

COUNCIL
12 MAY 2022

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.

Public Sector Executive Group

2. Scrutiny received a report informing Members of the work of the Public Sector Executive Group (PSEG), which was formed following agreement at Council on 15 July as one of the arrangements that replaced the Darlington Partnership.
3. The report outlined the membership of the PSEG, which includes a range of senior officers from key public sector bodies and is chaired by the Council's Chief Executive. We noted the key aims of the PSEG, that the PSEG is financially supported by partners and that the group has no decision making authority.
4. We were provided with details of the recent activity of the group which included consideration of social value through procurement, providing comments on the Levelling Up Darlington proposal, and acting as a forum to share issues and pressures resulting from the pandemic and to discuss solutions.
5. We discussed the frequency and attendance for the PSEG and following a question, the Director, Darlington Partnership informed Members that work is progressing to establish the Stronger Communities Board.

The Northgate Initiative

6. We received a report summarising the current position and developments of the Northgate Initiative, a multi-agency programme established in 2019, piloting a range of interventions to improve outcomes for local residents in all areas of wellbeing including economy, education and childhood, health, environment and social relationships.
7. Scrutiny were informed that there have been some measurable improvements over the past 2 years working towards the targets set for 2024 and that as the restrictions of the pandemic were lifted community engagement has been developed through face to face workings.
8. We were provided with details of the workstream achievements to date. We were pleased to note that the Environment Crime Co-ordinator was now in post delivering on a back lanes project with the aim of cleaner waste free back lanes. We also noted that £298,918 has been secured from the Home Office Safer Streets funding to introduce target-hardening and that there has been a five per cent decrease in calls relating to 'concern for safety' for Northgate for March 2021 to February 2022 when compared to the same period in the previous year.

9. Members were informed that the number of empty properties in the ward has decreased from 177 in December 2019 to 150 in March 2022, and the number of properties in the ward with an EPC rating of F or G has decreased from 148 in December 2019 to 84 in December 2021. We also noted that four properties have been bought by the Council as part of the Next Steps projects, these have been renovated and are online as an extension to the current homelessness pathway.
10. We were advised that a Community Information Hub would be located at Corporation Road Primary for service providers to provide drop in style sessions, which would help to improve engagement with residents in the ward.
11. We also noted that a data dashboard has been implemented to help analyse the impact of the Northgate initiative and identify any gaps. We look forward to receiving further updates.

Darlington Hippodrome

12. Scrutiny welcomed a PowerPoint presentation on Darlington Hippodrome, updating Members on the theatre's re-emergence following the easing of Covid restrictions.
13. Members were informed that between March 2020 and Autumn 2021 the theatre applied for and secured £1.7M of funding from the Cultural Recovery Fund which enabled staff to be retained, overheads to be paid and ensured a programme of theatre, cinema and engagement activities was in place in the Autumn of 2021.
14. The presentation made reference to the Hippodrome Team who have ensured that the theatre remains operational and open to the public and we were informed that the response from the public has been unprecedented.
15. We noted the community engagement opportunities and the theatre's charitable fund, A place for everyone, which has enabled 1,128 theatre experiences for young people and community groups, visits by 25 Darlington Schools and has supported students with a bursary place for the Theatre's Contemporary Dance classes.
16. Members were informed of the upcoming shows at the Hippodrome and the Hullabaloo and noted the ticket sales in the recovery period.
17. We discussed in particular the options to address an anticipated reduction in ticket sales as a result of increased living costs, which includes an extension of the 241 offer and a range of ticket prices. A discussion took place on ticket payment options with a focus on being able to spread the cost of a theatre ticket - options like Klarna were discussed. As of yet there isn't an industry standard model of doing this but with the aim of making Darlington's culture offer accessible and affordable to everyone, given financial pressures on households, we remain open minded at looking at different solutions.

Darlington Libraries

18. Scrutiny received a PowerPoint presentation on Darlington Libraries to update Members on the progress of the renovation work.

19. We were informed that the external scaffolding has been erected and work is progressing on the roof. Internal scaffolding has also been erected and work is progressing on the adult and junior lending libraries and the reference library, which includes new lighting, installation of wifi, redecoration, cleaning of glass lights and cleaning and treatment of shelving units.
20. The presentation provided internal photos of the reception area and adult lending library and graphics for the renovated adult lending library and reference library.
21. Members noted that the library is offering a limited service during the work, however most services are being maintained on a smaller scale with popular stock available in a condensed area and a free select and collect service offering access to all stock on request.
22. The Centre for Local Studies remains open and the Art Gallery has been transformed into a space for children's activities. Free deliveries are available people 60 and over and the branch library remains open part time with children's activities taking place outside of opening hours.

Work Programme 2021/22

23. 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.

Councillor Steven Tait
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee