

COUNCIL
21 MARCH 2024

OVERVIEW OF LOCAL SERVICES PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Local Services Portfolio.

Highway Maintenance Programme

2. Highway Maintenance Schemes on site:
 - (a) C71 Houghton Bank, Heighington: Drainage Repairs/Carriageway Reconstruction (0.188 km)
 - (b) C182 Thompson Street East: Carriageway Resurfacing (0.183 km)
3. Highway Maintenance schemes due to start:
 - (a) B6279 Tornado Way/McMullen Road Junction: Carriageway Resurfacing (0.447 km)
 - (b) Unc Swaledale Avenue: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.275 km)
 - (c) A67 Coniscliffe Road: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.440 km)
 - (d) Unc Barmpton Lane: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.810 km)
4. Highway Maintenance Schemes completed:
 - (a) There were no schemes completed in this period.
5. Work continues to maintain our extensive highway asset which consists of 557 km of roads and drainage, 631 km of footways and cycle routes, 16,000 highway lighting assets, 315 bridges and other structure, 67 traffic signal junctions and over 16,000 signs, bollards and fences.
6. Prolonged and exceptional levels of rainfall over the winter have had a significant impact on road conditions with 1,457 potholes repaired in December and January compared to 909 in the same period in the previous year. Potholes remain a national issue on with similar experiences being seen across the entire country.

Local Transport Plan (LTP)

7. TVCA and Local Authorities are developing initial concepts on a pipeline of programmes and schemes for the Department for Transport's City Region Sustainable Transport settlement (CRSTS).
8. In January, TVCA Cabinet approved proposals for Round Two of the CRSTS.
9. In March this year, Cabinet approved the LTP programme of works for 2023/24, investing £3.5M in our transport network, including maintenance schemes. Below is an update on delivery of the LTP:
 - (a) Officers are reviewing the significant number of responses to Safe Routes To School (SRTS) consultation at Hurworth Comprehensive School and St Augustine's Primary School, with design changes in progress for the latter which will be consulted on in April 2024. This will require further consultation once complete.
 - (b) Consultation has taken place on the Abbey Juniors and Infants SRTS scheme, on Abbey Road and Cleveland Avenue. Officers are currently reviewing the consultation responses.
 - (c) Officers have reviewed the current town centre cycle parking provision with a view to enabling parking to be safer and ensuring that supply is adequate and appropriate for use. Options for improvement have been costed and will be installed in the coming months.
 - (d) Officers are currently in the process of reviewing all bus stops in the borough to address maintenance issues. This audit will seek to identify and then rectify issues at bus stops such as replacing broken/damaged timetable cases, repairing bus stop shelters and renewing lining/signage where required.

Bus Services

10. The Connect team and TVCA are in the process of revising the way at stop bus information is displayed. The review will include a revised layout of information and the removal and replacement of Connect branding with new TVCA branding. TVCA are currently consulting with local authorities on the new design. We have stressed the need to include a consultation process with visually impaired and other disabled passenger groups before any changes are made.
11. Agreement has been reached across the Tees Valley to adopt a new Clear Channel bus shelter contract that will see all bus shelters in Darlington refurbished or replaced if they are life expired. Clear Channel will recruit four new members of staff who will be dedicated to working in the Tees Valley. This new team will work with the Councils to devise and deliver a programme of shelter renewal and refurbishment across the Tees Valley. This will include the renewal of our town centre bus shelters.

Rail Education Programme

12. The Bishop Line Community Rail Partnership recruited a Rail Education Officer in September 2023 on a fixed-term, two-year, part-time contract to deliver a programme of rail safety and confidence sessions in schools within a 1.5-mile corridor of the Bishop Line, between Bishop Auckland and Darlington. The programme is funded by the rail industry and since sessions began in schools in November the programme has been delivered in seven schools (one in Darlington – Red Hall Primary) and trained 1,068 pupils (164 Darlington students). Bookings for 2024 so far include four Darlington schools – St Bede’s RC Primary, St George’s CE Academy, St John’s CE Academy and Firthmoor Primary.

Hopetown Darlington

13. Hopetown Darlington and the Stockton & Darlington Railway Partnership engaged with approximately 1,500 visitors at Darlington’s Jobs Fair in February to promote both the £35 million visitor attraction and the upcoming roles that will be available both front of house and behind the scenes, as well as promoting the apprenticeships and volunteering opportunities with the Stockton & Darlington Railway Partnership. Feedback from visitors was overwhelmingly positive with praise for the investment into Darlington, excitement for such a large attraction and eagerness to join the team.
14. Filming of the characters for Hopetown Darlington’s immersive experience ‘Experiment!’ was completed in February. The characters of Georgie and Stephen take visitors on a vivid immersion into passenger rail travel from 1825 to the present day (and the future), and the extraordinary impact it had across societies and cultures around the world.

Darlington Hippodrome – A Place For Everyone Fund

15. The Hippodrome’s ‘A Place For Everyone’ Fund opens up the theatre to audiences, practitioners and performers, regardless of social, physical or economic barriers.
16. In 2023, the total expenditure was £24,018. Donations are made up of customer donations, bucket collections, Friends of Darlington Hippodrome subscriptions and legacy donations.
17. 50 percent of the budget supported the cost of tickets, opening up access to theatre performances for schools, community groups and refugee groups, young people from the looked after sector, care leavers and groups with access needs.
18. 29 percent of the budget supported us to deliver community events and projects such as the free Mini Mela open day (hosted by Gem Arts) and the free Curious Takeover (hosted by Curious Arts).
19. The final 21 percent of the budget supported transport costs for schools and groups attending shows, bursaries for the Hippodrome’s youth dance and youth theatre programme, the weekly warm space, essential companion tickets, research and development/space in kind for local artists, the In2 Projects and support for local charities.
20. An infographic is currently being designed to celebrate and publicise the support the fund has provided to our community in 2023.

Libraries

BookFest

21. Darlington's book festival for children, 'BookFest' returned in March to coincide with World Book Day, following a break during the Covid pandemic and the restoration of the Library. The week-long extravaganza of events included a tea party with Alice and The Mad Hatter, creative writing with Madam Dragon, and family friendly music gigs. All activities were free of charge, with the aim of engaging families in creative, cultural and literary activity.
22. Schools in Darlington received free author experiences and creative writing workshops as part of BookFest, including schools with a significantly higher proportion of children accessing free school meals.

Free Books for Children

23. To further support families who are economically disadvantaged, Darlington Library is one of five pilot authorities to trial gifting free World Book Day books to children. The vouchers are usually exchanged at bookstores, which can pressure families to "buy" and is a barrier to them accessing their free book. It is thought that by offering them from libraries more children will receive their book and become engaged in reading for enjoyment.

Visitors to Crown Steet Library

24. In January, the library welcomed a record number of visitors: 29,534. This is the highest number of visitors to date, based on records dating from 2017. Customers continue to visit the library to view the new spaces and features, borrow stock, with a significant number also utilising 'The Study' space within the building. Attendees of the children's sessions have also increased, following removal of the potentially prohibitive booking system.
25. A significant number of visitors to the 'The Hive' are children and young people accessing the workshop area as part of the library's school offer. Coding, animation, creative and digital design, use of 3D printers, Cricut and laser cutters are supporting schools to enhance their STEAM offer, and workshops using the library's Virtual Reality Headsets are proving to be invaluable, immersing children in exciting learning experiences.

Creative Darlington

26. Young musicians from Durham Music's ensembles worked with musicians from the Hallé Orchestra to create and rehearse a new piece of music which was performed at Darlington Hippodrome. The performance took place on the evening of Saturday 10 February to a large and appreciative audience. Since 2016/17, the Council's Heritage and Culture Fund budget has supported ongoing work led by Orchestras Live, involving Durham Music Service and Darlington Hippodrome, offering pupils from participating schools in Darlington (both primary and secondary) opportunities to work alongside different orchestras performing at Darlington Hippodrome.

27. The Place, People & Living Memory, exploring and celebrating the work of female artists and/or campaigners, including Darlington's Elizabeth Pease, opened in the Art Gallery at Darlington Library on 2 February 2024 and is on display until 25 March 2024. Over 400 people have visited the exhibition to date, which is backed by Arts Council England Project Funding, and accompanied by a series of events. The opening evening of Thursday 8 February featured a talk on Elizabeth Pease by Chris Lloyd and attracted 50 plus people, with gallery tours, talks from the exhibition curator, Phil Gatenby, the artists involved, and a MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) curator.
28. Cabinet of Curiosity Studio led three workshops at Darlington Library from Saturday 27 January to Saturday 10 February and have contributed to a small display in the Local Studies section, which is currently on display. Additional free, family friendly drop-in activities were also offered at the Friends Community Hub between Wednesday 21 February and Saturday 24 February 2024 as part of their Arts Council England Project, 'Grow Your Own Creativity programme'.

Town Centre Partnership and Events

29. Darlington hosted the first Association of Town Centre Managers (ATCM) Regional Network Meeting in March, welcoming managers from across the region to the town centre, in addition to round table activities.
30. Officers attended a presentation to understand and learn about the potential opportunities from filmmaking, as one of 12 local authorities who have signed up to be part of North East Screen's Filming Friendly Charter. The Charter aims to encourage more filming in the region as this will have a positive impact on jobs and economic development. The presentation discussed what support Darlington could provide to location managers, with a further meeting planned to connect local suppliers with the industry.
31. Chinese New Year celebrations took place on Saturday 10 February for the Year of the Dragon; a cultural event added into the programme with support from the town centre Chinese restaurants and bubble tea shops. Dragons and lions paraded and performed in the town centre, dance workshops were held in the Dolphin Centre and storytelling and craft activities in the library. The event was programmed to help support movement of visitors around the town and incorporated feedback received from families who have expressed a wish to engage with different activities.
32. 'Superhero Saturday' is new for 2024, with meet and greet characters, encouraging movement and footfall around the town centre. This format has been well received by both businesses and visitors. The events team aim to add this element of exploration throughout the calendar to encourage visitors to extend the duration of their visits to the town centre.
33. The summer animation and events programme has been created and a 2024 events leaflet has been printed to be distributed across the region. Leaflets are available to pick up in a variety of town centre locations and will be in leaflet racks distributed via a company across South Durham, Tees Valley and North Yorkshire. Promotion has also taken place online and events have been featured in Living Magazine.

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Local Services Portfolio