



Council Agenda

6.00 pm, Thursday, 15 May 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 Meeting of this Council held on 27 March 2025 (Pages 7 - 8)
3. Declarations of Interest.
4. Sealing.
5. Announcements.
6. Questions - To answer questions (where appropriate notice has been given from):-
 - (a) The Public;
 - (b) Members to Cabinet/Chairs;
7. Council Reports.
 - (a) Constitution Update – Report of the Executive Director, Resources and Governance (Pages 9 - 14)
8. Cabinet Reports.
 - (a) Overview Report of the Leader of the Council; (Pages 15 - 18)

- (b) Overview Report of the Economy Portfolio; (Pages 19 - 24)
 - (c) Overview Report of the Adults Portfolio; (Pages 25 - 28)
 - (d) Overview Report of the Children and Young People Portfolio; (Pages 29 - 36)
 - (e) Overview Report of the Health and Housing Portfolio; (Pages 37 - 42)
 - (f) Overview Report of the Local Services Portfolio; (Pages 43 - 50)
 - (g) Overview Report of the Resources Portfolio; and (Pages 51 - 54)
 - (h) Overview Report of the Stronger Communities Portfolio; (Pages 55 - 60)
9. Scrutiny Reports - To consider Scrutiny Overview Reports:-
- (a) Adults Scrutiny Committee; (Pages 61 - 64)
 - (b) Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee; (Pages 65 - 66)
 - (c) Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee; (Pages 67 - 72)
 - (d) Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee; and (Pages 73 - 76)
 - (e) Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee. (Pages 77 - 80)
10. Notice of Motion
- (a) To consider a Motion submitted by Councillor McEwan and seconded by Councillor Mammolotti –

Nature Restoration Motion

That this Council notes:

- i) The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Since the Industrial Revolution, we have already lost half of all animals, plants and birds because of intensive agriculture, habitat depletion and climate change.
- ii) Pollination is one of the most important mechanisms in the maintenance and conservation of biodiversity, and in general, life on earth. Bees and other pollinating insects such as the hoverfly are vital in this process. Two thirds of the world's 3000 species of agricultural crops require agents for and are reliant on pollination.
- iii) 97% of wildflower meadows have been lost since the 1930s, reducing an important food source for pollinating insects. Estimates suggest it would

cost UK farmers £1.8 billion a year to manually pollinate their crops.

- iv) The State of Nature 2023 report shows that since 1970, UK species populations have declined by about 19% on average, and nearly 1 in 6 species are now threatened with extinction.
- v) A report published by UN agencies on Climate Change and Biodiversity, states that the destruction of forests and other ecosystems is undermining nature's ability to absorb and store greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which is the single biggest driver of global warming. The report concluded that climate change and biodiversity loss should be tackled together.
- vi) Nature is vital for the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink. But nature is in free-fall.
- vii) The covid 19 pandemic highlighted the importance of the relationship between people and nature. Faced with isolation during this time, being outdoors in nature offered many benefits and served, and continues to serve, as a reminder of the profound consequences to our wellbeing that can result from continued degradation of nature. There are many studies identifying clear links between robust mental health and access to green spaces and nature.
- viii) However, reports provided by the world's governments, as well as other sources of evidence, reveal examples of progress, which, if greatly scaled up, could support the transformative changes necessary to achieve the 2050 vision of living in harmony with nature.
- ix) The government states that local authorities are perfectly placed to lead by example, working with local communities, landowners and other partners in the development of local plans and strategies which support biodiversity.

That this Council believes:

- i) A thriving natural environment underpins a healthy, happy, prosperous society, and it is our duty and responsibility to support a Nature Restoration Plan to work together with the Climate Change Emergency already adopted, since they are inextricably linked.
- ii) Just like climate change, the loss of species and degradation of our natural environment is an existential threat, and the action needed is both urgent and transformative.
- iii) As well as improvements in the innate value people place in biodiversity, tackling its decline can deliver wider benefits to the environment, economy and society.

That this Council resolves:

- i) To declare a Nature Restoration Plan which, together with the Climate Change Emergency, will underpin all the Council's considerations, proposals

and decisions.

- ii) To develop a Nature Restoration Action Plan, informed by consultation with officers, councillors, experts (specifically our Ecologist and Climate Change Officer), community and environmental groups and residents. The Plan should be subject to annual review by the Climate Change and Nature Restoration groups within the council to maintain its efficacy.
- iii) To lead by example by including targeted and site-appropriate measures on council owned land and communal areas and commit to ongoing monitoring to inform further action.
- iv) To effect borough-wide measures which will include, but not be limited to:
 - (a) Ensuring the delivery of biodiversity enhancements through our planning policy and development, embedding nature recovery in all strategies, plans, including the Local Plan, and all policy areas.
 - (b) Establishing a Darlington Biodiversity and Nature Recovery Charter and Recognition Scheme, calling on all organisations, businesses, schools, groups and individuals to contribute towards net gain.
 - (c) Designing all new council housing with opportunities for net gain e.g. swift boxes, hedgehog highways (where viable) etc.
 - (d) Identifying how the town's open spaces can create net increases, with community engagement in habitat development, such as flowering meadows for pollinating insects, bee banks and ponds, and wherever possible make better links between areas as recommended in the Lawton Review.
 - (e) Providing a range of public engagement and awareness campaigns to give advice to residents, groups and businesses on how to protect and enhance habitats within their neighbourhood, and to work more closely with already established ecological and environmentally engaged groups.
 - (f) Providing training and resources for councillors and council employees about the ecological emergency.
 - (g) Integrating the targets, objectives and outcomes of this Motion, i.e. the Nature Restoration Action Plan, with those outlined in the Climate Change Plan, to ensure measures to tackle climate issues do not contravene the principles of enhancing biodiversity, and wherever possible the Council will invest in nature-based solutions to climate change, to confront the climate and nature emergencies together.

- 11. Membership Changes - To consider any membership changes to Committees, Subsidiary Bodies and Other Bodies.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'A. Wennington', with a horizontal line underneath.

Amy Wennington
Assistant Director Law and Governance

Wednesday, 7 May 2025

Town Hall
Darlington.

Membership

The Mayor, Councillors Ali, Allen, Anderson, Baker, Bartch, 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 Manager, 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 or Telephone 01325 405805

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COUNCIL

Thursday, 27 March 2025

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

APOLOGIES – Councillors Coe, Crudass, Kane, Mahmud and Pease.

ABSENT – Councillors Ali and Robinson.

66 MINUTES - TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETINGS OF THIS COUNCIL HELD ON 30 JANUARY 2025 AND 20 FEBRUARY 2025

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meetings of this Council held on 30 January 2025 and 20 February 2025.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meetings of this Council held on 30 January 2025 and 20 February 2025, be approved as correct records.

67 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

68 SEALING.

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

69 ANNOUNCEMENTS.

Welcome to the Chief Executive – The Mayor extended a warm welcome to Rose Rouse, the new Chief Executive, who was attending her first Ordinary Meeting of the Council.

Death of former-Councillor Barrie Armstrong - The Mayor announced the death of former-Councillor Barrie Armstrong, and made reference to former-Councillor Armstrong's years of service on the Council.

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

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

(1) THE PUBLIC;

There were eight questions, received with notice, from Members of the Public. Seven 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.

71 COUNCIL REPORTS.

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

72 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.

73 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.

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

There were no membership changes reported at the meeting.

COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

CONSTITUTION UPDATE

Responsible Cabinet Member – Councillor Stephen Harker, Leader

**Responsible Director – Elizabeth Davison,
Executive Director of Resources and Governance**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To approve changes to the Council's Constitution.

Summary

2. Following the senior management restructure agreed by Council on 24 September 2024, internal restructuring and organisational changes have been underway. As a result, amendments to the Constitution are required to reflect changes to senior management roles and address appointments to a number of Proper Officer and Statutory Officer roles. These changes are necessary to ensure that the Constitution remains up-to-date.
3. A number of further changes are proposed in order to better facilitate the work of the Council's committees.

Recommendations

4. It is recommended that:
 - (a) The updates and changes to the Constitution as detailed in this report, unless otherwise stated, be approved.
 - (b) The Monitoring Officer is delegated to update the Constitution to reflect the changes identified.

Reasons

5. The recommendations are supported to ensure that the Constitution is clear, accurate, up-to-date and fit for purpose.

**Elizabeth Davison,
Executive Director of Resources and Governance**

Background Papers

The Constitution of the Council

Amy Wennington: Extension 5490

Council Plan	An up to date and clear Constitution should contribute to the decision making and governance arrangements and help members and officers to deliver the Council plan.
Addressing inequalities	There is no direct impact on inequality.
Tackling Climate Change	There is no impact on climate change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	Improving the clarity of the Constitution will help with efficiency
Health and Wellbeing	There are no direct issues relating to Health & Wellbeing.
S17 Crime and Disorder	There is no direct impact on Crime and Disorder.
Wards Affected	There will be no direct impact on any particular ward.
Groups Affected	There will be no direct impact on any particular group.
Budget and Policy Framework	Amendments to the Constitution need to be approved by Council.
Key Decision	This is not an Executive Decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an Executive Decision
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

6. The Council's Constitution prescribes the framework for Council decision making and the procedures that are followed.
7. Some updating of the Constitution will be needed from time to time as a matter of good house-keeping, and there are also a number of updates and changes proposed to ensure that the overall Constitution remains up-to-date and fit for purpose.

Senior Management, Proper Officer and Statutory Officer Roles

8. Following the senior management restructure agreed by Council on 24 September 2024, internal restructuring and organisational changes have been underway. As a result, amendments to the Constitution are required to reflect changes to senior management roles and address appointments to a number of Proper Officer and Statutory Officer roles.
9. Part 1 of the Constitution (Summary and Explanation) details the Statutory Employees, with Paragraph 40 outlining the appointment of the Council's Statutory Scrutiny Officer. Following the amalgamation of the roles of Democratic Manager and Elections Manager, this role will now be undertaken by the Democratic and Elections Manager, and the Constitution should be updated to reflect this new role.
10. In Part 2 (Responsibility for Functions), the table at Paragraph 23 outlines 'local choice functions', and the Constitution sets out in detail who is responsible for them. A number of references are made to the 'Group Director of Services', however this should be corrected as follows:
 - (a) Point 8 within the table – reference to the 'Group Director of Services' to be changed to 'Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection';
 - (b) Point 9 within the table – reference to the 'Group Director of Services' to be changed to 'Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection';
 - (c) Point 10 within the table – reference to the 'Group Director of Services' to be changed to 'Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection';
 - (d) Point 12 within the table – reference to the 'Group Director of Services' to be changed to 'Executive Director for Environment, Highways and Community Services, and the Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection';
 - (e) Point 13 within the table – reference to the 'Group Director of Services' to be changed to 'Executive Director for Environment, Highways and Community Services, and the Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection';
 - (f) Point 14 within the table – reference to the 'Group Director of Services' to be changed to 'Executive Director for Environment, Highways and Community Services, and the Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection';

- (g) Point 15 within the table – reference to the ‘Group Director of Services’ to be changed to ‘Executive Director for Environment, Highways and Community Services, and the Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection’; and
 - (h) Point 16 within the table – reference to the ‘Group Director of Services’ to be changed to ‘Executive Director for Environment, Highways and Community Services’.
11. Part 2, Schedule 4 (Scheme of Delegation to Officers) outlines the Statutory Officer and Proper Officer Powers, and again an amendment needs to be made to reflect that the Council’s Statutory Scrutiny Officer will be the Democratic and Elections Manager (as opposed to the Democratic Manager).
 12. Within this section, it also identifies the Assistant Director, Law and Governance as the Returning Officer, however, as part of the senior management restructure, the role of Returning Officer will now sit with the Chief Executive, and so the Constitution should be updated to reflect this.
 13. As a consequence of this change, the Chief Executive will also become the Proper Officer for the purposes of discharging the functions identified under the Representation of the People Act 1983, the Local Elections (Principal Area) Rules 1986 (now the Local Elections (Principal Area) Rules 2006), and the Local Elections (Parishes and Communities) Rules 1986 (now the Local Elections (Parishes and Communities) (England and Wales) Rules 2006) within this section, and the necessary amendments to the Constitution will need to be made.
 14. Likewise, the Assistant Director, Law and Governance, is currently listed as the Electoral Registration Officer within this section, however this role has also been transferred to the Chief Executive, and will need to be updated accordingly.
 15. The Property Procedure Rules make a number of references to the ‘Assistant Director, Economic Growth’ (namely at paragraphs 3, 4, 6, 10, 17, 24, 36, 37, 40, 43 and 46), however the role no longer appears on the organisational structure and therefore reference to this position should be updated to the ‘Executive Director, Economy and Public Protection’.
 16. Paragraph 17 of the Property Procedure Rules states ‘Where Property is to be acquired by the Council including by a compulsory purchase order the Group Director of is to be responsible for seeking Cabinet approval...’, and in light of the recent structural organisational changes ‘Group Director of’ should be updated to ‘Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection’.
 17. Paragraph 35 (c) of the Property Procedure Rules refers to the ‘Group Director of Services’, and again this should be updated to ‘Executive Director for Economy and Public Protection’.
 18. Paragraph 2.9 of the Anti-Bribery Policy and Procedures references Luke Swinhoe as the Assistant Director, Law and Governance, and should be amended to reflect Amy Wennington’s appointment to the role following Luke Swinhoe’s retirement.

19. The same paragraph also lists Elizabeth Davison as the 'Group Director of Resources', and this should be amended to 'Executive Director, Resources and Governance', to reflect the revised job title.

Council Committees

20. Part 2, Schedule 1 of the Constitution outlines the Council's Committees, their membership and their powers. It is proposed to update the protocols for both the General Licensing Sub-Committee and Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee, to reflect that the Chairs of the respective parent Committees (the General Licensing Committee and the Licensing Act 2003 Committee) also chair meetings of the sub-committees.
21. It would seem appropriate that, where a Special Responsibility Allowance is paid for the discharge of a role, that the individual elected exercises that role in relation to all matters pertaining to that committee, especially in this case, where the majority of matters dealt with in relation to licensing are undertaken by the sub-committees.
22. Where the Chair is unable to attend a meeting of the sub-committee, then the Vice-Chair will chair in the Chair's absence, and where neither is able to attend the meeting, then a Chair will be elected from those in attendance at the meeting.
23. The protocol for the General Licensing Sub-Committee will read *'The Chair of the General Licensing Committee shall chair meetings of the General Licensing Sub-Committee. If the Chair of the General Licensing Committee is not in attendance at a meeting of the General Licensing Sub-Committee, then the Vice-Chair will chair the meeting in the Chair's absence. Where neither the Chair or Vice-Chair is present, then a Chair will be elected from those Members in attendance at the meeting. Cabinet Members cannot be appointed as Chair or Vice-Chair of the General Licensing Sub-Committee'*.
24. The protocol for the Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee will therefore read *'The Chair of the Licensing Act 2003 Committee shall chair meetings of the Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee. If the Chair of the Licensing Act 2003 Committee is not in attendance at a meeting of the Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee, then the Vice-Chair will chair the meeting in the Chair's absence. Where neither the Chair or Vice-Chair is present, then a Chair will be elected from those Members in attendance at the meeting.. Cabinet Members cannot be appointed as Chair or Vice-Chair of the Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee'*.

Council Procedure Rules

25. Chairs and Vice-Chairs of committees are currently appointed at the respective committee's initial meeting of the Municipal Year. In recent years this has resulted in committees not having Chairs or Vice-Chairs in place for a number of weeks at the beginning of the Municipal Year, which has delayed work in relation to work programming for Scrutiny Committees, and decisions taken under delegation in relation to the Planning Applications Committee.
26. Other local authorities include a provision within their Constitution to allow their Full Council to appoint the Chairs and Vice-Chairs to committees when approving the membership of committees at their Annual Meeting of the Council. This enables Chairs

and Vice-Chairs to be in place from the beginning of the Municipal Year, thus removing any unnecessary delays to working.

27. It is therefore proposed to amend Paragraph 1 (f) of the Council Procedure Rules to enable the appointment of Chairs and Vice-Chairs at the Annual Meeting of the Council. Paragraph 1 (f) will therefore read: *'Appoint Scrutiny Committees, Quasi-Judicial Committees and Statutory and Subsidiary bodies as the Council considers appropriate to deal with matters which are neither reserved to the Council nor are Cabinet functions; and appoint the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the Adults Scrutiny Committee, the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, the Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee, the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee, the General Licensing Committee, the Licensing Act 2003 Committee, the Planning Applications Committee, the Audit Committee, the Council Decision Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group, and the Climate Change Committee'*.

Consultation

28. The Constitution update has been raised with Chief Officers and Senior Managers as part of the review. Groups Leaders have also been consulted on the proposed changes.
29. The Local Government Act 2000 requires that the adoption of a local authority's Constitution is exercised by the Council.

COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

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.

Darlington Station

2. Delivery of the Darlington Station project continues at a pace and ahead of scheduled completion at the end of this year when south-bound high-speed long-distance trains and trains between Darlington and Saltburn will begin to use the new platforms. Whilst trains between Bishop Auckland and Saltburn are expected to continue to use the same platforms as now.
3. The TVCA-led work to the multi storey car park continues to make good progress with the lifts currently being installed within the car park and external landscaping work having started. The final scope for the associated highway works has now been agreed with Darlington Borough Council and highway authority agreement is being progressed, which will enable the multi-storey car park and station building to come into operation at the end of the year.
4. The East Coast Main Line was closed during six weekends throughout February and March to enable works to be carried out at several sites including Darlington station. Network Rail completed track and infrastructure work to the Dinsdale/local lines, as well as work to facilitate the track for the new platforms. During these closures, the first two spans of the new footbridge were successfully lifted and slid into place. The third span (which doesn't require a weekend railway closure) is due to be complete by the end of April. Network Rail are also continuing with the fit out of the new station concourse, including installation of the mechanical and electrical equipment, plastering, and installation of the escalators.
5. TVCA, along with support from Darlington Borough Council, have been actively progressing the outstanding survey / environmental cleaning work that is required in advance of the remaining demolition work for the Western Gateway scheme. Demolition is expected to commence from the beginning of May and be complete by late summer, which will then allow the highway and public realm improvements work to commence later in the year. We are currently working closely with LNER to agree the sequencing of the main works to ensure this aligns with their plans for the Porte Cochere.

Active Travel and Bus Priority Improvements

6. Across Tees Valley, the development of several active travel and bus priority improvement schemes continues ahead of delivery commencing later this year. Specifically in Darlington, statutory consultation on the Northgate to Darlington Town Centre and the

Woodlands Road Phase 2 schemes are expected to commence in late April / early May 2025 and works on site are expected to start at the end of summer.

7. Other schemes identified as part of the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) programme are also continuing to progress with the statutory consultation phase expected later this year and delivery commencing from late 2025 or early 2026.

Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) update

8. Contracts have been put in place for the supported services, as outlined at the previous meeting, enabling these services to continue from 1 April.
9. At the TVCA Cabinet meeting on 27 March 2025, it was agreed to introduce a new bus pass for Tees Valley care leavers ages 17-25. TVCA are currently working with the bus operators to finalise the details for how this will operate, and further details will be announced shortly.

City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (2027-2032)

10. TVCA are continuing to work with the Department for Transport and Government in relation to the previously announced City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement for the period April 2027 to March 2032 (referred to as CRSTS2). A programme was agreed by TVCA Cabinet in January 2024 based on the previously announced £978m of funding and work has begun, over the last 18 months, to develop these projects.
11. TVCA is currently awaiting the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review in June, at which it is expected clarity will be given as to any amounts of devolved transport funding that Mayoral Combined Authority from 2027 onwards.
12. Transport has been identified with government as a joint shared priority for the local growth plan, with recognition that our Tees Valley aspirations can't be achieved without improvements to transport accessibility and travel experiences to better connect workers across the region to employment and industrial sites.

Climate Change

13. The Cross Party Climate Change Working Group met on 24 April, where the members heard progress updates from the Assistant Directors of Community Services and Environmental Services & Community Safety.

External Meetings and Engagement

14. Since the last meeting of Council the following are some of meetings and events I have attended:
 - (a) Citizenship Ceremony
 - (b) Town Deals Board
 - (c) Visit with Take Root Bio Ltd
 - (d) Various TVCA Cabinet and Transport Committee meetings

- (e) S&DR 200 Railway Pioneers Exhibition at Hopetown
- (f) YMCA Listening event
- (g) Various Transport for The North, and Rail North meetings
- (h) Quarterly meeting with PCC's office
- (i) The Mayor's Ball
- (j) Darlington Foodbanks
- (k) Darlington Building Society's AGM
- (l) MP briefing

Councillor Steve Harker
Leader of the Council

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY PORTFOLIO

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 1,109 requests for service in Quarter 4 2024/2025. The main categories of these requests are:
- | | |
|------------------------|-----|
| (a) Food | 158 |
| (b) Licensing | 85 |
| (c) Noise | 221 |
| (d) Planning Enquiries | 77 |
| (e) Refuse | 62 |
| (f) Pests | 175 |
| (g) Personal searches | 183 |
3. Advice has been given in One Darlington magazine to dog owners on steps that can be taken to minimise dog barking. Barking dog complaints (359 in 2024) account for 40% of all noise complaints received each year. Officers from Environmental Health are working with Communications, to plan for Noise Action Week (19 – 24 May 2025) to highlight this issue. A review is also being undertaken of the procedure for investigating barking dog noise complaints.
4. The former owner of popular Darlington takeaway 'Spice 4 U' has been prosecuted for hygiene offences and ordered to pay more than £1600 in fines and court costs. A routine inspection by Darlington Borough Council's environmental health team in September last year, uncovered a string of hygiene offences at the Cockerton based business including filthy structure, equipment and poor food handling practices. This resulted in the business receiving a 0-star hygiene rating. A number of immediate actions to improve the cleanliness of the premises and associated equipment were identified by the council which business owner, Mr Choudhury, failed to comply with. Following an interview under caution, the council progressed a prosecution under the Food Safety and Hygiene (England) Regulations 2013.
5. Since the start of February Environmental Health have been conducting visits to check products being sold are safe for consumption. Many sweets and fizzy drinks imported from the US contain chemicals which are banned in the UK or additives which may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children. The team have been liaising with local businesses about the risks posed by imported confectionary and asking them to withdraw stock that is not compliant with UK regulations. The warning comes following a series of inspections carried out by Environmental Health, where nearly £1,600 of confectionary containing dangerous ingredients was seized from eight local shops. Media reports and TV

interviews have helped to promote the campaign. It has also been shared on TikTok where it has had 380k views, 8k likes, 292 comments and 8.5k shares.

Climate Change

6. Following the departure of the Climate Change Officer, we have undergone a recruitment process. From a very strong set of candidates, I am delighted to say that we have appointed an internal candidate and HR processes all being well, they will be in post from 12 May.

Development Management

7. 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. The Agreement is however yet to be signed.
8. 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.

Building Control

9. We have now completed the first reporting quarter for Building Safety Regulator KPI returns. Returns for the quarter are to be submitted prior to 30 April 2025. The Building Control team continue to work towards preparing all relevant reports to be submitted to the BSR.
10. The government's Building Safety Levy has now been confirmed to be postponed until autumn 2026. It is still thought that Building Control will be the collectors and administrators of the Levy within DBC. The Building Control team continue to take every opportunity to learn more about the expectations from MHCLG and prepare for the levy introduction. This may take up further resource from the Building Control service and a resource review will be required in the run up to autumn 2026.
11. Following the departure of our previous Building Control Manager, the post has now been filled internally, and that candidate is now undertaking the post of Building Control Manager within the Building Control team. Two members of the surveying team have dropped to part-time working patterns. Further recruitment is underway at present, and we hope to appoint further Building Control Surveyors soon.
12. 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. Some recent reports were received about works being undertaken which may have been a general health and safety concern. Appropriate steps were taken to inform the HSE about potential unsafe working practices.
 - (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.
13. General – Following incidences of inclement/stormy weather we saw a large upturn in reports of dangerous structures to the Building Control team. This had a significant impact on available resource for other, general Building Control business. All incidents have been dealt with accordingly in relation to Building Control involvement, ensuring safety of the public within the Borough. Reports appear to have slowed following a spell of calmer weather.

Business Investment

14. The number of business investment enquiries has increased since the start of the year. The main areas of interest continue to be from the hospitality sector, but there has also been a noticeable number of new enquiries from the local industrial/manufacturing sector looking for follow-on space.
15. The Business Investment Team have continued to promote the range of business support services available through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund before the programme ended on 31 March 2025.
16. The Business Investment Team have attended the following Business Events:
- (a) Cockerton Business Club – 3 March 2025
 - (b) Tees Valley Labs Demo Day 2025 – 5 March 2025
 - (c) Small Business Strategy & Business Growth Service National Review Workshop – 19 March 2025
 - (d) Made in the Tees Valley - Sold to the World Event – 25 March 2025
 - (e) Steam Ahead - the Darlington Big Big Project Finale Presentation – 25 March 2025
 - (f) NECC Showcase at Teesside Expo – 27 March 2025
 - (g) Business Central 10th Anniversary Event – 7 April 2025

Towns Fund

17. The Towns Fund Programme continues to deliver on its objectives with the public realm enhancements in Coniscliffe Road completed on target in March 2025, some minor revisions to planters ongoing. Shopfront works continue in the final phases on both Victoria Road and Skinnergate & the Yards.
18. Enabling works are underway on the former Northern Echo building, with Adult Skills facilities likely to be operational by early 2026 and completion of the full building by the end of 2026.
19. Work has commenced on 156 Northgate to transform an historic building into quality office space, this should be completed by December 2025.
20. Contracts are with procurement for works to Edward Pease House, with a target start on site date May/June 2025. It is anticipated that the refurbishment work will be finished in autumn 2025. Development of the disused site on Garden Street into an urban green space has commenced with an artist being appointed in March 2025 to begin research.

Estates

21. The Blackwell parkland continues to be enjoyed by regular users and newcomers alike with positive feedback; the maintenance company for the parkland, Brambledown are carrying out regular inspections and can be contacted directly should any issues arise. The new footpath from the parkland to the bus stop on Grange Road near the hotel entrance has now been completed with safety barrier installed. A similar barrier is to be installed outside the other footpath access on Grange Road. The 'Heritage Park' residential development by Homes by Esh is now well underway with early purchases continuing and show homes due to be open early May.
22. The Burtree Garden Village development which includes the Council's land at High Faverdale Farm has now started and the infrastructure works which will open up the site from Rotary Way in the south and Burtree Lane in the north are progressing well. The Phase 1 reserved matters planning applications are now being progressed and the farmhouse and buildings have been demolished.
23. The procurement of the town centre regeneration development partner has been paused temporarily awaiting the arrival in early May of the Council's newly-appointed Executive Director of Economy and Public Protection will take an active role in the process.

Planning Policy

24. Work is ongoing on a new Homes Strategy for the Borough. It is hoped a draft will be presented to Cabinet in July seeking approval to consult on a wider level.
25. The built environment is important to the Borough and its Conservation Areas play an important role in its appearance. Conservation Area Appraisals should be reviewed every five years. Many of the Borough's Conservation Area Appraisals are out of date and a systematic review is now taking place concentrating on the Conservation Areas on Historic England's 'at risk register' as a priority.

26. A review of the Northgate Conservation Area Appraisal has taken place and consultation has occurred. It is hoped this will be adopted by the Council at this meeting.
27. A new Conservation Area Appraisal and designation of a Conservation Area for Middleton St George has been prepared and consulted upon. It is hoped this will be adopted by the Council at this meeting.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF ADULTS PORTFOLIO

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. We have received confirmation from the Care Quality Commission (CQC) on the 5 May 2025 that the final report will likely be published within the next three weeks, and we will be updated once they have a publication date.

Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG)

3. The new risk assessment has embedded alongside development in governance and oversight. The change in approach within Occupational Therapy (OT) interventions; 'High Support High Challenge' has been positively accepted across the OT Team. We received additional Better Care Fund (BCF) grant monies of £175k in February which has enabled ASC to continue approving the highest risk individuals and families throughout the financial year. Moving into a new grant period, we are confident with the process and considerations that are in place to meet the outcomes of those of highest needs.
4. We currently have 58 people awaiting a DFG all risk and impact assessed. 23 properties are currently undergoing work with contractors on site or planned to be on site for small works such as ramps, level access showers and stair lifts. We have 6 properties approved for major works (extensions to support ground floor living and access) awaiting contractor availability.

Bed Lever and rails Risk Assessment

5. Adult Social Care (ASC) had over 400 historic bed lever and rail equipment prescribed orders to support people in our community. Following a medical alert and Health & Safety (H&S) Executive requirements, the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) tasked LAs to develop a system for risk assessments.
6. ASC now have a risk assessment built into our client data base system and any new prescribed bed lever/rail equipment is risk assessed at the point of delivery, and if ongoing risks are identified there are regular reviews. ASC currently have 21 bed lever and rail risk assessments outstanding, and these have been individuals we have struggled to contact; they may have moved home, deceased etc. We have linked with our partner agencies to explore all information sources and continue to achieve contact or conclusion.

OT Technician

7. ASC have moved to a formal arrangement with Stockton Home Improvement Agency with a 3-year contract from 1 April 2025 supporting minor works.

Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS)

8. DoLS referrals have slightly increased. Agency Best Interest Assessors (BIA's) have reduced and x10 in house BIAs are now being allocated assessments alongside agency BIAs. BIA training is planned for April 2025 to enable additional BIA's to be trained this includes x4 Social Workers and x2 Occupational Therapists (OT's).

Safeguarding (SG)

9. The numbers of safeguarding concerns received have increased alongside complexity. The main themes of concerns are self-neglect within the working age demographic and acts of omission from care homes. We continue to respond 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. Two care homes remain in our Executive Strategy procedures. ASC work closely with our internal and system partners to support the provider make required improvements against the action plan. Lifted suspension is in place for one care home whilst monitoring of improvements are undertaken whilst another is currently suspended from accepting new admissions.

Adult Social Care Teams

11. **Hospital Discharges** - Referrals remain high, and complexity has increased resulting in a higher use of intermediate care beds and short break stays following discharge. This remains under constant review.
12. **People awaiting allocation** - Any referrals awaiting allocation continue to be closely risk assessed and reviewed. All people waiting for allocation have had a detailed contact assessment and have been signposted and provided with appropriate advice and information. All are low risk and have three-monthly contact to ensure needs have not changed.

Commissioning and Contracts

13. The Government announced that the rate of employers' national insurance contributions will increase by 1.2% from 13.8% to 15% from April 2025. Further, that the level at which employers start paying national insurance contributions will also reduce from £9,100 to £5,000 per year. Following a review of the impact of these changes on Darlington's care market, the Council agreed to increase the staffing element (i.e. increase in payroll costs) by 1.2%. The increase will apply to those care providers on the Council's Adults residential and Home Care and Support frameworks.
14. A review of Working Age Adults Residential contract arrangements has been successfully completed. This involved contract negotiations with local providers that care for young

adults who require the most complex care and support services. Typically, the care will involve people with complex learning disability needs and enduring mental health care requirements. The review consisted of new specifications that strengthened outcome-based and person-centred care arrangements, a revised fee formula and greater clarity with regard to situations where care needs may increase during the care arrangements.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

15. The first meeting of the Lead Safeguarding Partners took place on 17 March 2025. Partners discussed the agreed changes which will become effective from 1 April 2025 and the Executive Director of People will undertake the Chair for the coming year. The main change is the introduction of a Management Group represented by the Delegated Safeguarding Partners which will become the decision-making group reporting into the Lead Safeguarding Partners. This group met for the first time on 10 March 2025 and the Assistant Director Children's Services will Chair this group for the coming year. The Terms of Reference and governance for all Groups will be reviewed in light of these changes to ensure they are explicit about the role and responsibility of each group at each level of the partnership and membership is to be reflected accordingly.
16. Other changes include a revision to the current Independent Chair/Scrutineer role held by Ann Baxter. This will become an Independent Scrutineer role only and will focus on quality assurance, audits and organisational scrutiny. Ann has made the decision to step down and Partners thanked her for her valuable contribution to safeguarding over the past ten years, her leadership has been greatly appreciated, and she will be very much missed by all in Darlington.

Councillor Anne-Marie Curry
Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Adults

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Children and Young People Portfolio.

Early Intervention and Front Door

2. The Children's Initial Advice Team continues to be a stable and effective team. It is clear from performance data, audit work, feedback and outcomes, that in the main the Children's Initial Advice Team is ensuring the right service to our families, without delay. The conversion rate of contacts to referrals to social care has decreased over the past 12 months and this is testament to the work that has been carried out to make sure decision making is proportionate, families do not experience unnecessary social care assessment and that first and foremost children are safe and that the service provided meets the needs of children and families.
3. The Family Time Service remains a stable and effective service for our children and their families as they continue to focus on maintaining relationships between children and their families when children are cared for by the Local Authority. The team work closely with social care teams and offer a wide range of support alongside facilitating and supervising family time sessions. More recently the team have supported with completing aspects of life story work, providing transport for young people and they are assisting with visits to families where there can be a focus on parenting work to inform assessment. The team also continue to link closely with partners, for example, the Housing team and there have been instances when there are white goods, furniture and household items that might have ordinarily been disposed of now being recycled for use by our families in need.

Building Stronger Families Service

4. Work is ongoing to monitor the quality and effectiveness of the refreshed Early Help Assessment. Initial indications are positive and feedback from families is encouraging. In addition, partners are starting to engage in a more proactive way and the number of external Early Help Assessments being initiated is increasing.
5. The Building Stronger Families management team have begun work to move the offer to one that is locality based, in line with the way social care teams deliver their service. Development of locality working for universal and targeted early help is in its early stages but is timely given the Family Help and Child Protection reform work that will increase in pace over 2025 and into 2026. 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)

6. 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 what is expected of them, and the oversight and governance that they provide to the Service.
7. The YPEJS have moved to new premises, the team is now situated at the Town Hall. This has been a positive transition and there does not appear to have been any impact on the young people we serve.

Safeguarding Assessment and Care Planning including Children with Disabilities

8. Within the Assessment and Safeguarding teams workloads have remained relatively stable with an average of 16 children per social worker and the highest being 26.
9. As a service we continue to focus on assessment and visiting timeliness. Where assessments are overdue a rationale for this is recorded on the child's record and a new timescale set. We have requested a new weekly performance report to support with improving visiting timeliness. This report is sent to senior managers and team managers on a Friday afternoon to show data for the following week. The data reports both overdue visits and visits due within seven days. This will assist the team manager to have a better grip of performance in this area.
10. Within the children with disabilities team a new role has been developed within existing resources to improve the quality of social care advice for children with an EHCP. This is in response to concerns about the quality and ensuring families are directed to the right support for their needs. This role is in development and will be working in partnership with the SEND team.
11. A new legal review meeting has been introduced to monitor children who are subject to a letter before proceedings or care proceedings. This is to ensure parallel planning is being completed and enable applications to court to be planned and following completion of all assessments. Data from CAFCASS shows that Darlington have reduced their applications to Court by almost half between the years 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 which shows that there is robust support for families to prevent them reaching the point of crisis.

Children in our Care and Care leavers

12. We have 12 taster flats currently occupied, five of our young people are over 18 and bidding on properties ready for move on, four young people have secured their own tenancy and are awaiting a move-in date, two Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children share a two-bed property, 1 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.

13. Data from 29 March 2025 evidenced we have 266 children in our care with 22 of 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 been a number of children returned to families under Placement with Parents, and plans are in place to review these placements within 6 months to prepare for discharge.
14. We have 143 care leavers supported by the team aged 18-25. This is the same as last month, we also support 55 care experienced young people under the age of 18 years. We keep in touch with our care leavers and there are regular opportunities for them to come together for activities and support. Recent activities have involved shows at the Hippodrome, matches at Middlesbrough Football Club and well-being walks.
15. 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. 89 young people are now attached to the programme, six waiting to be matched to mentor, eight planned ends from the project, an increase of 20 young people since January 2025. 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 in employment, raising their own families whilst also helping younger children in our care, we look to appoint more mentors in the future.
16. We received confirmation of government grant funding at the same funding amount as last year, this allows us to continue with our Peer Mentoring project for a further 12 months.
17. 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 received 12 months funding for this project which ended October 2024. 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. We are attending a full Rotary meeting to present project.
18. Staying Close continues to enhance the support provided to our young people who are preparing to leave care; we are currently supporting 23 young people. This number remains consistent as young people come to the end of their support journey and have achieved their goals. The project has supported 39 young people since April 2023 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 "she makes sure I'm getting the help I need", "she always listens to me, gives amazing advice, she never lets me down", "the targeted support offered to this young person by the staying close PA has been crucial to their success", "The support I have got is the best".

Fostering and Supported Lodgings

19. As at the end of March 2025, we have 55 approved foster carer households, 31 of which are supporting 54 children, 30.1% of which are long term matched. We have 49 approved connected carers, with 40 households supporting 53 children, accounting for 31.7% of the children that are in foster care.
20. The Fostering & Supported Lodgings team continues to support the service in completing viabilities. In the last quarter January 2025 to March 2025 the team was requested to complete 20 viability assessments. In the same period the team has started 12 Connected Carers assessments and three Special Guardianship assessments. In January 2025 Coram Baaf who develop and licence the Form C form for Connected Carers have launched a new Form K that combines the Form C and the SGO assessment into one document. The team is currently in the initial stages of training and implementing the Form K and hope that it should streamline the assessment of Kinship carers and reduce duplication of work.
21. The Team have received 4 Expressions of Interest through Fostering with Northeast in the period January 2025 to end of March 2025. Unfortunately, three of the applicants withdrew their expression of interest for personal reasons and one expression of interest we continue to follow up the enquiry. One of the applicants has since come back for further information and we are hopeful that this could lead to an application being made. In the last quarter we have had one new Foster Carer approved, looking ahead we have three Foster Carers at a Panel on 8th April 2025 and potentially a further Foster Carer at a panel at the end of April or start of May 2025. The team is currently operating two panels per month to deal with the increase in connected carers needing to be approved. As previous discussed we have recruited an additional panel chair and inducted four new independent panel members providing greater capacity.
22. With regards to panel outcomes over quarter 4, we have had seven Connected Carers approved, one Foster Carer approved and one Foster Carer resignation. This carer has fostered for over 25 years and a celebration event was organised to recognise her retirement and achievement.
23. Fostering Recruitment is led by Fostering with Northeast who have had radio and TV campaigns as well as targeted social media campaigns for teenage and separated children that have featured on the Darlington Borough Council social media pages. The Team is targeting Fostering Fortnight in May 2025 to both celebrate and recognise our own foster carers, but also to create promotional material to recruit more foster carers. We are planning events and a campaign to create videos again of carers on this year's theme of the "power of relationships".
24. As part of the 2025/2026 Fostering Recruitment strategy we recognise that we have a gap in in house foster care provision for teenagers generally. We also recognise strategically that teenagers are often the most difficult children to find a home for and also the costliest. We have developed a teenage pathway for foster carers to both encourage existing carers to find a home for a teenager and to attract new, experienced carers from other areas and agencies to join Darlington. The package of support recognises the challenges carers face in supporting teenagers whilst also ensuring we meet the support

needs of a teenager in our care. Support will include input from virtual school, Family Group Conference service, CEDARS as well as peer fostering support. The planning and development is in its infancy, however foster carers have been identified and consulted as well as a consultation meeting with key stakeholders. It is envisaged that by the end of the next quarter we will have this in the pilot phase and will be able to identify a carer and teenage child.

Foster Carer Recruitment

25. Our 2025 recruitment strategy alongside Fostering with North East's recruitment is to target certain key dates this year, these include:
 - (a) Fostering Fortnight – May 2025
 - (b) World Refugee Day – June 2025
 - (c) Supported Lodgings Week – July 2025
 - (d) Kinship Carers Week – October 2025
26. 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 Hope Town etc and events at local amenities during the above weeks can create some good content and awareness.
27. 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

28. The registered manager for CEDARS resigned and left her post on 31 March 2025.
29. We recruited to this post with the new manager commencing in post on 24 March 2025. They have commenced registration with Ofsted, as the registered manager of CEDARS.
30. The new registered manager for Gilling has commenced the re-registration of Gilling children's home and her registration as the registered manager of the home. The recruitment for staff for the home is ongoing.
31. Harewood Hill Lodge had its annual Ofsted inspection in March and maintained its GOOD grading.

Education

32. Heighington C of E Primary School was recently inspected by Ofsted. The previous inspection outcome was "Good." Inspectors found the school has taken effective action to maintain the standards identified at the previous inspection. Inspectors recognised that pupils flourish and the school goes the extra mile to make sure all pupils are safe and take part in all aspects of school life. The school has exceptionally high expectations of pupils' academic and personal success.

33. Heathfield Primary School has also maintained the standards identified in the previous report in the school's recent inspection. Inspectors recognised that pupils thrive at the school. Staff have high expectations of pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities and parents appreciate the nurture and education their children receive.
34. In Borough Road Nursey School's recent inspection the schools was found to have maintained the standards of the previous inspection when the school was judged to be "Good." Inspectors recognised that Borough Road Nursery School has high expectations for all children. The report detailed the inclusive ethos of the school and the highly skilled leaders and staff who support children with special educational needs and / or disabilities, ensuring that all children have the key knowledge and skills ready for their next steps in education.
35. Red Hall Primary School was judged to have maintained the standards of the previous inspection where it was judged "Good" during the school's recent inspection by Ofsted. inspectors recognised that pupils are prepared well for life beyond school. Pupils are well cared for by nurturing staff and they enjoy warm relationships with the adults in school. Expectations of pupils' achievement are high and appropriate support is put in place to help pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities achieve well.

Youth Unemployment

36. The 18-24 claimant count has risen slightly from 6.6% (495 young people) in December 2024 to 6.9% (515 young people) in February 2025. Darlington at 6.9% is still higher than North-East average (6.1%) and National average (5.6%). In the same period the North-East average rose by 0.2%, and the England average rose by 0.3%. This rise could be as a result of seasonal employment ceasing after the Christmas period.
37. February 2025 figures for the Tees Valley shows a similar increase across all five local authorities. Darlington continues to have the lowest claimant count in the Tees Valley (December 2024 figures in brackets):

(a) 8.7% (8.4%)	Stockton
(b) 8.8% (8.2%)	Hartlepool
(c) 8.1% (7.7%)	Middlesbrough
(d) 7.7% (7.3%)	Redcar & Cleveland
(e) 6.9% (6.6%)	Darlington
38. 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 has just been extended to 31 March 2026.
39. By the end of February 2025, the team had engaged 162 participants (against an overall contract target of 104) with 77 (48%) moved into employment (against an overall contract target of 24). Of those above 79 of the 162 participants were aged 16-24 (49%) with 38 of those moving into work (48%).

40. 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

41. A formal launch of the Darlington Young Carers Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was held on 12 March to coincide with the national Young Carers Action Day. The launch reflected upon a number of strengths in Darlington, including the designated young carers support service and the positive work in schools to progress the Young Carers Charter. The launch also included a debut video developed by Darlington Young Carers for other young carers outlining what being a young carer means to them. A further follow on event is taking place on 29 April to progress the mobilisation and implementation of the MOU, which will include a further video from Darlington Young Carers tailored to professional audiences.
42. The joint work with the 12 North East Councils to review placement costs and activity for children in care has continued to progress with focused provider engagement forming the next part of the workstream. This joint analytical work has been undertaken concurrently with joint fee negotiations with providers where the majority of the placing councils are from the North East which has had positive early results. The review will be concluded in early Summer 2025.

Tackling Child Poverty

43. Child poverty is a growing national and regional issue. The latest DWP data on children living in poverty published late March 2025 for the year 2023/24 is currently being reviewed. This data shows rising numbers of children in poverty across North East England. We continue to support the work of the North East Child Poverty Commission and are currently undertaking a review to understand the work currently undertaken across services that has a positive impact on those living in poverty. National government is also due to publish a national strategy to tackle child poverty later this year.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

44. The first meeting of the Lead Safeguarding Partners took place on 17 March 2025. Partners discussed the agreed changes which will become effective from 1 April 2025, The Executive Director of People will step in as Partnership Chair for the year. The main change is the introduction of a Management Group represented by the Delegated Safeguarding Partners, which will become the decision-making group reporting into the Lead Safeguarding Partners. This group met for the first time on 10 March and the Assistant Director Children's Services will Chair this group for the year. The requirements require Education to be involved in safeguarding arrangements and its decision making and there will be four representatives covering Primary, Secondary, Tertiary and SEND provision. The Terms of Reference and governance will need to be reviewed in light of

these changes to ensure they are explicit about the role and responsibility of each group at each level of the partnership and membership is to be reflected accordingly.

45. Other changes include a revision to the current Independent Chair/Scrutineer role held by Ann Baxter which will become an Independent Scrutineer role only to focus on quality assurance, audits and organisational scrutiny, the recruitment process will take place over the next few weeks. Ann has made the decision to step down and Partners thanked her for her valuable contribution to safeguarding over the past 10 years.
46. The Partnership published its Child J Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review on 21 February. Child J died from a head trauma consistent with a non-accidental injury whilst in the care of his mother's partner. This review explored what happened leading up to the significant incident and reflected on key themes that helped the Partnership understand what happened and what that meant for Child J and other children in the family home, to help improve multi-agency responses in the future.
47. The review identified important learning for the multi-agency safeguarding partnership to consider and reflect upon regards current systems and practice. The following themes were identified:
 - (a) The child's lived experience and what it was like to be an infant and child in this family
 - (b) Neglect and its impact on child development and wellbeing
 - (c) Parental mental health - impact on parenting and family functioning
 - (d) Unseen or unconsidered adults and caregivers within the household and their role with regards the children
 - (e) Effectiveness of multi-agency working in identifying and meeting the children's needs
27. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnership Group met on 2 April, the agenda covered the new multi-agency Safeguarding Partnership arrangements, the findings of the Child J report and a focus on Suicide Prevention.

Councillor Nick Wallis
Children and Young People Portfolio

COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING PORTFOLIO

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. We have reached the end of the one-year research programme for the roll out of the Eyes on the Baby training, to aid in preventing SUDI (sudden unexpected death in infancy) in Darlington. The multi-agency approach to the tiered levels of training has been well received locally with a diverse steering group to aid in the dissemination. The final numbers as of 31 March show that 217 people have completed the training with representation including the Police, Building Stronger Families, Housing, Looked After Children, Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust and local childcare providers.
3. Public Health and Environmental Health have been working on a significant joint project which involved looking at improvements in hygiene and infection prevention in care homes within Darlington. The work has resulted in a 75 per cent decrease in outbreaks of gastrointestinal illness associated with care homes in the past year. Project findings were shared via poster presentation at the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) national conference in March and have attracted regional, national, and international interest.
4. Public Health have been working with Environmental Health on another project with adult social care and education settings, as it has become apparent that some premises have been running a 'hatching project', which means they have baby chicks on site. As this presents an environmental health risk the council have been working with settings to make sure they understand and can comply with national guidance, related to stopping the spread of avian flu. This work will be showcased at the national UK Health Security Agency conference in May.
5. Confirmation has been received of the following ring-fenced grants for 2025/26, delegated to the Director of Public Health:
 - (a) Drug and Alcohol Treatment and Recovery Improvement Grant (DATRIG)
 - (i) The funding allocation of £1,000,006 is used to commission additional capacity in drug and alcohol treatment and recovery services.
 - (b) Local Stop Smoking Services and Support Grant
 - (i) The funding allocation of £108,687 is for additional investment in commissioned stop smoking services and support, to provide greater capacity,

and for local action to increase demand. It is expected that the additional funding will result in an increase in the number of people setting a quit date and successfully quitting.

- (c) Following the government announcement on 7 March of plans to implement (or expand) a national targeted supervised toothbrushing programme for children aged three to five, it has been confirmed that Darlington will receive a funding allocation of £37,411. Utilising the additional investment, work is underway to expand the existing supervised toothbrushing scheme which is already established in Darlington. It has also been confirmed by Ministers, following a public consultation, that there will be an expansion of community water fluoridation in the North East.

Health and Well Being Board

- 6. At the meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board on 13 March the annual report of Darlington's Safeguarding Partnership was presented, and the Board received an update on the Better Care Fund. Additionally, the ICB Director of Delivery shared an update on NHS Planning and a paper was brought forward setting out proposals for the refresh of the Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment, which is a statutory responsibility of the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- 7. The Board also agreed the next steps for putting the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy into action. There will be a deep dive review of two agreed priorities each year; the June meeting will focus on pregnancy and early years and the December meeting will focus on mental health and resilience. Furthermore, there will be annual review of the Strategy at the September meeting.

Housing Services

Housing Contact

- 8. In 2024-25, our Housing Contact teams received 63,442 telephone calls from our tenants and other residents enquiring about Housing Services. This is only slightly higher than the previous year of 63,163 calls. However, in 2024-25, 89.6 per cent of calls were answered, compared to 84.6 per cent of calls in 2023-24. The average waiting time for answered calls in 2024-25 was four minutes and 36 seconds and therefore, within the Corporate Customer Services Strategy target of five minutes and an improvement on previous years performance.
- 9. Our investment in our Housing Contact teams over the past 12 months demonstrates our commitment to deliver excellent customer services to our tenants.

Universal Credit

- 10. The managed migration of Housing Benefit to Universal Credit for our tenants is continuing at a pace and is due to be completed in 2025-26. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will continue to contact households receiving income related Employment and Support Allowance to invite a claim for Universal Credit. Support is available from the DWP over the telephone and through visiting officers. The DWP has also introduced a new Complex Case team, to ensure the safe transition of more vulnerable customers to

Universal Credit and prevent anyone from having their legacy benefit stopped before they move to Universal Credit. Support is also being provided by our own Tenancy Sustainment team to ensure none of our tenants lose any of their benefits during the move from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit.

11. As at the end of March 2025, 2,447 of our Council tenants were receiving support with their housing costs through Universal Credit, with only 409 working aged Council tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit.

Acquisitions

12. I am pleased to report that Housing Services has recently completed the purchase of two former Council properties, previously sold through the right to buy scheme, with another two properties currently being prepared for exchange of contracts. Both properties will initially be made available for our Housing Options team as temporary accommodation to house homeless families, supporting our new Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

Refugee Support

13. Our Housing Services Refugee Support team had the pleasure of hosting our first 'Communities Together' event in collaboration with other Local Authorities across Tees Valley. Over 60 people from Darlington attended the event at the Dorman Club in Middlesbrough.
14. The event celebrated the diverse cultures in the area and offered an opportunity for people to get involved in something that may not usually have the opportunity to. Attendees were able to meet up and make friends with all the people we support across the Tees Valley and ultimately to have a wonderful day taking part in all the activities on offer, such as plant potting, arts and crafts, inflatables, dancing and singing. Refreshments were provided in the way of local curries, smash burgers, cotton candy, popcorn and drinks.

Rough Sleeping Winter Pressures 2024/25

15. Darlington Borough Council has recently received the Rough Sleeping Winter Pressures grant for 2024-25 of £127,164. This grant is to support people in housing crisis and prevent homelessness and rough sleeping.
16. We intend to use this money productively in working with landlords to help residents sustain their tenancies and access new tenancies, supporting our Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, including:
 - (a) Providing resources to fund ongoing support to people when they are accommodated to help them sustain their accommodation; this could include engagement with faith and community-based organisations.
 - (b) Paying rent arrears in private, social or supported housing, where threat of eviction can be prevented.

- (c) Paying historical rent arrears to enable access to social housing or supported housing, where arrears are a barrier to access.
- (d) Paying private rented sector deposits, rent in advance and landlord incentives.
- (e) Funding personalisation budgets.
- (f) Providing home starter packs to enable rapid rehousing.
- (g) Making payments or the provision of goods to enable people to stay living with family or friends for a longer period, until alternative accommodation can be arranged.

Rent Collection 2024-25

- 17. During 2024-25, our Housing Services team collected £30.35m of rent and service charges, compared to £27.90m in 2023-24, an increase of 8.8 per cent. This is the highest collection rate for 5 years, which was 98.15 per cent for 2024-25, compared to 95.97 per cent in 2023-24. This has been a huge achievement for the team, as our tenants continue to face the challenges of the cost-of-living crisis and the nationwide migration from Housing Benefit and other legacy benefits onto Universal Credit.
- 18. Universal Credit is paid in arrears and our Housing Services team has been contacting tenants at the earliest opportunity, providing advice and support, to ensure that reasonable and robust payment arrangements and processes are in place.
- 19. Rent arrears have subsequently reduced from £1.07m in March 2024 to £0.88m in March 2025. Rent arrears as a percentage of the rent charged was 2.85 per cent for 2024-25, compared to 3.69 per cent in 2023-24.

Neasham Road Site

- 20. Many members will be aware that the Neasham Road construction site was broken into on 27 April and several properties were significantly damaged. These were empty homes nearing completion so no residents were hurt thankfully, however this damage will have a huge impact on the completion of the site.
- 21. I am devastated by the mindless damage, especially because it will delay the completion of much needed new good quality council homes and is a blow to the dedicated team who are building such excellent houses.
- 22. Work is ongoing on assessing the damage and security has been increased on site. The Council is working closely with the Police, who are investigating. I continue to urge anyone with any information to speak to the Police.

Health in Haughton

- 23. The Move More team supported Health in Haughton Matters in their application to the National Lottery "Awards for All" grant last year. The successful £20,000 application is now supporting a supplementary programme to enable Haughton to expand on the existing programme. The new programme consists of; a move to improve session, mat

Pilates and additional children's sessions. The Move More team are working with Pulmonary Rehabilitation at Darlington Memorial Hospital who are signposting patients into the move to improve session every six weeks. Feedback from the first referral session has been positive. In the coming weeks, the aim is to add further activities such as netball to the offer. Over 300 attendances are consistently being recorded each week to the overall Haughton Matters programme.

Inclusion Programme

24. Darlington Move More Team have been working with Sport for Confidence and Teesside University on developing a new boccia session at the Dolphin Centre starting Monday 7 April, following a successful application of £12,000 to the Sport England movement fund. The bid includes new inclusive boccia equipment, line marking of the main sports hall, funding for the session and leaders to be trained up from internal and external inclusive services and occupational therapists. The team have linked up with Dimensions, The Links, Darlington Association of Disability, Foundations, Lakeside Lodge and social prescribers to promote the session; and the overall programme of inclusive activity sessions the team delivers within our existing provision across Darlington.

Dolphin Centre

25. Work continues to install 399 photovoltaic (PV) panels on the flat roofs of the Dolphin Centre and is expected to complete late Summer.
26. Further signage has been developed at reception to encourage customers to download information on activities and services using QR codes rather than taking away a leaflet to save on paper and a further acknowledgement to our commitments around the environment.
27. A new booking office has been opened on the first floor of the Dolphin Centre to facilitate bowling admissions and memberships. The relocation of memberships will support the customer journey and experience for new members and will reduce queue times at main reception.
28. The Dolphin Centre website is being redesigned to give the website a fresh look with improved functionality. The work is expected to be fully complete by June.

Councillor Matthew Roche
Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Health and Housing

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF LOCAL SERVICES PORTFOLIO

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

Climate Change

2. Darlington Hippodrome has become the newest members of the Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership (DEEP). The network, overseen by Darlington Cares, was launched last year to promote sustainability, share best practices, and encourage collaboration on green initiatives.
3. The Hippodrome are looking forward to sharing ideas on building a greener future and the Theatre has made a 'Pledge to the Planet,' (promoted to our audiences) to commit to sustainability in everything we do. This includes minimising the leaflets and posters we print, using sustainably sourced paper, and opting for digital alternatives wherever possible. The Hippodrome are also reducing their carbon footprint by working with local suppliers, promoting the cycle-to-work scheme, encouraging hybrid working to cut car journeys, and using automated lighting systems. Even the colourful lights that illuminate the theatre's façade are now all LED.

Highway Maintenance Programme

4. In December 2024 the government announced a further £500m of funding was to be awarded to local authorities across England for 2025/26. This funding is for Highway maintenance works including roads, footpaths and structures, with discretion on how to spend this locally based on our current condition surveys and areas of greatest need. Darlington's settlement equates to £902,061 however DFT will only release 75 per cent of this initially (£676,546) with the remaining 25 per cent (£225,515) to be released in January 2026 once the Council are able to satisfy the Department for Transport (DFT) they have met the qualifying criteria. DFT have sent all authorities a template which needs to be completed and submitted for review prior to January 2026.
5. Highway Maintenance schemes due to start:
 - (a) Unc. Barnes Road: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.268km)
6. Highway Maintenance Schemes on site:
 - (a) Patching Contract: Carriageway Patching (six sites)
 - (b) A67 Sadberge Road Roundabout: Carriageway Resurfacing (0.223km)
 - (c) Unc Allington Way: Carriageway Resurfacing (0.832km)

Bus Services

7. Through S106 funding the service 6 and 6a will see an enhanced service with a daily evening service and an hourly daytime Sunday service being introduced in May 2025. These enhancements will operate for a minimum three-year period. Tees Flex is continuing until August 2025, a decision beyond this period is awaited from the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA).
8. TVCA has been successful in a bid for Zero Emission Bus Regional Area (ZEBRA) funding, which will see electric buses coming to Darlington, with all 'town' services operating with new electric vehicles. There is a significant lead-in period, but it is anticipated these buses will be on the road by the end of the year.
9. The under 22 fares promotion will continue for the financial year 2025/26. There is also a scheme to provide bus passes for care leavers agreed.

Safer Routes to School

10. **Table 1** below shows progress on all our Safer Routes to School (SRTS) 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	Ward Member Briefing	Scheme Consultation	Portfolio Holder sign-off	Traffic Regulation Order Consultation	Potential Cabinet (if we receive objections)	Construction (currently programmed)
Hurworth Academy School 20mph Zone	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Complete	Works were completed during the 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
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

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**Levelling Up Funding 2 (LUF2)**

11. TVCA are proposing an active travel scheme adjacent to the River Skerne and St Cuthbert's Way to improve cyclist and pedestrian priority with the Levelling Up Funding received. The scheme is anticipated to be on site later this year and will be delivered by the Council.

Resident Parking Zone (RPZ) Review

12. Communities & Local Services Scrutiny Committee requested consider differential charging rates for permits depending on impacts from various vehicles. The scope has been considered and initial findings were presented to the committee in early April. A wider consultation on RPZs is expected in the early Summer.

Hopetown Darlington

13. Hopetown Darlington welcomed 625 Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rangers and 180 Guide Leaders from Darlington, Durham, Northumberland, Yorkshire and Leeds on Saturday 29 March to celebrate the launch of the Girlguiding North East England Railway Challenge – Celebrating 200 years of railway travel. The groups explored the site as well as taking part in a Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) session before visiting Wagon Woods and 'Experiment!' our immersive experience. The event was also attended by the Deputy Lord Lieutenant Cyndi Hughes with representatives from Rail 200 and Network Rail.
14. 'Railway Pioneers - Celebrating the Railway Rockstars of the Past' opened at Hopetown Darlington on Friday 4 April. In celebration of the start of the S&DR200 bicentennial anniversary festival, three iconic locomotives are on show in the historic Grade II listed Carriage Works until 22 June 2025. The locomotives showcase the advancements of rail technology in the early 19th century as well as the engineering innovation which led to the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway. These early locomotives were critical to future rail success, and Railway Pioneers is a unique opportunity to see them all in one place. The original preserved Locomotion No.1 returns to Darlington for the exhibition. This iconic engine, designed and driven by George Stephenson on the historical first journey in 1825, is an integral part of Darlington's history, included both on the town's coat of arms and the football team's crest. Joining Locomotion No.1 are replicas of two

other classic locomotives: the Pen-y-Darren, designed by Richard Trevithick in 1804, and 'Steam Elephant', designed by John Buddle and William Chapman in 1815.

15. The working replica of Locomotion No.1 underwent two weeks of testing at Weardale Railway in preparation for the Anniversary Journey event in September. The public will be able to see the replica Locomotion No.1, the replica passenger carriage Experiment and three replica S&DR coal chaldron wagons cross the historic Skerne Bridge on 27 September for the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. Hopetown Darlington will have a programme of bicentenary events throughout September to compliment the SDR200 festival programme.
16. Hopetown Darlington celebrated Easter with a programme of events, including walkaround characters, an egg-rolling tournament, Easter bonnet parade and live music. There was also an exciting programme of spring and animal-themed activities running throughout the school holidays for visitors.
17. On Monday 5 May, a VE Day 80th Anniversary celebration event was held at Hopetown Darlington. Local community groups were invited to a street party in the Goods Yard and general visitors also joined in with the celebrations and party atmosphere, which included street music and dance performances from The Daisies, Kellen Dance ft. FitLab and HC Vocal and Performance Academy. There was also the opportunity to view and handle historical objects related to the railways and join the Stockton & Darlington Railway 26 Miles Heritage Team for reminiscing activities. Many thanks to the Stockton & Darlington Railway 26 Miles Heritage Team for supporting this event.

Libraries

18. I am delighted to share the news that the library won the prestigious National EDGE Award for Digital Innovation. Judges' comments as follows:

"The Hive's digital transformation has been extraordinarily successful. Sometimes the word 'digital' can be overused and be so general it loses all meaning, but what Darlington have done is made the digital tangible - they've made digital resources and activities of so many kinds available to groups who really need and appreciate them. In doing so I'm confident they redefined the idea of what a public library is for their local community and have converted scores of youngsters into lifelong library users. I've chosen them as winners partly due to the sheer impact of what they've done - this digital transformation has had a halo effect on all their services. Digital borrowing is up, educational interactions are up, website use is up and the number of people visiting the library is way up. People come for the digital transformation, and they STAY for everything else we have to offer in libraries. Finally, it's hard to imagine better feedback for anything, ever, than this comment from a Year 3 pupil who visited The Hive: "This is the best day of my entire life!" Congratulations to our incredible winners!"

19. The Library Manager attended the award ceremony and was surrounded by professionals from as far away as the USA. Colleagues from around the UK and world were impressed at what has been achieved in our little library service in Darlington and were looking to learn and see what they could do to improve both their building and their service delivery. Thanks must be offered again to all those involved in the project and delivery of the

service in what they have achieved. Our library services should continue to be a source of great pride for our borough.

20. Our libraries are noting a positive rise in digital borrowing and with the help of the Communications and Marketing Team, have begun a new campaign called 'Books that Bloom'. Attractive postcards have been created using seeded paper, these have been distributed around businesses and venues around the town, and they detail the quick, easy and free way people can access magazines, newspaper books and audiobooks. The postcards are then planted and wildflowers bloom. We expect an increase in library membership and digital issues as well as general awareness of our fantastic free service.
21. The library has recorded the highest number of book loans seen in Darlington for seven years, up 22 percent from last year. A total number of 296,542 items were borrowed from Darlington and Cockerton library during 2024/25.
22. To Celebrate World Book Night and Reading Hour, on the 23 April a big book giveaway was organised of Cathy Bramley's, The Surprise Visitor. These were given to non-library users at venues including the Cornmill Centre to encourage those who wouldn't usually read, to pick up a short story and enjoy it. There was also an author event on the evening with Gervase Phinn.
23. A packed-out programme of events is on offer throughout May for Local History Month aiming to increase awareness of local history, promote history in general to the local community and encourage all members of the community to participate. At Darlington Library we have fascinating talks, displays, art collections and writing workshops available and have linked many to the celebrations of the Stockton to Darlington Railway celebrations.
24. Our libraries are offering special book displays to mark VE Day, as well as a lovely display in the Centre for local Studies which showcases how Darlington celebrated the end of the war in 1945.
25. In the run up to this year's celebrations of the Stockton & Darlington Railway Bicentennial, our library team have been visiting nurseries and pre-schools to tell younger residents the story of the railways and why this year is so special in Darlington. 223 children were gifted a free book pack containing "All Aboard Train" by Seb Braun.

Hippodrome

26. March and April saw great occupancy levels with family audiences attending Horrible Histories and adult audiences attending the popular 'Rocky Horror Show'. High occupancy across the period has resulted in great food and beverage income supporting the theatre's business plan.
27. In April and May, the Hippodrome programme has a great mix of drama, family shows, dance, musicals and music including 'Dracula', The Easter Panto, 'Milkshake!' Live, Steve Steinman and Ballet Lorent.
28. Darlington Operatic Society present hit show 'Everybody's Talking About Jamie' 30 April – 10 May which marks the end of the celebrations for Darlington OS and

Darlington Hippodrome's centenary year.

Creative Darlington

29. Mike Connell's 'Observed Surroundings' exhibition was displayed in the Art Gallery at Darlington Library from Saturday 15 March 2025 to Thursday 10 April 2025 securing 2,442 visits to the Art Gallery. Darlington Association of Photographers' 'Where in the North?' exhibition runs between Saturday 12 April 2025 and Thursday 8 May 2025 invites visitors to guess where their untitled photographs were taken in the North of England.
30. North East Culture Award's Visual Artist of the Year 2024, Lizzie Lovejoy, devised and led the Circe's Island project in Darlington supported by Creative Darlington budget and Arts Council England Project funding attracting 179 audience members across five workshops, a performance day, an exhibition, and digitally.

Town Centre Partnership and Events

31. Following an Innovation Challenge TVCA project, the events team created a mobile Easter Trail. Over 20 businesses joined in with prizes, offers and competitions to encourage visitors to explore Darlington through the Easter holidays. The team are looking to utilise this app for further trails working with the businesses in the town centre.
32. The MAM Markets Team programmed their annual Food Festival with specialist food traders setting up and welcoming thousands of visitors to the town centre for the May Bank Holiday
33. Echo 3 hosted their Star Wars Day, a great independent raising money for a local, chosen charities each year. Their chosen charities for 2025 are Mac My Day, MediCinema, CHUF, and Spaniel Aid.
34. Dance schools from across the town performed their annual mass dance to thousands of spectators with a railway-themed mix of songs at the beginning of May. The weekend of 16 to 18 May sees the return of the Groovefest weekend programmed alongside many of the town centre hospitality venues with the aim to attract new visitors to Darlington.
35. The horticulture and town centre teams welcomed our judges for the annual Northumbria in Bloom competition with a further visit in the summer as well as national Britain in Bloom judges coming to Darlington.

Environmental Services

36. Garden waste collections are underway for the current growing season. Collections commenced on Monday 17 March 2025 and will run through to Friday 5 December 2025.
37. The Environment Act 2021 brought into place new legislation around recycling. One of the new requirements is that all businesses with 10 or more employees must separate dry mixed recyclables and food waste from general waste by 31 March 2025 (businesses with fewer than 10 employees will commence on 31 March 2027). Staff from Environmental Services have liaised directly with all DBC trade waste customers, providing advice and

guidance on their obligations and signposting to the support available.

38. Grass cutting operations commenced towards the end of March. All wildflower areas have received the relevant attention with displays becoming visible over the next few months.

Councillor Libby McCollom
Local Services Portfolio

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF RESOURCES PORTFOLIO

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

Revenues and Benefits

2. I am pleased to be able to report the Council Tax and Business Rates collection data for 2024-25, which has been another successful year for our Revenues and Benefits team:
 - (a) For the Council Tax due in 2024-25, we collected 96.32%, which is only a slight decrease in the performance for the previous year of 96.39%. Benchmarking data for 2024-25 will be available later this year, but the latest data from 2023-24 shows that our previous two years' performance was higher than the national average of 95.94% and the regional average of 94.93%. In terms of amounts of Council Tax collected, this was £79.29m in 2024-25, including £1.85m arrears collected for previous years. This compares to £74.46m in 2023-24, an increase of 6.1%.
 - (b) For the Business Rates due in 2024-25, we collected 99.82%, a very slight decrease in the performance for the previous year of 99.97%. Benchmarking data for 2024-25 will be available later this year, but the latest data from 2023-24 shows that the previous two years' performance was better than the national average of 97.23% and the regional average of 97.78%. In terms of amounts of Business Rates collected, this was £32.54m in 2024-25. This compares to £29.44m in 2023-24, an increase of 10.5%.

Climate Change

3. The opportunity was taken during annual Council Tax and Business Rate billing to remind residents and businesses that paperless e-billing is the most efficient way to pay with the added benefit of reducing paper consumption, the campaign has increased e-billing take up by 19%.
4. The Network refresh which started at the beginning of the year sees the replacement of network switches with new more efficient equipment which will help reduce power consumption. In addition, the Netcall Contact Centre system has recently been refreshed with two physical servers virtualised effectively reducing the physical server count by two, this subsequently reduces power consumption.
5. The works on The Dolphin Centre to include a new 399 panel Photovoltaic array and a replacement 100KW Combined Heat Power (CHP) are continuing and will be completed late summer.

Artificial Intelligence

6. Supported by the LGA, we are working in collaboration with councils across the country to understand artificial intelligence (AI) technology and how it could be beneficial in local government. We continue to see opportunities for it to help the council be more productive and efficient. We are focusing on ensuring we have the right governance in place so any sensitive information we have is kept secure, we know how our information is being processed and managed, and how issues such as bias could affect the products generated by the AI tools.
7. Some highlights to note since the last update to Council (September 2024) include:
 - (a) Three existing members of staff voluntarily started a level 4 apprenticeship in business process analysis, but with a focus on the use of AI within local government. It is intended the learning from the apprenticeship will contribute to the development of an AI strategy for the Council.
 - (b) We have been successful in our bid to be part of a pilot for a product called MINUTE that has been created by central government. The pilot is expected to commence before the summer.
 - (c) We are continuing to explore the benefits of Microsoft CoPilot. As the product develops, we will continue to assess the cost benefit of deploying it more widely across the organisation.
 - (d) Subject to the release of external funding, we will be part of a regional trial of an AI product called Magic Notes which is designed to support the activities of staff within children and adults social services.
8. As reported to Council in September 2024, we remain on track to have a clear plan in place for the application of artificial intelligence before the end of 2025.

Enjoy Darlington

9. Following feedback from businesses, residents and tourists it's been agreed to rename the Love Darlo social media platform to 'Enjoy Darlington'.
10. Enjoy Darlington is already a well-established brand with a successful TikTok account and a [popular website](#). By bringing all the platforms together under the one name, we will unify our visitor communications channels and make it easier for people to find the information they need - particularly people from outside the borough.
11. Our highly skilled marketing team, which already looks after the existing Enjoy Darlington platforms, has brought back in-house the management of the renamed social media accounts. The channels will continue to focus on increasing footfall to the town centre and will still share the same high-quality information about things to do, see, buy and enjoy across Darlington. We will also explore new opportunities to attract a wider audience and further strengthen the existing offer.

12. We have shared content on the council's social media channels alerting people to the channel's name change and would welcome support from members in raising awareness of the changes.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

13. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) On the Darlington Railway Station scheme Network Rail's contractor are working on the fit out works and the external areas by Willmott Dixon are nearing completion. The delivery of the scheme is being managed by TVCA.
 - (b) Neasham Road and Sherborne housing schemes continue to progress on site with the initial phases of houses handed over at the Neasham Road site.
 - (c) The contractor appointed for the No. 156 Northgate refurbishment scheme has commenced the site works. This project aims to transform a vacant, listed building into office space. Much of the site strip has been completed ahead of refurbishment works that will be completed in the New Year.
 - (d) A similar refurbishment scheme for No. 142 Northgate will be going out to tender shortly. Forming part of the original Pease House, following procurement, the ground floor will be returned to its original residential form, and the intention is to operate a rail heritage interpretation space in partnership with the Friends of Stockton & Darlington Railway.
 - (e) The main refurbishment work at the former Northern Echo Building is progressing with works underway on the internal refurbishment.
 - (f) The next phase of demolition at the Skinnergate Housing site is now complete with the demolition and clearance of No.2 Raby Terrace.
 - (g) Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
 - (h) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Staff Wellbeing

14. April was Stress awareness month which is an annual event observed every April since 1992, dedicated to increasing public awareness about the causes and cures for stress. Our HR team has developed a stress awareness calendar which ran throughout April to provide lots of tips and ideas on how to manage stress with different initiatives for each day. During this month as part of the Mental Health Awareness week which takes place from 12th to 18th May, our HR team have encouraged employees to take up the walking challenge to promote mental wellbeing and fitness amongst our staff. The last challenge walked approximately 6,000 miles across 13 teams, and it is hoped to go further with this challenge.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 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)

2. Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour Trends for Darlington:

Darlington	YTD March 2024	YTD March 2025
Crime	12005	10391
ASB	2246	2620

Crime

3. The year-to-date figure is significantly lower than the same period last year, by 13%. Specific areas of crime with comparative increasing trends are: drugs offences, racially-aggravated crime, rape, burglary (business and community) and possession of weapons. All reported incidents of violence have reduced to varying amounts (16% reduction) and harassment has reduced by 19%.

ASB

4. The ASB year-to-date figure is higher than the same period last year, by 17%. During the reporting period there was an increase in anti-social behaviour associated with a gathering of youths travelling from outside the area into the Town Centre and causing significant incidents of ASB. Additional measures were introduced to address the ASB, including a police-led ASB Dispersal Order, additional uniformed staff on patrol, increased youth intervention work, increased staffing within CCTV room and increased civic enforcement.
5. During the reporting period the Young People’s Engagement and Justice Service have received 12 referrals into the Early Intervention and Prevention Pathway from the Civic Enforcement Team.
6. Between 5 December 2024 and 31 March 2025:
- (a) 12 young people received first warnings for ASB
 - (b) 13 young people received acceptable behaviour agreements (ABA)
 - (c) 7 committed ABA breaches
 - (d) 12 young people were referred to Darlington Borough Council Young Peoples Engagement and Justice Service for positive intervention

- (e) 7 young people are awaiting interview.
- (f) 1 young person has received a Civil Injunction and another young person's case is being processed.

Parking and Environmental Enforcement Activity

- 7. Since the last reporting period officers have continued to enforce parking contraventions and tackle problems associated with fly-tipping and waste in back lanes, the figures below provide an overview of activity.
 - (a) 142 enviro crime cases (of which 107 closed)
 - (b) 1 Fixed Penalty Notices issued for Breach on a Community Protection Notice (£100)
 - (c) 1 Community Protection Warnings (CPW) issued
 - (d) 1 Community Protection Notices (CPN) issued
 - (e) 2 individuals were prosecuted for obstructing investigations, with one individual ordered to pay £1674. A second individual was fined a total of £458
 - (f) A further Case was adjourned until 2 April 2025 for 3 offences (related to fly tipping)
 - (g) Trail cameras to improve CCTV deployment options are being used
 - (h) 5235 Penalty Charge Notices (PCN) have been issued in the last nine months. During the period of 01/04/23 – 31/03/24 6396 PCNs were issued.

Begging Incidents

- 8. Begging incidents during the first three months of 2025 have shown a significant increase of 74 recorded incidents, compared to the same period the previous year. Dedicated patrols and joined-up partnership working is underway to address this and showing signs of improvement.
- 9. There is currently a cohort of 17 people begging who teams are engaging with to provide all available support mechanisms. Intelligence is gathered amongst partners and reviewed at multi-agency meetings to determine the most appropriate solutions and actions. Support is offered through a dedicated outreach worker who engages and signposts individuals to the appropriate services.
- 10. Media campaigns focussed on begging continue to educate members of the public on ways to report incidents of begging.

Licensing

- 11. Licensing have commenced plans for the introduction of the Tobacco and Vapes Bill currently going through Parliament and anticipated to receive Royal Assent later this year. Whilst Trading Standards will be the enforcement agency, a new licensing regime will need

to be established. This will require co-ordination between regional and national networks and will be a substantial piece of work within tight legislative timescales.

12. Two separate prosecutions are ongoing for illegal dog breeding involving four defendants. These cases have been listed for trial at Peterlee Magistrates Court later this year.

Trading Standards

13. The trading standards team have assisted in multi-agency work alongside Police, Immigration and HMRC in relation to illegal vape and tobacco sellers. Large seizures have been made, and investigations are ongoing. They have also assisted in a number of visits to barber shops to check on legal compliance.
14. The team have also undertaken joint visits with the Licensing team to businesses licensed to sell alcohol. Issues have been discovered and appropriate action taken. Information gathered of interest to other teams within the council such as illegal American sweets has been passed over for investigation.
15. The team routinely undertake a series of programmed inspections to high-risk businesses, and these have been completed for the 2024-25 year. These have included visits to car dealers, vape sellers, farms, and the most complained about businesses. Visits were also undertaken to e-bike suppliers and repairers and advice given on lithium batteries and recharging. With the introduction of new vape legislation coming into force on 1 June 2025 banning disposable vapes, the team have commenced visits to retailers to ensure that they are all aware of the changes.

Plan for Neighbourhoods

16. Darlington was included in the second tranche of Long Term Plan for Towns announced in March 2024. With the incoming Government the programme was paused in July and then in November it was announced that it would be replaced with an initiative with a revised focus as part of a wider regeneration programme.
17. A prospectus for Plan for Neighbourhoods was published on 5 March 2025 outlining the new approach and confirming that Darlington is one of the 75 eligible authorities.
18. £20 million will be provided to Darlington over the next 10 years.
19. The intention of the programme is to bring communities together, allocating funding to improve living standards and give people in the 75 recipient locations more of a stake in their future.

Neighbourhood Boards

20. The government will support the establishment of new Neighbourhood Boards, for local people to address deprivation and regenerate their local area.

21. Each board is required, in partnership with their local authority, to develop a 'Regeneration Plan', setting out its vision for the next decade alongside a more detailed 'Investment Plan' for the first four years of the programme.
22. The Government recognises that there are existing 'Town Boards' and governance structures already in place to deliver the previous administration's Long-Term Plan for Towns programme. It is expected that these Board will form the basis of the new Boards.
23. Neighbourhood Boards are required to confirm finalised membership and any proposals to alter their place boundaries by 22 April 2025.
24. The existing Towns Board met on 1 April, where it was agreed that the existing membership would be proposed for the Neighbourhood Board.
25. The Board also discussed how community engagement and capacity building could be undertaken. The chair of the Board will meet with the Voluntary and Community Sector Engagement Group in May.

Household Support Fund

26. Household Support Fund (HSF) will be extended from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. As has been done for previous schemes, the fund will be made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need. This will be the fifth extension to the fund since its inception in October 2021.
27. Authorities are required to send a delivery plan to DWP by 30 May 2025 which outlines their intentions for The Fund, clearly setting out their priorities and approach for use of the Fund, and to demonstrate the ways in which they intend to allocate their funding.
28. The objective of The Fund is the same as the previous extension in that it is to provide crisis support to vulnerable households in most need of support to help with significantly rising living costs.
29. The last rounds of the Fund covered a six-month period however this round covers a full year. Allocations have been published with Darlington's being £1,610,640.10.
30. In Darlington, the fund is delivered by third party organisation with a significant proportion being administered by Darlington based voluntary sector organisations.
31. Previous rounds of Household Support Fund have been successfully delivered, reaching a wide range of households requiring support and achieving both planned outputs and spend.
32. Therefore, this programme builds on that delivered in previous rounds and includes:
 - (a) Food Vouchers over holidays for children eligible for free school meals

- (b) Support for Care Leavers
- (c) Vulnerable families supported by Voluntary Sector (targeted using the Low Income Family Tracker):
 - i. Support for Elderly - support will be targeted at those pensioners whose annual income is low enough for them to be in receipt of some form of support from the Council or DWP as a consequence of their low income recorded on the LIFT dashboard but not in receipt of Pension Credit.
 - ii. Lone Parent Households with children living in poverty.
- (d) Support for Elderly with energy bills – a targeted programme delivered by Age UK to improve the energy efficiency of homes by installing energy saving devices.
- (e) Support for Food Banks - there are ten foodbanks across Darlington. The largest is at King Centre on Whessoe Road. All food banks are seeing an increase in demand. Whilst there are numerous reasons why people use food banks the increase in fuel costs is cited frequently as is reducing monthly budgets. There is an increase in demand from working families but also a growth in demand from the elderly.
- (f) Uniform Exchange Scheme - the scheme, established during the pandemic, has grown in use and is well supported by uniform donations. It reduces a significant cost burden parents experience in sending children to school.
- (g) Crisis Support Grant - discretionary support will be provided to low income households living in Darlington who are in financial hardship and struggling to manage their essential expenditure. Delivered by Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB), the support will be focussed on households who are being acutely affected by the Cost of Living Crisis and who may be in significant debt.
- (h) Preventative Support - guidance for this round of HSF explains that the fund may be used to prevent poverty locally and build local resilience. This can include activity which prevents vulnerable residents from falling into - or falling further into – crisis. Citizens Advice Bureau will provide:
 - i. Fuel Efficiency Advice/Support
 - ii. Financial and Income Maximisation Service

Councillor Jim Garner
Stronger Communities Portfolio

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF ADULTS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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 inspection outcome from an 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), was a structured approach to evaluating the performance of local authorities in delivering Adult Social Care services. It aligns with the goals of the Health and Care Act 2022, which aimed to ensure high-quality, equitable, and sustainable care for individuals in need.
4. This report demonstrated how CQC assurance Framework evaluated how local authorities assessed needs and provided necessary support. Additionally, The Assistant Director, Adults, explained the assessment criteria of the inspection and the methodology used by the CQC. Reference was then made to how surrounding local authorities had been graded in accordance with this structure.
5. Members commented upon how the narrow margins of the scoring criteria could separate a Local Authority from being “Good” or “Requires Improvement”. Members were reassured that other Local Authorities had also flagged this concern, and were provided further explanation as to how the clear criteria used by the CQC establishes a fair result.
6. The Assistant Director, Adults, then went on to discuss the improvement focus outlined in the framework. I then asked that this be taken into account and that the Darlington’s score be proactively responded to once returned by the CQC.

Mapping of Provisions within the Borough including Commissioned Services

7. The Assistant Director, Commissioning, Performance & Transformation, provided a report regarding the mapping of provisions within the Borough which also referred to commissioned services. It was made clear to members that external bodies commissioned by the Council would also be made aware of the CQC guidelines and that they were to adhere to them.
8. Members were informed of both the Livingwell Directory and Information on Commissioned Services, which internal members of staff within the council have access to and are encouraged to actively engage with.

9. The report outlined the Strategic Framework of Adult Social Care, specifically discussing The Accommodation with Care and Support Strategy 2024-2027, and members were assured that this guided the provision of services in Darlington.
10. The aim of this framework is to emphasise innovative housing solution, the use of assistive technology, and the use of local provisions. The intent of this being the reducing of reliance upon residential care homes, increasing independence, and minimising the need for out-of-borough placements by meeting needs locally.
11. The Assistant Director, Commissioning, Performance & Transformation, discussed the Supported Living provision for individuals. Applying to those who share accommodation with on site-support staff, those who share communal facilities, and those living independently.
12. The report also made reference to Specialist Services like the North East Centre for Autism, in addition to outlining the Target Groups listed in the strategy.
13. The Assistant Director, Commissioning, Performance & Transformation, went on to address the challenges and future directions of the service, notably surrounding financial and demographical pressures. The report addressed potential innovative solutions such as reducing residential care usage and encouraging provider collaboration.
14. The report looked into the procedure of accessing adult care and support services in Darlington, the institutions in Darlington who offer the service, and other preventative services such as Health and Wellbeing Programs, Social Prescribing and Assistive Technology.
15. Members questioned the use of technology, and were reassured that emphasis is being placed upon building confidence in utilising the technology available. Discussion followed regarding the need to integrate the use of technology whilst also maintaining an element of “human touch”, and as a result we had a productive discussion surrounding encouraging/training young people to join the service.
16. I brought a close to the discussion by asking for a look into what is and is not provided already by the service area and how such can be improved, and I was reassured that any provisions we do not have capacity to provide currently are being provided by services out of area.

Shared Lives

17. The Assistant Director, Commissioning, Performance and Transformation, introduced the Shared Lives model of support and provided an overview of the new service offer. The report outlined how the Council had conducted a Homecare and Supported Living re-tender exercise in 2024, resulting in the establishment of the Shared Lives service. The Committee was made aware of encouragement upon the community to utilise spare rooms to provide care, with those who engage being provided with full training.
18. Members commented upon the increasing trend of family members moving away from those receiving Adult Social Care, and how this has affected the strain on the service area.

Additionally, members questioned whether the offer of the Shared Lives service would result in an uptake in both recipients of the service and providers of care, to which the Assistant Director, Adults, responded by stating that there is no guarantee, and this trend will be evaluated as the service is deployed.

Work Programme 2024/25

19. We acknowledged that this was the last meeting of the Municipal Year, and that we were satisfied that all interests had been discussed sufficiently.
20. Members opened discussion into potential focuses to be included in the forthcoming work programme for the new municipal year. As a result, Members of the committee commented upon successful areas of discussion in this year's meetings, and our intent to monitor them going forward. I also urged members and officers in attendance to be cognisant of any items of interest that had previously been discussed, and to address them when compiling the forthcoming work programme.

Councillor Andrew Anderson
Chair of Adults Scrutiny Committee

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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.

Elective Home Education

2. We welcomed the Assistant Director of Education and Inclusion who presented members with an update on Elective Home Education in Darlington. Parents have a legal right to choose to electively home educate their child and the local authority has certain duties regarding the monitoring of education being provided and enforcement action where it is judged a suitable education is not being provided. We were informed that a refreshed version of the legislation is currently being considered by the House of Lords before ratification after which it will be implemented by local authorities.
3. Members were informed that parents have a legal right to withdraw children into home education assuming full responsibility for the child's education, with the local authority having responsibility for monitoring that suitable education is provided. Darlington employ an Elective Home Education advisor for this role who also sits on the Vulnerable Pupils Panel. We were notified that the post-COVID period showed a significant rise in children being home educated – 2023-24 shows 390 children compared to 250 in 2021-22.
4. Discussions were held including the features of the new legislation with officers clarifying that the full details are not yet available but that an update can be provided to this committee once the full details are known – members agreed to receive an update in an upcoming meeting of this Committee. A member also highlighted that it would be useful to have numbers or percentages for the various reasons that parents choose to home educate. Furthermore another member expressed an interest in any figures relating to anti-social behaviour and home schooling.
5. Questions were raised including how many officers are working with home education with the response that both Children's and Education services are working together to prepare for the expectations of the new legislation. It was asked how schools support those being home educated with the schools' representative assuring members that a great deal of integrated work takes place highlighting that Darlington's small size ensures that closer relationships can be forged than in larger locales with families being made aware of the education pathways available to them. Officers added that a robust health offer is also present in Darlington for those being home educated, ensuring access to vaccinations and other health services available in a school setting.
6. A member noted the increase in numbers in Home Education and questioned as to whether a reason for this is clear. Officers informed members that numbers in elective home education were relatively stable in the pre-COVID period and the increase appears to be a direct result of the pandemic however the new compulsory registration rules in the

new legislation will allow for more accurate figures and trend-mapping. Officers were asked to confirm how quickly they anticipate the new legislation will be implemented with confirmation that a swift changeover is expected due to staff readiness.

7. It was also asked as to whether families in receipt of free school meals receive equivalent benefits when home educating. Officers clarified that parents who electively home educate take on the full responsibility for the child's schooling, including meals however when the local authority is made aware of a parent considering home education, a meeting is offered in order to make them aware of the various aspects and costs of home education, for example, books and examinations.
8. We noted the content of the report, the council's legal duties and current arrangements as well as upcoming changes in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

Work Programme

9. 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

COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

Allotment Strategy Review

2. The Assistant Director Environmental Services and Community Safety submitted a report to provide us with an update on how Darlington Borough Council managed the Council owned allotments and those transferred to 'self-managed' associations.
3. The report explained that Council developed an allotment strategy when the majority of allotments were in council ownership, the strategy had not been renewed as during the period of the strategy 13 of the 16 allotment sites transferred to a 'self-managed' association. It did explain that the principles in the strategy have continued to be used as a management framework to manage allotments going forward.
4. The report stated that there was an excess of 800 individual plots available across the Borough, both DBC and self-managed. There are also four privately owned allotment sites in the borough, the council manages three allotment sites; Arnold Road, Honeypot Lane and Parkside, the other remaining sites are managed and ran by committees.
5. Conversation ensued around the current status of allotments still managed by the Council, we wanted to understand whether there were any plans in place to increase dwellings for future allotment sites.
6. We wanted to know if any 106 funding is used towards allotment sites and if the Council is involved with any Allotment Forums.

Management of Parks and Open Spaces

7. The Head of Environmental Services provided a presentation on the Management of Parks and Open Spaces to Members of the Committee.
8. The presentation explained the types of open spaces that are managed by Darlington Borough Council, such as formal manicured parks like South Park and designated local nature reserves such as Brankin Moor. It also stated the resources used to cover 665 hectares across the borough with a budget of £932,988.
9. It was advised that there are various volunteer and volunteer groups which support parks and open spaces such as the Darlington Forest Project, 17 x Friends Groups, South Park Foundation, Doves and 738 Street Champions. Other agencies involved in the management of parks and open spaces included Darlington Cares, Durham Wildlife Trust, Northumbrian Water, Etc.

10. The presentation gave an overview of the Health and Safety Management, named parks such as South Park, The Denes, etc are inspected twice per week. Other parks are inspected weekly and nature reserves are inspected on a monthly basis.
11. Conversation ensued around the maintenance of open spaces on new developments, whether this is the developer or Councils responsibility.
12. We discussed invasive species and whether the Council had any involvement, it was explained that friend groups were aware of the current issues with Himalayan Balsam and licensing is required for the management of American Crayfish.
13. We asked whether community services still operates around parks and opens spaces in Darlington. Vandalism was discussed during this item and how the light nights had spiked an increase in this particular crime, we wanted to know whether implementing CCTV would help.

Customer Relationship Management Systems

14. The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications submitted a report to provide us with information on the Council's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems.
15. The report referred to the points raised from the Quad of Aims submitted by us, such as whether it was possible to configure existing systems spanning several service areas into a single point of access to accept reports from the public and from councillors, and automatically provide updates which included job numbers, allocation status and the date started or completed.
16. It was explained that the Council uses over 17 commercial systems to meet different service needs. The report focused on the systems that are in use to report antisocial behaviour issues, environmental issues, highway issues and housing repair requests. The report also explained how some system providers allow their customer portals to connect with 3rd party portals which would reduce the number of online accounts customers need to access council services, where this is possible the Council's in-house team have already developed the integrations.
17. Discussion ensued around the current CRM Systems the Council currently has, we wanted to know whether other integrations within the systems in place would be possible and whether there is information anywhere to find the most relevant officers to speak when logging a report.
18. We wanted to know whether timescales are tracked from the report had been logged to the work completed, other issues were identified from Members in certain systems.
19. We asked if it is possible to take a photo of the issue you are to report rather than downloading the photo and uploading at a further stage and if the photo size limit could be increased.

Renters Rights Bill – Discussion Paper

20. The Private Sector Housing Manager provided a discussion paper (previously circulated) and a presentation to the Committee around the Renter's Rights Bill.
21. The presentation included the Bill's aims were to give greater security and stability to renters to stay in their homes for longer, build lives in their communities and avoid the risk of homelessness. An overview of the 4 parts of the bill were explained as well as what is included in the bill such as the duty to enforce and report, the key measures and how the changes will be funded.
22. The discussion paper stated that the Private Rented Sector had now stabilised from its increase in the 15 years to 2021. 10.45% of households in Darlington are rented from the Local Authority, 5.76% are rented from a housing association and 18.47% are privately rented. The proportion of privately rented properties in Darlington was explained to be above the nation average and that of the Northeast.
23. Included in the paper was the latest census data (2021) which indicated that the Private Rented Sector (PRS) in Darlington was approximately 9,035 properties. The Council did not have the details of the individual properties, but the census data is broken down into Ward data, Northgate Ward was detailed with the highest proportion of privately rented with 1,118 (50%) properties.
24. Discussion ensued around the funding of the renter's rights bill and how this would affect officers at Darlington Borough Council.

Consultation on the renewal of the Town Centre Public Space Protection Order and Introduction of a Borough Wide Public Space Protection Order

25. The Assistant Director of Environmental Services and Community Safety submitted a report which provided information on the Consultation of the Renewal of the Town Centre Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) and Introduction of a Borough Wide Public Space Protection Order. A final report would be presented to Cabinet in June to consider and make a decision.
26. The existing PSPO covered the Town Centre and came into force on the 2 July 2022, it is due to expire on the 1 July 2025. The current town PSPO provides the Council with the powers to deal with the following: Persons acting in an anti-social manner who continue to drink alcohol in public places where are not licensed premises, after they have been asked to stop. Persons acting in an antisocial manner who fail to surrender any alcohol in their possession in a public place and not a licensed premises, when asked to do so. As well as begging and threatening behaviour.
27. The report explained that the Council must be satisfied on reasonable grounds that certain conditions had been met to renew or introduce a PSPO, officers reviewed the evidence and are satisfied that the required conditions had been met to consider the renewal of the order.
28. It also explained that there are some new considerations that are to be consulted, it was proposed to extend the area covered by the PSPO to include Victoria Road from the

Station entrance area to Feethams due to the experiences of ASB covered by the PSPO. There are two new activities that the Council receives complaints about in the Town Centre that cause issues to the public and business which are Feeding Birds and Anti-Social use of bicycles, scooters, skates and skateboards within the Town Centre.

29. The report also detailed that other authorities have borough wide PSPO's for certain circumstances, based on experience and evidence from Civic Enforcement Team this could be considered for certain issues because of the impact on communities, financially and service delivery. The proposed powers to deter and assist with the management are Begging, Side Waste and Stray Dogs.
30. Discussion ensued around the current issues with pigeons in the Town Centre and how this can affect the cleanliness, we wanted to understand the enforcement around of cycling in the Town Centre and whether this would only affect any antisocial behaviour.
31. We asked for further clarification around begging and whether fines would be introduced as well as repeat offenders for stray dogs.

Residents Parking Zone Policy Update

32. The Assistant Director of Highways and Capital Projects submitted a report to provide an update on the Resident's Parking Policy that the Council operates to prioritise on street parking for residents in areas where there is also a demand for visitor parking.
33. In addition to this we submitted a Quad of Aims to consider the implications of vehicles of different sizes and emissions when parking within the zones.
34. The Quad of Aims identified the following outcomes: To provide an incentive to use and ownership of smaller, more sustainable vehicles that will have a positive impact on Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Road Maintenance Budget, provide additional funding for transport policy objectives, reduce severity of road collision injuries and inform any future review of on-street and council car park differential charging.
35. It was explained that the existing policy had been in place for a number of years and is subject to a review to ensure it meets its current needs. At current there are 16 RPZ zones within the Borough of Darlington. Parking is restricted to permit holders only during the hours of operation which are generally between 8am-6pm seven days a week. Of the 16 zones, 13 are charged for permits at £40 per 12 months, £24 per six months and £12 for a temporary 3 month permit.
36. The report also included the current policies which influence the Resident Permit Zones, the current Resident Parking Policy, current schemes such as how the Darlington Scheme compares to other Local Authority RPZs, Enforcement and the proposal for a consultation to be undertaken with relevant Ward Members, eligible residents and businesses.
37. Discussion ensued around how visitor permits would work and ward issues with the enforcement team. We asked if there is any additional enforcement staff scheduled for the future. The committee also discussed how some of the markings for permit zones have faded which can affect parking.

Councillor James McGill
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

Inclusive Growth Strategy

2. The Business Growth and Investment Manager submitted a report which provided an overview of the work completed over the last 12 months to develop a new Inclusive Growth Strategy for Darlington. It was explained that the plan would set the framework to ensure Darlington is a great place to live, work and visit.
3. The report stated that during the development of the strategy, the UK Government announced the intention to publish a new national Industrial Strategy and develop local growth plans for each mayoral authority. Due to this announcement the development of the Inclusive Growth Strategy was delayed to ensure new policy ambitions could be understood where appropriate.
4. The report touched on the Invest 2035 green paper which detailed the proposals for a modern industrial strategy and the Tees Valley Local Growth Plan which will provide framework for inclusive growth in the local area.
5. The report included the next steps for the strategy, the final policy documents are yet to be published and with a defined policy framework in place, work to build the Darlington Inclusive Growth Strategy can now re-commence.
6. We explored the differences between the Darlington Plan and the Tees Valley Local Growth plan, Members questioned whether the policies for both plans were similar.
7. We discussed how it was important that the Darlington should benefit from the Tees Valley Local Growth Plan. We explored different ways of how to review this strategy before the Local Growth Plan would be submitted to Government.

Artificial Intelligence

8. The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications provided a report which provided an overview of the progress made by the Council for the assessment and adoption of artificial intelligence.
9. The report explained that at present there is no specific UK Legislation which governs the use of AI, instead reliance is on existing laws and regulations such as Data Protection, Intellectual Property and Equality Act.

10. The report expressed the aim to establish an Artificial Intelligence Strategy for Darlington Borough Council, work is ongoing and four main themes have surfaced. Darlington Borough Council are members of the LGA Artificial Intelligence Practitioners Group which involved sharing knowledge and learning work done by other local authorities.
11. It was clarified that in March 2025 Darlington Borough Council were selected to be part of a pilot programme for an AI tool called MINUTE that had been developed by the Government. In October 2024 three current Darlington Borough Council officers embarked on an 18-month Level 4 Business Analyst Apprenticeship which focused on the application of AI within Local Government.
12. It was explained to us that once a clear governance arrangement had been established, the Council will seek to maximise the benefits AI can offer where there is a clear business case.
13. We discussed their concerns regarding the use of AI tools within the Council, we advised different aspects for the team to investigate with AI such as bias and setting up partnerships with other local authorities whilst research is still to be done.
14. We explored the future of AI at Darlington Borough Council and how this would be a good item to review in future meetings when we have more information and if a Strategy was to be introduced.

Agile and Blended Working

15. The Assistant Director of Resources submitted a report to share an update on Agile and Blended Working at Darlington Borough Council.
16. The report explained that the Council undertook an agile working pilot between May and December 2022 to explore the potential of formalising the new ways of working which had commenced during the pandemic. Due to the success of the pilot the Council adopted an agile working solution and the "Ways we can work" policy was adopted in April 2023.
17. The report stated the four role types the Council offers including fixed, agile, blended and home. The report included the statistics of the number of staff employed in the categories.
18. The report confirmed that flexible practice where agile/blended working was applied around business needs continued to demonstrate a return, there had been savings from reductions in travel costs, printing and rationalisation of buildings. The report showed evidence to suggest that our employment offer had increased recruitment and retention and assisted with staff sickness absence, if any changes would be made to this offer it could impact negatively on this. There is no evidence to suggest that the implementation of agile/blended working had impacted negatively on the service delivery.
19. We acknowledged the information included within this report; we wanted further clarification on the procedures if staff were to underperform.
20. We queried whether there are additional benefits for those employed agile/blended compared to employees working fixed. We asked whether residents perspectives had

been sought with regards to these working arrangements. We raised concerns around staff welfare when working from home, it was explained that management of staff is the same regardless of location and managers should be in regular contact with their team and agile/blended employees have access to all the support available to all staff including the mental health first aiders.

Councillor Rebecca Baker
Chair Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee

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COUNCIL
15 MAY 2025

OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

Climate Change Strategy 2024-2029

2. We received a presentation updating Members on the Climate Change Strategy 2024-2029, noting the aims of the strategy and the actions taken in 2024/25 in relation to retrofit.
3. Members were informed that £1.27m funding was secured from the government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund wave 2.1 and that this money has been used, alongside the Council's matched contribution to roll out retrofit works to 130 homes. This work is due to be completed in May 2025.
4. Further funding was applied for in September 2024 under the government's Warm Homes Social Housing Fund wave 3 and the Council was successful in the bid, securing £3.6m funding for a 3 year programme to upgrade 1600 properties. Members noted that the Council had committed over £4m each year over the lifetime of the MTFP for energy efficiency works.
5. Members were provided with details of the actions taken in 2024/25 in relation to new build homes, noting that new builds are built to a standard of EPC B, solar photovoltaics and air source heat pumps are included as standard and electric vehicle chargers would be installed in line with new building regulations.
6. In relation to EPC's Members were advised that 51 per cent of council properties now have an EPC C or above and that there has been an increase of 184 homes having reached EPC C or above from 2024 to January 2025.
7. We discussed those properties with low or no EPC ratings and were informed that stock modelling is undertaken for those properties with no EPC ratings and those properties with the lowest EPC ratings are in receipt of targeted work in the first instance.
8. Concerns were raised regarding the progress being made to retrofit the council's housing stock in order to achieve net zero carbon by 2050. Members were informed that the next wave of funding would enable work to be undertaken on up to 1700 properties, however there are a range of factors to consider and further clarity is required in relation to the government's plans for gas boiler installations.

Working Collectively to Transform the Mental Health System

9. We welcomed a presentation from the Associate Director of Partnerships and Strategy, Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust updating Members on the work being undertaken to transform the mental health system. The presentation outlined the core aims and the vision of Community Transformation and reference was made to the expectations and impact of the model.
10. Members were advised of the plans for 2025 which include the commencement of peer support and autism support services in May 2025 and the key challenges of community transformation were outlined.
11. Members highlighted concerns regarding the visibility of Darlington Connect, despite its central location and it was suggested that Members provide further information regarding the service to residents via their newsletters.
12. Discussion ensued regarding the low percentage of patients requiring step up to secondary care services, the reduction in patients waiting for assessment, and staff turnover. Reference was also made to the importance of offering support and techniques to enable people to manage their own mental health and Members noted that Daisy Chain would be offering this service via Darlington Connect for people aged 16 years and above, for those with and without a formal diagnosis.

Children and Young People's Services

13. We welcomed a presentation from the General Manager – Durham and Tees Valley Community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Tees Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust updating Members on the Children and Young People's Services in Darlington.
14. The presentation outlined average wait times for assessment and treatment, with waits for treatment dependent on the support required, wait time for specialist neuro assessment and services in place to help address waiting times. These services included Keeping in Touch process, transformation programme, Mental Health School Teams, with Members noting that Darlington is the first local authority in the Tees Valley to achieve 100 per cent coverage of all mainstream schools. Reference was also made to the regional work with partners to address the backlog and unmet needs of those waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments.
15. We were provided with details of regulatory activity, including a recent independent review undertaken by Niche Health and Social Care Consulting in 2024 and the work being undertaken to deliver on the Trust's priorities for children and young people service.
16. Following a query regarding support for those waiting for a neurodevelopmental assessment, Members were advised that support is available to children and young people without a formal diagnosis, that people are encouraged to access the bubble of support which is widely promoted, and that this is a key area of focus for the Trust.
17. Particular concern was raised regarding the lack of progress being made by services for children with autism. The General Manager Durham and Tees Valley Community CAMHS

acknowledged Members concerns, informing them of the challenges faced by the services in the years that followed COVID. Members were advised that there had previously been an exponential increase in wait times for assessments however this increase had started to reduce and that there was no additional funding for services.

Healthy Lifestyle Survey

18. We received an overview of the current Healthy Lifestyle Survey, including headlines of the 2024/25 survey and a timeline for the consultation and review taking place.
19. The survey, which has been delivered in Darlington for 14 years, is offered to all primary and secondary schools across the Darlington Borough and there are two surveys, one on wellbeing and relationships and one on health.
20. Members were provided with details of the topics covered by the surveys and reference was made to the headlines for both primary and secondary schools.
21. We discussed topics not included in the surveys, gambling and addictive behaviour and consent.
22. Members support the continuation of the Healthy Lifestyle Survey, and where possible will share the positive messages captured through the survey.

Supporting Children and Young People's Health and Wellbeing in Schools – Conference

23. Members received an overview of the Supporting Children and Young People's Health and Wellbeing in Schools conference, held on 11 February 2025. This was organised and facilitated by the Public Health Team.
24. Members noted that there were 103 delegates in attendance from 33 schools and 14 local and national services which support work in schools. The event included seven workshops, eight speakers delivering a range of regional and local updates and the launch of the consultation on the Healthy Lifestyle Survey, including an activity for all participants.
25. Reference was made to other outcomes and feedback from the day, which was extremely positive. Members were informed of the intention to hold the conference on a biennial basis (subject to availability), which Members support.

Work Programme

26. 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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