

**COUNCIL**  
**20 JULY 2023**

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**OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING PORTFOLIO**

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**Purpose of the Report**

1. Since the last meeting of Council, an introduction followed by the main areas of work under the Health and Housing Portfolio were as follows:-

**Introduction**

2. I am hugely privileged to have begun my work with officers and to learn more about the great services and activities that are delivered by Darlington Borough Council and our partners in this portfolio area. I would like to acknowledge and thank the work of my predecessor Councillor Kevin Nicholson and look forward to working with him, the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee (chaired by Cllr Mary Layton) and other members across the political spectrum.
3. On housing, it remains hugely beneficial for Darlington that we still own and run our own council housing. However, I am acutely aware that there are over 1,200 people on the council house waiting list - so all options to tackle this are going to be explored. The 150 quality new council homes being built on the Neasham Road site is part of the solution and I was very impressed by the work of the team when I visited earlier in the month.
4. The number of people presenting as homeless remains high and so another key priority will be to review and update our homelessness strategy. Part of the regular cycle of reviewing and renewing our key housing strategies.
5. With regards health you can read in this report many of the great initiatives that are going on. However, the health inequalities in Darlington remain stark. In Darlington men living in our most affluent areas can expect to live on average 13 years longer compared to men living in our most disadvantaged areas. For women there is a gap of 10.6 years between our most and least affluent wards. Half (50%) of children in Year 6 in one ward in Darlington are recorded as being overweight and obese compared to just over a quarter (26.9%) in another ward 3 miles away. This will be foremost in our minds as we engage more with the Integrated Care Board, the development of their place plan for Darlington and when we refresh the Health and Wellbeing Strategy for the town with our partners.
6. Finally, the fantastic developments at Eastbourne Sports Complex are going well and the Dolphin Centre continues to be well used, despite the ongoing refurbishment work to the closed main pool.

**Public Health**

7. To support our ambition of improving the health of our young people the Summer Green Space Activity Programme returns for its 3rd year. This takes place in parks and green

spaces on the doorsteps of our residents across the borough and is aimed at young people aged 7-12 years. There are 2 hours of free of activities per week at over 16 sites across the borough. Activities include sports, teambuilding, and team games. Following positive feedback from parents and young people this programme has grown year on year and now includes input from Sustrans and the authorities own Transport team to offer information and advice on cycling including safe bike storage and a programme of supervised led rides from all the sites.

8. To celebrate the re-launch of the Darlington Breastfeeding Accreditation Scheme, a group of the Health Visitors from our Growing Healthy in Darlington team has worked with the Hullabaloo and Hippodrome and hosted an infant feeding event. Over 70 babies with their parents, grandparents, and carers came together to learn more about infant feeding. The families and young people also got the opportunity to explore the creative play space, reading, and craft corner at these venues. This event also allowed the staff at the Hippodrome and Hullabaloo to update their training to ensure that both venues continue to provide Breastfeeding Friendly environments as part of the Darlington Breast Feeding Accreditation Scheme. This will contribute to Darlington maintaining its WHO accreditation as an Infant feeding friendly town.
9. I am pleased to be able to welcome Recovery Connections which is a peer led organisation which supports individuals in their recovery journey from substance use, as the last component of our STRIDE service. Recovery Connections will work our outreach support team and our drug and alcohol treatment service to ensure that Darlington residents receive the highest level of care to allow for a positive recovery journey.
10. MECC (Make Every Contact Count) - We have hosted 4 train the trainer sessions, as well as 3 training sessions for our Workforce. On Thursday 15 June we hosted the first of 2 MECC Training sessions for elected members, with 23 participants on the call. The next training is face to face and scheduled for 18 July. This is an initiative we are continuing to push through our workforce and local partnerships in the corporate and voluntary sector. We are looking to set up a network of trained trainers to see how we can support to offer more training locally. There is a podcast on Darlington Xtra as an introduction to MECC and it gives a useful overview.
11. Whilst it's great to spend time outdoors and be active over the summer I would like to remind members about the increasing risk from Ticks. These live in mainly grassy or wooded areas and wait on vegetation for a host such as a person or pet, to pass so they can grab hold. The tick can then attach to the skin by biting, which may cause infection including in some cases Lyme's Disease. The recent warmer and wetter winters and hot summers means that ticks are more prevalent and active at this time of year. We should all be more aware of ticks during this time while we enjoy the outdoors and particularly if you have a pet such as a dog. Information about Lyme's disease and how to deal with a tick bite can be found on the NHS website.

## **Housing Services**

### **Rent Collection Performance**

12. Data from our RentSense IT system has confirmed exceptional rent collection performance by our Housing Services Income Management team in 2022-23, compared to other social

housing providers. This includes the following data:

- (a) Our gross rent arrears stood at 3.9 per cent. Nationally, this figure was 5.1 per cent and for other Council landlords, this was 5.5 per cent.
- (b) Our average rent arrears were £279.07. Nationally, this figure was £555.40 and for other Council landlords, this was £622.32.
- (c) For tenants receiving Universal Credit, the average rent arrears stood at £395.03. Nationally, this figure was £648.81 and for other Council landlords, this was £744.44.
- (d) For tenants not receiving Universal Credit, the average rent arrears stood at £176.44. Nationally, this figure was £511.93 and for other Council landlords, this was £556.87.

13. Our Housing Services team collected £25.94 million in Council rents, in 2022-23.

### **Tenancy Enforcement**

14. I am pleased to report that our Housing Tenancy Enforcement team continue to take decisive action against those Council tenants causing anti-social behaviour in our communities. All of these cases related to properties in the Park East ward:

- (a) An eviction was carried out on a Council property in March 2023. Legal action was taken against the tenant due to poor properties conditions and drug related anti-social behaviour. The tenant had failed to engage with Housing Officers and as a result, we were granted an outright possession order by the court.
- (b) An eviction was carried out on a Council property in April 2023. We received a mandatory possession order from the court as a result of a previous closure order we had obtained. The property had been used for drug related crimes and other anti-social behaviour.
- (c) An eviction was carried out on a Council property in May 2023. A possession order was granted by the court but the tenant failed to vacate, so an eviction order was granted. The tenants had subjected neighbours to verbal abuse, threats and harassment, as well as drug related anti-social behaviour.

### **Lifeline Services**

15. Our Lifeline Services team continues to provide vital support to over 3,400 Darlington elderly and vulnerable residents. During 2022-23, over 90,000 calls were made to our Lifeline response officers, with over 8,500 incidents attended. 90 per cent of these incidents which were attended in less than 30 minutes, often providing the first contact for residents, before emergency services arrive. In addition, 800 analogue emergency alarms were replaced as part of the Lifeline digitalisation project.

### **HomeSearch**

16. Our new Housing Allocations system HomeSearch went live on 12 June 2023, replacing the previous HomeFinder system.
17. Members will recall that Cabinet approved a new Housing Allocations policy in March, as a result of the Council leaving the Tees Valley Lettings Partnership. As Members will be aware, we have seen a significant increase in demand for Council housing in Darlington over the past few years. As the largest provider of social housing in Darlington, the previous Housing Allocations Policy and IT system no longer met the strategic needs for Darlington and some changes were required.
18. Our Housing Services team has been preparing for the switch over, testing the new system and writing to customers on the waiting list to inform them of the changes. Everyone in priority band 1 will be automatically moved over to the new system. Letters have been sent to everyone else on the waiting list, inviting them to register on HomeSearch. Instructions and “how to” user guides are available on our website and Housing staff are on hand to support customers who require assistance with the registration process.

### **New Build**

19. Work on the Neasham Road new build site is progressing on schedule. The foundations for all 150 properties has now been completed and building work has now commenced on numerous plots. The first properties are due to be handed over later this year, with the whole site due for completion in May 2025.
20. The Neasham Road site will provide good quality and much needed housing for Darlington, with a range of property types and sizes, and options for affordable rent and low-cost home ownership.

### **Climate Change**

21. Work on our Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (wave 1) project has now been completed. 23 Council properties have benefitted from a number of upgrades including, external and cavity wall insulation, new double glazed windows, solar panels and low energy lighting. These measures will not only help reduce carbon emissions but tenants have already reported reductions in their energy bills and other benefits, such as noise reduction. This project was partly funded using almost £300,000 of Government funding.
22. Work is currently underway to procure contractors for the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (wave 2) project. This project will bring upgrades to a further 130 Council homes, using £1.2 million of Government funding and £1.2 million match funding from the Housing Revenue Account.

### **Dolphin Centre**

23. Gym memberships continue to sit above 2000 with a strong presence from students within the town. Work continues with the local colleges to promote access through curricular activities and a targeted student membership.
24. May half-term welcomed families into the Dolphin Centre, with favourites such as bowling and soft play well attended. The training pool and toddler pool was offered during this

period as part of the family offer and additional family activities such as facepainting and balloon modelling included, in the absence of the main pool.

25. South Park Cafe and outdoor hospitality at the Dolphin Centre has been incredibly busy with record business in both areas. Outdoor hospitality continues to be a focus area for development in the near future.
26. Water safety talks have been delivered in primary schools in Darlington to ensure the critical messages around water safety are being repeated with young people in the town.

### **Holiday Activity Project**

27. The Easter provision of activities was successful, with an attendance rate higher than anticipated, increased participation from secondary school children and a reduced dropout rate. Attendees numbered 1082 overall, with 909 Primary aged children, 173 Secondary aged children and 173 SEND. A total of 978 children attended the programme who were eligible for benefits related free school meals. New activities were trialled, including Forrest school and Circus Week, in addition to escape rooms and golf clubs for older children.

### **Sheltered Housing Project**

28. The Move More Team continue to deliver weekly activity sessions within the sheltered housing schemes to residents, with the majority aged 60 years plus. There are 15 sessions per week and activities vary from target games, chair-based exercises to Tai Chi. In March/April, the Move More Team organised beauty students from Darlington College to attend 14 schemes to offer treatments to residents, which was extremely popular.

### **Eastbourne Sports Complex Capital Project**

29. Ambitious plans to transform Eastbourne Sports Complex into one of the Tees Valley's premier outdoor grassroots sports venues are starting to take shape. Work is well underway to resurface the current athletics track, and is near completion, with a new reception area being created and the track will once again be able to host premier athletics events, including the secondary and primary school town sports, north east youth development athletics leagues and also regional athletics events again on site.
30. The work also includes a new artificial grass pitch with changing rooms, turnstiles, and access for up to 200 spectators funded with a grant of £941,842 from the Football foundation.
31. The grant will enable local football clubs to play up to Step 5 on the National League Pyramid, with over 500 participants a week able to play on the pitch once work is completed.

### **Health in Haughton Matters**

32. Health in Haughton Matters participation rates have grown month on month since the start of year. The health walk continues to receive good numbers with three clear meeting points established. Tai Chi is extremely popular with over 30 people attending the sessions

on average each week. Yoga has been promoted, which has led to increased participation rates and a new venue being used due to the increase in popularity. Archery is being offered more frequently due to the improved weather. A total of eight sessions are on offer with over 150 participants taking part each month.

**Councillor Matthew Roche**  
**Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Health and Housing**