

COUNCIL
27 MARCH 2025

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

Digital Darlington Strategy

2. The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications submitted a report which provided us with the details of the Draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 and sought our views before the submission to Cabinet for approval.
3. The report stated that the Digital Darlington Strategy was also aligned with the Customer Services Strategy. The main focus of the Strategy detailed in the report was to maximise the productivity and efficiency that can be achieved through technology through customer access to services and via back-office systems. The Strategy adopted a 'digital first' approach when it came to accessing council services for those who can and allowed resources to be allocated to those who required support.
4. The report explained that the successful delivery of the strategy relied on several factors and to have a clear understanding on digital exclusion. Those affected by digital exclusion enabled officers to explore potential interventions and ensure no one is left unable to access the services.
5. We discussed the ICT system supplier markets and how to ensure the value for money, we also wanted to understand how the Council makes sure we get the best use of the software.
6. We asked what the Intervention on Digital Exclusion would look like on the delivery plan. We touched on the customer relationship system and how data is gathered for the Council and Members.
7. Discussion ensued around the feedback from the Digital Darlington Strategy and how this was completed, how the feedback would be received and how digital exclusion would be monitored.
8. We asked if digital exclusion had moved away from an age point of view to a cost-of-living issue perspective. We also wanted to understand why the updates of systems take such an extensive amount of time to complete.

Customer Services Strategy

9. The Assistant Director of Housing and Revenues submitted a report for us to consider the draft Customer Services Strategy 2025-2030 before approval from Cabinet.

10. The report set out the strategy's vision to deliver excellent services to customers and in particular how to support customers to access council services. The Strategy detailed the Customer Standards which set out timescales and standards customers will expect from all customer services when contacted.
11. It was explained that a public consultation exercise had been undertaken on the Strategy and a verbal report was given on the outcome of the consultation, which will be set out in the upcoming Cabinet report. The Strategy focuses on seven key aims; Providing excellent customer services, making it clear how customers can contact us, Making it clear what we can help customers with and what we can't, Providing support for these customers who are digitally excluded, Delivering value for money, Investing in our people and Listening to our customers and using this to improve our services.
12. We asked if anyone would be turned away from Customer Services if it was an issue that Members of the public could resolve online, and it was confirmed that every customer would be provided with any support needed. We asked officers if the staff had any levels of training around supporting Members of the public with disabilities.
13. We wanted to know if the same focuses were on any customers queries to be resolved the first time and if we could receive monthly Customer Services feedback. We mentioned that the priority of staff safety should be highlighted within the strategy.

Footfall and Impacts Study

14. The Assistant Director Economic Growth and Assistant Director Community Services submitted a report which provided us with the factors that can impact on footfall within the town centre.
15. The report explained that Darlington had the largest conurbation in County Durham with a retail catchment of 400,300 (Experian) which extended to 586,000 within a 30-minute drive time. Both the level of home and car ownership in Darlington are above the UK average and that the town had excellent road connections, located 3 miles east of the A1M.
16. It was explained that town centre footfall was influenced by numerous factors which were detailed throughout the report, these included Shopping from home (online), Entertainment at home, Cost of Living, Changes to Bus Network, Etc.
17. We were happy to see the level of detail in this report but would like to see how much money people are spending and how working from home can affect footfall numbers.
18. We wanted to understand how the events programme can help business in Darlington, officers explained that a number of events such as the in trails happened inside some stores which promoted new customers to enter shops.
19. We wanted to understand why the Town footfall numbers were the best in September 2024 compared to the last seven years. Discussion ensued around the reduction in numbers that could be due to the increase in retail sales on the internet.

Procurement Strategy

20. The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report for us to consider the Draft Procurement Strategy 2025-2027.
21. The report explained that the work on this strategy had been informed by the Council's own priorities and ambitions as well as reviewed comparable approaches. The version set out in this report was a distillation from this exercise and the seven key objectives were Working together, Delivering Quality and value for money, Social Value, Climate Change, Governance and Compliance, Local Economy and SME and Innovation, improvement and forward planning.
22. The report also explained the need to set develop a subset of specific goals and targets to assist the measurement of deliverance. Some of those were detailed in the strategy under the heading 'Drawing things together'.
23. We entered discussion around the social value of the strategy, it was asked if local businesses were used would this come under social value and how to increase local spend.
24. Discussion ensued further around the how KPI's would be incorporated, and we were glad to see this Procurement Strategy in place.

Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring Quarter 3

25. The Executive Director Resources and Governance and Executive Director Environment, Highways and Community Services submitted a report for us to consider the Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring for Q3.
26. We considered the report which provided information on the delivery of the Council's capital programme and a summary of current construction projects. The report included the projected outturn of the Capital Programme is £330.800m against an approved programme of £330.901m.
27. We asked if the timescale from network rail had been received yet with regards to Hopetown, officers advised they were still waiting for this information.

Performance Indicators Quarter 2

28. The Assistant Director Community Services, Assistant Director Economic Growth, Assistant Director Law and Governance, Assistant Director Housing and Revenues, and Assistant Director Resources submitted a report providing us with an update on performance against key performance indicators at Quarter 4 2023/24.
29. It was reported that of the 22 indicators reported to this Scrutiny Committee, 17 had Quarter 2 data.
30. The submitted report gave the performance position in relation to the 17 indicators, of which nine had increased when compared to the same period last year or from when last

reported, whilst eight had decreased when compared to the same period last year or from when last reported.

31. We wanted further clarification around the Council Tax arrears collected which was detailed in the report. We also discussed how the Performance Indicators could be reviewed and revamped going forward.

Revenue Budget Monitoring 2024/25 Quarter 3

32. The Assistant Director Resources submitted a report providing an early forecast of the 2024/25 revenue budget outturn as part of the Council's continuous financial management process to be presented at 4 February Cabinet.
33. We were provided with the third revenue budget management report 2024/25 which included financial records to November and managers projections for the remainder of the year. Assumptions had been made concerning the future demand for services over the final quarter.
34. The report included the Council's projects revenue reserves position at the end of 31 March 2025 are £11.458m, £0.885m lower than the initial 2024-28 MTFP position. The position related to the £1.982m of departmental pressures and a decline of £0.224m from corporate resources, offset by £1.321m of additional balances following the 2023/24 outturn.
35. We entered discussion around the Carry Forward Request, it was requested if more information could be received regarding this request. We also wanted to understand if any more carry forward requests will be submitted in the future.

Darlington Indoor Markets

36. We received a report which was submitted following the receipt of a 'call-in' from Cabinet held on 4 February 2024 (Minute C113) in relation to its decision in respect of the Darlington Indoor Markets. The 'call-in' had been submitted by three Members of this Scrutiny Committee.
37. We opened the meeting up to questions which could be asked and responded to in the non-confidential part of this meeting and we discussed the first question of Part 1 and how the Darlington Indoor Markets item was not included on the Work Programme for Members to scrutinise.
38. We ensued into conversation around question 4 of the part 1 report, Members expressed their concerns that the response did not answer the question. Conversation ensued around that the Terms of Reference that was yet to be agreed and the potential for this to attend scrutiny in the future.
39. Question 8 of part 1 was in relation to whether an audit had been undertaken from the request of Cabinet, we discussed whether this was usual practice for the Council to request another business to complete an audit. We scrutinised that if the Council is to loan such a significant amount of money that the business accounts should be looked at closer.

40. Conversation then ensued to Question 10, we scrutinised that there was no detail of how the work could be brought back in house, officers explained the implications of bringing the Darlington Indoor Market back in house and what MAM offer to the Indoor Market.

Councillor Rebecca Baker
Chair Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee