



**DARLINGTON**  
Borough Council

# Council Agenda

6.00 pm, Thursday, 27 March 2025

Central Hall, Dolphin Centre, Horsemarket, Darlington, DL1 5RP

**Members of the Public are welcome to attend this Meeting.**

1. Introductions / Attendance at Meeting.
2. Minutes - To approve the Minutes of the Meetings of this Council held on 30 January 2025 and 20 February 2025 (Pages 5 - 18)
3. Declarations of Interest.
4. Sealing.
5. Announcements.
6. Questions - To answer questions (where appropriate notice has been given from):-
  - (a) The Public; (Pages 19 - 24)
  - (b) Members to Cabinet/Chairs;
7. Council Reports.
8. Cabinet Reports.
  - (a) Overview Report of the Leader of the Council; (Pages 25 - 30)
  - (b) Overview Report of the Economy Portfolio; (Pages 31 - 36)

- (c) Overview Report of the Adults Portfolio; (Pages 37 - 40)
  - (d) Overview Report of the Children and Young People Portfolio; (Pages 41 - 50)
  - (e) Overview Report of the Health and Housing Portfolio; (Pages 51 - 56)
  - (f) Overview Report of the Local Services Portfolio; (Pages 57 - 62)
  - (g) Overview Report of the Resources Portfolio; and (Pages 63 - 66)
  - (h) Overview Report of the Stronger Communities Portfolio; (Pages 67 - 72)
9. Scrutiny Reports - To consider Scrutiny Overview Reports:-
- (a) Adults Scrutiny Committee; (Pages 73 - 76)
  - (b) Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee; (Pages 77 - 82)
  - (c) Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee; (Pages 83 - 84)
  - (d) Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee; and (Pages 85 - 90)
  - (e) Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee. (Pages 91 - 94)
10. Membership Changes - To consider any membership changes to Committees, Subsidiary Bodies and Other Bodies.



**Luke Swinhoe**  
**Assistant Director, Law and Governance**

**Wednesday, 19 March 2025**

**Town Hall**  
**Darlington.**

**Membership**

The Mayor, Councillors Ali, Allen, Anderson, Baker, Barch, Beckett, Coe, Cossins, Crudass, Crumbie, Mrs Culley, Curry, Dillon, Dulston, Durham, Garner, Harker, Haszeldine, Henderson, Holroyd, Johnson, Kane, Keir, Laing, Lawley, Layton, Lee, Mahmud, Mammolotti, Marshall, McCollom, McEwan, McGill, K Nicholson, M Nicholson, Pease, Porter, Ray, Renton, Dr. Riley, Robinson, Roche, Mrs Scott, Snedker, Storr, Toms, Tostevin, Wallis and Walters.

If you need this information in a different language or format or you have any other queries on this agenda please contact Paul Dalton, Democratic and Elections Officer, Resources and Governance Group, during normal office hours 8.30 a.m. to 4.45 p.m. Mondays to Thursdays and 8.30 a.m. to 4.15 p.m. Fridays Email: [paul.dalton@darlington.gov.uk](mailto:paul.dalton@darlington.gov.uk) or Telephone 01325 405805

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## COUNCIL

Thursday, 30 January 2025

**PRESENT** – The Mayor, Councillors Allen, Anderson, Baker, Bartch, Beckett, Coe, Cossins, Crumbie, Mrs Culley, Curry, Dillon, Dulston, Durham, Garner, Harker, Henderson, Holroyd, Johnson, Kane, Keir, Laing, Lawley, Layton, Lee, Mahmud, Mammolotti, Marshall, McCollom, McEwan, McGill, K Nicholson, Pease, Porter, Renton, Dr. Riley, Robinson, Roche, Snedker, Storr, Toms, Tostevin and Walters.

**APOLOGIES** – Councillors Ali, Crudass, Haszeldine, M Nicholson, Ray, Mrs Scott and Wallis.

**46 MINUTES - TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF THIS COUNCIL HELD ON 28 NOVEMBER 2024 AND 19 DECEMBER 2024**

**Submitted** – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meetings of this Council held on 28 November 2024 and 19 December 2024.

**RESOLVED** – That the Minutes of the meetings of this Council held on 28 November 2024 and 19 December 2024, be approved as correct records.

**47 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.**

Councillor Robinson declared a Pecuniary interest in Minute 54 (a) below, in accordance with Section 106 of the Local Government and Finance Act 1992, and took no part in the discussion or vote thereon.

**48 SEALING.**

**Presented** – The Register showing the documents which had been sealed since the last meeting of Council.

**49 ANNOUNCEMENTS.**

**Death of the Deputy Lord-Lieutenant of County Durham, Alasdair MacConnachie** – The Mayor announced the death of the Deputy Lord-Lieutenant of County Durham, Alasdair MacConnachie, who had passed away on 25<sup>th</sup> December 2024. The Mayor referred to Mr. MacConnachie's years of service as Vice Lord-Lieutenant of County Durham, Deputy Lord-Lieutenant of County Durham and High Sheriff of Durham, and noted that Mr. MacConnachie had been awarded the Freedom of the Borough of Darlington in 2012.

**Death of the ex-Lord Lieutenant of County Durham, Sir Paul Nicholson** - The Mayor announced the death of the ex-Lord Lieutenant of County Durham, Sir Paul Nicholson, who had passed away on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2025. The Mayor referred to Sir Paul's years of service, noting that he was knighted in 1993 for services to industry and the public in the North-East, and that he had served as Lord Lieutenant of County Durham between 1997 and 2013.

Members stood and observed a short silence in respect of these individuals who had contributed and demonstrated such a commitment to the Borough.

**King's New Year's Honours 2025** – The Mayor advised Members that awards were conferred on two individuals who resided or worked in Darlington. Members were informed that John Arthur Evans, Executive Chair of Beanies the Flavour Company, based in Darlington, had been awarded with the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) for services to Entrepreneurship, and that Calvin Kipling, Head of the Virtual School, Darlington Borough Council, had been awarded the Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) for services to Education.

**RESOLVED** – That the congratulations of the Council be conveyed to those who received awards.

**Holocaust Memorial Day 2025** - The Mayor acknowledged Holocaust Memorial Day, which had taken place on Monday, 27th January 2025, and marked the 80th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the genocide in Bosnia.

Members stood and observed a short silence to remember those murdered and reflect on the atrocities of genocide.

**50 QUESTIONS - TO ANSWER QUESTIONS (WHERE APPROPRIATE NOTICE HAS BEEN GIVEN FROM):-**

**51 THE PUBLIC;**

There were seven questions, received with notice, from Members of the Public. Five Members of the Public attended the meeting to ask their question in person, and each received an answer thereon.

The Mayor requested that a written response be provided to those Members of the Public who did not attend to ask their question in person.

**52 MEMBERS TO CABINET/CHAIRS;**

There were no questions from Members, where notice had been given, for the Mayor, Members of the Cabinet, or the Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees.

**53 COUNCIL REPORTS.**

There were no reports to be decided by Council, which had not been considered by Cabinet.

**54 CABINET REPORTS.**

**(1) COUNCIL TAX CALCULATION OF TAX BASE 2025/26**

The Executive Director of Resources and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) to determine the Council's tax base for 2025/26.

The submitted report stated that, in accordance with Section 33 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 2012, the Council had to decide its tax base by 31 January in the year preceding that for

which the tax base applies.

**RESOLVED** - (a) That the report for the calculation of the Council's tax base for the year 2025/26, be approved.

(b) That the tax base for the Council of 35,904.5 and the individual tax base for the parishes, as set out at Appendix 2 of the submitted report, be approved.

**REASON** - The recommendations are supported to comply with statutory requirements, enabling the Council Tax for 2025/26 to be set by Council in February 2025.

## **(2) CLIMATE CHANGE PROGRESS**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (previously circulated) to update Council on progress towards the Council's net zero target.

The submitted report stated that the Darlington Eco Fair was held in June 2024, with more than 5000 attending the marquee, and that a Climate Change Seminar for Members had been held on 19 September 2024. It was reported that the Highways Asset Management Team annual maintenance programme for 2023/24 had demonstrated a total reduction of over 348 tonnes in CO2 emissions.

The submitted report highlighted that the Sustainability and Climate Change Officer had submitted the Council's report to DEFRA as part of a trial project for local authorities to report to the Secretary of State under the Climate Change Act's Adaption Reporting Power. Progress on actions had been reviewed and some of the delivery dates of actions had been amended to allow resources (staff and financial) to be managed.

It was reported that the Housing Service was bidding for Wave Three of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund through the Tees Valley Combined Authority, and it was stated that should the bid be successful, Wave Three would see a further 1600 of the Council's homes below EPC C by 2028.

Members were informed that the Head of Environmental Services and the Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer had worked together to commission a piece of work to calculate the carbon sequestration potential of Council land, and that the Council were the first local authority in the UK to do this work in this way. It was reported that the report had been received and demonstrated a positive result.

**RESOLVED** – That the content of the report be acknowledged.

**REASON** – Due to the increasing public pressure to act on climate change, the Council runs the risk of significant damage to its reputation if it does not deliver on its stated commitment to dealing with the Council's contribution to climate change.

## **(3) MID YEAR PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS AND TREASURY MANAGEMENT MONITORING REPORT 2024/25**

The Executive Director of Resources and Governance submitted a report (previously

circulated) which sought approval of the revised Treasury Management Strategy, Prudential Indicators and to provide a mid-yearly review of the Council's borrowing and investment activities.

The submitted report stated that the mandatory Prudential Code, which governs Council borrowing, required Council approval of controls, called Prudential Indicators, relating to capital spending and borrowing. It was reported that the Prudential Indicators were set in three statutory annual reports to Council, and the submitted report followed the Council's approval in February 2024 of the 2024/25 Prudential Indicators and Treasury Management Strategy.

The submitted report highlighted that the key objectives of the three annual reports were to ensure that governance of the large amounts of public money under the Council's Treasury Management activities complied with legislation and met the high standards set out in the codes of practice, to ensure that borrowing was affordable, and to report performance of the key activities of borrowing and investments.

The submitted report also outlined revisions to the Prudential Indicators in terms of a reduction to Operational Boundary to £179.323M, and the Authorised Limit to £259.628M to allow for any additional cashflow requirement.

**RESOLVED** - (a) That the revised Prudential Indicators and limits in Tables 1 to 6, 8, 10 and 12 to 17 of the submitted report be examined.

(b) That the Treasury Management Budget (Financing Costs) projected outturn, shown in Table 11, be noted.

(c) That the updated Prudential Indicators be approved.

**REASONS** - (a) In order to comply with the Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities;

(b) To inform Members of the performance of the Treasury Management function;

(c) To comply with the Local Government Act 2003;

(d) To enable further improvements to be made in the Council's Treasury Management function.

#### **(4) CABINET REPORTS**

The Cabinet Members each gave a report (previously circulated) on the main areas of work undertaken under their relevant portfolio during the previous cycle of meetings. Cabinet Members answered questions on their portfolios.

#### **55 SCRUTINY REPORTS - TO CONSIDER SCRUTINY OVERVIEW REPORTS:-**

The Scrutiny Committee Chairs each submitted a report (previously circulated) on the main areas of work undertaken by their relevant Scrutiny Committee during the last cycle of



Committee meetings, and responded to any questions thereon.

**56 MEMBERSHIP CHANGES - TO CONSIDER ANY MEMBERSHIP CHANGES TO COMMITTEES, SUBSIDIARY BODIES AND OTHER BODIES.**

Consideration was given to membership changes of the Committees, Subsidiary Bodies and Other Bodies for the remainder of the Municipal Year 2024/25 that:

- (a) That Councillor Beckett replace Councillor Garner on the Audit Committee.

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## COUNCIL

Thursday, 20 February 2025

**PRESENT** – The Mayor, Councillors Ali, Allen, Anderson, Baker, Bartch, Beckett, Coe, Cossins, Crudass, Crumbie, Mrs Culley, Curry, Dillon, Dulston, Durham, Garner, Harker, Henderson, Holroyd, Johnson, Kane, Keir, Laing, Layton, Lee, Mahmud, Mammolotti, Marshall, McCollom, McEwan, McGill, K Nicholson, M Nicholson, Pease, Porter, Ray, Renton, Dr. Riley, Roche, Mrs Scott, Snedker, Storr, Toms, Tostevin, Wallis and Walters.

**APOLOGIES** – Councillors Haszeldine, Lawley and Robinson.

### 57 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.**

Councillors Cossins and M. Nicholson each declared an interest in Minute 63, below, as tenants of the Council.

### 58 **ANNOUNCEMENTS.**

**Death of former-Councillor Lynne Haszeldine** – The Mayor announced the death of former-Councillor Lynne Haszeldine, and made reference to former-Councillor Haszeldine's years of service on the Council.

Members stood and observed a short silence in respect of their former colleague.

**Retirement of the Chief Executive and the Assistant Director, Law and Governance** - The Mayor announced that this was the last meeting of the Council that both the Chief Executive and the Assistant Director, Law and Governance, would be attending prior to their retirements. The Mayor extended the thanks of the Council to both for their long-standing service and support to the Council.

### 59 **QUESTIONS - TO ANSWER QUESTIONS (WHERE APPROPRIATE NOTICE HAS BEEN GIVEN FROM):-**

#### (1) **THE PUBLIC;**

There were three questions, received with notice, from Members of the Public. Two Members of the Public attended the meeting to ask their question in person, and each received an answer thereon.

The Mayor requested that a written response be provided to the Member of the Public who did not attend to ask their question in person.

#### (2) **MEMBERS TO CABINET/CHAIRS;**

There were no questions from Members, where notice had been given, for the Mayor, Members of the Cabinet, or the Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees.

### 60 **MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP)**

The Chief Officers Executive submitted a report (previously circulated) to seek approval for a Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2025/26 to 2028/29, including setting a budget and Council Tax increase for 2025/26, and also the approval of a 2025/26 to 2028/29 Capital Programme.

The submitted report highlighted that the Council continued to face significant and unparalleled financial challenges which stemmed from reductions in public spending between 2010 and 2019 where the Council's budget was reduced by £46m in real terms, a 36% reduction in budget. This financial position had been further compounded in the aftermath of covid and an unstable economic climate, which had seen the cost of living is increasing, high inflation, income deprivation and poverty rising.

The submitted report stated that the Council had previously met the challenges faced head on through value for money service delivery, shared services, economic growth, and strong financial management and had utilised built up reserves to continue to provide vital services for the residents of Darlington, however it was noted that significant additional demand for services was putting unprecedented pressure on affordability and despite additional savings achieved the Council's reserves would be fully depleted by the end of 2027/28.

It was reported that the provisional Local Government Finance Settlement was published on 18 December 2024, and confirmed funding for one year only, along with the Council Tax referendum limits of 3% Council Tax and 2% for Social Care precept. It was noted that the provisional settlement was positive and provided additional grant funding for Darlington, along with an extension on the New Homes Bonus for an additional year, however, it was anticipated the increase in employers National Insurance contributions announced in the budget will fall short of the resource being made available by £0.670m which was an additional MTFP pressure and furthermore the increase in CPI directly impacted on our social care contracts and had reduced the benefit of additional grant funding.

The submitted report stated that future years funding had not been confirmed and that the consequence of this was that the 2025/26 – 2028/29 MTFP had an eye to future years but did not seek to presume what the future would look like, and aimed to ensure that the Council could set a legal budget in 2025/26 and continue to provide our core offer level of services to the residents of Darlington.

The following Amendment was moved by Councillor Toms and seconded by Councillor Dulston:

'Make necessary adjustments to the MTFP to continue necessary resource to the Stronger Communities Fund.

In Appendix 6, page 73, 'Medium Term Financial Plan 2025 to 2029' in the box 'Balances' insert a line 'Transfer to Stronger Communities Fund (0.050)' for the financial year 2025/26 and make all necessary adjustments to the relevant calculations.'

In accordance with the requirements of the Budget and Policy Framework Rules a vote on the Amendment was taken of those Members present at the meeting and there appeared:-

**For the Amendment** – The Mayor; Councillors Bartch, Crudass, Mrs. Culley, Dulston, Durham,

Henderson, Holroyd, Keir, Laing, Lee, Mammolotti, Marshall, K. Nicholson, Pease, Renton, Mrs. Scott, Snedker, Toms, Tostevin and Walters (21)

**Against the Amendment** – Councillors Ali, Anderson, Baker, Beckett, Coe, Cossins, Crumbie, Curry, Dillon, Garner, Harker, Johnson, Kane, Layton, Mahmud, McCollom, McEwan, McGill, M. Nicholson, Porter, Ray, Dr. Riley, Roche, Storr and Wallis (25)

**Abstentions** – Councillor Allen (1)

Amendment Lost.

The Substantive Motion was then put to the meeting. In accordance with the requirements of the Budget and Policy Framework Rules a vote on the recommendation was taken of those Members present at the meeting and there appeared:-

**For the Motion** – Councillors Ali, Allen, Anderson, Baker, Beckett, Coe, Cossins, Crumbie, Curry, Dillon, Garner, Harker, Henderson, Johnson, Kane, Layton, Mahmud, Mammolotti, McCollom, McEwan, McGill, M. Nicholson, Porter, Ray, Dr. Riley, Roche, Snedker, Storr, Toms and Wallis (30)

**Against the Motion** – The Mayor, Councillors Bartch, Crudass, Mrs. Culley, Dulston, Durham, Keir, Laing, Marshall, K. Nicholson, Pease, Renton, Mrs. Scott, Tostevin and Walters (15)

**Abstentions** – Councillor Holroyd (1)

(**Note:** Councillor Lee was not present at the meeting at the time that the vote was taken).

Motion Carried.

**RESOLVED** – That:

- (a) the response and comments received to the consultation be noted.
- (b) the Revenue MTFP as set out in Appendix 6 and the Capital programme as set out in Appendix 7, including the following, be approved:
  - (i) A Council Tax increase of 2.99% plus a 2% Adult Social Care Precept to help fund social care for 2025/26.
  - (ii) The Schedule of Charges as set out in Appendix 3.
  - (iii) The efficiency savings, transformation and services reviewed proposed.
- (c) a delegation for Cabinet to vary the Revenue Budget for 2025/26 by up to £0.5m without further Council approval, be approved.
- (d) a delegation for Cabinet to vary the Capital Budget for 2025/26 by up to £0.5m without further Council approval, be approved.

**REASONS** - The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:

- (a) The Council must set a budget for the next financial year.
- (b) To enable the Council to continue to plan services and finances over the medium term.
- (c) To ensure decisions can be made in a timely manner.
- (d) To reduce the pressures on the MTFP in the medium term.
- (e) To ensure investment in our assets is maintained.

## **6 SETTING THE COUNCIL TAX FOR 2025/26**

**1**

The Executive Director of Resources and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to setting this Council's Council Tax for 2025/2026, which was required to be set before 11th March 2025.

In accordance with the requirements of the Budget and Policy Framework Rules a vote on the recommendation was taken of those Members present at the meeting and there appeared:-

**For the Motion** – Councillors Ali, Allen, Anderson, Baker, Beckett, Coe, Cossins, Crumbie, Curry, Dillon, Garner, Harker, Henderson, Holroyd, Johnson, Kane, Layton, Mahmud, McCollom, McEwan, McGill, M. Nicholson, Porter, Ray, Dr. Riley, Roche, Snedker, Storr, Toms and Wallis (30)

**Against the Motion** – The Mayor, Councillors Bartch, Crudass, Mrs. Culley, Dulston, Durham, Keir, Laing, Marshall, K. Nicholson, Mrs. Scott, Tostevin and Walters (13)

**Abstentions** - None (0)

(**Note:** Councillors Lee, Mammolotti, Pease and Renton were not present at the meeting at the time the vote was taken.)

Motion Carried.

**RESOLVED** – That:

- (a) the following amounts be calculated by the Council for 2025/26 in accordance with sections 31 to 36 of the Act and relevant regulations:-
  - (i) the aggregate of the amount which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish Councils, which is its expenditure £280,308,728
  - (ii) the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) of the Act, which is its income £209,712,000

- (iii) the amount by which (i) exceeds (ii) calculated by the Council for the year in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act as its Council Tax Requirement £70,596,728
- (iv) The amount at item 5(iii) above, divided by the Council Tax base in paragraph 13 below, calculated by the Council in accordance with Section 31B of the Act as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year (including Parish Precepts) £1,966.23
- (v) the aggregate of all special items (Parish Precepts) referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act as in **Appendix 1** of the submitted report £255,728
- (vi) the amount at 5(iv) above less the result given by dividing the amount at 5(v) above by the amount at paragraph 13 below, calculated by the Council in accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no Parish Precept relates £1,959.11
- (vii) That the basic Council Tax for 2025/26 calculated for dwellings in those areas that have parish precepts be as set out in **Appendix 1**, column 5, of the submitted report
- (viii) That the Council, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Act, hereby sets the aggregate amounts shown in **Appendix 2** of the submitted report as the amount of Council Tax for 2025/26 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings

- (b) It be noted that for the year 2025/26 The Office of the Durham Police, Crime and Victims' Commissioner has stated the following amounts in the precept issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Act, for each of the categories of dwellings shown : -

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p
Police Authority	188.16	219.52	250.88	282.24	344.96	407.68	470.40	564.48

- (c) It be noted that for the year 2025/26 County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service has stated the following amounts in the precept issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Act, for each of the categories of dwellings shown: -

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p	£ p
Fire Authority	82.08	95.76	109.44	123.12	150.48	177.84	205.20	246.24

- (d) The Council, in accordance with Section 30(2) of the Act hereby sets the amounts set out

in **Appendix 3** of the submitted report as the amounts of Council Tax for 2025/26 for each of the categories of dwellings.

**REASON** - To set the Council Tax for the Council's area in accordance with statutory requirements.

## **62 DARLINGTON CAPITAL STRATEGY 2025/26**

The Executive Director of Resources and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to the Council's Capital Strategy for 2025/26.

The submitted report stated that the revised Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities 2024 required every Council to publish a Capital Strategy and review it on an annual basis. It was reported that the revised Code emphasised the need to ensure capital expenditure was prudent, proportional, affordable and sustainable, and that greater emphasis was placed on the long-term implications of capital expenditure on the revenue budget and the delivery of the Council's policy objectives.

The submitted report stated that the Strategy provided an overview of how capital expenditure and financing plans are decided upon, and provided a framework for the development, management and monitoring of the Council's capital investment plans. The Strategy also highlighted the resource streams available in terms of funding to the Council and the risk management approach taken.

The submitted report highlighted that the Strategy maintained a strong and current link to the Council's priorities and to its key strategy documents such as the Treasury Management Strategy, Medium Term Financial Plan and the Council Plan.

**RESOLVED** – That the Capital Strategy for 2025/26, as appended at Appendix 1 of the submitted report, be approved.

**REASONS** - (a) To provide a framework for capital investments.

(b) To ensure the Council adopts the Prudential Code for Capital Finance 2024.

(c) To enable the Council to invest in its assets.

## **63 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT - MTFP 2025-26 TO 2028-29**

The Executive Director of Resources and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to proposals for the revenue budget, capital programme, rent levels and service charges for the Council's Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the financial year 2025/26, in the context of the HRA Medium Term Financial Plan to 2028/29, and the 30 year Business Plan, following consultation with Council tenants.

The submitted report stated that the Council was the largest provider of social housing in the Borough, providing 5,260 homes to local residents, and outlined the ambitious programme to build new Council houses in Darlington. It was reported that the new build Council housing



programme was funded through capital receipts from right to buy sales, grant funding from Homes England and through estimated borrowing of £13.8m.

The submitted report set out the key decisions for the HRA for 2025-26, which included proposed revenue expenditure of £30.186m, and a proposed capital programme of £30.092m.

It was stated that Councils had the discretion to increase rents each year by the Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1%, which means for 2025-26 Members had the option to increase rents by up to 2.7%. Members were reminded that at 6.7% rent increase was agreed in February 2024 for the current financial year, and although rents could have been increased by 7.7%, the 6.7% increase was in recognition of the ongoing economic pressures facing tenants.

Taking into account the current economic pressures facing tenants and balancing this with the increased costs of maintaining and improving our housing and the need to deliver the Council's ambitious capital and energy efficiency programmes, it was determined that an increase of 2.7% was to be recommended, or an average of £2.81 each week. It was also recommended to increase service charges by an appropriate inflationary amount.

**RESOLVED** - (a) That an average weekly rent increase of 2.7% for 2025-26 be implemented giving an average social rent of £86.15 and affordable rent of £97.55.

(b) That garage rents and service charges are increased, as shown in Table 3 of the submitted report.

(c) That the revenue budget, at Appendix 1 of the submitted report, be approved.

(d) That the Housing Business Plan at Appendix 2 of the submitted report, be agreed.

(e) That the Capital programme at Appendix 3 of the submitted report, be approved.

**REASON** - To enable the Council to deliver an appropriate level of services to tenants to meet housing need and to support the economic growth of the Borough through housing development.

## **64 PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS AND TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY REPORT 2025/26**

The Executive Director of Resources and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) which requested that Council adopt the Prudential Indicators and Limits for 2025/26 to 2027/28 relating to capital expenditure and Treasury Management activity, a policy statement relating to the Minimum Revenue Provision, and the Treasury Management Strategy 2025/26, which includes the Annual Investment Strategy for 2025/26.

The submitted report outlined the Council's Prudential Indicators for 2025/26 – 2027/28, and set out the expected treasury operations for this period. It was stated that the report fulfilled key legislative and guidance requirements.

The information contained within the submitted report regarding the Council's expenditure

plans, treasury management and prudential borrowing activities indicated that they were within the statutory framework and consistent with the relevant codes of practice, prudent, affordable and sustainable, and an integral part of the Council's Revenue and Capital Medium Term Financial Plans.

**RESOLVED** - (a) That the Prudential Indicators and limits for 2025/26 to 2027/28, as summarised in Tables 1 and 2 of the submitted report, be approved.

(b) That the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) statement (paragraphs 39-48 of the submitted report) be approved.

(c) That the Treasury Management Strategy 2025/26 to 2027/28, as summarised in paragraphs 52 to 82 of the submitted report, be approved.

(d) That the Annual Investment Strategy 2025/26, as contained in paragraphs 83 to 114 of the submitted report, be approved.

**REASONS** - (a) In order to comply with the Prudential Code for Capital Finance in Local Authorities and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) guidance on investments.

(b) To comply with the requirements of the Local Government Act 2003.

(c) To approve a framework for officers to work within when making investment decisions.

## **65 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2025/26**

The Executive Director of Resources and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting approval of the Pay Policy Statement for the financial year 2025/2026 in line with the requirements of the Localism Act 2011 and Local Government Transparency Code 2014.

The submitted report stated that the Localism Act 2011 required the Council to agree a written Pay Policy on an annual basis and publish specific information relating to the Council's highest and lowest paid employees.

**RESOLVED** – That the proposed Pay Policy 2025/26, as detailed at Appendix A of the submitted report, be approved, and arrangements be made to publish the Policy on the Council's internet for public access.

**REASON** – To enable the Council to comply with the requirements of the Localism Act 2011.

**Questions submitted on Notice for the Ordinary Meeting of the Council – Thursday, 27 March 2025**

(Please note that the questions outlined below are reproduced as they have been submitted by those individuals or groups seeking to ask a question, and do not reflect the views or opinions of the Council)

Question No.	Question received from	Respondent	Question
1.	Kevin BRACK	Councillor HARKER	"The People of Darlington Borough Council Deserves better, we had Labour wanting to close the library and then the Tories with the Darlington plan which they were going to change when they got into power, which they never did. Sheffield City Council and Folkestone & Hythe District Council have moved away from leader and cabinet system to that of committee stye governance, considering the recent discussions around improving the effectiveness and inclusivity of our local governance, would you support a motion to transition Darlington Borough Council from the current leader and cabinet model to a committee style of governance? This change aims to enhance participation from all councillors, increase transparency and accountability, and ensure better representation of our community's interests. Given the potential benefits for democracy within our council, how do you view this proposal, and what steps would you recommend to explore or implement this governance reform?"
2.	Michael WALKER	Councillor HARKER	At a previous council meeting, a resident shouted from the audience their desperate concern over people freezing in their homes due to the disastrous policies of the Labour Party. Instead of showing compassion, Cllr McEwan asked if the member of the public, a person who pays for your allowances, could be removed from the room. The current code of conduct states that councillors should treat all persons with respect and that public resources are used prudently in accordance with the local authority's requirements and in the public interest. Please explain to me what initiatives you have put in place to ensure councillors follow the code of conduct.
3.	Miriam McGEARY	Councillor WALLIS	"Why are systemic failure, malpractice and social injustice covered up as routine practice. Why is faulty and outdated oversight still operational in today's modern society?"
4.	Leigh TAYLOR	Councillor	Cllr McCollom, in September 2024 my question to you regarding events and safeguarding was disallowed.

McCOLLUM

When I raised similar issues in November, you refused to answer my second question orally (in red below). You replied: 'Mrs Taylor I will get back to you with a written response. At the moment I feel unable to answer your question fully because of your equivocation of sexual offences and Pride, an LGBTQ+ celebration, I find personally very offensive.'" Despite three polite requests, from me and then Mr Swinhoe, you still have not responded.

In the intervening period we have seen:

- the Church of England set up a series of new safeguarding measures
- the Government state its commitment to fully implement the reforms outlined in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse report (2022) with a specific emphasis on multi-agency working and
- Hazell Dean, Patron of Pride in Surrey, issue a statement about the convictions of Stephen Ireland and David Sutton: "These individuals "hid in plain sight" using charities, businesses, organisations and Pride as a distraction from their disgusting activities."

Countless inquiries and reports into child sex abuse have pointed to lost opportunities to act on whistleblowers reports and to stop abuse with many citing reasons such as political correctness, identity sensitivities and not wanting to 'rock the establishment boat'. Being offended won't safeguard children from paedophiles. Safeguarding policies and procedures are supposed to deal with the few in order to protect the many.

It may be that you have forgotten to reply.

**What assurances can you give residents that the council's Events Management Team employ active measures to prevent abusers, and suspected abusers, from being involved in any Darlington events, and having access to children and vulnerable adults, and how confident are you on a scale of 1-10 that they are sufficient?**

[Pride in Surrey - Statement from Pride in Surrey. In... | Facebook](#)

In November

Q2. Everyone knows of at least a handful of ‘safeguarding scandals’ that institutions have attempted to ignore. Concerns raised to clarify what procedures and processes are in place are often shut down by accusations of offence and hate.

Several Pride events have recently become safeguarding concerns with obvious red flags ignored. The following examples highlight that concerns are not hypothetical or exaggerated but rooted in evidence. And indicate lessons aren't being learned, and safeguarding procedures and requirements may be overlooked in relation to Pride events.

Lee Clarke was jailed for 15 months in Australia in 2014 for the possession of indecent images of children, yet in 2018 he was allowed to become the acting chairman of Swindon and Wiltshire Pride. [1]

Andrew Way’s registered sex offender status was not a bar to his organising what would have been the first Welshpool Pride. It wasn't until he was charged, and then convicted, for further child sex offences that this came to light, and the Pride 2023 event was cancelled. [2]

Earlier this year, Surrey Police arrested Stephen Ireland and David Sutton. They were subsequently charged & remanded in custody (September 2024) for 37 counts of sexual abuse against children, including rape and kidnapping of children under 13. All the offences are alleged to have occurred between August 2022 and July 2024 which is also whilst they were a director of Pride in Surrey (Ireland) and a volunteer (Sutton). Ireland was also an active patron of the now closed Educate and Celebrate charity – an organisation promoted by ex-Darlington Mayor Cllr Cindy Hughes to resource Darlington schools. Surrey Police and Stephen Ireland visited schools together to take part in what they referred to as “Pride engagement work”. [3]

Cllr McCollom, I would hope that, unlike the Church of England, DBC could not be accused of a lack of curiosity. What assurances can you give to residents that the Council’s Events Management Team employ active measures to prevent abusers, and suspected abusers, from being involved in any similar Darlington events, and from having access to children and vulnerable adults?

Notes:

[1] <https://www.swindonadvertiser.co.uk/news/18482410.swindon-wiltshire-pride-responds-reports-convicted-paedophile-helm-2018/>

			<p>[2] <a href="https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/tv-drag-queen-miss-gin-27588086">https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/tv-drag-queen-miss-gin-27588086</a></p> <p>[3] <a href="https://www.surrey.police.uk/news/surrey/news/2024/08/two-men-charged-with-child-sex-offences/">https://www.surrey.police.uk/news/surrey/news/2024/08/two-men-charged-with-child-sex-offences/</a>  <a href="https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/17/lgbt-pride-surrey-ireland-sutton-charity-children-sex-abuse/">https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/17/lgbt-pride-surrey-ireland-sutton-charity-children-sex-abuse/</a>                      Archived version <a href="https://archive.ph/0Ag2t">https://archive.ph/0Ag2t</a></p>
5.	Kevin GRAINGER	Councillor McCOLLOM	"Will the Councillor assure me the increase on Council tax will be spent on services".
6.	Ren BELL	Councillor GARNER	<p>"This month the ██████ charity Sex Matters got involved in the Melanie Newman vs Met Police case, managing to get the rule 49 anonymity request removed, opening the door to potentially reveal the identities of a number of trans employees and pro trans allies within the met police should this tactic be repeated.</p> <p>This is a direct response to the tactics used in the Bethany Hutchinson vs Darlington NHS Trust case, where the trans woman in question had her anonymity request turned down.</p> <p>In a political climate where hate crimes against trans people are raising at an astonishing rate, and our community faces near constant harassment online and in person, these anonymity requests allow us access to the legal systems without fear of repercussion. This new tactic is designed to intimidate trans people away from accessing legal systems for fear of their safety.</p> <p>What does this council intend to do to ensure marginalised people have full and equal access to the legal systems in place to protect them, and how do they intend to protect them going forward when the courts fail to do so?"</p>
7.	Skerningham Woodland Action Group	Councillor McEWAN	Many of our members have witnessed the felling of numerous trees and the extensive excavation of vegetation along the banks of the River Skerne at Burdon Gardens, located off Bishopton Lane. This area is where a proposed Temporary Skerningham garden village phase 1 construction traffic haul will cross the river.

			<p>When we informed the council about this incident before a planning application was submitted, we were informed that it was merely routine farmland maintenance carried out by the new landowner, (the Skerningham developer).</p> <p>At one point, a large digger slipped or entered the Skerne, necessitating the call for another large piece of machinery to dig the riverbank and extract the digger. This area is situated in a flood zone 3, and removing trees, vegetation, and damaging the riverbanks will not mitigate the flooding risks in that area.</p> <p>Our question is, given the actions we have witnessed at Burdon Gardens by the Skerningham developer is this a taste of future developments before or after the garden village planning applications have been determined by the council's planning committee? Or, can you and planning officers assure us that the council will effectively manage this developer, who do not have a good track record when it comes to environmental issues on land they develop.</p>
8.	Peter PLANT	Councillor McEWAN	<p>"I would like to ask about what is happening at Skerningham. It appears that work is being carried out to clear (living, not dead as has been implied) trees along a potential route of the haul road between Bishopton and Barmpton Lanes, despite no planning permission being granted for this. The Council were made aware of this, and investigated, but now describe it as 'routine land maintenance work' which does not require planning permission, when it clearly is not. People don't pre-emptively clear the route of a road for 'routine maintenance' reasons. Who is making this decision not to challenge the landowners on this, and why?"</p>

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**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW**

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**Purpose of the Report**

1. To inform and update Members on the Leader's Portfolio since the last meeting of Council. The following are some of the areas of work under the Leader's Portfolio.

**Strategic Transport**

**New ECML Timetable – December 2025**

2. The Darlington Station project is part of the infrastructure upgrades north of York on the East Coast Main Line (ECML) to create capacity to enable additional new services to be delivered in the future.
3. Members may recall that a previous ECML timetable proposal, which was to have been implemented in May 2022, drew significant criticism and was subsequently not progressed. Following further development, a new timetable for the East Coast Main Line (ECML) has now been approved in principle for implementation in December 2025.
4. As well as long distance services on the ECML itself, this timetable also covers local and regional services in the North East, so in fact includes every rail service which operates in the Tees Valley. Network Rail is now taking the timetable through the necessary industry approval processes.
5. In terms of Tees Valley services, the timetable is very similar to that for December 2024, with the quantum of long-distance service calls remaining as they are now at Darlington, Middlesbrough and our other key stations on the LNER, CrossCountry, Grand Central and TransPennine Express routes. There are only very minor timing changes on these routes. Provision is made for an increase in the number of services between Middlesbrough and London in the future, when infrastructure upgrades are completed to enable this to be delivered.
6. The quantum of all local/regional services in the Tees Valley, as operated by Northern, also stay as they are although there are some more significant timing changes for some services, for example on the Durham Coast and Middlesbrough-Nunthorpe routes, which helps improve certain connections. The timetable changes in December 2025 also enable the introduction of the full hourly semi-fast service between Middlesbrough and Newcastle on the Durham Coast, although this is still subject to funding approval for the DfT.

## **Darlington Station**

7. The Network Rail led fit out of the new station concourse is ongoing. The closure of the East Coast Main Line for 6 weekends from 8 / 9 February until 15 / 16 March has been essential to allow key rail infrastructure work to take place. Work at Darlington includes renewal of some of the existing track and new tracks to enable trains to access the new platforms. Most significantly the weekend of 22 / 23 February saw the new footbridge connecting the new and existing station being successfully lifted and then slid into place through the hole which had been created in the train shed roof.
8. The TVCA-led work to the multi storey car park is continuing ahead of scheduled completion later this year. Good progress has been made on the external works with the transport interchange area being at an advanced stage of construction. Final designs for the associated highway works are in the process of being agreed to enable the multi-storey car park and station building to come into operation at the end of the year.
9. Detailed design for the Western Gateway scheme is underway in close collaboration with LNER to ensure the design and programme aligns with their plans for the Porte Cochere. Letters have been provided to residents informing them of upcoming demolition work. Further surveys are required to be undertaken before physical demolition can commence, but we are expecting the demolition to be completed in early Summer, which will then allow the highway and public realm improvements work to commence later in the year.
10. A number of Councillors have participated in the three site visits which have been organised to view the progress which has been made with the scheme.

## **Strategic Infrastructure**

### **Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) update**

11. In the Autumn 2024 budget, the Government announced further funding to support and improve bus services in 2025/26. TVCA has been allocated £7.28m of funding in 2025/26 to support the delivery of the Tees Valley BSIP, which is an increased allocation compared to previous years.
12. As accountable body for the funding, on behalf of the Enhanced Bus Partnership, TVCA have now established a proposed BSIP investment programme for the year ahead, with confirmed or provisional allocations being made to extend existing activities funded by BSIP in 2024/25. This includes:
  - (a) Extending all supported service contracts until March 2026 (where possible) – confirmed allocation of £2.898m, with a further provisional allocation of £1.495m where procurements are required (see details at point 14).
  - (b) Extending the timetable printing and posting contracts until March 2026 – confirmed allocation of £75k.
  - (c) Funding to support the Connect Tees Valley service - confirmed allocation of £125k from the Capacity and Capability part of the 2025/26 BSIP allocation.

13. From the remaining funding, consideration is being given to the potential provision of new services, the extension of the U21 Fares Offer which is currently planned to run until June 2025 and the introduction of new fares offers. The costs of these options are currently being calculated, and further details will be announced in coming weeks.
14. Bus service extensions until March 2026 for the services detailed below have now been agreed:
  - (a) Services 17/18 (Darlington), to be operated by Arriva.
  - (b) Services 6/6A (Darlington & Stockton), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (c) Services 1&2 (Redcar and Cleveland), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (d) Service RP1 to Riverside Park (Middlesbrough), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (e) Services X40/X41 to Wynyard (Stockton & Hartlepool), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (f) Services 3&4 (Darlington), to be operated by Arriva.
  - (g) Service 29 (Middlesbrough), to be operated by Arriva.
  - (h) Service 3 (Redcar and Cleveland), to be operated by Arriva.
15. In addition to the services above that are being extended to March 2026, TVCA are also making extensions to the below services:
  - (a) Service 16 (Darlington) to be operated by Stagecoach until June 2025 to allow for a further procurement exercise, which will allow the service to continue until March 2026.
  - (b) Service 101 to Teesport (Middlesbrough), to be operated by Stagecoach until August 2025. A further extension of this service is dependent on another Stagecoach contract continuing, as the same buses are used to operate both services.
  - (c) Tees Flex, to be operated by Stagecoach until August 2025. The vehicles used to deliver Tees Flex are now reaching end-of-life and are a risk to the continued performance and reliability of the service. In addition, the planned conversion of Stagecoach's Stockton depot to be fully electric will likely have an impact on operational requirements.
16. TVCA have also been made aware of some proposed cuts to local services as a result of the operators experiencing cost pressures due to the increase in employer National Insurance contributions. Working with the operators to understand the impact of the cuts, it was understood that three services so far are due to be wholly withdrawn from the network. These are:

(a) Service 13/13b Coulby Newham – Middlesbrough – Stockton – Salters Lane

(b) Service 35 Stockton – Norton Grange – Billingham – Wolviston Court

(c) Service 39 Middlesbrough – North Ormesby – Park End

17. After looking at the passenger usage in comparison to the proposed cost of intervention, TVCA are in the process of temporarily, direct awarding service extensions whilst a procurement takes place to formally award the services to March 2026, in line with the rest of the supported network.
18. The above service support equates to a total allocation of £4.393m from the 2025/26 BSIP, with £2.898m of this funding confirmed, and the remaining £1.495m of funding set aside as a provisional allocation, subject to procurements.

### **Active Travel and Bus Priority Improvements**

19. During February TVCA have undertaken further public engagement for a number of Active travel schemes to be delivered using Levelling Up Funding. Statutory consultation on these proposals is expected to commence in March / April 2025 and a target date of June 25 for commencing works on site.
20. Design work for the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) funded Active Travel and Bus Priority schemes is also continuing to progress and are expected to commence on site from 2026, with delivery anticipated over an 18-month period.
21. Within Darlington, Woodlands Road Phase 2, which extends the current scheme towards Cockerton, is expected to be in delivery from summer 2025 as design works are more advanced and has now been through a final design review with Active Travel England.

### **Climate Change**

22. The Climate Change Cross Party Working Group met on 6 December and had a presentation from SmartCarbon on the services they offer and how they could help the Council to carbon neutral. The Group met again on 20 February, when the first of a series of updates from Assistant Directors were heard to update the group on their work to support the Council's carbon neutral target.

### **External Meetings and Engagement**

#### **Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership (DEEP)**

23. I attended the Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership (DEEP) Event held in Central Hall. The Net Zero Market Place event enabled a host of businesses – from the very local to multinational – to share knowledge and display sustainable initiatives. Three new companies - Willmott Dixon, SSE, and Chestnut Biopolymers – joined on the day of the event. DEEP now has a membership of 38 businesses and organisations.

24. Formed at the start of 2024, DEEP acts as the local champion for the business community to support achieving carbon reductions. was to enable businesses and other organisations in the Darlington area to work together on environmental challenges.

### **Employment**

25. I visited Darlington Jobs Fair, which was once again very well attended by a very varied range of employers, and large numbers of people looking for work, or a change of career. There were over 100 stalls, and over 1,200 people attended the event. Also attending the event were a range of organisations who provide support to people seeking employment.
26. Together with Councillor Baker, our Armed Forces champion, I attended a graduation at Darlington College. Building Heroes is a fantastic charity who help former military personnel by providing training that opens access to construction employment opportunities. Building Heroes provide support to help former military personnel have a seamless transition into the civilian workplace through this training.

### **Safer Streets**

27. I attended a roundtable event hosted by Rt Hon Darren Jones MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury. As part of a national 'tour' this event was hosted at DEC, with various partners from the criminal justice system invited. Darren is using the events to hear first-hand about current organisational challenges and how Government can help with addressing those challenges. This focus links to the Government's Safer Streets Mission.
28. Since the last meeting of Council I have attended and/or met:
  - (a) Northern Echo editor, Gavin Foster
  - (b) Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership (DEEP) Event
  - (c) Amazon drone trial consultation
  - (d) Darlington Jobs Fair
  - (e) Building Heroes Graduation
  - (f) Darlington Towns' Deal Board
  - (g) Citizenship ceremony
  - (h) Mayor's song contest
  - (i) Association of NE Councils (ANEC)
  - (j) Deputy Chief Constable Ciaron Irvine
  - (k) Transport meetings and briefings

**Councillor Steve Harker  
Leader of the Council**

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**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY PORTFOLIO**

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1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Economy Portfolio.

**Environmental Health**

2. The Environmental Health section has responded to 1,361 requests for service in Quarter 3 2024/2025. The main categories of these requests are:

(a) Food	158
(b) Licensing	129
(c) Noise	237
(d) Planning Enquiries	91
(e) Refuse	84
(f) Pest	257
(g) Personal searches	201

3. Environmental Health and Public Health have been working on a significant project which involved looking at improvements in hygiene and infection control in the Boroughs 32 elderly Care Homes. The work has resulted in a 75% decrease in outbreaks of sickness associated with the care homes in the past year. The team has also been informed that the improvements have also led to a significant decrease in outbreak admissions to Darlington Memorial Hospital whilst other similar areas have remained the same. The success of the work is to be highlighted at a National Conference organised by the UK Health Security Agency.

**Climate Change**

4. In December, the Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer submitted our report to Defra for the trial project to extend the Secretary of State's Adaptation Reporting Power to Local Authorities. We have received positive feedback from Defra for the quality of the report. My thanks to all teams involved in pulling it together.

**Development Management**

5. The application for the New Treasury Building has now been granted planning permission by the Council following a formal announcement from the Government. Further discussions have been had with the applicant's agent to further improve the design of the scheme. These discussions have been productive and are now complete. A further meeting with residents to explain the details of the scheme has taken place in conjunction with the Deputy Leader and local ward members. The Section 106 agreement associated with the permission has yet to be signed. Whilst there is a commitment to the scheme it is likely that some further amendments to the scheme will be negotiated at the applicant's

request. Following further discussions with the applicant it has been agreed that they will now progress with the 106 legal agreement to enable the Council to issue the decision.

6. The matter was presented to Members of the Planning Committee on 7 August 2024. A decision was made to approve subject to the signing of the above 106 agreement. It has been recently confirmed that the Government will sign the agreement imminently.
7. Further work is ongoing following the Outline Approvals for housing recently granted at Coniscliffe Park. A 106 legal agreement has now been signed. Discussions have been held with the developers regarding the further involvement of nearby residents prior to a formal detailed submission. This meeting has now taken place. Planning permission has been granted. Discussions with the developer for the Northern part of the site are well under way which have included extensive pre application discussions which have resulted in significant improvements to the scheme. A detailed submission is expected in the next couple of months.
8. Enforcement reports relating to unauthorised development are still currently increasing. Most reports continue to be solved at officer level. All more significant cases where there are ongoing investigations, Members are updated confidentially at Planning Committee on a monthly basis. There is an increase in the use of Stop Notices to prevent the progression of unauthorised works, which has had a noticeable impact on staff resources. The Enforcement Team is currently piloting a scheme to investigate unauthorised or unsuitable advertisements, which could result in the service of discontinuance notices to remove the signage. These would be used selectively in the more sensitive areas.
9. The National Infrastructure Project Public Inquiry at Byers Green for solar panels has now completed. Unlike most applications a decision on the matter will be dealt with by a Government Inspector, not the Council.
10. Delivery onsite continues along Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancements completed to a significant number of properties and to the public realm. The planning application for Coniscliffe Road public realm proposals has been approved and is currently underway, which when complete will achieve a much-improved public realm.
11. It is anticipated that decisions will be made on significant Housing Schemes in the coming months at Middleton St George and elements of the Skertingham Local Plan allocation.

### **Building Control**

12. Building Regulations applications and works progressing as normal, no issues to be reported.
13. We are now in the first reporting quarter for Building Safety Regulator KPI returns. Monitoring is ongoing and returns for the quarter are to be submitted prior to the end of April 2025. The Building Control team continue to work towards preparing all relevant reports to be submitted to the BSR. Information relating to the BSR requesting to undertake an audit of the DBC Building Control service has been received and may occur anytime within the next few years, with limited notice. The Building Control team have been preparing towards the potential of the audit over the last 18 months and are in a good position. These changes and additional requirements / roles / responsibilities



continue to impose strain on the resources available. This has been further exacerbated by recent loss of staff to the private sector building control sector.

14. The government's Building Safety Levy has been confirmed to come into effect in autumn 2025. It has been confirmed that Building Control will be the collectors and administrators of the Levy within DBC. The Building Control team are taking every opportunity to learn more about the expectations from MHCLG. Communication pathways have been opened with IT system providers who are responding to MHCLG's guidance on Levy collection processes. This may take up further resource from the Building Control service. MHCLG have now provided details of burdens funding which will be available in relation to the introduction of the Levy. Further work will be required to ascertain exact requirements for resourcing and implementation of systems and processes to support Levy collection.
15. Regarding Dangerous structures:
  - (a) Working together with Environmental Health, we continue to monitor the situation with Northgate House and take any action necessary under The Building Act. No recent reports of concerns have been raised in recent months.
  - (b) Rise Carr Club: Working together with Environmental Health we continue to monitor developments and incidents in relation to this property and respond accordingly. It has been noted that several reports of potential dangers have been made over recent weeks in relation to this property. Contact with the owners has been made to resolve any matters requiring attention under The Building Act.
  - (c) General – It has been noted that there was a record number of dangerous structures reports recently, following a single incidence of inclement/stormy weather. More than half the yearly number of reports were received in relation to this weather event. This had a significant impact on available resource for other, general Building Control business in the interim. All incidents have been dealt with accordingly in relation to Building Control involvement, ensuring safety of the public within the Borough.

### **Business Investment**

16. Business investment enquiries continue, with the main area of interests from the hospitality sector.
17. Darlington (together with Bassetlaw & Mansfield Councils) has been announced as an 'Early Adopter' of the High Street Rental Auction programme. Officers are working on developing the processes and gathering the evidence and data to enable this initiative to be implemented.
18. On 13 February 2025, the Council hosted another successful Jobs Fair with over 1300 attendees on the day. At the Jobs Fair, over 100 employers and support services were on hand to support individuals in their search for employment. New to the Jobs Fair was a Digital Hub, a space to bring digital inclusivity to those Darlington residents who currently have limited or no access to on-line resources. The Digital Hub enabled lots of learners to sign up for courses and online CPD with Learning and Skills.

19. The Business Investment Team continue to promote the range of business support services available through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund before the programme ends at the end of March 2025. The Business Team are working collaboratively with the Tees Valley Combined Authority and the service providers to raise awareness of these schemes and encourage Darlington businesses to engage and participate.
20. The Business Investment Team have attended the following Business Events:
  - (a) Teesside University Business Network - work skills development – 12 February 2025
  - (b) Darlington Professionals Network – 17 February 2025
  - (c) Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership – NetZero Marketplace Event – 21 February 2025
  - (d) Tees Valley Pitching & Mentoring Event – 26 February 2025
  - (e) Discover & Connect Event – 27 February 2025
  - (f) Tees Valley Labs Demo Day 2025 – 5 March 2025

### **Estates**

21. The Blackwell parkland continues to be well used with many positive comments; however the heavy rainfall and increased use is causing some issues with the surface of the paths but these have been reported to the maintenance company for the parkland. The 'Heritage Park' residential development by Homes by Esh is progressing at pace with early purchases continuing to evidence strong demand.
22. The proposed Burtree Garden Village development which includes the Council's land at High Faverdale Farm is moving forward with an anticipated start of the infrastructure works in March 2025, subject to Cabinet approval. Removal of hedges and trees in accordance with the planning permission have been completed to avoid the bird nesting season. The Phase 1 reserved matters planning applications are now being progressed.
23. The procurement of the town centre regeneration/development partner has concluded, and results will be reported in May.

### **Planning Policy**

24. It was agreed at Cabinet on 4 February to begin the review of the Local Plan in line with Government ambitions. Progress will be monitored and reported.

### **Towns Fund**

25. The programme continues to deliver on its objectives with several projects nearing completion including the enhancements of Coniscliffe Road, Skinnergate and the Yards and Victoria Road.

26. Work is due to commence on 156 Northgate to transform this heritage building into quality office space. Work should be completed by December 2025. In addition, planning approval and Listed Building Consent has been granted for the improvement works on Edward Pease House. Working with the Friends of Stockton and Darlington Railway it is anticipated that the refurbishment work will be finished in autumn 2025.

**Councillor Chris McEwan**  
**Economy Portfolio**

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**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF ADULTS PORTFOLIO**

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**Purpose of the Report**

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Adults Portfolio.

**Operational Services**

2. The on-site CQC (Care Quality Commission) Inspection has now taken place, with inspectors in the Town Hall the week commencing 20 January 2025, with further off-site virtual calls undertaken in the week commencing 27 January 2025.
3. During the on-site Inspection, Inspectors spoke with various Officers and Members and held themed focussed sessions and drop-ins with our frontline practitioners and managers. Practitioners spoke overwhelmingly positively about their interactions with inspectors and their opportunities to share and discuss the work they do.
4. Following the conclusion of inspection activity, high-level feedback was provided to the Executive Director of People (DASS) and Assistant Director of Adult Social Care. The feedback was positive in tone with CQC praising the supportive culture of the Council, the dedication of the teams and the examples of good practice that were evidenced. The outcome of the inspection will not be known until the final report is published. It is anticipated that the final report will be published in late spring.

**Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG)**

5. Following an increase in demand for DFG's and grant funding limitations a new process was developed and put into place from Autumn 2024. This new process through a risk and impact assessment, alongside governance and high support high challenge discussion, enables those with the most need and highest risk will be prioritised.
6. To date, Adult Social Care (ASC) have been able to continue to progress DFG's for those identified as high risk and high impact to independence. This has led to a wait list being held for those identified as lower risk and impact, however a robust system is in place to enable additional points which considers length of time waiting. Our position as of end of January 2025 is a wait list of 49. We have received an additional interim grant of approximately £170k and the grant for 2025-2026.
7. Darlington Borough Council ASC have been asked to present and discuss this new process with Foundations Housing, Home Improvement Agency and regional leads as an example of good practice, with the focus of supporting those in most need.

### **Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS)**

8. DoLS referrals have remained stable. Agency Best Interest Assessors (BIA's) are beginning to reduce as legal refreshers have been supported and allocations are now being made to in house BIA's. BIA training is planned for February 2025 to enable additional BIA's to be trained. This intake will include x2 Occupational Therapists (OT) which supports wider development around Mental Capacity Assessments and Best interest decisions alongside legal frameworks within the OT team as well as supporting progression opportunities for OTs.

### **Safeguarding (SG)**

9. The numbers of safeguarding concerns received have remained stable however, complexity of concerns received have increased. The main themes of concerns are self-neglect within the working age demographic. We have responded to this by utilising an approach of joint work between the safeguarding and front door teams to ensure early intervention to prevent harm and escalation of concerns.
10. Section 42 of the Care Act (s42 criteria) requires a local authority to make enquiries or have others do so if it has reasonable cause to suspect that an adult is experiencing, or at risk of, abuse or neglect, to see whether or not the authority is meeting any of those needs. The enquiry aims to decide what, if any, action is needed to help and protect the adult. The Risk Notification pilot continues to impact positively reducing the number of Safeguarding referrals where s42 criteria hasn't been met by 200 since 1 April 2024. We have increased the pilot to include x6 residential care providers and x1 domiciliary care provider. Ongoing opportunities are observed to increase providers within this pilot. 268 appropriate risk notifications have been received to date. Work is ongoing to develop the pilot.

### **Adult Social Care Teams**

11. **Hospital Discharges** - Following significant pressures within the acute health settings referrals have increased. Hospital discharge referrals have more than doubled over recent months which is reflective of the acute foundation trust pressures. This in turn has impacted on the increase in discharge to assess short break stay beds. These remain closely monitored and reviewed.
12. **ASC waiting lists** - Any referrals awaiting allocation are closely risk assessed and reviewed. We continue to monitor numbers as well as wait times and continue to explore approaches to reduce the length of time people wait to be allocated to a Practitioner. We are undertaking a deep dive of all people awaiting a Care Act Assessment and the numbers have significantly reduced to 78. All people waiting are low risk and have three-monthly contact to ensure needs have not changed. We anticipate we will be able to review this further in the coming months.

### **Commissioning and Contracts**

13. The Better Care Fund Policy Framework (2025- 2026) was recently published by the Government. The Better Care Fund sets out national priorities and expectations across health and social care including improving hospital discharge arrangements, reducing

pressure on Urgent and Emergency Care, Social Care and Intermediate Care Services. The Government has emphasised the importance of strengthening neighbourhood services with the objective of providing more care closer to home; increasing focus on prevention and harnessing digital technology to transform care. The Council is working with the NENC ICB (North East and North Cumbria Integrated Commissioning Board) to ensure that the health and social care partners meet these planning requirements. Darlington's Health and Wellbeing Board will oversee the jointly agreed 2025/26 plan.

14. The new Home Care and Support Services Framework is now fully operational with effect from the 3 February 2025. Commissioning, Contracts and Brokerage staff have held a series of "welcome" meetings with care providers that are new to Darlington. Services include home care and support, supported living arrangements and a new "Shared lives" scheme for Darlington. The new framework supports older people, people with a learning disability, people with mental health needs including dementia, Autism (including Asperger's Syndrome) and for families with children
15. The Council has renewed its "Just Checking Scheme" which is a digital activity monitoring system used mainly in people's own homes. The scheme actively promotes independent living through monitoring of service users' movements and in particular, social workers use "Just Checking" during the assessment process. The scheme has been enhanced through the addition of heat and light sensors which tracks whether a home is kept warm for vulnerable people. This scheme is used to determine the most effective and cost-effective care and independent living arrangements for people with social care needs.

**Councillor Anne-Marie Curry**  
**Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Adults**

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**COUNCIL  
27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO**

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1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Children and Young People Portfolio. At the request of our Youth Cabinet, I am also including a report from them as an addendum, so Members can see the work that they are undertaking. This will be a regular feature, which I am sure will prove enlightening.

**Early Intervention and Front Door**

2. From January 2025 the Children's Initial Advice Team are further increasing their time working from the office. The safety and welfare of children is the priority, together with ensuring family help is offered by the right service without delay. In order to achieve this the management team provide a consistent and high level of quality assurance of contacts and telephone calls and a focused piece of work considers the outcome of every contact ensuring that decision making is appropriate and that all four potential outcomes are considered, for example, Universal services, external Early Help – single agency, Building Stronger Families or Social Care.
3. The 4 Kids project continues to provide a service to a wider age range of children and continues to receive excellent feedback from parents and children. Work in relation to gathering and analysing performance data will help report more effectively on outcomes and impact. There have been no re-referrals to social care following work with 4 kids.
4. The Child and Family Time Service continues to provide a consistent service for our children and their families to maintain their relationships where they are cared for by the Local Authority. The team have recently had some capacity to support other social care teams, and they are completing aspects of life story work, providing transport for young people that are cared for and they are assisting with visits to families where there can be a focus on parenting work. The team have also linked in with partners from the Housing team and when there are white goods, furniture and household items that might have ordinarily been disposed of these are being recycled for use by our families in need.

**Building Stronger Families Service**

5. The Early Help Assessment is now embedded by staff and is supported by The Families Journey Booklet which is a relational tool to empower families to lead on their goals, with the support of the Early Help Practitioner. The booklet will be for the family to keep as part of any exit strategy as an aide for their use in the future. There is a sharper focus on bringing in family networks and external partners to the plan as part of a multi-agency approach to ensure a wraparound provision for those we work with. The Early Help Assessment has been launched at partnership events which took place during December to ensure that there is a consistent approach across the Borough for our families regardless of who is delivering intervention.

6. In line with the new Department for Education and government focus on building Multi Agency Teams, planning is underway at a Senior Leadership Level in the first instance, work will continue and staff will be fully engaged in the process. Given the impact this will have across both Internal and External partner agencies, it will require a collaborative approach, mapping out the localities and how the new process will work in practice, ensuring that families continue to receive a seamless and proportionate service.

### **Young People's Engagement and Justice Service (YPEJS)**

7. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) have determined their new Inspection Regime which will commence in March 2025. The focus is less on process and more engaging in a Child First Approach. Victim Standards will now be inspected in its own right and members should be assured that our offer for victims has been highlighted as best practice by the Youth Justice Board. Board Members have been fully engaged in the process and have a good understanding of the expectations on them and the oversight and governance that they provide to the Service.
8. The YPEJS is due to move from Gladstone Street to the Town Hall in the next couple of weeks. A great deal of planning has taken place to ensure a swift transition for not only the staff, but also the young people that we work with so they will not be unduly impacted on by the process.

### **Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities**

9. At the end of December 2024 there were 248 children open on a Child in Need plan and 111 children subject to a Child Protection Plan. Social Worker caseloads are below 25 children each across the Assessment and Safeguarding Service and Children with Disabilities team. The service continues to have a low reliance on agency workers which enables stability for children and families.
10. The Keeping Families Together service has been expanded to include Family Support Workers who are able to offer intensive family support over a 12-week period including weekends and a targeted support service which can provide targeted support to families. This is progressing well and currently 12 families are supported by the intensive support aspect.
11. The service continue to work on writing relationally to children and this is now incorporated within all children and families management oversight of assessments. This ensures that everything written on children's records is written in a style personally to them, as opposed to being written in the third person. Research shows that writing in such a way promotes the voice of the child being heard and captured and ensures that records are written respectfully and sensitively and recognising potential trauma. This continues to be reviewed on a weekly basis in our Weekly Review Meeting.
12. Ongoing focus on re-referrals to children's services within a 12-month period has seen positive improvement in practice for families and this has reduced to 13.8% of referrals being re-referrals in comparison to 24.2% in 2023/2024. A weekly re-referral meeting ensures we focus on learning as a service to improve outcomes for children.

13. Deep-dive audits have taken place on all children subject to care proceedings and children subject to strategy discussions. Findings in relation to care proceedings show that decision making is appropriate and applications are only made when all other options are explored. However, it did identify that assessment of wider family members within pre-proceedings procedures requires focus and a new legal panel is to be held monthly chaired by the Head of Service/Service Managers to monitor progress both during pre-proceedings and following the issuing of care proceedings.

### **Fostering and Supported Lodgings**

14. We continue to expand our taster flat offer using support from Personal Adviser and Staying close personal advisers offering a wrap-around level of support to the individuals moving to the taster flats to develop their independent living skills prior to securing their own tenancies. We continue to hold 13 flats, overseen by the registered manager, working alongside housing ensuring the young people are placed in a suitable and safe environment. They are offered a unique individual care plan developed with their staying close personal adviser using the outcome stars tool to measure the level of support required. Young people have moved on to independence in their own tenancy and some have been given the opportunity to recognise that they don't feel ready for independence so have been supported to transition to supported accommodation, without the long term implications of having to give up tenancies or accruing any potential outstanding rent arrears, etc.
15. From the 12 taster flats currently occupied we have five over 18's bidding on properties ready for move on, four young people have secured their own tenancy and are awaiting a move-in date, two UASC young people are sharing a two bed property, one is awaiting right to remain decision, the other is bidding for properties. Two under 18's continuing to receive the support from staying close, with referrals for more under 18's to move into the properties becoming vacant in the coming weeks.
16. Data from 14 January 2025 shows there are 275 children in our care. Comparatively the same week in 2024 we had 324 children in our care. 22 of the 275 children accommodated are Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. The reduction in children subject to a Care Order is a result of focused work across all services to ensure the threshold for the Care Order is consistently reviewed and consideration is given to all other possible routes out of care for our children. Monthly tracking meetings have been introduced to reduce delay for children and ensure discharge of care order plans are progressing. We have had a great deal of success in respect of reunifying children home to their families in a planned and assessed way. This has led to an increase in discharge of Care Order's where it is felt the threshold for the Care Order is no longer met. There has also been a number of children where Care Orders have been discharged in favour of Special Guardianship Orders.
17. There are currently 143 care leavers being supported by the team aged 18-25. An increase from 140 in August 2024, we also support 53 care experienced young people under the age of 18 years. We keep in touch with all our care leavers and there are regular opportunities for them to come together for activities and support. Recent activities have involved paddleboarding and the theatre during care leavers week and the panto and a celebratory lunch at Christmas.

18. The mentoring programme offers the opportunity for care experienced adults to become mentors for younger children in care and our care experienced young people. We have successfully recruited and trained 11 care experienced young people to date. 97 young people are now attached to the programme an increase from 58 in August 2024 and 22 since March 2024, the service is offered to all teams, supporting children and young people. The matching process has been incredibly positive for all concerned and rewarding emotionally for all parties. Our mentors are often holding down jobs, raising their own families whilst also helping younger children in our care, we look to appoint more mentors in the future.
19. Safe space was a youth provision operated by the team for children in our care. It is a mix of social and focused activities aimed at reducing loneliness, anti-social behaviour and supporting children's emotional health. We gained the funding for 12 months until October 2024, throughout the project we delivered sessions every other Tuesday evening and numerous days in the school holidays. We are hoping to gain additional funding for this project enabling us to continue and deliver sessions, offer provision during holidays and in time form the group into a 11-16 year old children in care council. We have submitted a funding application to the Rotary Club to support with some of the costs to continue this valuable support to children in our care.
20. Staying Close remains a significant strength; we are currently supporting 24 young people. This number remains constant as young people come to the end of their support journey and have achieved their goals. A further two young people are due to close to the service and replaced with two new young people. The project has supported 37 young people since April 2024 and 14 young people have successfully moved onto their own accommodation. The project offers a six-days-per-week service for young people most in need. Some feedback from the young people and their workers "couldn't have done it without her", "she always listens to me, gives amazing advice, she never lets me down", "it is a great that one young person has progressed to a level where he feels he no longer needs this intense support. "The support I have got is the best".
21. As detailed earlier, we are currently supporting 22 unaccompanied children. We are mandated to support a maximum of 22 children and young people. Our next unaccompanied young person will turn 18 on 27/04/2025. We can expect additional referrals from that point onwards. Within the last 12 months, we have supported eight new unaccompanied children.
22. In terms of placement of children, we have 13 unaccompanied young people placed in Darlington and nine outside of Darlington with six of these placed at a distance.

### **Fostering and Supported Lodgings**

23. We have 65 approved foster carers, with 30 households supporting 55 children, 23.9 % of which are long term matched. We have 68 approved connected carers, with 39 households supporting 46 children, accounting for 30.9% of the children in foster care.
24. The Fostering & Supported Lodgings Team has now embedded the completion of viability assessments into the team's roles and responsibilities and the team are completing most viability assessments across all of children's services teams, where positive viabilities are leading to Connected Care and Special Guardianship assessments. We have seen positive

outcomes for children remaining within their families and alongside their siblings as well as supporting the services strategy to “Think Family” and to not be accommodating any child before first exploring and assessing their family. This has resulted in an increase of work for the team assessing and supervising Kinship carers.

25. Since 1.4.2024 to date, the team have completed 44 viability assessments, 21 Connected Carers Assessments and 10 Special Guardianship Assessments. Currently the Team has 15 Connected Carer assessment ongoing and three Special Guardianship assessments.
26. Expressions of Interest from Fostering with Northeast have slowed from September 2024 until January 2025. This is in line with previous years, we have received one Expression of Interest in December and three expressions of Interest in January, with two expressions not going any further, due to their own personal reasons. Fostering with Northeast have a programme of advertisement on TV, Radio and Cinema for 2025. Fostering with Northeast have started to conduct initial visits alongside other Local Authorities Fostering Teams and whilst Darlington has not yet started it has committed to be part of this initiative. Initial feedback is that there is the scope for duplication and mis messaging between agencies, but with a co-ordinated approach and good collaboration this is getting better. It is the plan for Fostering with Northeast that in time they could take over the application and then assessment of Foster Carers regionally. The Head of Service is a member of the board and leading for Darlington.
27. The Fostering & Supported Lodgings Team has recruited a second Panel Chair and additional panel members to build capacity in our Fostering Panels. Due to an increase in Connected Carer and Fostering Assessments, we need more capacity to have them considered and hopefully approved. Whilst assessments have been prioritised, other panel work such as reviews and long-term matches have been deprioritised and there is a small back log of such panel work that we also now need to work through. The Fostering Panels are now planned to run twice monthly for the next three months to begin with. Work is also planned with Care Leavers and Peer Mentors to review how we ensure that applicants are assessed and questioned appropriately on matters that are important to our young people.
28. DfE funding for our current two Mockingbird constellation ends on 31.3.2025. We have funding to continue Mockingbird support in its current form for 12 more months; work has begun with carers to evaluate Mockingbird to inform decisions for 2026/2027.

### **Foster Carer Recruitment**

29. We currently have two active fostering applications and five applicants in assessment with one family attending panel on 25 February 2025 following deferment in November panel for more information. Two families are due to attend panel on 8 April 2025 and a further two families are attending panel at the end of April 2025.
30. Our 2025 recruitment strategy alongside Fostering with North East’s recruitment is to target certain key dates this year, these include:
  - (a) Social Work Week – March 2025
  - (b) Fostering Fortnight – May 2025
  - (c) World Refugee Day – June 2025

- (d) Supported Lodgings Week – July 2025
- (e) Kinship Carers Week – October 2025

31. We will adopt a co-ordinated approach within the Council using our social media, PR, and marketing to really sell and support our fostering offer. Events such as bowling, attending Hopetown, etc and events at local amenities during the above weeks can create some good content and awareness.
32. We continue to promote recruitment through the DBC Facebook page. We have established monthly meetings between the team and colleagues in Communications. This will ensure that fostering is covered regularly in the One Darlington Magazine, and we will twin-track this by pushing live news and information through social media.

### **Homes for our Children**

33. The registered manager for CEDARS, has resigned and wishes to move to a part time residential care worker. We interviewed on 12 February 2025 and successfully recruited a Senior Residential Worker with nine years' experience of working within residential homes. Recruitment checks are underway.
34. Gilling Crescent has been relocated to Butterfield, and we are in the process of repurposing the home to accommodate children aged 4 to 10. Registered managers and senior staff have been appointed, and recruitment for additional team members is still ongoing.
35. The candidate was successful in the interview to be the registered manager for the new home. They are currently a senior residential worker at Butterfield Children's Residential Home.
36. CEDARS had an inspection and received an inadequate grading in all areas. The home has received a further inspection eight weeks later and some of the requirements had been responded to and removed from the report. The inspector on revisiting the home shared lots of positives and changes had been implemented since the initial visit.

### **Education**

37. The Darlington local area was inspected by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in November 2024 to evaluate how services in the area support Children and Young People with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).
38. Darlington has seen improvements to services for children with SEND since its previous inspections in 2022. The report, said children and young people with SEND have a voice in Darlington. They are valued, visible and included in their communities. Children, young people and their families are included in decision-making about the individual support plans and types of support that they receive. There are many positives about the partnership's SEND arrangements and the experiences and outcomes for children for young people with SEND.
39. Inspectors state the local area partnership is committed to improving the education, health and social care services across Darlington which benefit children and young people

with SEND. However, inspectors found the partnership's arrangements for some children and young people can lead to inconsistent experiences and outcomes. Some of the areas of strength the report highlighted include:

- (a) The partnership is ambitious for children and young people with SEND. Leaders work closely together to improve local provision.
- (b) Children and young people are involved effectively in co-producing the Darlington SEND strategy.
- (c) The timeliness and quality of children and young people's education, health and care plans are improving.
- (d) Children, young people and their families receive a comprehensive range of effective support while they are waiting for access to services.
- (e) The partnership has implemented well-thought-out strategies to support the mental health and emotional well-being needs of children and young people across Darlington.
- (f) Children and young people who are in care, and have SEND, are successfully prepared for adulthood.
- (g) Disabled children receiving support from children's social care experience smooth transitions to adult social care.

40. However, the report also highlighted areas where the partnership must improve, including:

- (a) Leaders need to continue to develop how they use data to inform strategic planning.
- (b) Children and young people wait too long for some therapy services and a diagnosis for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- (c) There is a lack of a defined process to assess and support children and young people with a learning disability.
- (d) Some children and young people experience delays in the delivery of some health services, for example when navigating access to home equipment.
- (e) Improve the quality of information sharing with schools and services.

41. The partnership already recognises and is responding to these challenges. The partnership had developed a new SEND Strategy to be adopted this year and completed a full public consultation on the strategy in December 2024. The partnership will use the findings of the report to align with and inform the SEND Strategy implementation plan.

### **Youth Unemployment**

42. The 18-24 claimant count has fallen slightly from 6.9% (520 young people) in October 2024 to 6.8% (510 young people) in December 2024. Darlington at 6.8% is still higher than

North-East average (6.0%) and National average (5.4%). In the same period the North-East average fell by 0.1%, and the England average rose by 0.1%.

43. December 2024 figures for the Tees Valley shows an increase for Redcar & Cleveland and Stockton, Hartlepool remained static and only Darlington and Middlesbrough fell. Darlington figures remain the lowest in the Tees Valley (October 2024 figures in brackets):
- (a) 8.5% (8.4%) Stockton
  - (b) 8.2% (8.2%) Hartlepool
  - (c) 7.8% (8.1%) Middlesbrough
  - (d) 7.5% (7.4%) Redcar & Cleveland
  - (e) 6.8% (6.9%) Darlington
44. The Council run Darlington Employment Initiative (DEI) offers employability support to economically inactive people of all ages, with a focus on; those looking after the family/home, those early retirees over 50, and those who are short term sick (under 12 months). The programme was due to end by 31 March 2025 and is funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). TVCA have recently extended the programme for 5 months utilised a 2024/25 underspend of UKSPF and it is hoped that TVCA Cabinet will extend this programme to 31 March 2026 at their March meeting. The government is currently reviewing a replacement for the UKSPF programme beyond 2025/26.
45. By the end of January 2025, the team had engaged 150 participants (against an overall contract target of 104) with 72 (48%) moved into employment (against an overall contract target of 24). Of those above 75 of the 150 participants were aged 16-24 (50%) with 37 of those moving into work (49%).
46. The government has launched a Youth Guarantee scheme to move 18-21 year olds into Education, Employment or Training (EET). The combined authority has submitted a bid to DWP and DfE to be one of the trailblazer areas, there is up to £5m available for Tees Valley. Trailblazers are expected to develop programmes that identify and engage the cohort as well as coordinating and managing pathways into EET. Officers from the five local authorities have been involved in shaping the bid. The programme is expected to start as soon as possible after 1 April 2025 for one year, and the outcomes of the eight trailblazer programmes will inform the national roll-out in 2026.

### **Children's Commissioning and Contracts**

47. A refreshed and updated Darlington Young Carers Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been published on the council's website. The MOU is an agreement between organisations to work together to support young carers and their families and is being formally launched at the young carers action day on 12 March. Darlington young carers have created a short video to ensure their voices are at the fore of this launch.
48. Darlington are part of a new subregional children's complex health and social care joint commissioning pilot service with the Integrated Care Board. This service will test a new approach to co-ordinating support and interventions for specific vulnerable children who may have experienced trauma and adversity. Work is currently underway to progress the multi-disciplinary working arrangements with a view to these new working arrangements being operational in Spring 2025.



## **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership**

49. The Partnership is planning publication of a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review which was undertaken following the death of a child with a non-accidental injury and criminal proceedings have now concluded. There were a number of learning points identified with four key themes; the children's lived experience, parental mental health impact on the family, unseen/unconsidered adults/caregivers and multi-agency working. The final Report and Executive Summary will be available on the Partnership website.
50. The Partnership has published its revised Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements following a revision of Working Together to Safeguard Children Statutory Guidance in 2023. The arrangements will strengthen multi-agency safeguarding arrangements including clarifying roles and responsibilities of safeguarding partners, emphasising the role of education and strengthening accountability expectations. Further details are published on the Partnership Website.
51. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group have not met in this period and therefore no further safeguarding updates to provide.

## **HAF - Holiday Activity and Food Programme**

52. Following the announcement that the Holiday Activity and Food Programme (HAF) will be extended, the Move More Team have been busy planning an exciting programme for Easter which I attended. The HAF Programme is funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and offers free activities and nutritious meals for all eligible young people aged 5 – 16 years in Darlington. Activities will take place at various locations across the town and will include sports, arts and crafts, bouldering, cooking and much more. A range of activity sessions will be available for children and families with additional needs (SEND). All children who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals can access the sessions every day of the Easter Holidays (bank holidays excluded). All eligible families will receive a letter from their school directly.

## **Youth Cabinet Report**

53. Since March 2024, we have had a new Member of Youth Parliament for Darlington alongside a Deputy and a Youth Cabinet. Over the past year, the group have been working on various projects to ensure the voices of young people in Darlington are being heard.
54. **Make Your Mark 2024**  
The first role for the Cabinet was to gain votes on the Make Your Mark consultation for 11-18 year olds. The group collected 3,440 votes across 12 schools and the highest area of concern for young people in Darlington and nationwide was 'Health & Wellbeing'.
55. **Health and Wellbeing Survey**  
These results then sparked the Health and Wellbeing Survey being shared with schools and young people to get a better understanding of what support young people wanted in relation to Health & Wellbeing. The group collected 569 responses and found out what areas were of main concern to our local young people. They then used this information to create an awareness poster to help young people understand the support that is already

out there and how it can help them. This topic is also a main priority for the group when meeting with key decision makers.

**56. Meetings**

The group regularly meet with key decision makers in different areas within the Council. They have already met with Housing, Education, Transport and Social Care amongst other areas. The group are always keen to meet with anyone who will be willing to listen to them so please contact Evie if you would like to be involved (evie.burford@darlington.gov.uk).

**57. Parliament**

The MYP recently attended a House of Commons sitting with all other MYP's from the Youth Parliament programme. Our MYP Stephen Adenuga was able to speak in Parliament about Period Poverty and why is it important to Darlington young people and why it should be a priority nationwide. This was then voted as the main focus area for Youth Parliament for the next year alongside changing the vote age to 16. The full session can be found on Parliament TV.

**58. MYP Manifesto topics**

Our MYP for Darlington, Stephen Adenuga is constantly being proactive in his approach to developing his manifesto topics. These include improving public transport, mental health and wellness and Schools of Sanctuary. Stephen is more than willing to be involved in any events or work that would be appropriate for him. Please again email Evie or contact Stephen directly to discuss.

**Councillor Nick Wallis  
Children and Young People Portfolio**

**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING PORTFOLIO**

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**Purpose of the Report**

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the main areas of work under my Health and Housing Portfolio were as follows.

**Public Health**

2. In February the Stop Smoking Hub held the first 'Swap to Stop' event outside Darlington Memorial Hospital, where smokers were encouraged to stop smoking and offered vape packs to support their quit attempt. Through the event the Service engaged with 60 individuals, of which 48 people signed up to a quit attempt and received a vape pack (they will receive ongoing support from the service). Building on this success more events were held in March to promote national No Smoking Day on Wednesday 12 March 2025.
3. The Stop Smoking Hub is now co-located with primary care at Forsythe House and runs two stop smoking support clinics a day (every weekday), whilst telephone appointments are offered on evenings. The team plan to extend the services to evening and weekends soon. The Service offers behavioural support to stop smoking, alongside a choice of Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) products and vapes, and from 1st April prescription-only stop smoking medications (Varenicline and Cytisine) will also be available via pharmacies. This further enhances the offer available and is based on national guidance.
4. We have recently started working with Veg Power, an organisation which supports schools to increase the consumption of, and familiarity with, fruit and vegetables. They have several projects including 'Eat Them to Defeat Them', 'Growing to Love Tomatoes' and 'Simply Veg'. After consultation we have five schools embarking on the 'Growing to Love Tomatoes' project this spring and one trialling 'Eat Them to Defeat Them'. As part of this work, we can offer broader support to schools via our School Food Catering Award and holistic support around positive eating environments and changing attitudes towards food.
5. The Supporting Children and Young People's Health and Wellbeing in Schools Conference took place on 11 February 2025. There were 102 delegates, with representation from 33 Darlington schools alongside 14 local and national services which can support the work in schools. The main agenda saw eight speakers deliver a range of regional and local updates, good practice sharing and examples of what works well, with links to local and national strategy.
6. The consultation on our Healthy Lifestyle Survey project opened at the event with an activity for all participants. Also launched was a consultation on the development of the Oral Health Promotion Strategy.

7. Reid Street and Hurworth Primary Schools received their PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) Quality Mark Award for completing their accreditation. Other outcomes from the day include four schools revisiting the opportunity to provide the supervised toothbrushing scheme within their settings and two schools offering to pilot the Health and Wellbeing Toolbox project. The agendas for the virtual Primary and Secondary PSHE Networks in March were developed based on feedback from the conference.
8. I am pleased to inform members of the successful recruitment into the post of Public Health Portfolio Lead for Public Mental Health and Ageing Well. This post makes a key contribution in coordinating and leading the work of the authority in working with our partners and our communities on these important areas of health improvement. The new post holder brings with them a wealth of experience in local government and the voluntary and community sector, and I am looking forward to their valuable contributions.

## **Housing Services**

### **Tenant Satisfaction Measures**

9. Members will recall from the last Council meeting that I reported the outcome of our Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) survey for 2023-24 and how they compared with other social housing providers. The results from our TSM survey for 2024-25 have now been received and I am pleased to report that satisfaction in 11 out of the 12 measures has improved. In addition, our performance, when benchmarked at a regional and national level, is higher in all areas.
10. These results demonstrate the high-quality services delivered by our fantastic Housing Services team. However, we are not complacent and will ensure during 2025-26 that we focus on the areas of dissatisfaction and our Tenants Panel will lead on developing an action plan to help address these. Areas to address will include:
  - (a) Improving how we keep communal areas in our sheltered and extra care schemes and our apartments blocks clean, tidy and well-maintained.
  - (b) Raising awareness of the Tenants Panel and the work they do to improve services for our tenants.
  - (c) Raising awareness of the actions we are taking to address anti-social behaviour on our estates.
  - (d) Improving the quality of our repairs; whilst this was again one of the highest areas of satisfaction, it is also the area where we see most formal complaints. In particular, we will need to focus on how we deal with damp and mould cases, with Awaab's Law being introduced later this year.
  - (e) Improving the process of complaints handling.

**TSM Results 2024-25**

<b>TSM</b>	<b>DBC Result 2024</b>	<b>DBC Result 2024</b>	<b>LA Northeast Benchmark</b>	<b>LA National Benchmark</b>
TP01 Proportion of respondents who report that they are satisfied with the overall service from their landlord	<b>79%</b>	76%	67%	68%
TP02 Proportion of respondents who have received a repair in the last 12 months who report that they are satisfied with the overall repairs service	<b>84%</b>	80%	70%	70%
TP03 Proportion of respondents who have received a repair in the last 12 months who report that they are satisfied with the time taken to complete their most recent repair	<b>83%</b>	80%	65%	67%
TP04 Proportion of respondents who report that they are satisfied that their home is well maintained	<b>82%</b>	78%	66%	67%
TP05 Proportion of respondents who report that they are satisfied that their home is safe	<b>85%</b>	81%	70%	73%
TP06 Proportion of respondents who report that they are satisfied that their landlord listens to tenant views and acts upon them	<b>70%</b>	66%	53%	56%
TP07 Proportion of respondents who report that they are satisfied that their landlord keeps them informed about things that matter to them	<b>76%</b>	72%	60%	66%
TP08 Proportion of respondents who report that they agree their landlord treats them fairly and with respect	<b>82%</b>	78%	70%	73%
TP09 Proportion of respondents who report making a complaint in the last 12 months who are satisfied with their landlord's approach to complaints handling	<b>35%</b>	38%	29%	31%
TP10 Proportion of respondents with communal areas who report that they are satisfied that their landlord keeps communal areas clean and well maintained.	<b>71%</b>	68%	58%	62%

<b>TSM</b>	<b>DBC Result 2024</b>	<b>DBC Result 2024</b>	<b>LA Northeast Benchmark</b>	<b>LA National Benchmark</b>
TP11 Proportion of respondents who report that they are satisfied that their landlord makes a positive contribution to the neighbourhood	<b>66%</b>	65%	54%	60%
TP12 Proportion of respondents who report that they are satisfied with their landlord's approach to handling antisocial behaviour	<b>59%</b>	58%	50%	54%

### **Neasham Road Council Homes Site**

11. Completion of our Council homes new build site at Neasham Road continues on schedule. After the handover of the first two phases of 28 homes, a further 10 homes were completed at the beginning of March, with another 6 due on 28 March. Phase 1 of the site is due to be completed in May 2025, with the completion of another 8 homes, before phase 2 will start to be handed over from May 2025, up to the full site completion in March 2026.
12. Feedback from the new residents has been very positive. Our Housing Services team are looking to help foster community in the area, starting with completing a consultation for the new play park that will be built on site. A consultation event was held at Darlington Mowden Park Rugby ground in February and some excellent conversations and feedback on the park were received. Residents are looking forward to the completion of the site so they can help us shape a new community and area that everyone can be proud of.

### **Lifeline Services Digitalisation**

13. Our Lifeline Services team continues to deliver the project to upgrade all our analogue Lifeline equipment to Digital, as part of the UK's switch to a fully digital telephone network by January 2027. Work delivered so far, includes the following:
  - (a) We have upgraded 1,300 dispersed units (box and button) out of a total of 1,364, leaving just 64 to upgrade.
  - (b) We have upgraded our 'Jontek' calls handling equipment to a digital, web-based, hybrid version that will be capable of handling both analogue and digital calls until the switchover date.
  - (c) We need to upgrade 76 warden call systems in our multi-occupied supported housing schemes (sheltered and extra care). So far, 3 sheltered schemes have had their call systems upgraded, with a further 4 sites planned in 2025-26.
  - (d) A programme of works has been developed to install dispersed equipment to schemes where the warden call systems will be decommissioned altogether.

- (e) We have also procured 25 digital communicators (these will turn analogue into digital data) for the schemes, to enable us to create some breathing space, as we work through the warden call upgrades and identified a test bed site for the first digital communicator install.

### **Rent Collection**

- 14. Our Housing Services team continue to perform well in the collection of Council rents and service charges. Rent arrears levels at the beginning of February were 3.2 per cent which is 0.2 per cent better than our target, and below the same point in 2024, which was 3.3 per cent. £25.7 million has been collected compared to £24.3 million for the same period in 2024, which represents a collection rate of 97.5 per cent compared to 96.9 per cent in 2024.
- 15. The number of working age Council tenants receiving some element of Universal Credit (UC) stands at 2,360, an increase from 2,062 at the same point in 2024 and consequently the number of Council Tenants receiving Housing Benefit (HB) has reduced from 1,882 to 1,593.
- 16. The migration of our tenants from HB to UC migration continues at a pace and is due to be completed by the Department for Work and Pensions by the end of March 2026 in Darlington. Our Tenancy Sustainment Team are on hand to help our tenants through this process. The final tranche of people due to migrate to UC in 2025-26 will be those currently receiving Employment and Support Allowance, so are likely to be those needing the most advice and support.
- 17. The average rent arrears for those tenants receiving UC is currently £450.31, which, although increased from 2024, is still within the normal 5 week waiting period for the first UC payment, and therefore within the expected arrears levels for these tenants.

### **Warm Homes Social Housing Funding**

- 18. I am pleased to report that our Housing Services team has been successful in bidding for £3.55m of Government funding through the Warm Homes: Social Housing Fund (WH:SHF) Wave 3. Our award was part of a Tees Valley Combined Authority consortium bid worth £43.9m.
- 19. This significant sum of money will be used alongside funding from our Housing Revenue Account budget, to fund a three-year programme of improvements worth over £15m. The work will include the installation of wall and loft insulation measures, double glazing and doors to help cut bills, tackle fuel poverty and also reduce the borough's emissions, which supports one of the council's key priorities to tackle climate change.
- 20. Our Housing Services team will start the procurement of specialist contractors to undertake this work, which is due to start later this year.

### **Dolphin Centre**

- 21. Work will commence on 13 March 2025 to install 399 photovoltaic (PV) panels on the flat roofs of the Dolphin Centre, which includes the swimming pool and the sports hall. It is

anticipated these panels will generate an estimated annual saving of £35,500, reducing the overall spend on electricity.

22. Dolphin centre memberships have continued to grow in the new year, which has included the introduction of a new corporate membership scheme offered to 400 Darlington College tutors, which enables them to join and pay by salary sacrifice through the College. This further develops and builds on the strong partnership in place with the College. January saw the highest net growth in memberships this financial year.
23. February half term welcomed many families to the centre to participate in swimming, pool parties with DJs, family bowling, soft play, family racket sports, diving camps and intensive swimming lessons that were fully subscribed by children from Darlington.
24. Catering and hospitality across the venues has been thriving in the new year, including during the half term holiday, with very positive footfall at South Park Cafe. The cafe is undergoing a small interior refurbishment to enhance the customer experience following the introduction of permanent outdoor furniture late last year, and external decoration carried out early this year.

#### **Health in Haughton Matters Project**

25. The Health in Haughton Matters committee have started putting together the National Lottery Awards for All grant programme, with 'The Move to Improve' session, Mat Pilates and a children's sports provision all up and running in the local area. Netball will also become part of the provision once a suitable venue and time slot is identified. The existing provision recorded a total of 342 attendances throughout January.
26. We have supported Haughton in obtaining external funding but will work with any community group that approaches us on external funding applications. The Haughton project has been in delivery for 4-5 years and has become sustainable. We work with the committee to grow participation levels/reach. In the draft Physical Activity Strategy, we have committed to widening this offer with other community groups using Haughton as an example of good practice.

**Councillor Matthew Roche**  
**Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Health and Housing**



**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF LOCAL SERVICES PORTFOLIO**

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1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Local Services Portfolio.

**Climate Change**

2. Hoptown Darlington's 'Playtown', an immersive indoor playscape designed around discovery, learning and adventure was created using borrowed or donated equipment and materials, making it not only fun for families but sustainable, too. The Exhibition Hall in the historic Carriage Works was transformed into an engaging zone-based playscape using Hoptown's own learning resources, play equipment and structures provided by the events team, Hullabaloo and Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) creating a free playful space for families visiting Hoptown throughout January and February. Over 5,500 people enjoyed 'Playtown' in its first four weeks.
3. Darlington Libraries joined forces with Darlington Cares to offer the first 'World Book Day Costume Swap'. Residents were encouraged to donate their pre-loved World Book Day Costumes for other children to choose and wear for this year's celebrations. In addition to encouraging reusing and recycling, the initiative was designed to be inclusive, providing opportunities for children from lower incomes households to read for fun.
4. The events team have drafted the 2025 events calendar and are currently programming content. All events are all planned to be as sustainable and locally driven as possible, re-using equipment and reducing waste.
5. The approved 2024/25 Integrated Transport Block spend included funding for improved cycle parking to be introduced around the town centre to encourage sustainable modes of transport. A study into the existing and potential additional cycle parking has been undertaken with a number of sites identified. Work to introduce and replace cycle parking has been ordered and will be undertaken and substantially completed during the coming months.

**Highway Maintenance Programme**

6. Highway Maintenance Schemes completed:
  - (a) Unc. West Auckland Road West Back Lane: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.190km)
7. Highway Maintenance schemes due to start:
  - (a) Patching Contract: Carriageway Patching (six sites)
  - (b) A67 Sadberge Road Roundabout: Carriageway Resurfacing (0.223km)
  - (c) Unc Allington Way: Carriageway Resurfacing (0.832km)
  - (d) Unc. Barnes Road: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.268km)

## Bus Services

8. The Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) scheme offering cheaper fares for people aged under 22 offering a £1 single fare and a £3 day ticket is going well. Tickets are primarily valid in Tees Valley, but also allow cross boundary travel into the North East Combined Authority area. This scheme is funded until June 2025 and its impact monitored throughout. Further funding may mean this scheme can be extended due to the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding that has been allocated to TVCA.
9. The supported bus services in Darlington (including 3 and 4 (evenings and Sundays), 6/6A, 16, 17 and 18) and the Tees Flex service were all previously funded by TVCA until March 2025. Funding beyond March 2025 has been announced by the Department for Transport (DfT) funding through the BSIP process. TVCA have confirmed that part of this funding will be used to ensure network stability for a further year and that these services, with the exception of Tees Flex, will continue to be supported until March 2026. A full network review will be undertaken in 2025 to inform how future funding can be allocated.

## Safer Routes to School (SRTS)

10. Table 1 below shows progress on all our Safe Routes to School schemes that are currently being developed. The construction dates are anticipated and will be dependent upon the outcome of consultation and the availability of construction resource at that time.

Scheme	Scheme Consultation	Ward Member Briefing	Portfolio Holder Signoff	Traffic Regulation Order Consultation	Potential Cabinet (if objections received)	Construction (currently programmed)
Hurworth Academy School 20mph Zone	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Partially complete. Remaining road hump programmed to be constructed over the school Easter holidays.
Abbey Infants and Junior School 20mph scheme	Complete	Complete	Complete	TROs advertised January	April 2025	Cleveland Terrace: Easter 2025 holidays with work carried out for two weeks during term time - four-week duration Abbey Road: school summer holidays
Stanhope Road North Puffin crossing	Public consultation March 2025	Complete	Awaiting outcome of consultation	May 2025	June 2025	To be determined
St. Augustine's School 20mph scheme	Complete	Complete	Engagement report being collated	April 2025	June 2025	To be determined

Scheme	Scheme Consultation	Ward Member Briefing	Portfolio Holder Signoff	Traffic Regulation Order Consultation	Potential Cabinet (if objections received)	Construction (currently programmed)
St Bede's School 20mph scheme	Complete	Complete	Complete	TROs advertised January	April 2025	School summer holidays 2025
Longfield School Puffin crossing	March 2025	Complete	Awaiting outcome of consultation	May 2025	Sept 2025	Oct 2025
Mowden Infant and Junior School 20mph scheme	Resident consultation March 2025.	Ward member briefing late January	Awaiting outcome of consultation and decision on funding	To be determined	To be determined	To be determined

**Table 1:** Progress of the current programme of SRTS Schemes

### City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement Funding (CRSTS)

11. TVCA received a five-year funding settlement from Government (April 2022 to March 2027) to develop a number of schemes to improve active travel and public transport across the Tees Valley. In Darlington, this includes development of active travel along the A68 corridor, between Faverdale and the town centre. To date, Phase 1 has been delivered with cycling infrastructure from the town centre along Duke Street and Woodland Road. Woodland Road Phase 2, (Hollyhurst Road to Deneside Road, via Tennis Dene) is planned to start on site in early Summer of 2025. Further sections of this route are in development, which also aim to improve public transport journey times that are part-funded through developer contributions, including roundabout improvements.
12. Improvements are also under development that will improve public transport journey times at Bondgate, Tornado Way and the A167 at Burtree Lane. It is anticipated that consultation on these proposals will be undertaken in Autumn 2025.

### Levelling Up Funding 2 (LUF2)

13. TVCA have received Levelling Up Funding and a scheme developed to improve active travel on the town centre fringe close to St Cuthbert's Way. This scheme improves pedestrian and cyclist priority at the junction of East Street, widening the provision towards the existing light-controlled (toucan) crossing across St Cuthbert's Way at Russell Street.

### Resident Parking Zone (RPZ) Review

14. Members requested that a review of Resident Parking Zones be considered by Scrutiny Committee regarding differential charges and the impacts on road conditions, congestion, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions of the size and fuel source of vehicles. A scope of work has been completed, and work is ongoing to consider these issues and their implications along with a review of the current RPZ policy. The first stage findings will be presented to the Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee in April.

## Hopetown Darlington

15. Hopetown Darlington welcomed 1,865 people to the site for the site's first Comicon event on Saturday 1 February. The event was a resounding success, with visitors arriving in costume and bringing a carnival atmosphere to the site. Highlights included a Dalek, R2-D2, Hacker T Dog from CBBC and actor Christopher Ryan (The Young Ones, Doctor Who etc). The star attraction was the DeLorean DMC car, of the Back to The Future film-series. Following the success of this event, a second Comicon weekend will be held in July.
16. Hopetown was the recipient of two prestigious awards at the Heritage Railway Association (HRA) award ceremony on Saturday 8 February. 'Best Museum Interpretation Award' by Heritage Railway Magazine and the 'HRA Railway 200 Award', created especially for Hopetown, with a unanimous decision by the HRA board following their visits to the site.
17. On Friday 7 February, Hopetown's 'The Stores', housed in the historic grade II listed Carriage Works building, was re-launched, following the return of the remainder of Hopetown railway heritage collection. Visitors enjoyed a guided tour of The Stores before having the opportunity to speak to members of the collection team and look at items from the archive collection. 'Study @ The Stores', the research centre at Hopetown, is now open. Students, researchers and rail enthusiasts can book an appointment to view historic railway archive documents, photo collections, records (including the Ken Hoole collection) and more with the collections team.
18. Visitors enjoyed a fun-packed February half-term programme of activities and events, including science, animal encounters and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) workshops, craft activities and trails.

## Libraries

19. The highest recorded number of digital loans since the service began was achieved in January 2025, with 9,986 digital items borrowed. These loans are comprised of digital books, audio books, newspapers and magazines, which can be selected and borrowed for free, without the possibility of incurring fines or charges. Library membership is free, and customers can seamlessly join the BorrowBox service from home via the web site.
20. Darlington Library's restoration and refurbishment has been recognised by Designing Libraries, who showcased the fantastic modernisation in an article, noting the Library was "Restored, Revamped and Reimagined".
21. Darlington Library Service has also been shortlisted for two Digital Culture Award, in the categories of 'Digital Inclusion' and a special recognition for the library's Digital Manager, in the 'Digital Ambassador' category.
22. An extensive programme of free activities, workshops, and events were delivered in March to coincide with World Book Day. BookFest, organised and delivered by Darlington Library, aims to reach a diverse family audience by offering opportunities to engage with authors and illustrators, participate in creative and digital experiences, and engage with books, reading and stories. Darlington Library is also one of a select group of libraries nationally

who gift World Book Day books via the World Book Day voucher scheme. BookFest and World Book Day resources are especially important for supporting low-income families to engage with reading and libraries.

23. Darlington Library continues to welcome school groups in The Hive for digital experiences, the Centre for Local Studies for history experiences, and The Children's Library for reading experiences. 22 individual classes visited Darlington Library during March 2025, in addition to local schools who visited the branch in Cockerton to routinely borrow books.

### **Creative Darlington**

24. 'People and Perspectives', a photography exhibition by Alan Clements, was on display in the Art Gallery at Darlington Library from Saturday 22 February to Thursday 13 March 2025. The exhibition included aerial photography, images from Whitby's Goth Weekend, Venice and America to enjoy. A 'Meet the Artist' event also took place on Saturday 8 March 2025.
25. Michael Connell's exhibition, 'Observed Surroundings', sharing original work inspired by Newton Aycliffe, opened at the Art Gallery in Darlington Library on Saturday 15 March and will run through to Thursday 10 April.
26. Pink-collar Gallery held a well-attended drop-in tea party in the Art Gallery at Darlington Library, on Saturday 1 February 2025 as part of their National Heritage Lottery Funded 'Working Lass' project, which aimed to find, highlight and elevate the role of North East women in the liberation movement (from the 1960s to the 1990s). The contributions of a selection of women will be memorialised in specially designed museum panels, as well as being archived in an online exhibition.
27. Creative Darlington budget support has been offered to the Arthur Wharton Foundation for their commission of a mural artist to create a rail heritage themed work to the exterior of their Darlington base in 2025.

### **Town Centre Partnership and Events**

28. Following rigorous assessment, Darlington has been re-accredited for Purple Flag status. The interim report noted: "This submission highlights an impressive range of offerings. The opening of Hopetown is a standout achievement, providing a fantastic opportunity to celebrate Darlington's rich engineering heritage. Groovefest also deserves recognition for its engaging approach, successfully involving venues and sparking enthusiasm for future events."
29. Over 20 restaurants took part in the bi-annual Restaurant Week, held from Monday 24 February to Sunday 2 March. Restaurant Week enables visitors to sample promotional menus, with many businesses seeing an increased footfall and new customers. As a result, many participating restaurants have extended offers beyond the promotional week.

### **Darlington Hippodrome**

30. The January to March 2025 period was highly successful for the Theatre's touring comedy offer. Highlights included Jason Manford, who performed to a sold-out audience on 30 January 2025, Jasper Carrott and Alistair McGowen who also performed to a sold-out audience on Wednesday 5 March, and Jimmy Carr, who performed two shows on Thursday 20 March, in response to high demand.
31. The Hippodrome once again hosted the Primary School Dance Festival on Monday 17 March. The annual event consisted of workshops, rehearsals and a performance with the aim of raising aspirations by providing the opportunity to perform at a prestigious theatre and working with a range of artists. The event engages new and target groups of young people, tackling inequalities to build social skills and connections, to promote a sense of belonging.
32. 'The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment' (OAE) brought their 'Baroquebusters' event to the theatre. Carmel school participants worked with James Redwood and three OAE musicians to create a new piece of music, which they performed as the opening piece to OAE's concert. Participants explored Baroque musical techniques used by Purcell and his contemporaries, including ground bass and dance forms, as well as the instruments used in this period. Darlo Creates (a partnership between The Hippodrome, Durham Music Service and Orchestras Live) delivered the project, which took inspiration from the music of Purcell.

### **Environmental Services**

33. From 31 March 2025, businesses with ten or more employees will be required to recycle any waste materials they produce, separating food waste, paper and card, tins and plastics and general waste. To assist our customers in this transition, staff from Environmental Services have written and telephoned all customers. A QR code has been applied to all bins to provide instant access to the relevant information, and officers have also visited the premises of those affected organisations to provide guidance about complying with the new regulations. The Council will also be compliant with the new rules.

**Councillor Libby McCollom  
Local Services Portfolio**

**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF RESOURCES PORTFOLIO**

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1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Resources Portfolio.

**Revenues and Benefits**

**Council Tax and Business Rates Annual Billing**

2. Earlier this month, our Revenues and Benefits team undertook the annual billing exercise for Council Tax and Business Rates, for 2025-26. The project started in November 2024, involving significant planning, preparation and testing of ICT software, to ensure the correct bills are produced, with the recalculation of benefits and other discounts.
3. Over 54,000 Council Tax bills and 4,000 Business Rates bills have been produced and dispatched to residents and local businesses, raising debits of £85 million Council Tax and £37 million Business Rates. Our Revenues and Benefits team will be busy over the next couple of months, dealing with enquiries and processing changes as a result of the annual billing exercise. Around 6,000 of those bills were sent as e-bills and I would urge Members who have received a paper Council Tax bill to sign up for our e-billing service, in our drive to reduce costs and paper usage.

**Council Tax Recovery**

4. Our Revenues and Benefits team continues to perform well in recovering long-standing and large debts to the Council, as follows:
  - (a) One debtor owed over £8,000 in Council Tax and, following the sale of the property, the full amount was recovered.
  - (b) One debtor owed over £6,000 in Council Tax and, following a number of attachment of earnings orders and payment arrangements, the full amount was recovered in December 2024.
  - (c) One debtor owed over £7,000 in Council Tax for an empty property. Following charging orders and an order for sale being obtained, the property was finally sold to a Housing Association for occupation, and the full amount was recovered in January 2025.

**Customer Services**

5. Our Customer Services team has recently completed the annual National Fraud Initiative exercise for Blue Badge data matching. A total of 233 Blue Badges were identified for review and only two badges required follow-up action, where the customer had a Blue

Badge issued by another Council. In both cases, the second Blue Badge was cancelled.

6. This exercise demonstrates the continued commitment to ensuring the correct issuing and accuracy of our Blue Badge decision making.

### **Climate Change**

7. The works on The Dolphin Centre to include a new 399 panel PV array and a replacement 100KW CHP started on 13 March.

### **Capital Projects and Design Services Management**

8. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
  - (a) Neasham Road and Sherborne housing schemes continue to progress well on site with the first initial phases of houses handed over at the Neasham Road site.
  - (b) The No.156 Northgate refurbishment scheme to provide new office space provision now has a contractor appointed and works will commence shortly on-site.
  - (c) A similar refurbishment scheme for No.142 Northgate will be going out to tender shortly.
  - (d) The main refurbishment work at the former Northern Echo Building continues with work to the existing windows underway.
  - (e) The next phase of Skinnergate Housing site has commenced and the former St Mary's Club property at the rear of the site is being demolished.
9. Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
10. There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

### **Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30**

11. The Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 was approved by Cabinet on 4 March, setting a clear direction of travel for the consideration and adoption of technology to help the council increase its efficiency and productivity. As previously reported, a theme within the strategy focuses on digital exclusion to ensure no resident is restricted from accessing our services. Another theme within the strategy focuses on emerging technology, and it is through this theme that we will be exploring opportunities for the application of artificial intelligence (AI) within some services. Our adoption of AI will be done with caution and consideration. To ensure we can be confident in the AI technology we use, we will be establishing a robust decision-making process to ensure we have clear governance, high levels of data security, and a clear understanding of how the AI tool is processing the data.



**Councillor Mandy Porter**  
**Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio**

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**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

**OVERVIEW OF STRONGER COMMUNITIES PORTFOLIO**

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the updates for the Stronger Communities Portfolio are as follows:

**Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB)**

Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour Trends for all Darlington

Darlington	YTD Jan 2024	YTD Jan 2025
Crime	10234	8686
ASB	1922	2172

**Crime**

2. The year-to-date figure is significantly lower than the same period last year, by 15.1%. Reported incidents of violence show a significant decrease of on average (18%) and harassment reduced by 23.6%. Criminal damage and arson also show a significant decrease of over 18%.
3. The police along with partners have continued their crime prevention campaigns; The Winter Nights Campaign focussing upon acquisitive crime has continued throughout this period.

**ASB**

4. The year-to-date figure is higher than the same period last year (13%). During the reporting period there was an increase in anti-social behaviour over a period of time associated with a gathering of youths travelling from outside the area into the Town. Additional measures were introduced to address the ASB including a Police led ASB Dispersal Order, additional uniformed staff on patrol, increased youth intervention work (YES), increased staffing within CCTV room and increased civic enforcement.
5. A number of individuals have been identified and the Young Peoples Engagement & Justice Service have received seven referrals into the Early Intervention and Prevention Pathway from the Civic Enforcement Team.
6. Future Pathways ASB evening sessions continue, and Cohort 5 commenced on 10 February with a total of 25 young people referred.
7. During the reporting period:
  - (a) Ten young people received first warnings for ASB.

- (b) Seven young person received acceptable behaviour agreements (ABA).
- (c) Six ABA breaches, five of these from the same individual who has a Civil Injunction pending.
- (d) Seven young people were referred to Darlington Borough Council Young People's Engagement and Justice Service for positive intervention.
- (e) Two young people are awaiting interview.
- (f) Two young people have a pending Civil Injunction.

### **Other Operational Updates**

#### **Parking Facilities**

- 8. All Council car parks (excluding East Street) have been reassessed and secured the Safer Parking Award, which demonstrates the facility provides Police accredited parking in relation to quality management, effective surveillance, appropriate lighting and a clean environment.

#### **Environmental Crime**

- 9. Since the last reporting period officers have continued to tackle problems associated with fly-tipping and waste in back lanes, the figures below provide an overview of activity:
  - (a) 856 enviro crime cases (of which 46 closed).
  - (b) One Fixed Penalty Notices issued.
  - (c) A roofing company was fined a total of £1674 for a fly-tipping offence.
- 10. Trail cameras have been purchased to improve CCTV deployment in areas within Northgate and North Road where fly-tipping is most prevalent.

#### **Begging Incidents**

- 11. Begging incidents between November 2024 and January 2025 show a decrease of 13 recorded incidents compared to the same period the previous year. There have been dedicated patrols and joined-up partnership working.
- 12. There is currently a cohort of 14 people begging whom we are engaging with through all available support mechanisms. The following support has been offered through our dedicated 'out-reach work' in November and December 2024: -
  - (a) Eighteen individuals have been engaged on over 71 occasions.
  - (b) Two referrals made to Housing support and one person housed in private rented accommodation.

- (c) Regular check-ins that they still have benefits in place and no sanctions have been issued. Also discuss ensuring they pay their rent for those in accommodation.
  - (d) Several referrals made to support the physical and mental health of those begging including GP referrals, engagement with We Are With You (WAWY), and Recovery Connection Groups.
  - (e) Support has been directly provided for foodstuffs and nutrition signposting.
13. Several media campaigns have been initiated through podcast, social media posts and inside the front page of One Darlington magazine winter edition. These strategies are aimed at educating residents and prevent begging activity within Darlington.

### **Licensing**

14. Licensing coordinated a cross-border taxi safety operation over the festive period and working with Durham County Council and Durham Constabulary they carried out safety checks on taxi and private hire vehicles. They were also looking out for unlicensed vehicles. Fifteen vehicles were directed to Darlington's in-house garage for further, more detailed checks and two of those were suspended until defects were rectified. There are plans for more of these operations during 2025.
15. Darlington's Licensing Committee approved a revised Pavement Café Policy for public consultation. The new policy will bring it in line with recent changes to legislation and in response to a change in the dynamics of the licensed trade since Covid-19. The response rate has been very good with mixed views on whether smoking/vaping should be allowed. The Licensing Committee will consider all responses before a final draft is submitted to Full Council for the new policy to be adopted.
16. Licensing have commenced a review of Darlington's Taxi and Private Hire Policy, and a report will be presented to the Licensing Committee to approve public consultation. Proposed changes to the policy are in line with the Department for Transport's revised Best Practice Guide, which was published after the last policy review.

### **Trading Standards**

17. The Trading Standards Team have put out several press releases to keep Darlington residents up to date including updates on their efforts to tackle the supply of illegal vapes. They have also advised on the latest bird flu restrictions so that those keeping birds are fully aware of their obligations.
18. The team continue to visit problem traders involved in the supply of illegal vapes and cigarettes, particularly where there is information from the public around sales to children. Inspections to business premises continue and the team are on target to complete their programmed inspections for this year, which targeted problem sectors.
19. Information has been sent out to all small businesses in Darlington who may supply corrosive substances, offering advice on selling chemicals responsibly.

20. The team continue to visit Darlington Farmers Auction Mart to check on animal welfare during transport and whilst at the Mart. They have also undertaken visits to farms and smallholdings, as both routine inspections and as a result of concerns expressed by members of the public.
21. The Trading Standards Manager has been invited and will present at the North East Serious and Organised Crime Conference on the excellent work undertaken by the team in developing a multi-agency approach to tackling the multiple issues around the supply of illegal vapes particularly to children.

### **Darlington Cares**

22. At the meeting of 14 February 2025 Darlington Cares Board agreed plans to roll out a programme creating opportunities for employers to engage with schools in informing and exciting students in their career choices. A register is being created of employers, detailing the type of activity they would like to participate in and details of the appropriate contact. School's Careers Information Advice and Guidance leads can then make contact and arrange events, keeping a record of outcomes. Darlington Cares members are currently being surveyed before the programme is rolled out further.
23. On Friday 21 February 2025 the Darlington Employers' Environmental Partnership (DEEP) staged its first Net Zero Marketplace Event, enabling a host of businesses to network, share knowledge, and display sustainable products and initiatives.
24. DEEP, with its administration provided by Darlington Cares, was formed at the start of 2024 to enable businesses and other organisations in the Darlington area to work together on environmental challenges.
25. The marketplace event was opened at the Dolphin Centre by Darlington MP Lola McEvoy, who congratulated the businesses on the initiative, which is thought to be the first partnership of its kind in the country.
26. Three new businesses – Willmott Dixon, SSE, and Chestnut Biopolymers – joined DEEP on the day, taking the membership to 38 companies and organisations.

### **Voluntary and Community Sector**

27. As in previous rounds, a collaboration of Darlington's voluntary organisations are supporting the Council in delivering the DWP Household Support Fund.
28. Households experiencing both fuel and food poverty, identified by the Low-Income Family Tracker, have been targeted first. Pensioners eligible for pension credits but not claiming and pensioners close to the threshold were targeted in January. Full details of numbers of household supported will be available in April once the programme is fully delivered.

### **Benefit Enquiry Action Team**

29. Residents across Darlington received a £1.6 Million boost from the Benefit Enquiry Action Team (BEAT) during 2024, and 15% increase from 2023. Darlington Borough Council commissions Citizens Advice Darlington, Redcar and Cleveland to provide the service. It has helped residents from all wards apply for unclaimed benefits they are entitled to, including

around £309k for pensioners. The 2024 report highlights 20 areas of support provided for benefit maximisation, with the greatest levels of maximisation attributed to Personal Independence Payments, Attendance Allowance, and several benefits associated with Universal Credit. Part of the 2024 success can be attributed to an enhanced campaign that raises awareness of the service and encourages people to seek support. Both the service and campaign will continue throughout 2025/26.

**Councillor Jim Garner**  
**Stronger Communities Portfolio**

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**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF ADULTS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Adults Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

**CQC Assurance Framework – Update**

2. The Assistant Director, Adults, provided the Committee with an update on the CQC Assurance Framework and the inspection, which took place in January 2025.
3. As a reminder for Members, the CQC Assurance Framework for Local Authorities in England, introduced by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), is a structured approach to evaluating the performance of local authorities in delivering Adult Social Care services, and is aligned with the goals of the Health and Care Act 2022, which aims to ensure high-quality, equitable, and sustainable care for individuals in need.
4. The report provided an outline of the assessment criteria, the methods of evaluation, the outcome ratings, and the focus on continuous improvement by identifying strengths and areas for development, and updated Members on the inspection undertaken between 20th January 2025 and 24th January 2025.
5. Members felt that the inspection represented a refreshing approach, and sought clarification over the scoring system. Members were made aware of the recent final report received by Middlesbrough Council and expressed an interest in the feedback from colleagues from that Council on their report.
6. I met with the Senior Leadership Team recently to place on record my thanks for their work in preparing for the inspection, and I feel assured that there should be no unforeseen issues arising from the inspection..

**Overview of Adult Self-Neglect reported into Darlington Safeguarding Partnership 2020-2024**

7. The Committee received a report which provided an overview of self-neglect, including the local picture, for the period 2020-2024, as reported into Darlington Safeguarding Partnership, along with the trends, themes and key learning points.
8. We were informed that the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership was aware that self-neglect continued to be a challenge with numbers of reported concerns highlighting a steady increase year on year. The report stated that a key priority for the Partnership was to ensure partner agencies improved awareness and understanding of adult self-neglect to ensure early identification was achieved and, wherever possible, prevent serious injury or the death of adults at risk who appear to be self-neglecting.

9. In addition to the submitted report, the Safeguarding Partnership Business Manager gave a presentation which provided an overview of the local picture of adult self-neglect, and the definition and description of self-neglect. Particular focus was given to the Safeguarding Adult Review referrals and data reported into the Partnership relating to self-neglect, which highlighted there has been an upward trend, locally, regionally and nationally. The presentation covered the themes, trends and key learning points identified, and the work that the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership has undertaken in response to support those working with adults who self-neglect.
10. Members of the Committee welcomed the report and were pleased to note that self-neglect and hoarding were not viewed as 'a lifestyle choice', but rather a mental health condition, usually found alongside another primary diagnosis. We questioned the level of work that the Partnership could undertake with those who privately rented, and with private landlords, and further discussion ensued on the work undertaken by Environmental Health, and the mechanism for referrals to General Practitioners.
11. We explored the perceptions and misconceptions around hoarding, and the use of the 'Clutter Tool'. We were particularly keen to understand the information sharing arrangements in place with safeguarding partners, particularly in relation to the Fire Service, where early intervention and a shared Fire Safety Plan may result in lives being saved with the Committee being notified of how the Fire Service are able to identify vulnerable residents to target them for home fire safety visits.

#### **Performance Indicators Quarter 2 2024/2025**

12. We received a report which provided Members with performance data against key performance indicators for Quarter 2 of 2024-25. The performance information was provided in line with an indicator set and Scrutiny Committee distribution agreed by the Monitoring and Coordination Group on 4 June 2018, and subsequently agreed by Scrutiny Committee Chairs. The indicators were aligned with key priorities, and twelve indicators are reported to this Committee, with the performance of eight of the twelve indicators as at the end of Quarter 2 2024/25, reported on.
13. Of those eight indicators, two of the indicators showed performance better than at this time last year (ASC002 - Older people aged 65+ admitted on a permanent basis in the year to residential or nursing care per 100,000 of the 65+ population - and ASC003 - Adults aged 18 - 64 admitted on a permanent basis in the year to residential or nursing care homes, per 100,000 population); two indicators were comparable with the same time last year (ASC019 - Percentage of people who have no ongoing care needs following completion of provision of a reablement package - and ASC050 - Proportion of carers using social care who receive self-directed support); one indicator showed a lower performance than at this time last year (ASC049 - Proportion of people using social care who receive self-directed support), and three of the indicators were not comparable and were reviewed at a point in time (ASC208 - Proportion of people using social care who receive self-directed support, ASC209 - Number of Safeguarding concerns (initial enquiries) started - per month, and ASC211 - Number of strategy meetings undertaken, i.e. concerns progressed to strategy per month).

14. It was reported that the two indicators recorded annually (ASC054 - The proportion of people who use Adult Care services who find it easy to find information about services – and ASC055 - The proportion of people who are carers who find it easy to find information about services) were not included within the report as the 2023-24 results would be released towards the end of the year, and would appear in the 2024-25 Quarter 3 Scrutiny report.
15. Members entered into discussion younger adults residing in older persons settings, the use of personal assistants to help those wishing to undertake self-directed care and payments and how this could be better promoted, and the reasoning why ASC045 (Proportion of adults with a learning disability who live in their own home or with their family) and ASC046 (Proportion of adults with learning disabilities in paid employment) were no longer reported on.
16. I reported to the Committee that I had recently contacted Darlington Association on Disability (D.A.D), with a view to extending an invitation for a representative to attend a meeting in the new Municipal Year and provide an overview of the support that the organisation provides, and a further discussion ensued on the cost effectiveness of direct payments compared to commissioned services.

#### **Care Homes in Executive Strategy Measures / Arrangements**

17. We received our regular six-monthly report which provided the Committee with an overview of the requirements on the Local Authority to support our statutory duties regarding organisational safeguarding under The Care Act 2014.
18. The report outlined the process and considerations in relation to Executive Strategy, and stated that since the previous six-monthly report to this Committee, the Council only had two providers within Executive Strategy Procedures (ESP).
19. It was reported that the first provider (a nursing home) entered ESP on 17 December 2024, following concerns in relation to increased individual Safeguarding concern referrals, concerns relating to medication omissions following audits, whistleblowing concerns received, CQC inspection identifying clinical oversight concerns, and environmental health concerns relating to infection control and establishment hygiene. The report outlined the actions that had been put into place to support immediate improvement, and it was noted that the Council continued to work closely with the CQC and our contracting and commissioning partners and the Integrated Care Board, as well as the provider, to support ongoing improvements.
20. The second provider (a residential care home) had entered ESP in November 2023, following increased individual Safeguarding concern referrals, concerns relating to medication omissions following audits, CQC inspection identifying clinical oversight concerns, environmental health concerns relating to infection control and establishment hygiene, concerns relating to self-neglect and acts of omission, and concerns held around the lack of care planning, risk assessments and physical safety. We were informed that, although the service remains in ESP, the provider had undertaken improvements across the last 14 months and was currently progressing with the action plan with the local authority and partner agencies to make the necessary improvements, and that a further

meeting had been arranged to ensure that the improvements were now sustainable with clear embedded governance processes before closing the ESP.

21. Members welcomed the report, and expressed the view that it was reassuring that the two providers were receiving additional support to improve. Discussion ensued on how such cases are identified, and clarified whether concerns can also be raised by whistleblowers from within an organisation or relatives.

#### **Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report - 2023/2024**

22. The Committee received the Annual Report of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership (DSP) for the period 2023/24, which was introduced at the meeting by the Independent Chair of the DSP.
23. Further information on a house fire that had resulted in two deaths in May 2023 was requested by Members, and clarification was sought as to whether partnership working extended to the Probation Service, in relation to domestic violence. Concerns were raised in relation to 'cuckooing', and Members remained hopeful that new legislation would be forthcoming to protect vulnerable adults from being abused in this manner.
24. The Committee also placed on record its thanks to the Independent Chair of the DSP, who advised that she would be stepping down this year.

#### **Work Programme 2024/25**

25. Members gave consideration to the Work Programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during the remainder of the Municipal Year 2024/25, and Members were encouraged to start to think about items that they would like to be included in the Work Programme for the new Municipal Year.
26. We also gave consideration to a request from the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee, that this Committee give consideration to the Carbapenemase-producing Enterobacterales (CPE) data in respect of Care Homes and Domiciliary Care, and whilst we understand there is no data specifically around CPE in this area, the Committee gave consideration to including a wider piece of work on infection control in Care Homes and within Domiciliary Care on the Work Programme for the Municipal Year 2025/26.

#### **Loneliness and Connected Communities Task and Finish Group**

27. The Loneliness and Connected Communities Task and Finish Group reconvened on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2025, with two further strands of work identified and arrangements will be made in due course.

**Councillor Andrew Anderson**  
**Chair of Adults Scrutiny Committee**

**COUNCIL**  
**25 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

**Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report**

2. We welcomed the Independent Chair of the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership who presented the Darlington Safeguarding Partnership Annual Report to account for the Partnerships' achievements over the previous year and assess the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements within the local area. The report summarised and reflected on the work of the Partnership over the 2023/24 period.
3. Points of note included the feedback has been very positive, with statutory partners continuing to meet on a regular basis (Local Authority, Police and health colleagues) with wider meetings also occurring which additionally include organisations such as education, housing, voluntary agencies, probation and the fire service.
4. We were informed that quality assurance drives the development of the partnership with its key function being to ensure all organisations can work together in the best possible way with children's services having three subgroups covering operational services, child exploitation and the child death overview partnership.
5. Questions were raised which included as to whether any barriers are existent against the partnership's work with the response that the wide variety of partners assist in overcoming any barriers. It was also asked as to whether the partnership is functioning well in comparison to other authorities, and it was confirmed that it is, with large amounts of information being shared including regional and subregional information-sharing, the national panel has also met with Darlington with deep-dive work taking place.
6. A member asked for clarification of the "Joined Up" approach stated in the report, and it was confirmed that this refers to the process in which any referral information is looked at by professionals from the various partner organisations to provide the best possible response. It was also asked if wait times for responses are an issue with assurance provided that statutory timeframes are always adhered to alongside an immediate response to any information received from the police.
7. Further questions included how organisations can become partnered and what training is available with officers confirming that relevant groups, where applicable are invited to attend multi-agency meetings and online training, with level one training also being available to elected members.

8. Discussions were held which included it being highlighted that GP referrals do not always receive full feedback with officers welcoming the feedback and willing to look into these areas.
9. We noted the annual report with members wishing to express their thanks for the positive work of the Safeguarding Partnership and its effectiveness and efficiency with quality information being shared between partners.

### **Local Designated Officer Annual Report**

10. We welcomed the Service Manager, Children's Services who present the Local Designated Officer Annual Report to update Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee on the progress and performance of the Designated Officers' (DO) response to all contacts received relating to allegations/concerns of abuse by those who work with children for the period April 2023 to March 2024.
11. Points of note included that there has been a 25% decrease in activity in the last year, showing a continued return to pre-COVID numbers. There have been 37 substantiated allegations in the period of which 30 resulted in dismissal of staff and 63 unsubstantiated allegations.
12. Members were also informed that the work of DO was carried out by agency workers however an advertisement for a full DBC staff member has been produced for the role in a permanent full-time basis.
13. Questions included as to whether a full time DO is warranted with the response that it is a statutory responsibility, and we were assured that options had been explored before making the decision which included sharing the post with Durham however this was not deemed viable. Another member believed that having a full time staff member in the role is a positive move.
14. A further question was how a rise in complaints are handled by schools and it was confirmed that schools welcome dialogue with the team and that allegations are always dealt with inside the established timeframes
15. We considered and agreed the content of the report.

### **Childcare Sufficiency Review 2024**

16. We welcomed the Head of Education Partnerships who presented the annual Childcare Sufficiency Review 2025. The Department for Education's Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities, January 2024 requires local authorities to 'secure sufficient childcare, so far as is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0 – 14 or up to 18 for disabled children'. In carrying out this requirement local authorities should 'report annually to elected council members on how they are meeting their duty to secure sufficient childcare and to make this report available and accessible to parents'

17. We were informed that the childcare market in Darlington is made up of private day nurseries, pre-schools, childminders, out of school clubs, nursery schools and nursery units. Cases of unmet demand are gathered using various methods: from providers through the monthly attendance returns, by analysing parental enquiries via the families' information service (FIS), via the unmet demand list and from any parental complaints to the local authority. There have been no indications that there has been a lack of sufficiency overall in the borough during the period of the review.
18. Questions were raised which included clarification on who pays for lunches with the response that the DfE issued new guidance around consumables – childcare entitlement providing a free place for a child with guidance as to what providers can and cannot offer or charge for. Officers are happy to speak to any providers to provide advice and will audit providers periodically.
19. It was also asked what the uptake rates of free provision are with the response Darlington is performing well against the relevant indicators and that information is shared with Social Care colleagues to help encourage eligible parents. A code is provided to parents who present this to a provider who then validates it with a 96.95% validation rate in Darlington and that entitlements can be transferred to a different provider due to government safety nets and grace periods for codes.
20. We noted the information and findings of the 2024 Childcare Sufficiency Review.

### **Home to School Transport**

21. We welcomed the Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion who presented the report to outline the current arrangements for the Council's Home to School Transport Policy and outlines the changes in recent statutory guidance with Darlington Borough Council having a statutory duty to provide free home to school transport in certain circumstances.
22. We were informed that previous interest from members with regards to transport for SEND children is now covered in the report and that highlighted plans will be adopted for the commencement of the 2025 academic year. It was also reiterated that the local authority purchases places on school busses who have entitlement to free transportation.
23. A member stated that parents sometimes encounter cancellations from transport providers with officers assuring members that the council are required by law to follow set procurement process, driver scarcity is always an issue however the service is more stable than in previous years. Members were reassured that staff are present from 07:00 every day and ready to react to any cancellations.
24. We considered the report and noted the arrangements in place as well as the changes to statutory guidance relating to home to school transport.

### **Performance Indicators Quarter 2 2024-25**

25. We welcomed the Assistant Director Children's Services who provided members with an update on performance against key performance indicators.
26. Points of note included that 0.6% of referrals took over three working days to be completed in Q2 2024/25, which is outperforming our target of 5%.  
64 children had a C&F assessment completed in Q2 2024/25. This is below the 376 assessments started in Q2 2023/24, and in line with pre-COVID figures. 93.9% of the assessments were completed with the 45-day timescale. This is an increase to previous years (51.2% in Q2 2023/24, 73.8% in Q2 2022/23 and 88.4% in Q2 2021/22) and evidence of sustained targeted work and support throughout the year
27. Slowdown in demand continues as per previous updates showing a continued return to pre-COVID levels with almost 94% of referrals being completed within 45-day timescales showing an impressive increase and a reflection of the efforts of staff.
28. A question was raised as to what most commonly leads to breakdown in placements with officers responding that poorer placement stability is experienced in independent placements and noting that some negative performance figures in this area are a result of previous years due to longer term placements taking time to show changes.
29. We reviewed and noted the performance information provided.

#### **Overview of the Local Area SEND Inspection (November 2024)**

30. We welcomed the Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion who provided members with an overview of the SEND Inspection Framework, the activity that took place during our inspection in November 2024 and the findings and subsequent actions taken and planned. Children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are 'valued, visible and included', inspectors have found. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission visited to check on services for young people with SEND. Darlington has seen improvements to services for children with SEND since its previous inspections in 2022
31. Points of note included the related inspection covered schools, providers and family views covering both the local authority and Integrated Care Board, both of whom are responsible for SEND provision. The report displayed a great many positive indicators for Darlington with areas for improvement including pathways for children with learning disabilities which will be actioned by officers.  
Officers aim to publish a year-long plan on the Council website once prepared.
32. It was asked how staff had reacted to the report with the response that from the LA perspective, staff were encouraged to see the inspectors' feedback and will work to focus on any areas for improvement.
33. We noted the update and planned response and members expressed their appreciation for the efforts of staff in achieving positive progress.



## **Work Programme**

34. Members gave consideration to the Work Programme items scheduled to be considered by this Scrutiny Committee during 2024/25, and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.

**Councillor Hilary Allen**  
**Chair of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee**

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**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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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.

**Local Transport Plan**

2. We received a report (previously circulated) which provided us an annual update on the delivery of the Darlington Transport Plan it outlined the delivery, performance, and public satisfaction in 2024/25 and will outline the 2025/26 programme, including the release of funding.
3. The report stated that the Tees Valley Region had secured significant funding from the Government, which includes £310m City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) programme and £6.851m Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). The report stated that there had been good progress on the development and delivery of the Transport Capital Programme.
4. It was reported that in 2022/23 there was a new Transport Strategy for the borough; a Town Centre Transport Plan and Parking Strategy which were adopted by the Council where work continued. A progress report on the schemes delivered in 2024/25 and the proposed programme of schemes 2025/26 was detailed in the report. From the Autumn Budget 2024 additional highways funding was announced for 2025/26 with £4.873M allocated to the Tees Valley, 25% had been held back due to unknown criteria that will follow.
5. The submitted report demonstrated the focus of the Department for Transport (DfT) on the switch to zero emission cars/vans, which would be the single biggest carbon saving measure in the UK's journey to Net Zero. The report explained that in December 2023, Government announced the Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) mandate, which requires 80% of new cars and 70% of new vans sold in the UK to be zero emission by 2035. In addition to this the Government will provide Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) funding to support combined authorities and local authorities.
6. Reference was made to the Tees Valley region which had been allocated funding of £978m for the second round of CRSTS which will cover the period of 2027/28 to 2031/32, the report stated that good progress had been made on the development and delivery of the transport capital programme including the work in partnership with Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) to deliver elements of the strategic transport plan.
7. Discussion ensued around the TVCA and public transport, Members asked what relationship the Council had with TVCA. The Committee went on to discuss public transport within Darlington, Members questioned what would make public transportation

easier for residents. Members suggested if QR codes or questionnaires could be utilised on bus journeys to receive feedback from users.

8. The Committee moved onto road maintenance, Members questioned if we share practices with other local authorities around road materials and maintenance of potholes. Further questions were raised with regards to when road maintenance has been completed, would this be regularly monitored and recorded.
9. Members scrutinised the accessibility and dropped curbs around John Street and Valley Street following on from Harrowgate Hill to get into town. The Committee also questioned when work would begin on the Cockerton Roundabout and what the first phase would entail.
10. Discussion ensued around 20mph limits in Darlington and if any further work is scheduled for this. Members scrutinised the difficulty of obtaining data from speed counters and how certain counters across the town seemed to be intermittent.

**Councillor James McGill**  
**Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee**

**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

**Digital Darlington Strategy**

2. The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications submitted a report which provided us with the details of the Draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 and sought our views before the submission to Cabinet for approval.
3. The report stated that the Digital Darlington Strategy was also aligned with the Customer Services Strategy. The main focus of the Strategy detailed in the report was to maximise the productivity and efficiency that can be achieved through technology through customer access to services and via back-office systems. The Strategy adopted a 'digital first' approach when it came to accessing council services for those who can and allowed resources to be allocated to those who required support.
4. The report explained that the successful delivery of the strategy relied on several factors and to have a clear understanding on digital exclusion. Those affected by digital exclusion enabled officers to explore potential interventions and ensure no one is left unable to access the services.
5. We discussed the ICT system supplier markets and how to ensure the value for money, we also wanted to understand how the Council makes sure we get the best use of the software.
6. We asked what the Intervention on Digital Exclusion would look like on the delivery plan. We touched on the customer relationship system and how data is gathered for the Council and Members.
7. Discussion ensued around the feedback from the Digital Darlington Strategy and how this was completed, how the feedback would be received and how digital exclusion would be monitored.
8. We asked if digital exclusion had moved away from an age point of view to a cost-of-living issue perspective. We also wanted to understand why the updates of systems take such an extensive amount of time to complete.

**Customer Services Strategy**

9. The Assistant Director of Housing and Revenues submitted a report for us to consider the draft Customer Services Strategy 2025-2030 before approval from Cabinet.

10. The report set out the strategy's vision to deliver excellent services to customers and in particular how to support customers to access council services. The Strategy detailed the Customer Standards which set out timescales and standards customers will expect from all customer services when contacted.
11. It was explained that a public consultation exercise had been undertaken on the Strategy and a verbal report was given on the outcome of the consultation, which will be set out in the upcoming Cabinet report. The Strategy focuses on seven key aims; Providing excellent customer services, making it clear how customers can contact us, Making it clear what we can help customers with and what we can't, Providing support for these customers who are digitally excluded, Delivering value for money, Investing in our people and Listening to our customers and using this to improve our services.
12. We asked if anyone would be turned away from Customer Services if it was an issue that Members of the public could resolve online, and it was confirmed that every customer would be provided with any support needed. We asked officers if the staff had any levels of training around supporting Members of the public with disabilities.
13. We wanted to know if the same focuses were on any customers queries to be resolved the first time and if we could receive monthly Customer Services feedback. We mentioned that the priority of staff safety should be highlighted within the strategy.

#### **Footfall and Impacts Study**

14. The Assistant Director Economic Growth and Assistant Director Community Services submitted a report which provided us with the factors that can impact on footfall within the town centre.
15. The report explained that Darlington had the largest conurbation in County Durham with a retail catchment of 400,300 (Experian) which extended to 586,000 within a 30-minute drive time. Both the level of home and car ownership in Darlington are above the UK average and that the town had excellent road connections, located 3 miles east of the A1M.
16. It was explained that town centre footfall was influenced by numerous factors which were detailed throughout the report, these included Shopping from home (online), Entertainment at home, Cost of Living, Changes to Bus Network, Etc.
17. We were happy to see the level of detail in this report but would like to see how much money people are spending and how working from home can affect footfall numbers.
18. We wanted to understand how the events programme can help business in Darlington, officers explained that a number of events such as the in trails happened inside some stores which promoted new customers to enter shops.
19. We wanted to understand why the Town footfall numbers were the best in September 2024 compared to the last seven years. Discussion ensued around the reduction in numbers that could be due to the increase in retail sales on the internet.

## **Procurement Strategy**

20. The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report for us to consider the Draft Procurement Strategy 2025-2027.
21. The report explained that the work on this strategy had been informed by the Council's own priorities and ambitions as well as reviewed comparable approaches. The version set out in this report was a distillation from this exercise and the seven key objectives were Working together, Delivering Quality and value for money, Social Value, Climate Change, Governance and Compliance, Local Economy and SME and Innovation, improvement and forward planning.
22. The report also explained the need to set develop a subset of specific goals and targets to assist the measurement of deliverance. Some of those were detailed in the strategy under the heading 'Drawing things together'.
23. We entered discussion around the social value of the strategy, it was asked if local businesses were used would this come under social value and how to increase local spend.
24. Discussion ensued further around the how KPI's would be incorporated, and we were glad to see this Procurement Strategy in place.

## **Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring Quarter 3**

25. The Executive Director Resources and Governance and Executive Director Environment, Highways and Community Services submitted a report for us to consider the Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring for Q3.
26. We considered the report which provided information on the delivery of the Council's capital programme and a summary of current construction projects. The report included the projected outturn of the Capital Programme is £330.800m against an approved programme of £330.901m.
27. We asked if the timescale from network rail had been received yet with regards to Hopetown, officers advised they were still waiting for this information.

## **Performance Indicators Quarter 2**

28. The Assistant Director Community Services, Assistant Director Economic Growth, Assistant Director Law and Governance, Assistant Director Housing and Revenues, and Assistant Director Resources submitted a report providing us with an update on performance against key performance indicators at Quarter 4 2023/24.
29. It was reported that of the 22 indicators reported to this Scrutiny Committee, 17 had Quarter 2 data.
30. The submitted report gave the performance position in relation to the 17 indicators, of which nine had increased when compared to the same period last year or from when last

reported, whilst eight had decreased when compared to the same period last year or from when last reported.

31. We wanted further clarification around the Council Tax arrears collected which was detailed in the report. We also discussed how the Performance Indicators could be reviewed and revamped going forward.

### **Revenue Budget Monitoring 2024/25 Quarter 3**

32. The Assistant Director Resources submitted a report providing an early forecast of the 2024/25 revenue budget outturn as part of the Council's continuous financial management process to be presented at 4 February Cabinet.
33. We were provided with the third revenue budget management report 2024/25 which included financial records to November and managers projections for the remainder of the year. Assumptions had been made concerning the future demand for services over the final quarter.
34. The report included the Council's projects revenue reserves position at the end of 31 March 2025 are £11.458m, £0.885m lower than the initial 2024-28 MTFP position. The position related to the £1.982m of departmental pressures and a decline of £0.224m from corporate resources, offset by £1.321m of additional balances following the 2023/24 outturn.
35. We entered discussion around the Carry Forward Request, it was requested if more information could be received regarding this request. We also wanted to understand if any more carry forward requests will be submitted in the future.

### **Darlington Indoor Markets**

36. We received a report which was submitted following the receipt of a 'call-in' from Cabinet held on 4 February 2024 (Minute C113) in relation to its decision in respect of the Darlington Indoor Markets. The 'call-in' had been submitted by three Members of this Scrutiny Committee.
37. We opened the meeting up to questions which could be asked and responded to in the non-confidential part of this meeting and we discussed the first question of Part 1 and how the Darlington Indoor Markets item was not included on the Work Programme for Members to scrutinise.
38. We ensued into conversation around question 4 of the part 1 report, Members expressed their concerns that the response did not answer the question. Conversation ensued around that the Terms of Reference that was yet to be agreed and the potential for this to attend scrutiny in the future.
39. Question 8 of part 1 was in relation to whether an audit had been undertaken from the request of Cabinet, we discussed whether this was usual practice for the Council to request another business to complete an audit. We scrutinised that if the Council is to loan such a significant amount of money that the business accounts should be looked at closer.



40. Conversation then ensued to Question 10, we scrutinised that there was no detail of how the work could be brought back in house, officers explained the implications of bringing the Darlington Indoor Market back in house and what MAM offer to the Indoor Market.

**Councillor Rebecca Baker**  
**Chair Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee**

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**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

**Darlington Physical Activity Strategy 2025-2035**

2. We gave consideration to the Darlington Physical Activity Strategy 2025-2035 which was due for renewal in 2025. We noted that the strategy had been approved by the Health and Wellbeing Board on 5 December 2024.
3. The purpose of the strategy is to improve participation and engagement in sports and physical activity. We noted that an action plan detailing short, medium and long term actions has been developed from the outcomes of consultation workshops that were undertaken.
4. We discussed funding and the need for a focus on economically challenged areas, with Members noting that work is underway to secure additional funding for a place based initiative. We were assured that Sport England funding is specifically targeted where financial, geographical and physical accessibility challenges are greatest. Reference was made to the importance of multi-agency input and Members were informed that Make Every Contact Count training is being rolled out to staff, including those in the community.
5. Members raised questions in relation to the perception of recommended activity levels and Members noted that physical activity extends beyond sport and could include daily activities of living in the home. Further discussion ensued regarding the use of green spaces in Darlington and members highlighted the need for effective safeguarding to make parks safer to access.
6. Discussion continued around physical activity in schools and members were informed that although there were swimming galas and cross-country events, there is a need to identify what barriers prevent a better uptake of physical activity as pupils move from Primary to Secondary education. It was noted that Healthwatch have been working with Darlington Football Club and other organisations and have bid to secure funding for 'Street Games'. Members also emphasised the challenges facing our ethnic communities and the stressed the need to support them to be able to engage more effectively in physical activity.
7. We have requested that consideration be given to the inclusion of Physical Activity Strategy in all reports.

## NHS Dental Services

8. We received an update on NHS Dental Services, noting details of the commissioned capacity in Darlington, including the Urgent Dental Access Centre (UDAC) which opened in June 2024.
9. Details were provided of the NHS dentistry challenges and we were informed that the challenges would be tackled in three streams; immediate actions to stabilise services, a more strategic approach to workforce and service Delivery and developing an oral health strategy to improve oral health and reduce the pressure on dentistry.
10. The presentation provided Members with details of the Dental Recovery Programme, with Members noting the limited uptake in Darlington for the incentivised access scheme. Reference was also made to the pilot of an urgent dental access centre in Darlington which offers 28 urgent appointments per day and has been delivering above commissioned capacity, at 104 per cent. Details were also provided of the transformation and sustainability plan, including an uplift in the local minimum unit of dental activity (UDA).
11. We noted the oral health improvement initiatives in Darlington, including supervised toothbrushing activity, oral health training for Health Visitors, public health teams and health and social care staff and investment in oral health promotion resources. Reference was also made to the dental access referral pathway for children in care and the positive impacts from this pathway.
12. The Chief Executive Officer, Healthwatch Darlington informed Members of the work being undertaken by Healthwatch and the ICB across the region to capture the voice of the community in relation to dental services. Concerns of Healthwatch North Tyneside, that high numbers of patients had no access to a dentist for more than 10 years, were shared with members.
13. Members were very concerned by the limited uptake of incentivised access appointments and by the limited signposting to dental services. The news that a dedicated dental comms lead is in place to improve communications was well received by members, but assurances were sought that all dental practices are aware of the incentivised scheme; and patients should be signposted to the NHS UK website. It was reiterated that the 111 service should only be used for those with urgent needs.
14. Members raised concerns and highlighted the need for improved communication regarding the impact of high sugar diets on oral health and noted that there is a dedicated oral health promotion team in Darlington; that additional funding has been provided for the toothbrush programme in preschool settings; and that the school oral health programme, which is taught via the PSHE curriculum, includes a healthy eating component. Members sought clarification regarding resources for parents.
15. Members acknowledged the challenges being faced by NHS dentistry and were advised that despite the 'Golden Hello' and a range of other incentives such as relocation packages, there are continued recruitment and retention challenges; and that contract reform, opportunities for professional development, providing more flexibility to dental providers, would help address this challenge.

### **Primary Medical Care and General Practice Access**

16. We welcomed a presentation on Primary Medical Care and General Practice Access. The presentation provided an overview of General Practice, with details provided of the GP contract and regulation of general practice, core funding and the Primary Care Network (PCN) Contract Directed Enhanced Services (DES). The presentation also gave an overview of General Practices in Darlington, including details of the workforce and means of contacting and accessing the practices.
17. Members were provided with details of primary care appointment activity including eConsult data and enhanced access utilisation and causes of access challenges were outlined. We received an update on the Primary Care Access Recovery Plan, which was focussing on empowering patients to manage their own health, implementing modern General Practice access, building capacity and cutting bureaucracy, noting the progress made to date.
18. We welcomed the wide range of roles of staff in GP practices that are available to patients and particular discussion ensued regarding the eConsult data. Members were advised that whilst all practices offer eConsults, a small number of practices operate a total triage model whereby a team of clinical practitioners review and prioritise submissions received from patients, with prioritisation of appointments based on clinical need. Members acknowledged the need to improve access but highlighted their concerns about how well this is being explained to patients.
19. Concerns were also raised regarding services offered by pharmacies, particularly prescription delivery. The Public Health Specialist informed Members that Darlington's Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment is being reviewed and as part of the review, all community pharmacies will be contacted to ascertain their offer.

### **County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust**

20. We welcomed an update on the Trust's progress against its Quality Accounts as at October 2024 to the end of Quarter 2, 2024/25.

### **Work Programme**

21. We have given consideration to the Work Programme for this Committee for the Municipal Year 2024/25 and possible review topics. The work programme is a rolling programme and items can be added as necessary.

**Councillor Mary Layton**  
**Chair of the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee**

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