

ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 30 January 2025

PRESENT – Councillors Baker (Chair), Coe, Dillon, Durham, Henderson, Marshall, and McGill

APOLOGIES – Councillors Haszeldine, Mrs Scott and Ray,

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors McEwan (Deputy Leader and Economic Portfolio Holder), Porter (Resources Portfolio Holder)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Mark Ladyman (Assistant Director Economic Growth), Brett Nielsen (Assistant Director Resources), Anthony Hewitt (Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects), Brian Robson (Head of Capital Projects), Anthony Sandys (Assistant Director - Housing and Revenues), Neil Bowerbank (Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications), Luke Swinhoe (Assistant Director Law and Governance), Alex Nicholson (Town Centre Partnership & Events Manager) and Olivia Hugill (Democratic Officer)

ER132 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

ER133 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THIS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:

- a) Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 9 January 2025.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 9 January 2025 be approved as a correct record.

- b) Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the Special Meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 9 January 2025.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the Special Meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 9 January 2025 be approved as a correct record.

ER134 DIGITAL DARLINGTON STRATEGY REPORT

The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications submitted a report which provided Members with the details of the Draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 and sought their views before the submission to Cabinet for approval.

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 comes to accessing council services for those who can and allowed resources to be allocated to those who require support.

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.

Members discussed the ICT system supplier markets and how to ensure the value for money, Members also wanted to understand how the Council makes sure we get the best use of the software.

Members asked what the Intervention on Digital Exclusion would look like on the delivery plan. The Committee touched on the customer relationship system and how data is gathered for the Council and Members.

Discussion ensued around the feedback from the Digital Darlington Strategy and how this was completed, how the feedback will be received and how digital exclusion will be monitored.

Members asked if digital exclusion has moved away from an age point of view to a cost-of-living issues viewpoint. Members also wants to understand why the updates of systems take such a vast amount of time to complete.

RESOLVED – That Members noted the report.

ER135 CUSTOMER SERVICES STRATEGY

The Assistant Director of Housing and Revenues submitted a report (previously circulated) for members to consider the draft Customer Services Strategy 2025-2030 before approval from Cabinet.

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.

It was explained that a public consultation exercise had been undertaken on the Strategy and at the upcoming Cabinet Meeting a verbal report on the outcome of the consultation will be given. The Strategy focused 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.

Members asked if anyone would be turned away from Customer Services if it was an issue that Members of the public could resolve online. Member also asked officers if the staff have any levels of training around supporting Members of the public with disabilities.

Members wanted to know if the same focuses were on any customers queries to be resolved

the first time and if Members could receive monthly Customer Services feedback. Members mentioned that the priority of staff safety should be highlighted within the strategy.

RESOLVED - That members noted the report.

ER136 FOOTFALL CAUSES AND IMPACTS STUDY

The Assistant Director Economic Growth and Community Services submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide Members with the factors that can impact on footfall within the town centre.

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.

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.

Members 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.

Members 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.

Members 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.

RESOLVED – That Members noted the report.

ER137 PROCUREMENT STRATEGY 2025-2027

The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report (previously submitted) for Members to consider the Draft Procurement Strategy 2025-2027.

The Council did not have a formally adopted Procurement Strategy, this report explained that the work on this strategy had been informed by the Councils 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.

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'.

Members 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.

Discussion ensued further around the how KPI's would be incorporated, and Members were glad to see this Procurement Strategy in place.

RESOLVED – That Members noted the report.

ER138 PROJECT POSITION STATEMENT AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING QUARTER 3

The Executive Director Resources and Governance and Executive Director Environment, Highways and Community Services submitted a report (previously circulated) for Members to consider the Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring for Q3.

Members 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.

Members if the timescale from network rail had been received yet with regards to Hopetown, officers advised they were still waiting for this information.

RESOLVED – That Members noted the report.

ER139 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS QUARTER 2 2024/25

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 (previously circulated) providing Members with an update on performance against key performance indicators at Quarter 4 2023/24.

It was reported that of the 22 indicators reported to this Scrutiny Committee, 17 had Quarter 2 data.

The submitted report gave the performance position in relation to the 17 indicators, of which 9 had increased when compared to the same period last year or from when last reported, whilst 8 had decreased when compared to the same period last year or from when last reported.

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

RESOLVED - That Members noted the report.

ER140 REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2024/25 QUARTER 3

The Assistant Director Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) 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.

Members 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.

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.

Members entered discussion around the Carry Forward Requests, it was requested if more information could be received regarding this request. Members also wanted to understand if any more carry forward request will be submitted in the future.

RESOLVED – That Members noted the report.

ER141 WORK PROGRAMME

The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's work programme.

Members discussed that consideration should start for what the Committee would like to see across next year's Work Programme.

RESOLVED - That Members noted the report.