

## **ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Thursday, 3 April 2025

**PRESENT** – Councillors Dillon, Durham, Haszeldine, Henderson, Marshall, McGill, Ray and Mrs Scott

**APOLOGIES** – Councillors Baker and Coe,

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE** – Councillor Porter (Cabinet Member for Resources)

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE** – Brett Nielsen (Assistant Director Resources), Neil Bowerbank (Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications), Andrew Perkin (Business Growth and Investment Manager) and Olivia Hugill (Democratic Officer)

### **ER146 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

### **ER147 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THIS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:-**

- a) Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 30 January 2025.

**RESOLVED** – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 30 January 2025 be approved as a correct record.

- b) Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the Special Meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 26 February 2025.

**RESOLVED** – That the Minutes of the Special Meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 26 February 2025 be approved as a correct record.

### **ER148 INCLUSIVE GROWTH STRATEGY FOR DARLINGTON**

The Business Growth and investment Manager submitted a report (previously circulated) 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.

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.

The report touched on the Invest 20235 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.

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.

Conversation ensued around the differences between the Darlington Plan and the Tees Valley Joint plan, Members questioned whether the policies for both plans were similar.

Members discussed how it was important that the Darlington should benefit from the Tees Valley Joint Plan. The Committee explored different ways of how to review this strategy before the Local Growth Plan would be submitted to Government.

**AGREED** – That a Task and Finish Group be formed to monitor going forward.

#### **ER149 ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

The Head of Strategy, Performance and Communications provided a report (previously circulated) which provided an overview of the progress made by the Council for the assessment and adoption of artificial intelligence.

The report explained that at current there are no specific UK Legislations which governance the use of AI, instead reliance on existing laws and regulations such as Data Protection, Intellectual Property and Equality Act.

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.

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.

It was explained to Members that once clear governance arrangement had been established, the Council will seek to maximise the benefits AI can offer where there is a clear business case.

Members discussed their concerns regarding the use of AI tools within the Council, Committee members 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.

Discussion ensued around 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.

**AGREED** – That Members note the content of the report.

## **ER150 AGILE AND BLENDED WORKING**

The Assistant Director of Resources submitted a report (previously circulated) to share an update on Agile and Blended Working at Darlington Borough Council.

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.

The report stated the four role types the Council had such as fixed, agile, blended and home. The report included the statistics of the number of staff employed in the categories.

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 deliverance.

Members acknowledged the information included within this report, the Committee wanted further clarification on the procedures if staff were to underperform.

Members queried whether there are additional benefits for those that who are fixed employed compared to an employee with agile/blended working. Members asked whether residents perspectives had been sought with regards to this working pattern. The committee raised their concerns around staff welfare when home working, it was explained that there are mental health first aiders and management support available.

**AGREED** – That the contents of the report be noted.

## **ER151 WORK PROGRAMME**

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

Discussion ensued around the Sickness Absence Year-end turn out and the Health and Safety Year-end turn out and whether the report should attend scrutiny rather than circulated to Members.

Members were encouraged to think about upcoming items to attend the next cycle of meetings for the Municipal Year 2025/26.

**AGREED** – That Members noted the report.