

**CABINET
7 JANUARY 2025**

COUNCIL PLAN 2024-27 PERFORMANCE REPORTING UPDATE

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Stephen Harker, Leader and all Cabinet Members**

**Responsible Director -
Chief Officers Executive**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report is the first performance report of the new Council Plan 2024-27. It summarises progress against the key commitments and deliverables in the plan. The **Appendix** to this report contains further narrative and supporting data.
2. The full plan can be found on the council website: [Darlington BC - Council Plan](#)

Summary

3. The Council Plan was approved by Council on 18 July 2024. The plan outlines Darlington Borough Council's long-term ambitions for Darlington and priorities for action over the next three years. It gives strategic direction to the council and council services, defining priorities, identifying key actions and shaping delivery.
4. The plan recognises the fundamental link between health, wellbeing and the economy. There are six priorities: economy, homes, living well, children and young people, communities and local environment. Three core principles shape the delivery of the plan: addressing inequalities, tackling climate change and efficient and effective use of resources.
5. This is the first report for the new plan and provides a summary of the key actions taken by the council to deliver the priorities in the Council Plan. The appendix contains narrative from lead service areas on key actions, demonstrating delivery of the priorities and core principles.
6. Cabinet agreed that they will receive two reports a year on progress and performance. The annual report will be a more detailed look, whilst this six-month report is a 'check-in' giving Cabinet the opportunity to discuss progress.

Recommendation

7. It is recommended that Cabinet note and review the progress made in the delivery of the Council Plan and approve this report.

Reason

8. The report and appendix provide a summary of key actions undertaken by the council, highlight key issues and progress.

Chief Officers Executive

Background Papers

Council Plan 2024 – 2027: [Darlington BC - Council Plan](#)

author: Lynne Davies Extension: 5070

Council Plan	This report is about the delivery of the council plan
Addressing inequalities	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Tackling Climate Change	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Efficient and effective use of resources	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Health and Wellbeing	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
S17 Crime and Disorder	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	This does not require a decision affecting the budget and policy framework
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

9. The Council Plan was agreed at Council on 18 July 2024. The plan is shaped by three core principles: addressing inequalities; tackling climate change; and efficient and effective resources. They are a long-term commitment to enhancing the wellbeing of all residents and ensuring the council is able to deliver the greatest impact within available resources.
10. There are six priorities for delivery:
 - (a) Economy
 - (b) Homes
 - (c) Living well
 - (d) Children and young people
 - (e) Communities
 - (f) Local environment
11. This report summarises key actions over the first six months and areas of progress in delivering the priorities and core principles in the plan. The appendix to this report contains further narrative and supporting data.

Core Principles

Efficient and Effective Use of Resources:

12. On the 3 December 2024 Cabinet agreed the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2025/26 - 2028/29 to go out for public consultation which will conclude on the 23 January 2025. The MTFP will then return to Cabinet and be presented to full council in February 2025 for approval.
13. As the Local Government Financial Settlement is not delivered until late December a number of assumptions were made in regard to resourcing levels informed by the Government's Autumn Budget announcement on the 30 October 2024. The Government's long term commitment to putting the local government sector on a sustainable footing is welcome and will be an important factor in enabling the success of council plan.
14. External auditors Ernest Young LLP are required to be satisfied that the council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources and must report if there are any significant weaknesses in the financial stability, governance and performance improvement. In the latest report for year ending 2022/23 the Auditors found no risk or actual significant weaknesses in the council's arrangements.
15. A number of key strategies and plans are being reviewed and refreshed:
 - (a) The asset management plan will be presented to Cabinet early 2025.
 - (b) Work continues on the procurement strategy which will be finalised in 2025 after the implementation of the Procurement Act 2023.

- (c) The refresh of the workforce strategy has begun with key stakeholders.
 - (d) The Digital Darlington strategy 2025-30 is currently out to public consultation.
 - (e) The Customer Services strategy 2025-30 is currently out to public consultation.
16. Strategic partnerships are important to delivering the plan with many examples highlighted throughout this report. Partnership working continues via Xentrall, with recent work developing a bespoke project management system for capital projects. Relationships with key stakeholders continue to be managed through the Public Sector Executive Group and Voluntary and Community Sector Engagement Group. The council also continues to work in partnership with ESH Homes Ltd to deliver a number of housing sites across the Borough.

Addressing Inequalities:

17. Many actions delivered for the council plan address inequalities and these are highlighted throughout the priorities section of this report.
18. The development of the new Health and Wellbeing Strategy has been underpinned by a consideration of health inequalities, building on the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and the recommendations of the Marmot Review. The thematic priorities taken forward will explicitly include consideration of inequalities, understanding differences in outcomes across wards and targeting actions to population groups or geographical areas where need is greatest.
19. The council has been taking an active role as a member of the North East Child Poverty Commission, supporting the work of the collective to inform lobbying on key issues for the national Child Poverty Strategy. This has included taking part in themed roundtables, a workshop specifically organised for Tees Valley partners, and ensuring representation from the voluntary and community sector.
20. Work continues to design and deliver Household Support Fund programmes, as highlighted later in this report with Round 6 currently being delivered. The Autumn Budget committed to a further round of funding for next financial year, and planning is underway for the new programme.

Tackling Climate Change:

21. Progress continues to deliver the climate change commitments through the delivery of the climate change action plan. We are following our trajectory of a 40% reduction in council carbon emissions every five years.
22. This is a cross-council ambition and we have:
- (a) Involved the public – Ecofair June 2024 was a big success with over 5,000 people being introduced to eco-friendly products and services and engaging with hands on activities such as crafts and science demonstrations.

- (b) Engaged with business – shared sources of help, funding and success stories direct to businesses through our business newsletter and council website.
- (c) Continued to be an active member of Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership, a collaboration of businesses aimed at spreading good practice around the net zero challenge. The council attended the network and learn event at the North East Net Zero Innovation Centre.
- (d) Briefed elected members at a seminar including representatives from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.
- (e) Worked with services across the council to trial a new report on our adaptation activities for the Department for Food and Rural Affairs, to help ensure we are resilient to future climate change. This involves the council risk assessing against risks identified by the Climate Change Commission.

Priorities

Economy:

- 23. The general economic outlook for Darlington is positive with unemployment levels remaining steady at around 4.4%, employee and residents' earnings on an upward trajectory and town centre footfall being higher in key months in 2024 when compared with 2023 figures. Some of the data around total employment growth rates and self-employment is showing a recent decline. The new inclusive growth strategy will look at this data in further detail as part of the evidence building stage.
- 24. The council continues to prioritise the economy and using the main levers to create the right conditions for new investment, businesses and jobs. In July 2024 Market Asset Management successfully completed phase three of the market refurbishment project and is growing its reputation as a community hub. The new trading area has attracted new traders and includes a new stall which sells goods manufactured by small scale producers.
- 25. The new government hub office development for Darlington Economic Campus on Brunswick Road was given planning approval on 7 August 2024, marking a significant milestone for the project. The complex will be home to 1,400 civil servants and is due to complete in 2027.
- 26. The council delivered the first of two annual Darlington Jobs Fairs in October 2024 at the Dolphin Centre, promoting good jobs and career opportunities available in the Borough. 1000 jobs seeker attended to meet around 100 employers and support organisations.
- 27. The Government's Autumn Budget confirmed the Long Term Plan for Towns programme will be retained and reformed, and focused on regeneration. Darlington's designation has been retained and will focus on a wider urban footprint in the Borough. The council will receive £20m over 10 years, beginning in financial year 2025/26 with a focus on capacity building. A board of local partners will provide strategic leadership for this programme, supported by the council.

28. Work continues to deliver Towns Fund projects with improvements to Victoria Road and to shops and the public realm along Skinnergate and the Yards. Significant work will take place over the next nine months on the creation of the Adult Skills Hub within the Northern Echo building refurbishment and the redevelopment of Coniscliffe Road public realm.
29. The council continues to prioritise the safety and cleanliness of the Borough for the benefit of residents and to sustain business confidence and investment. Independent auditing during the reporting period has given the overall cleanliness of the area an excellent rating.

Homes:

30. There remain challenges in relation to homelessness and rough sleeping, in particular in achieving positive outcomes to prevent homelessness due to the lack of move on accommodation. A new Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy has been developed with partners and has been published for consultation. It proposes priorities for action and will involve the council working in partnership with charities and voluntary organisations, social housing providers, public health and statutory agencies to focus on prevention. The strategy will return to Cabinet in February 2025 for approval.
31. Investment in council houses continues with work beginning on site in July 2024 for Phase Two of new council housing at Sherbourne Close. Phase Two will deliver 14 new homes including 11 affordable rented properties, 2 buy to rent and one for Children's Services. The Neasham Road new build site which will deliver 130 council houses had tenants move into the first 22 council homes in September, further phases will be released in 2024 and 2025.
32. Work continues to deliver greater energy efficiency in existing properties. Wave 1 of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) has delivered energy efficiency solutions to 23 council homes. Wave Two commenced in September to support 130 council homes funded by £1.27m Government funding and £1.27m Housing Revenue Account Capital expenditure.
33. The council has bid into Wave Three of SHDF to deliver upgrades to 1,600 council homes over a three year period. If successful this would significantly uplift the percentage of homes with an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of C or above from the current level of 52%, going some way to help achieve the Government's target of all properties with an EPC 'C' rating by 2030.
34. The new build housing sector has seen a slow down in delivery largely due to the impact of the nutrient neutrality designation, it is anticipated that this will continue throughout this year. Recently applications have been progressing and gaining consent, and there have been 100 completions in quarter two of this year.
35. The council has reviewed and streamlined the Disabled Facilities Grant. The Adult Services Team now leads the management of applications, communication and approvals; working with the Commissioning Team who leads contract oversight.

Living Well:

36. The Health and Wellbeing Strategy has been developed with partners and takes a life course approach underpinned by thematic priorities. The strategy was presented and approved by the Health and Wellbeing Board in December 2024.
37. In addition to the Health and Wellbeing Strategy there is also work ongoing to develop the public health approach to tackling health inequalities, working in partnership with key stakeholders. Priorities include developing the Physical Activity Strategy and Healthy Weight Plan; delivering strategic priorities and actions on domestic abuse and sexual violence through a partnership board; refreshing the domestic abuse safe accommodation strategy with Durham County Council; and working with the Combatting Drugs and Alcohol Partnership to monitor local plans.
38. Council teams continue to collaborate with health and care partners to support residents, particularly through the NHS led Integrated Care Board arrangements and partnership with the Foundation Trusts. A task and finish group has recently been set up to review the intermediate care offer.
39. The Dolphin Centre pool complex fully reopened in August 2024 after significant refurbishment. The new toddler pool is popular with families and swimming lessons are at their highest numbers since 2019, with lessons accommodating over 900 children. Memberships are at their highest ever levels and a partnership with Darlington College has driven more student use, with 600 active accounts using the facilities at off peak times.
40. Events and hospitality at the Dolphin Centre have seen the return of the BBC Make a Difference Awards and the hosting of the United Dance Organisation Dance Competition which attracted an audience from across the country. The significant investment in new facilities at Eastbourne Sports Complex is also encouraging an increase in visits and substantial growth in women and girls' participation.
41. There is an increase in residential care by older people (aged 65+) in Darlington. The council is actively working to reduce the reliance on residential care through the strength-based practice approach and through a home first approach to hospital discharges. This trend will continue to be monitored.
42. Work on the adult social care transformation plan is ongoing, the team has introduced Netcall within the adult contact team to ensure timely, effective and efficient referral pathways for people contacting adult services. The new support plan review process has also been implemented to undertake reviews of support plans and needs, and ensure a timely review process. The adult social care engagement and co-production strategy has been developed and shared with local groups including Darlington Association on Disability, with an agreement to develop co-produced activities and plans.
43. Market capacity for community placements continues to be a challenge. In support of developing a sustainable care market in Darlington the council has worked with colleagues across health, housing and the VCSE sector to develop a Market Position Statement and Commissioning Strategy with an Accommodation with Care and Support Needs Strategy (Adults) and a Sufficiency Statement (Children).

Children and Young People:

44. The council has increased the proportion of Children in Care who are being cared for by Local Authority Foster Carers to 20%, supported by an increase in the number of approved Foster Carer Households to 64 (50 in 2023). Short term placement instability has reduced to 9.2% compared to 15.5% in the same period in 2023.
45. The council continues to work with multi-academy trusts and schools to develop a high-quality inclusive education sector. The Education Strategy Group launched the Darlington Inclusion Charter at an all-schools event on 21 June 2024. A new Education Exploration Partnership will be facilitated by the Education Endowment Foundation to support the council and schools to develop evidence-informed practices and strategies to embed the commitment to inclusion.
46. The Education Village Academy Trust has been confirmed as the preferred sponsor of the new free school for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. The council is working with the Trust and the Department for Education to ensure the earliest possible opening. A local governing board has been established to ensure local planning and estates issues are identified and addressed at the earliest point.
47. A Revised Children and Young People's Plan 2024-27 has been produced with extensive engagement with children, young people and key stakeholders. The plan is a poster and video designed and produced by local children. Five priorities were agreed: health, education, family and carers, employment and community. The plan will be launched in the second half of this year with regular updates published on the council's website.
48. The Young Darlington Advisors project has been established bring together current work to involve young people in service development and design and enable it to happen on a wider scale. The young people will form a board, and membership will be from local young people aged 13-19 (or up to 25 for care leavers or those with an Education Health Care Plan/Special Education Needs plan). To date six young people have been identified to for the board and training is currently underway.
49. The council continues to successfully manage the safety valve plan for the education budget. The council is on track to eliminate the deficit within the terms of the agreement by 2026/27. After being approached by the Department for Education, the council has agreed to take part in ISOS-led research to reflect Darlington's successful use of the safety valve initiative for SEND funding to address historic budget deficits and support sustainable financial delivery.
50. The April and September 2024 roll out of expanding funded childcare entitlement has progressed well with no current evidence of unmet demand.

Communities:

51. Work continues with partners to reduce the burden of the cost of living, supported by the Government's Household Support Fund. Round 6 delivery is being supported by the voluntary and community sector and will deliver: one-off payments of £175 for 1000 households living in food and fuel poverty; one-off payment of £175 for 550 pensioners; home energy proofing for elderly residents via Age UK; food provision for Darlington

foodbanks; vouchers for children in receipt of free school meals; support for care leavers and up to £100 support via Citizens Advice for residents experiencing financial crisis.

52. Combined total incidents of crime and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) have seen a decline compared to the previous quarter (crime is down by 16% and ASB up by 13%). The ASB trailblazer project focuses activity across 8 hotspot areas and 575 patrols were undertaken between 1 July and 22 October 2024.
53. Whilst crime figures have declined, burglary, vehicle crime and shoplifting are areas being monitored and targeted. Support for business is provided by the Shopwatch network which now has a membership of 167; and work is ongoing to ensure all retail and businesses have a means of communication outside of this membership.
54. To support community safety Future Pathways held the first of three community events in the Eastbourne Community Arena with sporting and intergenerational activities for young people, police and council staff. North Road and North Gate Community Cohesion Panel has been set up with financial support for locally driven community initiatives. For rural areas progress continues as rural crime co-ordinators have been appointed and support has been offered to Darlington's rural areas.
55. Council officers have continued to tackle problems associated with fly tipping and waste in back lanes with 118 environmental crime cases received. The majority of cases have been closed and a range of actions have been taken including 1 prosecution for breach of a Community Protection Notice, 3 Fixed Penalty Notices issued and 10 prosecutions for environmental offences.
56. The begging figures for July to September 2024 show a decrease of 36% when compared to the same period last year, with support services offering support to those still on the streets. Further information on the council's approach to homelessness is in the Homes priority.
57. Partnership working with key agencies continues to support communities to remain safe and resilient. Number 40 continues to provide a service to anyone who needed assistance on a night out in Darlington, supported by volunteers. Darlington Cares membership and volunteering continues to grow to support the delivery of a programme of activities focussing on three areas: environment, education and social justice.

Local Environment:

58. Figures show high use of council-run cultural and sporting facilities, and in some cases such as the Theatre Hullabaloo significant growth. Hopetown Darlington is a new facility and opened to the public on 16 July 2024. The railway-based visitor attraction welcomed 55,000 visitors in the first 10 weeks. The official opening took place on 27 September, the 199th birthday of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, and was officially opened by The Worshipful the Mayor of Darlington Cllr Bob Donoghue.
59. The Stockton and Darlington Railway 200 Festival was launched to the media at Darlington Hippodrome on 19 September 2024. This will be a nine-month international festival beginning in March 2025 and Hopetown will be central to several key events.

60. The annual events programme continues to be a success offering free welcoming activity to attract visitors to the town centre and customers to businesses. The council is working with high street businesses to ensure the programme of events is planned to encourage movement around the town centre and increase dwell time. Events this year have included animation days such as dinosaur day and large-scale music events using the stage in the market square.
61. There has been a fall in the percentage of household waste collected by the council that is sent to landfill. It is at its lowest level at 16.3% as more waste is sent to energy recovery and causes less environmental impact. However waste recycling continues to be a challenge, with the amount of waste that is recycled, composted or reused falling slightly in recent years. There is ongoing work by Street Scene and communications teams to increase recycling and reduce contamination.
62. Cabinet will receive a paper before the end of this financial year on the implementation of a new weekly food waste collection service. The team has been working on delivery options but there are some challenges with the resourcing of this service as Government funding will not be sufficient. The Chief Executive and the MP for Darlington have both written to DEFRA expressing concerns and seeking clarification.
63. Finally, work is progressing with studies on flood risk in Darlington, with a particular focus on mitigating the impact of climate change. The Darlington Northumbria Integrated Drainage Partnership (NIDP) study has prioritised a scheme covering West Beck and Cocker Beck watercourses including the Cockerton area. The Flood Asset Risk Study identified a scheme on West Beck which has been incorporated into the NIDP, and business case is currently being assessed for a scheme at Killerby.