

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 10 April 2025

PRESENT – Councillors McGill (Chair), Cossins, Mrs Culley, Mahmud, M Nicholson, Snedker and Walters

APOLOGIES – Councillors Coe, Keir and Dr. Riley,

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors McCollom and Garner (Cabinet Member for Stronger Communities)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Brian Graham (Head of Environmental Services), Booth (Private Sector Housing Manager), Neil Bowerbank (Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications), Andrew Casey (Head of Highway Network Management), Chris Knox (Head of Community Safety), Richardson (ASB Civic Enforce Operational Team Lead), Smalling (Parks Allotments and Countryside Officer) and Olivia Hugill (Democratic Officer)

CLS30 INTRODUCTIONS/ATTENDANCE AT MEETING

CLS31 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Walters declared that he had a rental property in Darlington in relation to the Renters Rights Bill Paper. Councillor Snedker declared he was a member of the Friends of Stanhope Park and Councillor McGill declared he was a member of the Friends of the Denes in relation to the Management of Parks and Open Spaces Item.

CLS32 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY HELD ON 27 FEBRUARY 2025

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 27 February 2025.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 27 February 2025 be approved as a correct record.

CLS33 ALLOTMENT STRATEGY REVIEW

The Assistant Director Environmental Services and Community Safety submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide an update to Members on how Darlington Borough Council managed the Council owned allotments and those transferred to 'self-managed' associations.

The report explained that Council developed an allotment strategy when the majority of allotments were in council ownership, the strategy had not been renewed as during the period of the strategy 13 of the 16 allotment sites transferred to a 'self-managed' association. It did explain that the principles in the strategy have continued to be used as a management framework to manage allotments going forward.

The report stated that there was an excess of 800 individual plots available across the Borough, both DBC and self-managed. There are also four privately owned allotment sites in the borough, the council manages three allotment sites; Arnold Road, Honeypot Lane and Parkside, the other remaining sites are managed and ran by committees.

Conversation ensued around the current status of allotments still managed by the Council, Members wanted to understand whether there were any plans in place to increase dwellings for future allotment sites.

Members wanted to know if any 106 funding is used towards allotment sites and if the Council is involved with any Allotment Forums. One of the self-managed sites was praised allocation of fresh produce to Food Banks across Darlington.

AGREED – That Members note the report.

CLS34 MANAGEMENT OF PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

The Head of Environmental Services provided a presentation on the Management of Parks and Open Spaces to Members of the Committee.

The presentation explained the types of open spaces that are managed by Darlington Borough Council, such as formal manicured parks like South Park and designated local nature reserves such as Brankin Moor. It also stated the resources used to cover 665 hectares across the borough with a budget of £932,988.

It was advised that there are various volunteer and volunteer groups which support parks and open spaces such as the Darlington Forest Project, 17 x Friends Groups, South Park Foundation, Doves and 738 Street Champions. Other agencies involved in the management of parks and open spaces included Darlington Cares, Durham Wildlife Trust, Northumbrian Water, Etc.

The presentation gave an overview of the Health and Safety Management, named parks such as South Park, The Denes, etc are inspected twice per week. Other parks are inspected weekly and nature reserves are inspected on a monthly basis.

Conversation ensued around the maintenance of open spaces on new developments, whether this is the developer or Councils responsibility.

Members discussed invasive species and whether the Council have any involvement, it was explained that friend groups are aware of the current issues with Himalayan Balsam and licensing is required for the management of American Crayfish.

The Committee asked whether community service still operates around parks and opens spaces in Darlington. Vandalism was discussed during this item and how the light nights had spiked an increase in this particular crime, Members wanted to know whether implementing CCTV would help.

AGREED – That Members note the report.

CLS35 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide Members with information on the Council's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems.

The report referred to the points raised from the Quad of Aims submitted by Members, such as whether it was possible to configure existing systems spanning several service areas into a single point of access to accept reports from the public and from councillors, and automatically provide updates which included job numbers, allocation status and the date started or completed.

It was explained that the Council uses over 17 commercial systems to meet different service needs. The report focused on the systems that are in use to report antisocial behaviour issues, environmental issues, highway issues and housing repair requests. The report also explained how some system providers allow their customer portals to connect with 3rd party portals which would reduce the number of online accounts customers need to access council services, where this is possible the Council's in-house team have already developed the integrations.

Discussion ensued around the current CRM Systems the Council currently has, Members wanted to know whether other integrations within the systems in place would be possible and whether there is information anywhere to find the most relevant officers to speak when logging a report.

The Committee wanted to know whether timescales are tracked from the report had been logged to the work completed, other issues were identified from Members in certain systems.

Members asked if it is possible to take a photo of the issue you are too report rather than downloading the photo and uploading at a further stage and if the photo size limit could be increased.

AGREED – That Members noted the report and asked for this item to remain on the Work Programme.

CLS36 RENTERS RIGHTS BILL - DISCUSSION PAPER

The Private Sector Housing Manager provided a discussion paper (previously circulated) and a presentation to the Committee around the Renter's Rights Bill.

The presentation included the Bill's aims were to give greater security and stability to renters to stay in their homes for longer, build lives in their communities and avoid the risk of homelessness. An overview of the 4 parts of the bill were explained as well as what is included in the bill such as the duty to enforce and report, the key measures and how the changes will be funded.

The discussion paper stated that the Private Rented Sector had now stabilised from its

increase in the 15 years to 2021. 10.45% of households in Darlington are rented from the Local Authority, 5.76% are rented from a housing association and 18.47% are privately rented. The proportion of privately rented properties in Darlington was explained to be above the nation average and that of the Northeast.

Included in the paper was the latest census data (2021) which indicated that the Private Rented Sector (PRS) in Darlington was approximately 9035 properties. The Council did not have the details of the individual properties, but the census data is broken down into Ward data, Northgate Ward was detailed with the highest proportion of privately rented with 1,118 (50%) properties.

Discussion ensued around the funding of the renter's rights bill and how this would affect officers at Darlington Borough Council.

AGREED – That Members note the report and recommended this item to return.

CLS37 CONSULTATION ON THE RENEWAL OF THE TOWN CENTRE PUBLIC SPACE PROTECTION ORDER AND INTRODUCTION OF A BOROUGH WIDE PUBLIC SPACE PROTECTION ORDER

The Assistant Director of Environmental Services and Community Safety submitted a report (previously circulated) which provided information on the Consultation of the Renewal of the Town Centre Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) and Introduction of a Borough Wide Public Space Protection Order. A final report would be presented to Cabinet in June to consider and make a decision.

The existing PSPO covered the Town Centre and came into force on the 2 July 2022, it is due to expire on the 1 July 2025. The current town PSPO provides the Council with the powers to deal with the following: Persons acting in an anti-social manner who continue to drink alcohol in public places where are not licensed premises, after they have been asked to stop. Persons acting in an antisocial manner who fail to surrender any alcohol in their possession in a public place and not a licensed premises, when asked to do so. As well as begging and threatening behaviour.

The report explained that the Council must be satisfied on reasonable grounds that certain conditions had been met to renew or introduce a PSPO, officers reviewed the evidence and are satisfied that the required conditions had been met to consider the renewal of the order.

It also explained that there are some new considerations that are to be consulted, it was proposed to extend the area covered by the PSPO to include Victoria Road from the Station entrance area to Feethams due to the experiences of ASB covered by the PSPO. There are two new activities that the Council receives complaints about in the Town Centre that cause issues to the public and business which are Feeding Birds and Anti-Social use of bicycles, scooters, skates and skateboards within the Town Centre.

The report also detailed that other authorities have borough wide PSPO's for certain circumstances, based on experience and evidence from Civic Enforcement Team this could be considered for certain issues because of the impact on communities, financially and service delivery. The proposed powers to deter and assist with the management are Begging, Side Waste and Stray Dogs.

Discussion ensued around the current issues with pigeons in the Town Centre and how this can affect the cleanliness, Members wanted to understand the enforcement around of cycling in the Town Centre and whether this would only affect any antisocial behaviour.

Members asked for further clarification around begging and whether fines would be introduced as well as repeat offends for stray dogs.

RESOLVED – That Members noted the report and approved consultation on the renewal of a revised Town Centre PSPO as outlined in this report and the introduction of a Borough wide PSPO as outlined in this report.

CLS38 RESIDENTS PARKING ZONE POLICY UPDATE

The Assistant Director of Highways and Capital Projects submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide an update on the Resident's Parking Policy that the Council operates to prioritise on street parking for residents in areas where there is also a demand for visitor parking.

In addition to this Members submitted a Quad of Aims to consider the implications of vehicles of different sizes and emissions when parking within the zones.

The Quad of Aims identified the following outcomes: To provide an incentive to use and ownership of smaller, more sustainable vehicles that will have a positive impact on Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Road Maintenance Budget, provide additional funding for transport policy objectives, reduce severity of road collision injuries and inform any future review of on-street and council car park differential charging.

It was explained that the existing policy had been in place for a number of years and is subject to a review to ensure it meets its current needs. At current there are 16 RPZ zones within the Borough of Darlington. Parking is restricted to permit holders only during the hours of operation which are generally between 8am-6pm seven days a week. Of the 16 zones, 13 are charged for permits at £40 per 12 months, £24 per six months and £12 for a temporary 3 month permit.

The report also included the current policies which influence the Resident Permit Zones, the current Resident Parking Policy, current schemes such as how the Darlington Scheme compares to other Local Authority RPZs, Enforcement and the proposal for a consultation to be undertaken with relevant Ward Members, eligible residents and businesses.

Discussion ensued around how visitor permits would work and ward issues with the enforcement team. Members asked if there is any additional enforcement staff scheduled for the future. The committee also discussed how some of the markings for permit zones have faded which can affect parking.

AGREED – That Members note the report.

CLS39 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 and to consider any additional areas which Members would like to suggest be included in the Work Programme for the next municipal year.

RESOLVED – That Members note the Work Programme

CLS40 SUPPLEMENTARY ITEM(S) (IF ANY) WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR OF THIS COMMITTEE ARE OF AN URGENT NATURE AND CAN BE DISCUSSED AT THE MEETING.

CLS41 QUESTIONS