

COUNCIL
14 JULY 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 Space Protection Order – Darlington Town Centre

2. Scrutiny received a report seeking Members' views on the renewal of the Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) for the Town Centre, as part of the consultation process prior to its consideration at Cabinet.
3. Were informed that that the PSPO, which was granted for Darlington Town Centre in 2019 to assist in dealing with issues such as nuisance behaviour, begging and anti-social drinking, expired in February 2022 and that the renewal of the PSPO could assist the Council, Police and partners in dealing with some of the ongoing issues.
4. Scrutiny were informed that the responsibility for making a new PSPO rests with the Council and an eight-week consultation exercise took place from 7 March 2022 to 2 May 2022. We noted the responses received in relation to the consultation.
5. Details were provided of the draft order and the restrictions of the PSPO. Reference was also made to the police figures for the town centre, and the benefits of the town centre PSPO were highlighted.
6. Members raised concern regarding arrangements to address youth nuisance. The Community Safety Programme Manager advised us that a range of tools were in place, this included Acceptable Behaviour Agreements and that the aim of the PSPO was to prevent the escalation of antisocial behaviour before it becomes criminal.
7. We noted the work of the Begging Working Group to in relation to fixed penalty notices issued to beggars and discussed the effectiveness of fines, engagement with multi-agency partners and the trends relating to youth related anti-social behaviour.
8. We requested that Cabinet be advised that this Scrutiny Committee supports the renewal of the Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) for the Town Centre. We look forward to receiving an update at a future meeting.

Stronger Communities Fund

9. Scrutiny received a report updating Members on the spend and use of the Stronger Communities Fund during the 2021/2022 financial year. We noted that there had been good use of the fund, with only £2,116.50 of the £50,000 remaining unspent.

10. Members were informed that the process for administering the scheme for the 2022/23 financial year had been reviewed following feedback from Members, Officers and the Credit Union and were provided with details of the updated administration process.

Taxis in Darlington

11. Scrutiny received an update from the Licensing Manager on the current position regarding taxis in Darlington.
12. We were provided with details of the number of licenced vehicles in Darlington, and that of the 232 vehicles, 11 were wheelchair accessible. We noted that the authority had seen a reduction in 109 drivers when compared to pre-covid.
13. Members were informed that the demand for drivers was highest for the night time economy and taxi marshals had been introduced to address disorder in the taxi queues, with funding in place to September.
14. We were advised that the Council's Private Hire and Hackney Carriage Licensing Policy 2021 was out for consultation and a meeting held with the Trade in April 2022 identified a number of changes to the Council's policy that would support the trade and increase recruitment of drivers, including removal of vehicle age and window tint restrictions and removal of the requirement for a knowledge locality test for private hire.
15. Scrutiny were informed that changes to requirements for the registration of taxi drivers with HMRC had resulted in the loss of five drivers in Darlington. We were also informed that the Council was awaiting public guidance on the Taxi and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Act which received royal ascent in April and that the Taxi and Private Hire Vehicles (Disabled Persons) bill was out for consultation. We noted that the Council's online taxi licensing system was due to be implemented on 1 August.
16. We expressed disappointment in relation to the availability of taxis for the night time economy in Darlington and were informed by the Licensing Manager that this was a national problem and changes to the Council's policy sought to address this.
17. We look forward to receiving further updates at a future meeting of this Scrutiny Committee.

Work Programme 2022/23

18. We have given consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's work programme for the Municipal Year 2022/23 and to consider any additional areas to be included.
19. We have requested updates in relation to Open Spaces Groups, Darlington Transport Strategy, Darlington Parking Strategy and Town Centre Parking Strategy.

20. We have also requested an update from the Stronger Communities Portfolio Holder on the Stronger Communities Board and Sub Groups at the next meeting of this Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Steven Tait
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee