

COUNCIL
27 OCTOBER 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.

The Northgate Initiative

2. Scrutiny received a report summarising the current position and developments of the Northgate Initiative, established in 2019 to pilot collaborative multi-agency working to improve outcomes for local residents in all areas of wellbeing.
3. Scrutiny were informed that there had been some measurable improvements since the start of the initiative and strong management of the programme has had a positive impact on ensuring the initiative and its outcomes are reflective of the need in the area.
4. We were pleased to note that a Data Dashboard has been set up to help analyse the impact of the Northgate initiative and to identify any gaps and details were provided of the workstream achievements to date in respect of childhood and education, environment, housing, crime and security, housing and economy.
5. We discussed in particular the roll out of the initiative to other wards. The Director Darlington Partnerships advised Scrutiny that the initiative has relied on collaborative working with partner agencies and a wider roll out was constrained by the resources available. A further update could be provided on the successes and learning, to help identify learning to be implemented in other wards.
6. Following the meeting, Members received an update regarding the money that remained from the £298,198 Safer Streets funding received for the Northgate ward, noting that £124K remained.

Cost of Living Support Leaflet

7. Scrutiny received a report summarising the Cost of Living Support leaflet, including its purpose and how it could be used.
8. Scrutiny were informed that the leaflet was initially compiled in 2020 to provide information on services available to residents during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequently updated in April 2022 to provide additional information for Ukrainian guests, including immigration support services and contacts for benefits and claims.
9. We were advised that the leaflet would become a signposting document for diverse use across the Local Authority and partners, available on the Council's website as a live document.

10. Members entered into a discussion regarding The Bread and Butter Thing, particularly in relation to the limited operating hours for the service and we queried whether these could be reviewed. We also discussed the accessibility of the leaflet and were advised that the details of a number of organisations in the leaflet would be included in the next article of One Darlington and I suggested that Members include details of key contacts in their newsletters.

Taxi Availability (including Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles)

11. Scrutiny welcomed a report updating Members on taxi provision, including wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAV), within Darlington in light of a reduction in the number of available drivers following the removal of Covid restrictions and the current economic climate.
12. We were advised that Darlington Borough Council has 143 licensed hackney carriage vehicles and 89 licensed private hire vehicles, 10 of which are wheelchair accessible and there are 397 drivers licensed with Darlington, which is 104 less than the month before Covid restrictions were implemented.
13. Reference was made to the reasons for driver shortages and Members were informed that proposed changes to the current Private Hire and Hackney Carriage Licensing Policy 2021 have been approved by the Licensing Committee for consideration by Council, to support the trade and attract additional drivers, and include changes in relation to vehicle age restrictions, topographical knowledge test and window tint.
14. We noted the introduction of taxi marshal for the Grange Road taxi rank, which had been proven to be very successful. We also noted the fare increase that was approved by Licensing Committee in May 2022 and that Darlington's taxi fares are currently the third highest in the north-east and highest in the Tees Valley area for a two mile journey.
15. We were informed that a new on-line taxi licensing application system, IDOX, went live on 1 September 2022 and provides a quicker and more efficient service to applicants. We also noted that following the Deregulation Act 2015, many drivers and proprietors use Wolverhampton as their Licensing Authority due to reduced fees and Take Me, who recently took over 1AB, may encourage their drivers to use Wolverhampton as their licensing authority. This may have implications for the Council's private hire licensing budget.
16. We discussed flexibility in relation to legislation for WAVs to increase vehicle numbers and the Licensing Manager advised Members that there is no mandatory requirement for a specific number of WAVs and that WAVs are considerably more expensive to purchase and run. We did acknowledge that Licensing offer a number of incentives for proprietors to invest in WAVs, which includes reduced licence fees (25%) and allowing these vehicles to remain on the fleet for longer.

Bank Top Masterplan

17. Scrutiny welcomed a PowerPoint presentation from the Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects updating Members on the Bank Top Masterplan.

18. We were provided with details of the component parts of the project and the key feature of Station East, Darlington Station and the Transport Interchange – Victoria Road were outlined along with key dates of the project.
19. The presentation provided Members with a number of graphics and photographs of the first stages of the works and we noted the details in relation the progress of CPO acquisitions along with the next steps of the project.
20. We discussed the promotional banners and following a question regarding HS2, Members were informed that whilst no further information was available, the work being undertaken would future proof the station. Reference was made to the consultation with ward Councillors in relation to planned demolition works.

Work Programme 2022/23

21. We have given consideration to this Scrutiny Committee's work programme for the Municipal Year 2022/23 and to any additional areas that Members would like to be included.
22. We considered a request for an item to be included on the work programme in relation to the current and future levels of service provided by the Council in relation to public waste bins and any particular issues which may be affecting the service and have agreed to establish a Task and Finish Review Group.
23. Members also agreed to receive an update in relation to the delivery timescales for the camera replacement programme at the next meeting of this Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Steven Tait
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee