited from obtaining a licence in another area and the subsequent loss of local control, and the blockages which were leading to delays in the licensing of drivers, such as DBS checks and Group 2 Medicals. Discussion also took place on Uber, its operating model, and whether larger authorities could be doing more to protect workers rights and raise standards.

The Committee were also interested to know whether the incidents of drink driving had risen as a consequence of there being a lack of drivers.

RESOLVED – That the current challenges within the taxi trade be noted.

CLS18 RAIL HERITAGE QUARTER

The Head of Heritage and Culture gave a presentation which provided an update on the development of the Rail Heritage Quarter, ahead of the bicentennial celebrations in 2025.

Members received an update on the build, the operation and the brand identity for a new visitor attraction, to be known as 'Hopetown, Darlington', which included artistic impressions and photographs of work in progress of the Goods Shed 1833, a Site Overview, the North Road Platform, the Exhibition Hall, the Locomotive Works, the 1861 Shed and the Wagon Works Play Park. Members were also provided details of the signature piece – a time travel simulator, a hydraulic ride which would provide a nine-minute shared experience detailing how Darlington had changed the World.

The Committee also received information as regard the brand identity, which included the key themes, the consultation which had taken place, the objectives in relation to the name of the attraction, and the reasoning for the typography and colour palette. Members were advised that the new visitor attraction would be opening in mid-Summer 2024.

Members raised concerns in relation to the arrangements for car parking and accessing the site, however received assurances that the car parking and traffic management arrangements would be in place in time for the site opening.

Disappointment was expressed that the details presented to Committee were not circulated with the Agenda for the meeting, however Officers advised that the details had been embargoed until the day of the meeting, and that publicity around the new visitor attraction, which included the name and branding for the attraction, was being publicly released alongside the meeting that morning.

Members were keen to understand how the attraction would seek to satisfy a wide range of people, and maintain longevity, and Members were pleased to hear that there was an extensive forward plan, which included strands focused on education and a continued renewal of assets.

Discussion ensued on other events taking place in Shildon and Stockton to mark the bicentennial, and Members sought assurances that events within the delivery programme would not clash.

RESOLVED – That the content of the presentation be noted.

CLS19 LIBRARY PLAN AND UPDATE

The Head of Heritage and Culture delivered a presentation which provided Members with an update on the Library Plan, which gave specific focus to the newly-restored and refurbished Crown Street Library, which had re-opened on Saturday, 9 September 2023.

Members viewed before and after photographs of the Adults Lending Library, the Children's Library, the Reference Library (now re-branded as The Study), the eLibrary (now known as The Hive), the Centre for Local Studies, the Foyer, the office space and reading room (now known as The Reminiscence Room), and the training room (now re-branded as The Hoskins Room). Members were also informed of the visitor numbers for the initial week of re-opening, and the Key Performance Indicators by which performance would be measured.

The objectives of the Library Plan were outlined for Members, together with the new School Packages for 2023 and actions being undertaken to reduce the equalities divide.

Members were keen to establish the length of the Library Plan and received further information on initiatives to promote reading, and were interested as to how visitor numbers were recorded, and how this compared to the projections for re-opening.

RESOLVED – That the contents of the presentation be noted.

CLS20 WORK PROGRAMME

The Assistant Director, Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme and to consider any additional areas which Members would like to suggest be included in the previously approved Work Programme.

Members noted the deferral of the item 'Heritage Action Zone' to the meeting on 11 January 2024, and the inclusion of the 'Medium Term Financial Plan' on the same date.

Clarification was sought in relation to elements of the Waste Management contract (of which an update was to be received on 11 January 2024), and aspects of the 'Tree and Woodland Strategy 2021-2031' (an update to be received on 18 April 2024). It was also noted that there were still items on the Work Programme which had not been scheduled as yet.

RESOLVED – That the Work Programme be updated to reflect discussions.