

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 27 October 2022

PRESENT – Councillors Tait (Chair), Allen, Bartch, Mrs Culley, Donoghue, Haszeldine, McCollom and Wallis

APOLOGIES – Councillors Cossins and Willis,

ABSENT – Councillors Bell

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Keir

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson (Assistant Director Community Services), Anthony Hewitt (Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects), Seth Pearson (Partnership Director), Colin Dobson (Licensing Manager), Ian Stewart (Capital Programme Manager), Hayley Jones (Senior Internal Communications Coordinator) and Hannah Miller (Democratic Officer)

CLS18 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

CLS19 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY HELD ON 25 AUGUST 2022

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 25 August, 2022.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 25 August, 2022 be approved as a correct record.

CLS20 THE NORTHGATE INITIATIVE

The Director, Darlington Partnerships submitted a report (previously circulated) summarising the current position and developments of the Northgate Initiative.

It was reported that the Northgate Initiative was established in 2019 to pilot collaborative multi-agency working to improve outcomes for local residents in all areas of wellbeing; there had been some measurable improvements since the start of the initiative; and that strong management of the programme has had a positive impact on ensuring the initiative and its outcomes were reflective of the need in the area.

The submitted report stated that a Data Dashboard had been set up to help analyse the impact of the Northgate initiative and to identify any gaps and as a result the focus and targets had changed slightly within each workstream to reflect the real needs of the area; and details were provided of the workstream achievements to date in respect of childhood and education, environment, housing, crime and security, housing and economy.

Reference was made to the community hub, based at Corporation Road School which was in

its final stages of planning; the hub would provide a variety of drop in style sessions for the residents of Northgate; and the sessions would begin after October Half Term.

Discussion ensued regarding housing in the Northgate Ward; and following a question regarding Safer Streets funding for other Wards, Members were advised that there were certain criteria to be met and the criteria would be circulated to Members when available. Members were informed that a steering group would identify further initiatives to spend the money that remained from the £298,198 Safer Streets funding received for the Northgate ward.

Discussion ensued regarding participation by residents and following a question regarding the roll out of the initiative to other wards, the Director Darlington Partnerships advised that initiative had 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 identify learning to be implemented in other wards.

In relation to the Health indicators, Members suggested the inclusion of obesity and physical activity as metrics; and following a question regarding fly tipping, the Assistant Director Community Services advised that fly tipping had reduced slightly across the whole borough.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

CLS21 COST OF LIVING SUPPORT LEAFLET

The Director, Darlington Partnerships submitted a report (previously circulated) summarising the Cost of Living Support leaflet, including its purpose and how it can be used.

It was reported that that leaflet was initially compiled in 2020 to provide information on services available to residents during the covid-19 pandemic; was updated in April 2022 to provide additional information for Ukrainian guests, including immigration support services and contacts for benefits and claims; and would become a signposting document for diverse use across the Local Authority and partners.

Members were informed that the leaflet would be made available on the Council's website and would be constantly updated.

Members entered into a discussion regarding The Bread and Butter Thing; Members noted the limited operating hours for the service and queried whether these could be reviewed. The Director, Darlington Partnerships assured Members that the operators were conscious of this issue however there may be cost implications associated with addressing this. Members were informed that despite rising costs, the price of the service had remained at £7.50 for a family order.

Discussion ensued regarding accessibility of the leaflet; Members were advised that the details of a number of organisations in the leaflet would be included in the next article of One Darlington and it was suggested that Members include details of key contacts in their newsletters.

RESOLVED – That the submitted report be received for information.

CLS22 TAXI AVAILABILITY (INCLUDING WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE VEHICLES)

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

The submitted report stated that following the relaxation of Covid-19 Regulations the country was faced with a shortage of professional drivers, this included the taxi trade; that the current economic climate had significantly increased operating costs to the taxi trade; and this was a regional and national issue.

It was reported that Darlington Borough Council had 143 licensed hackney carriage vehicles and 89 licensed private hire vehicles, 10 of which were wheelchair accessible; there were 397 drivers licensed with Darlington, which was 104 less than the month before Covid restrictions were implemented; details were provided for the four private hire operators, each of which had their own business model; and that contrary to public opinion, Uber had never applied for a licence in Darlington.

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 had been approved by the Licensing Committee for consideration by Council, to support the trade and attract additional drivers, and included changes in relation to vehicle age restrictions, topographical knowledge test and window tint.

In relation to WAVs, Members were informed that there was no mandatory requirement for a specific number of WAVs; that WAVs were considerably more expensive to purchase and run; and that Licensing offered a number of incentives for proprietors to invest in WAVs, which included reduced licence fees (25%) and allowing these vehicles to remain on the fleet for longer.

Reference was made to the taxi marshals introduced between the hours of 11.00pm and 5.00am on Friday and Saturday nights for the Grange Road rank following a successful bid to Safer Streets, which had been proved to be very successful in controlling the rank; a fare increase had been approved in May by Darlington's Licensing Committee; and Darlington's taxi fares were currently the third highest in the north-east and highest in the Tees Valley area for a two mile journey.

Details were provided of the new on-line taxi licensing application system, IDOX, which went live on 1 September 2022 and provided a quicker and more efficient service to applicants. Members were also informed that following the Deregulation Act 2015, many drivers and proprietors used Wolverhampton as their Licensing Authority due to reduced fees and Take Me, who had recently taken over 1AB, encouraged their drivers to use Wolverhampton as their licensing authority. This may have implications for the Council's private hire licensing budget.

Discussion ensued regarding the flexibility in relation to legislation for WAVs to increase vehicle numbers; the Licensing Manager confirmed that the policy review had proposed that

WAVs be exempt from having to be compliant with Euro 6 standards and a range of incentives were in place to encourage operators to invest in a WAV; and following a question Members were assured that any drivers refusing to transport wheelchair users would be prosecuted.

Members were encouraged to report any issues regarding the new taxi company to the Licensing Manager to raise with the company directly.

RESOLVED – That the current challenges within the taxi trade be noted.

CLS23 BANK TOP MASTERPLAN

The Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects gave a PowerPoint presentation (previously circulated) updating Members on the Bank Top Masterplan and in doing so outlined the component parts of the project which included Darlington Station, Victoria Road Interchange, Cattle Market, Victoria Road improvements, New Station, Multi-Storey car park and Interchange and link to Central Park

Details were provided of the key feature of Station East, Darlington Station and the Transport Interchange – Victoria Road; and key dates of the project were outlined. The presentation provided a number of graphics and photographs of the first stages of the works; and Members were provided with details in relation the progress of CPO acquisitions. The next steps of the project were outlined.

Discussion ensued regarding 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; and concern was raised regarding a lack of consultation with ward Councillors in relation to planned demolition works.

The Committee extended their thanks to Neil Sturgeon for providing photographs of the first stages of the works.

RESOLVED – That the presentation be noted.

CLS24 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 for the remainder of the 2022/23 Municipal Year.

Members also gave consideration, in line with the agreed procedure, to a Quad of Aims which had been received in respect of 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.

Reference was made to the camera upgrade programme; Members agreed to receive an update in relation to the delivery timescales for the programme at the next meeting of this Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED – (a) That a Task and Finish Review Group be established to undertake the work outlined in the Quad of Aims for the current and future levels of service provided by the Council in relation to public waste bins.

(b) That the work programme be updated accordingly.