

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 17 February 2022

PRESENT – Councillors Tait (Chair), Allen, Cossins, Mrs Culley, Donoghue, Haszeldine, B Jones, McCollom and Willis

APOLOGIES – Councillors Bartch and Wallis

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Keir, Snedker and Kim Purcell (Arriva)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson (Assistant Director Community Services), Anthony Hewitt (Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects), Sue Dobson (Sustainable Transport Manager), Stephen Wiper (Creative Darlington Manager), Colin Dobson (Licensing Manager) and Hannah Miller (Democratic Officer)

CLS28 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

CLS29 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES/NOTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY HELD ON :-

CLS30 9 DECEMBER 2021

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 9 December 2021.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 9 December 2021 be approved as a correct record

CLS31 6 JANUARY 2022

Submitted – The Notes (previously circulated) of the Special meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 6 January 2022.

RESOLVED – That the Notes of the Special meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 6 January 2022 be approved as a correct record.

CLS32 DARLINGTON CULTURAL STRATEGY 2022-2026

The Group Director of Services submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that Members provide comments on the draft Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026 (also previously circulated) to pass to Cabinet for consideration at the meeting on 8 March 2022.

It was reported that the Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026 was focused on maximizing the social and economical benefits which culture can bring to people across Darlington; that the strategy would assist the Council in developing and allocating resources to address priorities; and the strategy had been informed by research, discussion with Arts Council England and Tees Valley Combined Authority and comments from partners.

The strategy took note of the vision and drivers of national strategies and the priorities of the Tees Valley Combined Authority; reference was made to the definition of Culture being used for the strategy and the areas covered; and the strategy would help in communicating the cultural vision and priorities for cultural investment in Darlington.

Reference was made to the building and place-based cultural assets; the investment secured for and achievements made in respect of the cultural offer over the last decade; and the strategy would support the Council in delivering its vision and priorities. Details were provided of the proposed vision for the strategy; reference was made to five draft priorities within the strategy; and action plans had been developed to address each priority which would be reviewed and updated annually.

Discussion ensued regarding the planned celebrations for the bicentenary of the 1825 passenger journey on the Stockton and Darlington Railway; concerns relating to the access to the Rail Heritage Quarter; and Members highlighted the lack of reference to diversity and minority groups within the strategy.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received.

(b) That be Cabinet be advised of this Scrutiny's view that references to diversity and minority groups be strengthened within the strategy.

CLS33 LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN

The Group Director of Services submitted a report (previously circulated) 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.

The submitted report stated that changes in travel behaviour had been a visible sign of restrictions; that omicron covid- 19 had a significant impact on the delivery of bus and rail services; and that challenges continue, with recognition that work was required to increase bus and rail services and to encourage passengers to use these services.

It was reported that there had been good progress on the delivery of the transport capital programme; the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) continued to deliver elements of the strategic transport plan; the Department for Transport (DfT) was focused on progressing the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIP) and the Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP); and Darlington had commenced the delivery of a priority scheme in the LCWIP with the creation of phase one of a cycling route on Woodland Road.

Details were provided of the capital and revenue investments in transport in Darlington 2021/22; reference was made to the transport initiatives developed by the Council in partnership with the TVCA; and details were provided of the key headlines for the performance data and public satisfaction for 2021/22.

It was reported that all of the transport funding from the DfT was now awarded to TVCA; this funding was included in the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) which was expected to be announced in February 2022 and would include the funding to deliver Darlington's transport plan; and a summary of the anticipated transport capital funding for 2022/23 was outlined. Members also noted additional funding from the BSIP and CRSTS would be available for schemes and initiatives in Darlington.

Members were informed that the Tees Valley BSIP had been published and work was ongoing to implement an Enhanced Partnership (EP), a statutory agreement between the TVCA, the five Tees Valley local authorities and the Tees Valley bus operators; the BSIP and EP had been structured around a five-point delivery plan; and delivery of this plan was dependent on government funding.

Members were informed that Darlington's Transport Strategy, Darlington Town Centre Transport Plan and a revised Parking Strategy had been drafted and would be brought to this Committee for consideration; and Darlington's Travel Plan Policy which formed part of the Supplementary Planning Document, used to set the policy basis for consideration of planning applications, had been revised.

Discussion ensued regarding the number of potholes repaired; cycling training provision; and following a question by a Member in attendance, the Transport Planning Manager 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.

Members raised concern regarding the real-time information provided for customers at bus stops which was deemed unsatisfactory. Members were informed that the system was reaching the end of its life, was due to be updated and that real-time information was available on the Arriva app.

RESOLVED – a) That the progress in delivering the Transport Programme in 2021/22 be noted.

(b) That the changes to the funding process and how the funding is proposed to be used in 2022/23, be noted.

(c) That the Travel Plan Guidance and how this can secure better quality development in Darlington, be noted.

(d) That Members note the proposal for Darlington Borough Council to become party to the 'shell' bus Enhanced Partnership agreement, noting that there are no direct obligations at this stage.

CLS34 ARRIVA - OPERATIONAL ISSUES

Members entered into a question and answer session with the Commercial Director, Arriva in relation to operational issues in Darlington.

Following a question regarding reimbursement for customers with bus passes and a

reduction in ticket prices, the Commercial Director informed Members that Arriva had been in receipt of government funding to cover operational costs, however even with this funding the company had 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; and during the lockdown periods customers were offered partial refund or an extension to their passes.

Discussion ensued regarding the lack of bus routes in certain areas of the town and the suggestion to incentivise bus travel. Members 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.

Following a question, Members were informed that it would not be financially viable to run smaller vehicles more frequently due to fuel and driver costs, however bus scheduling could be adjusted to meet demands in peak periods; reference was made to the incentive packages that were available to businesses, working in partnership with Arriva to offer a bus service to the workplace; and Arriva and Stagecoach were supporting a bid to introduce Hydrogen vehicles in the region.

RESOLVED – That the discussion be noted.

CLS35 MANAGEMENT OF GRASS VERGES - FINAL REPORT

The Chair of Management of Grass Verges Task and Finish Group submitted a report (previously circulated) 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 (also previously circulated) to address a range of issues associated with grass verges.

It was reported that the Task and Finish Group was established following receipt of a report at its meeting on 25 February 2021 which set out the current position adopted by the Council in relation to the management of grass verges; an initial meeting was held on 9 April 2021 and a further meeting was held in 12 November 2021.

The review group were provided with details of a draft flow chart, which would provide a toolkit of options to address a range of issues associated with grass verges. Members of the review group were in agreement that the flow chart would be beneficial; this was developed further by Officers and circulated to all Members to provide feedback.

Discussion ensued regarding the effectiveness of the flow chart and Members acknowledged funding limitations in relation to the management of grass verges. Members considered the flow chart to be a useful framework to address issues associated with grass verges.

RESOLVED – That the adoption of the flow chart to assist with the management of grass verges, as appended to the submitted report, be endorsed.

CLS36 WORK PROGRAMME

The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's work programme and to

give consideration to a request received from Councillor Jones that an item on wheelchair accessible taxis be added to the Scrutiny Committee's work programme.

The submitted report stated that a request had been received from a Member of this Committee to investigate options to increase the number of wheelchair accessible taxis in Darlington and improve on the current situation; and Members were invited to make a decision as to whether this item should be added to its work programme, and if so, how work should proceed.

The Licensing Manager advised Members that there was a national shortage of taxi drivers following the removal of covid restrictions; an action plan was in place to address the shortage of drivers; 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.

Members were informed that the Council works closely with Darlington Association on Disability (DAD) in an attempt to resolve issues as they arise; the Council's policy offers a number of incentives to drivers to invest in wheelchair accessible vehicles; 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. Reference was also made to Tees Flex, which provided wheelchair accessible vehicles.

Members acknowledged the current position regarding taxis in Darlington and welcomed an update report at a future meeting of this scrutiny committee

Discussion ensued on the current work programme; it was agreed that the item 'Drug and Alcohol Service Contract' be removed from the work programme.

RESOLVED – (a) That an update report regarding taxis in Darlington be provided at a future meeting of this Scrutiny Committee.

(b) That the Work Programme be updated to reflect discussion.