

**COUNCIL**  
**15 MAY 2025**

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**OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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

**Inclusive Growth Strategy**

2. The Business Growth and Investment Manager submitted a report which provided an overview of the work completed over the last 12 months to develop a new Inclusive Growth Strategy for Darlington. It was explained that the plan would set the framework to ensure Darlington is a great place to live, work and visit.
3. The report stated that during the development of the strategy, the UK Government announced the intention to publish a new national Industrial Strategy and develop local growth plans for each mayoral authority. Due to this announcement the development of the Inclusive Growth Strategy was delayed to ensure new policy ambitions could be understood where appropriate.
4. The report touched on the Invest 2035 green paper which detailed the proposals for a modern industrial strategy and the Tees Valley Local Growth Plan which will provide framework for inclusive growth in the local area.
5. The report included the next steps for the strategy, the final policy documents are yet to be published and with a defined policy framework in place, work to build the Darlington Inclusive Growth Strategy can now re-commence.
6. We explored the differences between the Darlington Plan and the Tees Valley Local Growth plan, Members questioned whether the policies for both plans were similar.
7. We discussed how it was important that the Darlington should benefit from the Tees Valley Local Growth Plan. We explored different ways of how to review this strategy before the Local Growth Plan would be submitted to Government.

**Artificial Intelligence**

8. The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications provided a report which provided an overview of the progress made by the Council for the assessment and adoption of artificial intelligence.
9. The report explained that at present there is no specific UK Legislation which governs the use of AI, instead reliance is on existing laws and regulations such as Data Protection, Intellectual Property and Equality Act.

10. The report expressed the aim to establish an Artificial Intelligence Strategy for Darlington Borough Council, work is ongoing and four main themes have surfaced. Darlington Borough Council are members of the LGA Artificial Intelligence Practitioners Group which involved sharing knowledge and learning work done by other local authorities.
11. It was clarified that in March 2025 Darlington Borough Council were selected to be part of a pilot programme for an AI tool called MINUTE that had been developed by the Government. In October 2024 three current Darlington Borough Council officers embarked on an 18-month Level 4 Business Analyst Apprenticeship which focused on the application of AI within Local Government.
12. It was explained to us that once a clear governance arrangement had been established, the Council will seek to maximise the benefits AI can offer where there is a clear business case.
13. We discussed their concerns regarding the use of AI tools within the Council, we advised different aspects for the team to investigate with AI such as bias and setting up partnerships with other local authorities whilst research is still to be done.
14. We explored the future of AI at Darlington Borough Council and how this would be a good item to review in future meetings when we have more information and if a Strategy was to be introduced.

### **Agile and Blended Working**

15. The Assistant Director of Resources submitted a report to share an update on Agile and Blended Working at Darlington Borough Council.
16. The report explained that the Council undertook an agile working pilot between May and December 2022 to explore the potential of formalising the new ways of working which had commenced during the pandemic. Due to the success of the pilot the Council adopted an agile working solution and the "Ways we can work" policy was adopted in April 2023.
17. The report stated the four role types the Council offers including fixed, agile, blended and home. The report included the statistics of the number of staff employed in the categories.
18. The report confirmed that flexible practice where agile/blended working was applied around business needs continued to demonstrate a return, there had been savings from reductions in travel costs, printing and rationalisation of buildings. The report showed evidence to suggest that our employment offer had increased recruitment and retention and assisted with staff sickness absence, if any changes would be made to this offer it could impact negatively on this. There is no evidence to suggest that the implementation of agile/blended working had impacted negatively on the service delivery.
19. We acknowledged the information included within this report; we wanted further clarification on the procedures if staff were to underperform.
20. We queried whether there are additional benefits for those employed agile/blended compared to employees working fixed. We asked whether residents perspectives had

been sought with regards to these working arrangements. We raised concerns around staff welfare when working from home, it was explained that management of staff is the same regardless of location and managers should be in regular contact with their team and agile/blended employees have access to all the support available to all staff including the mental health first aiders.

**Councillor Rebecca Baker**  
**Chair Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee**