

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

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**OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING PORTFOLIO**

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**Purpose of the Report**

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the main areas of work under my Health and Housing Portfolio were as follows:-

**Public Health**

2. We have reached the end of the one-year research programme for the roll out of the Eyes on the Baby training, to aid in preventing SUDI (sudden unexpected death in infancy) in Darlington. The multi-agency approach to the tiered levels of training has been well received locally with a diverse steering group to aid in the dissemination. The final numbers as of 31 March show that 217 people have completed the training with representation including the Police, Building Stronger Families, Housing, Looked After Children, Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust and local childcare providers.
3. Public Health and Environmental Health have been working on a significant joint project which involved looking at improvements in hygiene and infection prevention in care homes within Darlington. The work has resulted in a 75 per cent decrease in outbreaks of gastrointestinal illness associated with care homes in the past year. Project findings were shared via poster presentation at the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) national conference in March and have attracted regional, national, and international interest.
4. Public Health have been working with Environmental Health on another project with adult social care and education settings, as it has become apparent that some premises have been running a 'hatching project', which means they have baby chicks on site. As this presents an environmental health risk the council have been working with settings to make sure they understand and can comply with national guidance, related to stopping the spread of avian flu. This work will be showcased at the national UK Health Security Agency conference in May.
5. Confirmation has been received of the following ring-fenced grants for 2025/26, delegated to the Director of Public Health:
  - (a) Drug and Alcohol Treatment and Recovery Improvement Grant (DATRIG)
    - (i) The funding allocation of £1,000,006 is used to commission additional capacity in drug and alcohol treatment and recovery services.
  - (b) Local Stop Smoking Services and Support Grant
    - (i) The funding allocation of £108,687 is for additional investment in commissioned stop smoking services and support, to provide greater capacity,

and for local action to increase demand. It is expected that the additional funding will result in an increase in the number of people setting a quit date and successfully quitting.

- (c) Following the government announcement on 7 March of plans to implement (or expand) a national targeted supervised toothbrushing programme for children aged three to five, it has been confirmed that Darlington will receive a funding allocation of £37,411. Utilising the additional investment, work is underway to expand the existing supervised toothbrushing scheme which is already established in Darlington. It has also been confirmed by Ministers, following a public consultation, that there will be an expansion of community water fluoridation in the North East.

### **Health and Well Being Board**

- 6. At the meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Board on 13 March the annual report of Darlington's Safeguarding Partnership was presented, and the Board received an update on the Better Care Fund. Additionally, the ICB Director of Delivery shared an update on NHS Planning and a paper was brought forward setting out proposals for the refresh of the Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment, which is a statutory responsibility of the Health and Wellbeing Board.
- 7. The Board also agreed the next steps for putting the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy into action. There will be a deep dive review of two agreed priorities each year; the June meeting will focus on pregnancy and early years and the December meeting will focus on mental health and resilience. Furthermore, there will be annual review of the Strategy at the September meeting.

### **Housing Services**

#### **Housing Contact**

- 8. In 2024-25, our Housing Contact teams received 63,442 telephone calls from our tenants and other residents enquiring about Housing Services. This is only slightly higher than the previous year of 63,163 calls. However, in 2024-25, 89.6 per cent of calls were answered, compared to 84.6 per cent of calls in 2023-24. The average waiting time for answered calls in 2024-25 was four minutes and 36 seconds and therefore, within the Corporate Customer Services Strategy target of five minutes and an improvement on previous years performance.
- 9. Our investment in our Housing Contact teams over the past 12 months demonstrates our commitment to deliver excellent customer services to our tenants.

#### **Universal Credit**

- 10. The managed migration of Housing Benefit to Universal Credit for our tenants is continuing at a pace and is due to be completed in 2025-26. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will continue to contact households receiving income related Employment and Support Allowance to invite a claim for Universal Credit. Support is available from the DWP over the telephone and through visiting officers. The DWP has also introduced a new Complex Case team, to ensure the safe transition of more vulnerable customers to

Universal Credit and prevent anyone from having their legacy benefit stopped before they move to Universal Credit. Support is also being provided by our own Tenancy Sustainment team to ensure none of our tenants lose any of their benefits during the move from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit.

11. As at the end of March 2025, 2,447 of our Council tenants were receiving support with their housing costs through Universal Credit, with only 409 working aged Council tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit.

### **Acquisitions**

12. I am pleased to report that Housing Services has recently completed the purchase of two former Council properties, previously sold through the right to buy scheme, with another two properties currently being prepared for exchange of contracts. Both properties will initially be made available for our Housing Options team as temporary accommodation to house homeless families, supporting our new Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy.

### **Refugee Support**

13. Our Housing Services Refugee Support team had the pleasure of hosting our first 'Communities Together' event in collaboration with other Local Authorities across Tees Valley. Over 60 people from Darlington attended the event at the Dorman Club in Middlesbrough.
14. The event celebrated the diverse cultures in the area and offered an opportunity for people to get involved in something that may not usually have the opportunity to. Attendees were able to meet up and make friends with all the people we support across the Tees Valley and ultimately to have a wonderful day taking part in all the activities on offer, such as plant potting, arts and crafts, inflatables, dancing and singing. Refreshments were provided in the way of local curries, smash burgers, cotton candy, popcorn and drinks.

### **Rough Sleeping Winter Pressures 2024/25**

15. Darlington Borough Council has recently received the Rough Sleeping Winter Pressures grant for 2024-25 of £127,164. This grant is to support people in housing crisis and prevent homelessness and rough sleeping.
16. We intend to use this money productively in working with landlords to help residents sustain their tenancies and access new tenancies, supporting our Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, including:
  - (a) Providing resources to fund ongoing support to people when they are accommodated to help them sustain their accommodation; this could include engagement with faith and community-based organisations.
  - (b) Paying rent arrears in private, social or supported housing, where threat of eviction can be prevented.

- (c) Paying historical rent arrears to enable access to social housing or supported housing, where arrears are a barrier to access.
- (d) Paying private rented sector deposits, rent in advance and landlord incentives.
- (e) Funding personalisation budgets.
- (f) Providing home starter packs to enable rapid rehousing.
- (g) Making payments or the provision of goods to enable people to stay living with family or friends for a longer period, until alternative accommodation can be arranged.

### **Rent Collection 2024-25**

- 17. During 2024-25, our Housing Services team collected £30.35m of rent and service charges, compared to £27.90m in 2023-24, an increase of 8.8 per cent. This is the highest collection rate for 5 years, which was 98.15 per cent for 2024-25, compared to 95.97 per cent in 2023-24. This has been a huge achievement for the team, as our tenants continue to face the challenges of the cost-of-living crisis and the nationwide migration from Housing Benefit and other legacy benefits onto Universal Credit.
- 18. Universal Credit is paid in arrears and our Housing Services team has been contacting tenants at the earliest opportunity, providing advice and support, to ensure that reasonable and robust payment arrangements and processes are in place.
- 19. Rent arrears have subsequently reduced from £1.07m in March 2024 to £0.88m in March 2025. Rent arrears as a percentage of the rent charged was 2.85 per cent for 2024-25, compared to 3.69 per cent in 2023-24.

### **Neasham Road Site**

- 20. Many members will be aware that the Neasham Road construction site was broken into on 27 April and several properties were significantly damaged. These were empty homes nearing completion so no residents were hurt thankfully, however this damage will have a huge impact on the completion of the site.
- 21. I am devastated by the mindless damage, especially because it will delay the completion of much needed new good quality council homes and is a blow to the dedicated team who are building such excellent houses.
- 22. Work is ongoing on assessing the damage and security has been increased on site. The Council is working closely with the Police, who are investigating. I continue to urge anyone with any information to speak to the Police.

### **Health in Haughton**

- 23. The Move More team supported Health in Haughton Matters in their application to the National Lottery "Awards for All" grant last year. The successful £20,000 application is now supporting a supplementary programme to enable Haughton to expand on the existing programme. The new programme consists of; a move to improve session, mat

Pilates and additional children's sessions. The Move More team are working with Pulmonary Rehabilitation at Darlington Memorial Hospital who are signposting patients into the move to improve session every six weeks. Feedback from the first referral session has been positive. In the coming weeks, the aim is to add further activities such as netball to the offer. Over 300 attendances are consistently being recorded each week to the overall Haughton Matters programme.

### **Inclusion Programme**

24. Darlington Move More Team have been working with Sport for Confidence and Teesside University on developing a new boccia session at the Dolphin Centre starting Monday 7 April, following a successful application of £12,000 to the Sport England movement fund. The bid includes new inclusive boccia equipment, line marking of the main sports hall, funding for the session and leaders to be trained up from internal and external inclusive services and occupational therapists. The team have linked up with Dimensions, The Links, Darlington Association of Disability, Foundations, Lakeside Lodge and social prescribers to promote the session; and the overall programme of inclusive activity sessions the team delivers within our existing provision across Darlington.

### **Dolphin Centre**

25. Work continues to install 399 photovoltaic (PV) panels on the flat roofs of the Dolphin Centre and is expected to complete late Summer.
26. Further signage has been developed at reception to encourage customers to download information on activities and services using QR codes rather than taking away a leaflet to save on paper and a further acknowledgement to our commitments around the environment.
27. A new booking office has been opened on the first floor of the Dolphin Centre to facilitate bowling admissions and memberships. The relocation of memberships will support the customer journey and experience for new members and will reduce queue times at main reception.
28. The Dolphin Centre website is being redesigned to give the website a fresh look with improved functionality. The work is expected to be fully complete by June.

**Councillor Matthew Roche**  
**Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Health and Housing**