

**COUNCIL**  
**31 MARCH 2022**

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

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

**Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026**

2. Scrutiny received a report, seeking Members comments on the draft Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026, prior to its consideration by Cabinet at its meeting on 8 March 2022.
3. Members were informed that the Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026 is focused on maximising the social and economic benefits which culture can bring to people across Darlington and the strategy will assist the Council in developing and allocating resources to address priorities.
4. We were provided with details of the proposed vision for the strategy and the five draft priorities within the strategy were outlined. We were informed that action plans have been developed to address each priority and these will be reviewed and updated annually.
5. We discussed the planned celebrations for the bicentenary of the 1825 passenger journey on the Stockton and Darlington Railway and concerns relating to the access to the Rail Heritage Quarter.
6. Members requested that Cabinet be advised of this Scrutiny's view that references to diversity and minority groups be strengthened within the strategy.

**Local Transport Plan**

7. We received a report providing Members with an annual update on highways and transport from a regional and local perspective, outlining delivery, performance and public satisfaction in 2021/22 and outlining the 2022/23 programme, including details of funding; and providing an update on the Tees Valley Strategic Transport Plan and the Darlington Transport Plan.
8. Details were provided of the capital and revenue investments in transport in Darlington 2021/22 and reference was made to the transport initiatives developed by the Council in partnership with the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA). We were also provided with details of the key headlines for the performance data and public satisfaction for 2021/22.
9. Scrutiny were informed that all of the transport funding from the Department for Transport is now awarded to TVCA and this funding is included in the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS). This would include the funding to deliver Darlington's transport plan.

10. A summary of the anticipated transport capital funding for 2022/23 was outlined and Members also noted additional funding from the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and CRSTS would be available for schemes and initiatives in Darlington.
11. Members were informed that the Tees Valley BSIP has been published and work is ongoing to implement an Enhanced Partnership (EP). The BSIP and EP have been structured around a five-point delivery plan and delivery of this plan is dependent on government funding.
12. Darlington's Transport Strategy, Darlington Town Centre Transport Plan and a revised Parking Strategy have been drafted and will be brought to a future meeting of this Committee for consideration. We also noted that Darlington's Travel Plan Policy which formed part of the Supplementary Planning Document and was used to set the policy basis for consideration of planning applications, has been revised.
13. Discussion ensued regarding the number of potholes repaired and cycling training provision and following a question by a Member in attendance, the Assistant Director, Highways and Capital Projects confirmed that Officers would work with the Climate Change Cross Party Working group regarding the inclusion of climate change targets in the Local Transport Plan.
14. We raised concern regarding the real-time information provided for customers at bus stops and we were informed that the system that was used was reaching the end of its life, was due to be updated and that real-time information is available on the Arriva app.

#### **Arriva – Operational Issues**

15. Scrutiny welcomed the Commercial Manager, Arriva for a question and answer session regarding operational issues in Darlington, following concerns raised at a previous meeting of this Scrutiny Committee.
16. We questioned the possibility of reimbursement for customers with bus passes and a reduction in ticket prices. The Commercial Director informed Members that Arriva has been in receipt of government funding to cover operational costs, however even with this funding the company has been operating at a loss, in part due to the requirement for the company to be running at 90 per cent or more of pre-COVID-19 mileage levels. We also noted that during the lockdown periods customers were offered partial refund or an extension to their passes.
17. Members entered into a discussion regarding the lack of bus routes in certain areas of the town and the suggestion to incentivise bus travel. We were informed that passenger levels in the North East were at 75 per cent of pre-pandemic levels and as such investment in new routes was a challenge, however potential funding from the Bus Service Improvement Plan could allow investment in new routes.
18. Members questioned the option to run smaller vehicles more frequently, but noted that this would not be financially viable due to fuel and driver costs. We acknowledged that bus scheduling could be adjusted to meet demands in peak periods and we were pleased to note that incentive packages were available to businesses, working in partnership with

Arriva to offer a bus service to the workplace. We also noted that Arriva and Stagecoach are supporting a bid to introduce Hydrogen vehicles in the region.

### **Management of Grass Verges – Final Report**

19. Scrutiny received a report updating Members on the Management of Grass Verges Task and Finish Group and requesting that Members consider and endorse the adoption of a flow chart to address a range of issues associated with grass verges.
20. The Task and Finish Group held an initial meeting on 9 April 2021. A further meeting was held in 12 November 2021 where Members discussed a draft flow chart which would provide a toolkit of options to address a range of issues associated with grass verges.
21. Members of this Scrutiny Committee discussed the effectiveness of the flow chart and we consider the flow chart to be a useful framework to address issues associated with grass verges. This Scrutiny Committee has endorsed the adoption of the flow chart.

### **Work Programme 2021/22**

22. We have given consideration to the Work Programme for this Committee for the Municipal Year 2021/22 and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.
23. We considered a request from Councillor Jones, for an item on the availability of wheelchair accessible taxis be included in the work programme.
24. Members were informed that there was a national shortage of taxi drivers following the removal of Covid restrictions and an action plan was in place to address the shortage of drivers. We noted that legislative and policy changes would be required to mandate the requirement of wheelchair accessible vehicles and this could have a financial impact on the Council and operators at a time when the focus was on restoring numbers of drivers to address the current pressures and demands on the taxi trade.
25. Scrutiny were also informed that the Council works closely with Darlington Association on Disability (DAD) in an attempt to resolve issues as they arise and in accordance with government recommendations, the Licensing Department publishes an up to date list of all wheelchair accessible vehicles on its website. Members suggested that this list be shared via social media.
26. Members acknowledged the current position regarding taxis in Darlington and welcomed an update at a future meeting.
27. On 4 February I visited the Crown Street Library to see how the teams are progressing with the renovations. Thank you to Alistair who is overseeing the project for the hard hat tour of the site – it was great to see the building up close especially the areas at the top which can only be accessed by scaffolding. Also thanks to the library manager Suzy Hill whose passion for the building is evident and I look forward to hearing and seeing more of the buildings secrets as the layers are peeled back as the renovations continue.

**Councillor Steven Tait**  
**Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee**