

COUNCIL
30 JANUARY 2025

OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2028/29

2. We gave consideration to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2025/26 to 2028/29 which had been agreed by Cabinet on 3 December 2024 as the basis for consultation. We were asked to consider the MTFP, in particular those services and finances within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee, and forward any views to a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, held on 20 January 2025, for consideration.
3. Members were informed that since the MTFP had been published for consultation, the Council had received notification of the draft financial settlement for 2025/26. The key headlines were outlined, with Members noting that whilst the estimated income was circa. £2m better than expected for 2025/26, there still remained a number of pressures and uncertainties.
4. Members raised concerns regarding their ability to agree the MTFP given the changes following the draft financial settlement and were informed that the MTFP would be updated prior to Cabinet on 4 February 2025.
5. Discussion ensued regarding the impact of National Insurance contribution increases on health service providers, noting that all service providers would be impacted by this increase as there was no specific funding for this going forward. Members were informed that the Council would be reviewing the sustainability of provisions; and following a suggestion by a Member for more in-house services, Members were informed that the Council regularly reviewed costs of in-house and external providers as part of the tender process. Members also noted the intentions of Housing Services to purchase properties for use as temporary accommodation.
6. Reference was made to the income generated by the proposed increase in car parking tariffs which would support a range of other services. Members suggested that this be publicised more widely to help mitigate negativity surrounding the increase in the tariffs. Members entered into a discussion regarding the savings generated by the back office, in particular staff vacancies.
7. Clarification was sought regarding the funding for concessionary fares and Tees Valley Combined Authority funding. A number of suggestions were also raised, including the potential for a review of council tax banding, request for additional funding from the Tees Valley Combined Authority for sustainable transport and increased resident permit parking charges. Members were informed that a review of residential parking locations was due to be undertaken in the Spring.

Climate Change

8. We gave consideration to the revised briefing note for Scrutiny Committees drafted by the Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer, in relation to the Council's commitment to tackling climate change. The briefing note reminded Members that tackling climate change was a shared responsibility, was deeply connected to other policy issues and local action was necessary for sustainable solution and that Scrutiny had a critical role to play in these cross-cutting issues.
9. Members noted that climate change as a stand-alone issue sits within the remit of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, however everything that the Council does either has an impact on, or is impacted by, climate change, so it is important that all Scrutiny Committees ensure that everything that comes before us has considered this.
10. We did suggest that external organisations also be encouraged to include climate considerations in any updates provided to this committee.

Housing Revenue Account – Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2028/29

11. We gave consideration to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) – Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2025-26 to 2028-29 prior to recommendation by Cabinet on 4 February 2025 and Council on 20 February 2025.
12. Details were provided on the key decisions within the HRA for 2025-26 which includes a proposed revenue expenditure of £30.186M, a proposed Capital Programme of £30.092M and a proposed weekly rent increase of 2.7 per cent.
13. Councils have the discretion to inflate rents by CPI plus 1 per cent, which means a rent increase of 2.7 per cent for 2025-26. Members were reminded that a 6.7 per cent increase was agreed in February 2024 for the current financial year, although rents could have been increased to 7.7 per cent.
14. Considering the current economic pressures faced by tenants and balancing this with increased costs of maintaining and improving Council housing and the need to deliver the Councils ambitious capital and energy efficiency programmes, an increase of 2.7 per cent was recommended which equated to an average £2.81 increase in weekly rents. Members were also informed that Cabinet also recommended that service charges be increased by an appropriate inflationary amount.
15. A presentation accompanied the report, outlining the consultation exercise undertaken with Darlington Borough Council tenants in relation to the proposed rent charges for 2025/2026.
16. We discussed the use of text messages as means of communicating with tenants, which has seen an increase in responses from tenants and we were informed of the range of mechanisms in place to support tenants that were struggling to pay their rent, including the tenancy sustainment team.

17. Members also discussed the budget for responsive repairs and maintenance and roofing repairs and clarity was sought in relation to lifeline services
18. This Scrutiny Committee supports the average weekly rent increase of 2.7 per cent for 2025/26, increases to the garage rents and services charges, the revenue budget, Housing Business Plan and capital programme.

Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025/2030

19. We gave consideration to the draft Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025-2030 prior to approval by Cabinet on 4 March 2025.
20. We were informed that Section 1(1) of the Homelessness Act 2002 requires housing authorities to carry out a homelessness review for their area and formulate and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results of the review every five years. The Council's previous Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for 2019-2024 successfully delivered a number of aims and objectives to reduce homelessness and deliver the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.
21. Members were advised that over the past few years and particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council has had to deal with a significant increase in demand for homeless services and that whilst these services would normally work in a proactive way with clients to prevent homelessness, the increase in presentations and demand for temporary accommodation has meant that services have had to be more reactive to ensure that no-one is left homeless or having to rough sleep.
22. We noted that the strategy has been developed with the support of local partners and organisations including Commissioning, Adult and Children's Services, Health, Probation, the Police, social and private landlords and the voluntary sector with the aim to be a document that is owned by partners and the people of Darlington.
23. We were provided with details of the long term vision and the six co-produced key priority areas to achieve this vision. Members also noted the action plan contained within the strategy, setting out key actions to deliver the six priority areas. Details were also provided of the Council's statutory homeless duties and figures for increases in homelessness and costs.
24. We discussed the increase in homeless presentation, in particular for those leaving hospital/prison. Members were informed that the housing team works closely with Darlington Memorial Hospital, attends discharge meetings and has a presence at West Park, to ensure that support is provided to those being discharged. Members requested that the figures for hospital/prison be separated.
25. We queried those required to leave asylum seeker accommodation and noted that overall the number of asylum seekers housed in Darlington is low. Discussion also ensued regarding 'sofa surfers' and those presenting homeless due to their property no longer being suitable due to ill health, noting the actions taken for these presentations.

26. We have agreed to the onward submission of the draft Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025-2030 to Cabinet and have also agreed to review the strategy 2025-2030 on an annual basis.

Performance Indicators – Quarter 2 2024/2025

27. We received Quarter 2 performance data against key performance indicators for 2024/25.
28. Members were informed that data was available for nine of the twelve Housing and Culture indicators, with seven of the nine indicators showing performance better than from when last reported and two showing performance not as good as when last reported.
29. In relation to Public Health indicators it was reported that twelve annual indicators have been updated since quarter 4 2023/24 and that nine of the twelve indicators were showing performance better than from when last reported, two were showing performance not as good as when last reported and one was showing performance that remained the same.
30. We discussed in particular the percentage of eligible population aged 40-74 offered an NHS Health Check who received an NHS Health Check in the five-year period, which has seen a decline. We noted that whilst there has been a decline, Darlington is statistically better than the North East and England and there will be a focus on targeted action to increase uptake in areas of the Borough where health outcomes are poorest. Whilst this might reduce overall uptake it is important to take such action to reduce health inequalities.
31. We have requested further details regarding hospital admissions caused by unintentional and deliberate injuries in children, noting that an audit and mapping exercise is underway and the outcome and recommendations from the work can be shared with Members once available. We also requested further details of the school toothbrushing scheme.
32. Members have agreed to remove the performance Indicator 'PBH052 - (PHOF D10) Adjusted antibiotic prescribing in primary care by the NHS' from the set of indicators for this Scrutiny Committee and that any further updates will be provided by the Integrated Care Board.

Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust - Progress with the Trust's Quality Priorities 2024/25

33. We welcomed an update on the Trust's Quality Account quality priorities for 2024/25, including key updates on delivery of the measures in place to deliver the priorities.
34. Members were reminded by the Director of Public Health that self-harm and suicide is a health and wellbeing key priority, highlighting that Darlington has the highest suicide rate in England. National data available indicates that 27 per cent of people who lost their lives to suicide were known to mental health services, and it is important to understand the local picture.
35. We discussed in particular relapse prevention and support for those on the waiting list for services. Members were assured that the Trust has seen an improvement in wait times

and that all patients receive an initial assessment, ongoing assessments of their risks and that a keeping in touch service is in place. Work is continuing to reduce waiting lists.

36. Members also noted that for those patients with limited support, the Trust has a multidisciplinary approach, working closely with a range of other agencies and for those patients without family, with a patients consent, the Trust will engage with friends. Members noted in addition, an advocacy service is available to patients.

Work Programme

37. We have given consideration to the Work Programme for this Committee for the Municipal Year 2024/25 and possible review topics. The work programme is a rolling programme and items can be added as necessary.
38. Following concerns, it was agreed that Members be provided with figures for flu and covid vaccination uptake in Darlington, including Local Authority staff.

Councillor Mary Layton
Chair of the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee