

COUNCIL
26 JANUARY 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.

Darlington Libraries

2. Scrutiny welcomed a presentation from the Library Manager updating Members on the progress of the renovation work to Crown Street Library.
3. We were provided with details of the work being undertaken on the roof and we welcomed drone footage and photos of this work. We also noted the internal work that had been undertaken to date which included restoration of plasterwork and redecoration, improved connectivity with access to Wi-Fi and improved lighting.
4. Members were provided with graphics for the renovated adult lending library, and reference library and noted the layout and facilities.
5. We discussed library usage and were assured that the engagement led approach along with the new facilities that would be available in the library, would help to increase library usage and we noted that a Library Plan outlining the aims of the library, was in development.

Camera Replacement Programme

6. Scrutiny received an update on the camera replacement programme agreed by Cabinet at its meeting on 22 June 2022, noting that the tender process will commence in January 2023 and the duration of the programme is expected to be 3 to 6 months, with work due to be completed by the end of 2023.
7. Following concerns raised regarding disruption to the CCTV feed, Members were advised that any disruption to the CCTV feed would be minimised to ensure there is no significant disruption during the replacement programme

Rail Heritage Quarter

8. Scrutiny received a presentation from the Assistant Director Community Services updating Members on the Darlington Rail Heritage Quarter.
9. We were informed of the timeline for the works, which are anticipated to be completed by Quarter 2/3 in 2024 and a number of graphics were provided along with details of the planned attractions.

10. We discussed in particular the possible risks to the delivery of the timetable and revenue costs for the site.

Management of Open Spaces

11. Scrutiny also welcomed a presentation from the Head of Environmental Services on the management of open spaces in Darlington.
12. We were provided with details of the types of open spaces in Darlington and the resources in place to manage these. We also noted the volunteer groups, which included 17 Friends Groups and 470 street champions and the support provided by the Council to the volunteer groups.
13. The presentation provided Members with details of the range of other agencies involved in managing open spaces in Darlington along with the Inspections and Health and Safety regime and the other undertakings by the Council including maintaining wildflower sites, maintenance of sports pitches and play areas.
14. Members queried the sufficiency of signage and lifesaving equipment, particularly in relation to frozen bodies of water and we were informed that an emergency meeting of the water safety group had taken place to identify requirements for additional measures and that increased signage and comms was planned.
15. We also discussed the adequacy of the resources in place to manage open spaces in the borough and the insurance arrangements for all volunteers involved in managing open spaces.

Performance Indicators - Quarter 2 2022/2023

16. We have received the information on the Quarter 2 performance against those key performance indicators for 2021/22 which are within the remit of our Scrutiny Committee.
17. Members noted that of the 25 indicators which are reported six monthly at quarter 2, seventeen are showing performance better than the same period in the previous year; one indicator is showing performance the same; five indicators are showing performance not as good as the same period in the previous year; one indicator does not have comparative information and one indicator is unavailable.
18. We requested and have received performance information in respect of the library digital offer and Members agreed that the indicator REG – 803 Trading Standards : % of high risk inspections carried out, be reported to this scrutiny committee on an annual basis.

Public Waste Bins Task and Finish Review Final Report

19. As Chair of the Public Waste Bins Task and Finish Group, I presented the outcomes and findings of the Group, established to look at 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.

20. Overall, Members of the Task and Finish Group gained a better understanding of the service provided by the Council in relation to public waste bins, acknowledging that resources are limited and that the circumstances which led to bins not being emptied in the summer period, have been addressed.
21. The Scrutiny Committee approved the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group and look forward to receiving an update at a future meeting regarding the digitalisation of the service.

Work Programme 2022/23

22. 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.

Medium-Term Financial Plan

23. As with all Scrutiny Committees, we have had the opportunity to respond to Cabinet, via the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, on the proposals in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2023/24 to 2026/27.
24. We were provided with an update on the finance settlement which had been received subsequent to the draft MTFP and that the Council Tax and Adult Social Care precept levels remained as anticipated at 2.99 per cent and 2 per cent respectively, and there had been additional one off funding for Social Care which was positive but did not change the overall context of the MTFP. As part of the consultation process the Committee reviewed the MTFP, in particular the services and finances which are specifically in the remit of this committee. Officer answered questions on fees and charges, assumptions made with regards to interest rates and inflation and on service areas.
25. There were mixed views on the MTFP, the majority view was that this Scrutiny Committee is dismayed at the lack of consultation with residents on the MTFP and that it does not support the proposed Council Tax increase of 2.99 per cent plus a 2 per cent Adult Social Care Precept in light of the cost living crisis and the impact of the proposed increases on residents and this Scrutiny Committee is concerned regarding the reliance on positive assumptions in the MTFP which may not come to fruition, and the potential increased risk in the future.
26. A minority view was also submitted as part of the consultation that this Scrutiny Committee supports the MTFP 2023/24 to 2026/27.

Stronger Communities Fund

27. The Stronger Communities Portfolio Holder provided Members with an update on the spend to date against the Stronger Communities Fund and we gave consideration to continuation of the scheme into the next financial year.
28. Members of this Scrutiny Committee support the continuation of the scheme in the 2023/24 financial year.

Councillor Steven Tait
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee