

COUNCIL
30 NOVEMBER 2023

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.

Taxis in Darlington

2. The Committee received a report to provide Members with an update on taxi provision (including wheelchair accessible vehicles) within Darlington. It was reported that Covid had impacted on many sectors of the economy, especially the hospitality sector, upon which Hackney Carriage and Private Hire Vehicles, drivers and operators are so heavily reliant. We heard that during the Covid pandemic taxi drivers had sought other opportunities, and that following the relaxation of Covid-19 regulations the country was faced with a shortage of professional drivers and that the taxi trade had been slow to recover.
3. We were informed that the high levels of inflation had also significantly increased operating costs and that the recruitment of new drivers remained extremely challenging. The submitted report outlined the background to the taxi trade in Darlington, and highlighted the current issues and measures being taken both locally and nationally to assist the taxi trade and address the problems.
4. Discussion ensued on the fares charged in Darlington, and we noted that fares in Darlington were the highest in the Tees Valley, and sixth highest in the North-East, for a two-mile journey, and we challenged why Darlington's fares appeared so expensive. The Committee entered into discussion on the differences in the fares charged by Private Hire Vehicles and Hackney Carriages and requested further information as regard the number of registered taxi buses within the Darlington fleet.
5. We were keen to establish whether there would be an increase in applications for Private Hire Licenses during the lead into Christmas and were informed that whilst existing drivers may do more hours, it was not anticipated that there would be an increase in applications.
6. We requested more information in relation to the incentives provided to assist with the costs of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAV), and the scope for further incentivisation.
7. Focus shifted to the measures and controls in place to ensure that drivers sanctioned in one area were prohibited from obtaining a licence in another area, and the subsequent loss of local control. We also examined the blockages which were leading to delays in the licensing of drivers, such as DBS checks and Group 2 Medicals. Discussion also took place on Uber, it's operating model, and whether larger authorities could be doing more to protect worker's rights and raise standards.

8. The Committee were also interested to know whether the incidents of drink driving had risen as a consequence of there being a lack of drivers, though this information was not available at the meeting.

Rail Heritage

9. The Head of Heritage and Culture provided the Committee with a presentation which gave an update on the development of the Rail Heritage Quarter and the plans of the bicentennial celebrations in 2025.
10. We received an update on the build, the operation and the brand identity for a new visitor attraction, to be known as 'Hopetown, Darlington'. The presentation included artistic impressions and photographs of the work in progress in relation to the Goods Shed 1833, a Site Overview, the North Road Platform, the Exhibition Hall, the Locomotive Works, the 1861 Shed and the Wagon Works Play Park. We were also provided details of the signature piece – a time travel simulator, a hydraulic ride, which would provide a nine-minute shared experience detailing how Darlington had changed the World. The presentation was well received by the Committee.
11. The Committee also received information as regard the brand identity. This included the key themes, details of the consultation which had taken place with stakeholders, including local rail heritage organisations. As well as the rationale and history behind the name of the attraction, the typography of logo and the colour palette. We were advised that the new visitor attraction would be opening in mid-Summer 2024, in good time for the 2025 celebrations.
12. Members raised concerns in relation to the arrangements for car parking and accessing the site, however we received assurances that the car parking and traffic management arrangements would be in place in time for the site opening.
13. We were keen to understand how the attraction would seek to satisfy a wide range of people, and maintain longevity, and the Committee were pleased to hear that there was an extensive forward plan, which included strands focused on education and a continued renewal of assets. Discussion ensued on other events taking place in Shildon and Stockton to mark the bicentennial, and Members sought assurances that events within the delivery programme would not clash.

Library Plan and Update

14. We received a presentation which provided the Committee with an update on the Library Plan. It focused on the newly-restored and refurbished Crown Street Library, which had successfully re-opened on Saturday 9 September 2023.
15. We received information in relation to the visitor numbers for the initial week of re-opening, and the Key Performance Indicators by which performance would be measured. The objectives of the Library Plan were outlined for Members, together with the new School Packages for 2023 and actions being undertaken to reduce the equalities divide.
16. Members were keen to establish the length of the Library Plan and received further information on initiatives to promote reading, and we were interested as to how visitor

numbers were recorded, and we pleased to note that the visitor numbers exceeded the projections for re-opening.

Councillor James McGill
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee