

CABINET
8 JULY 2025

QUARTER 4 - COUNCIL PLAN PERFORMANCE REPORT

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Stephen Harker, Leader and all Cabinet Members**

**Responsible Director -
Rose Rouse, Chief Executive and all Executive Directors**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This is the performance report of the new Council Plan 2024-27. It summarises progress against the key commitments and deliverables in the plan.

Summary

2. The Council Plan was approved by Council on 18 July 2024. The plan outlines Darlington Borough Council's long-term ambitions for Darlington and priorities for action over the next three years. It gives strategic direction to the Council and Council services, defining priorities, identifying key actions and shaping delivery.
3. The plan recognises the fundamental link between health, wellbeing and the economy. There are six priorities: economy, homes, living well, children and young people, communities and local environment. Three core principles shape the delivery of the plan: addressing inequalities, tackling climate change and efficient and effective use of resources.
4. This report provides a summary of the key actions taken by the council to deliver the priorities in the Council Plan. The appendix contains narrative from lead service areas on key actions, demonstrating delivery of the priorities and core principles.
5. The full plan can be found on the council website.

Recommendations

6. It is recommended that Cabinet note the progress made in the delivery of the Council Plan.

Reasons

7. To monitor progress against key actions and priorities in the Council Plan.

Chief Officers Executive

Background Papers

- (i) Darlington Council Plan 2024 - 2027

Lynne Davies: Extension 5070

Council Plan	This report is about the delivery of the council plan
Addressing inequalities	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Tackling Climate Change	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Efficient and effective use of resources	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Health and Wellbeing	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
S17 Crime and Disorder	Update on key actions are highlighted in the plan
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	This does not require a decision affecting the budget and policy framework
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	Update and key actions are highlighted in the plan

MAIN REPORT

INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS

8. The Council Plan was agreed at Council on 18 July 2024. The plan is shaped by three core principles: addressing inequalities; tackling climate change; and efficient and effective resources. They are a long-term commitment to enhancing the wellbeing of all residents and ensuring the council can deliver the greatest impact within available resources.
9. There are six priorities for delivery:
 - (a) Economy
 - (b) Homes
 - (c) Living well
 - (d) Children and young people
 - (e) Communities
 - (f) Local environment

10. There has been considerable progress this year despite a tight financial settlement and increasing demands for services. Highlights of actions led by the Council include:
 - (a) **The Safety Valve Plan** for the education budget is on track to have eliminated the deficit within the terms of the agreement with DfE by the end of 2026/27. Delivering on this plan will enable the council and partners to proceed with improvements in a financially sustainable way.
 - (b) Two successful **Jobs Fairs** delivered in the Dolphin Centre supporting people to find work and overcome barriers to employment with around 1000 jobs seekers and 100 employers and support organisations at each event.
 - (c) The process to identify a preferred private sector development partner to bring forward **development on several town centre sites** is near completion. A paper is going to Cabinet in July 2025 to seek endorsement for the appointment of the preferred partner.
 - (d) Completion of Phase One of the **Neasham Road council housing development programme**, delivering 21 new homes as part of the priority to increase the number of affordable homes in the Borough.
 - (e) A report was published in February 2025 following an **inspection of how services in the area support children and young people with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND) by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in November 2024**. It said children and young people with SEND have a voice in Darlington; they are valued, visible and included in their communities.
 - (f) The Council's **Adults Social Care Services have been rated 'Good'** in a comprehensive assessment by the Care Quality Commission, confirming the council's robust performance in supporting residents' independence, wellbeing and care needs.
 - (g) **Darlington's Health and Wellbeing Strategy agreed and published** by the Health and Wellbeing Board, setting out strategic objectives that key stakeholders will collaborate on to improve health outcomes for the Borough's residents.
 - (h) Darlington's place in the **Government's Plan for Neighbourhoods programme confirmed** in the Government's Autumn Budget 2024 with a funding allocation of £20m over the next 10 years.
 - (i) **Hopetown Darlington opened** to the public on 16 July 2024 with an official opening on 27 September, the 199th birthday of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. The attraction has since won three major awards.
11. This report summarises key actions over the last six months and areas of progress in delivering the priorities and core principles in the plan. The appendix to this report contains further narrative and supporting data.

CORE PRINCIPLES

Efficient and Effective Use of Resources

12. Council approved the 2025/26 to 2028/29 Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) at their February 2025 meeting. The revenue budget management outturn report for 2024/25 shows an improved position of £1.149m on the 2025/26 MTFP opening balance with an overall positive position against the 2024/25 MTFP of £0.264m. Further detail can be found in the July Cabinet report. All services continue to scrutinise all their budgets to assist with the current and future years budgets and to ensure value for money.
13. The Council remains focused on delivering high quality governance and decision-making and has many measures in achieving this for example:
 - (a) Regular meetings of the member working group to review council decision-making and the role of scrutiny committees.
 - (b) Delivering of training on a range of topics including: code of conduct, procurement, governance and political awareness.
14. Key strategies and plans are under review:
 - (a) Workforce strategy - a draft strategy and supporting frameworks have been produced and staff consultation stage just concluded; next steps are to review feedback.
 - (b) Asset management plan – the plan, now referred to as the strategic asset plan will be referred to Cabinet in September 2025.
 - (c) Procurement strategy – the strategy was reviewed and refreshed for the period 2025-27 and approved by Cabinet in April 2025. It ensures the Council procures goods, services and works in line with the Procurement Act 2023 (which came into force on 24 February 2025), the Council Plan and our key objectives. The Council Plan prioritises growing the local economy and procurement activity can help in delivering this goal.
 - (d) Digital Darlington strategy – following public consultation the strategy was refreshed for the period 2025-30 and approved by Cabinet in March 2025. It sets the direction to increase the Council's productivity and efficiency through the use of technology and is underpinned by a delivery plan.
15. A bespoke project management system within Microsoft Teams has been developed in partnership with Xentrall to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of capital project delivery, the system is currently being tested.
16. Work continues to maximise income through joint venture companies, increase business rates by growing the local economy and maximise grant opportunities:
 - (a) The Council has a framework partnership with ESH Homes Ltd to deliver a number of housing sites in the Borough with work underway to deliver 612 units across

Blackwell, Neasham Road and Burtree sites. Initial feasibility is also underway to bring forward development on the Coniscliffe Road site for a further 80 units.

- (b) The drive on economic growth is seeing new businesses open and with it increases in business rates. Examples from 2024/25 include the developments at Faverdale with two new retail units opening, Home Bargains and Starbucks. Business rates for Greenbox Darlington and their 400,000 square ft Grade A logistics and industrial space will also come online this year.
- (c) Grant opportunities continue to be maximised, recent examples include the Warm Homes Social Housing fund which we were successful in bidding for, £3.55m has been allocated which will improve the energy efficiency of our Council homes and subsequently reduce energy bills for our tenants. The Council was also successful in its bid for the Swimming Pool Support Fund, £0.526m has been received to install Photovoltaic panels and a combined heat and power unit to reduce the energy consumption within the centre and subsequently our carbon footprint.

17. Partnerships continue via the voluntary and community sector engagement group and public sector executive group to build strong relationships with partners, residents and communities.

Addressing Inequalities

18. Many actions delivered for the council plan address inequalities, and these are highlighted throughout the priorities sections in this report, for example the approach to SEND in children and young people. There is also support to services through an internal policy and strategy network to share information and good practice; an annual report analysing key data to inform decision making; and training, support and guidance to staff and members to help them meet their duties under the equality act.
19. The council continues to be an active member of the North East Child Poverty Commission to support their work and lobbying on the key issues for the national child poverty strategy. Analysis of data on child poverty in Darlington and the actions the council is currently undertaking to address poverty in the Borough is underway. The analysis of this work is intended to inform the approach the council takes to addressing this challenge, how collaborating with voluntary, public and business partners could be focused to address inequality, and how discretionary funding, such as the Plan for Neighbourhoods, may be deployed.
20. Work continues to ensure all new strategies and plans consider inequalities. Two important examples this year have been the publication on the following:
- (a) The health and wellbeing strategy with a health inequalities focus;
 - (b) The digital Darlington strategy and digital inclusion.
21. Darlington's inclusive growth strategy is in the early stages of development, with work focused on the analysis of data and engagement with stakeholders to understand inequalities and related challenges.

22. The council is working in partnership with key stakeholders and the voluntary and community sector to address the causes of inequality and reducing the burden of the cost of living. The Household Support Fund round seven includes support for care leavers, vulnerable households including lone parents and low income pensioners; vouchers during the school holidays for children in receipt of free school meals; help for elderly residents to energy proof their homes with Age UK; support Darlington based foodbanks; and helping households experiencing hardship identify and apply for benefits they are entitled to via Citizens Advice.

Tackling Climate Change

23. The most recent government data set on CO₂ emissions per capita of Darlington's population shows a decline in line with recent trends. This data is issued in late June each year and are 2 years in arrears.
24. For the Council's own net zero by 2040 target, the council is following the trajectory of a 40% reduction in council carbon emissions every five years. Given this is a long-term ambition there may be fluctuations in data between years as the council transitions. 2025 data on council emissions have shown an increase since the last year's data point. The Council is looking into reasons for these data results, but some of them can be attributed to the Dolphin Centre using more electricity from the grid, whilst the combined heat and power system was being replaced; and the development of Hopetown Darlington, which brought more buildings back into public use.
25. Progress continues to deliver the climate change commitments through the delivery of the climate change action plan. This is a cross-council plan and we have:
 - (a) Become the first UK local authority to audit council land to assess its ability to store carbon. Following that audit, the Environment Team is running a trial on alternative seeding to increase the potential of our land to absorb carbon.
 - (b) Continued with actions to reduce the Council's own energy use including installing solar panels on the Dolphin Centre, this work will be complete ahead of schedule.
 - (c) Installed solar panels on five refuse collection vehicles. This has saved almost 2,000 litres of fuel to date.
 - (d) Continued to engage with business to support their transition to net zero – shared sources of help, funding and success stories direct to businesses through our business newsletter and council website. The climate change pages on the website contain sources of advice and information for business, residents and schools.
 - (e) Continued to be an active member of Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership, a collaboration of businesses aimed at spreading good practice around the net zero challenge. Within the last six months membership has doubled to over 40.
 - (f) Submitted a report to Department for Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on a trial expanding the Secretary of State's powers to mandate reporting on adaptation

activities to local authorities. This involved the council risk assessing its activities against risks identified by the Climate Change Commission.

PRIORITIES

ECONOMY – building a strong sustainable economy and highly skilled workforce with opportunities for all.

CASE STUDY: Jobs Fair and Learning and Skills Service Supporting People into Work

The Council's Learning & Skills service is an externally funded further education and training provider, offering courses to help Darlington residents gain in confidence, upskill and find employment. The team takes a regular stand at the Jobs Fairs held in the Dolphin Centre, and organised by the Business Growth Team.

The team supported a young person 19 years of age who they met at the Jobs Fair, he was new to the area living with his grandma. He wanted to find work so he could live independently again, but had little confidence and no formal qualifications.

The team supported the young man to find an appropriate training course with a guaranteed job interview through their Bespoke Employer Led Programs. The team helped the young man with his confidence to attend the course and supported him throughout. He succeeded at his interview, and now has a comi chef job within the hotel which he really enjoys, he will be travelling to Ireland as part of this role for further training to develop his career.

26. Key datasets are showing the outlook in Darlington remains positive. The number of people self-employed now stands at 58,000, a decline from the previous year, but part of a steady increase since 2021. Business formation rates remain above the North East average and on an upward trajectory.
27. Changes in employment have followed regional trends over the last two year of reporting and is on an upward trend, now at 4.1% (compared with 2.9% North East average). Resident and employee weekly gross pay for full time workers continues on an upward trend and in line with the North East average. The unemployment rate remains fairly static over recent years and at 4% (March 2025) is just below the regional average at 4.1%.
28. Economic confidence remains high with planning permission secured for the Darlington Economic Campus government hub on Brunswick Street in the town centre in August 2024; in February 2025 Amazon unveiled plans to develop its first UK drone delivery centre in Darlington; and in March 2025 Greenbox Darlington completed 400,000ft² Grade A logistics and industrial space at a 24-acre site in Tornado Way.
29. The Market Hall in the town centre continues to thrive. New businesses have taken up residency; the hall has become an events destination with a variety of events attracting

businesses and footfall; and a vibrant and diverse programme of regular markets has been delivered with a focus on attracting independent traders from across the region.

30. The new inclusive growth strategy will be developed with long-term approach to enable a fair distribution of growth across the Borough and ensure there are accessible economic opportunities for all residents. This work begun with a roundtable event with stakeholders to understand the challenges, barriers and opportunities for growth from local employers.
31. In February 2025 the Council delivered the second of two annual Darlington Jobs Fairs in at the Dolphin Centre, promoting good jobs and career opportunities available in the Borough. 1000 jobs seeker attended to meet around 100 employers and support organisations who were there to help people find work, and support in overcoming barriers to employment.
32. Development work continues on programmes to deliver more education and skills opportunities for residents, working in partnership with key stakeholders:
 - (a) The Council's learning and skills service and Darlington College jointly developing the adult skills centre in the old Northern Echo building due to complete November 2025. The commercial floors of the building will complete in early 2026.
 - (b) Council staff collaborating with TVCA, DWP and DfE to develop the Youth Guarantee Trailblazer which will encourage 18-21 yearly olds into employment, supporting those with disability, long-term health issues or multiple and complex barriers into work. It will start later in 2025 administered by TVCA.
33. Work continues to deliver the Towns Fund projects with the programme now in the latter stages of delivery. The redevelopment of Coniscliffe Road is complete; improvements to Skinnergate, the Yards and Victoria Road continue; and the redevelopment of 156 Northgate into office accommodation is now underway.
34. The Government's Plan for Neighbourhoods programme confirmed £20m of funding and support over 10 years for Darlington's urban core. Cabinet agreed to recommendations by officers to support the Towns Board to take on the role of the Neighbourhood Board. The programme will bring together representatives from the community, business and strategic partners to prioritise funding into areas of local need.
35. The Council continues to prioritise the safety and cleanliness of the Borough for the benefit of residents and to sustain business confidence and investment. Prevention, education and enforcement measures has been used to deliver the service which independent auditing has given an excellent rating with an average score of 85% for the overall cleanliness of the area.

HOMES – affordable and secure homes that meet the current and future needs of residents

CASE STUDY: Supporting residents to live independently in their own homes for longer:

The disabled facilities grant supports residents to make changes to their homes to enable them to live independently for longer. Adult social care occupational therapists assess need and make referrals for small and larger adaptations, aids and equipment.

The team has supported a 92 year old lady who lives on her own in a housing association bungalow. She referred herself to adult social care as she was struggling using the bath. Occupational therapy assessed her physical health and agreed an outcome was needed that secured her independence with personal care and showering.

A wet room has since been installed and the resident has been able to continue supporting herself without the help of another.

36. A New Preventing Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025-30 was approved by Cabinet in March 2025 following full public consultation in November 2024 and consideration by the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee in January 2025. Key priorities:
- (a) Working in partnership to prevent homelessness.
 - (b) Increasing the amount and improving the quality of temporary accommodation.
 - (c) Addressing homelessness faced by particular groups including those with multiple and complex needs. Improving move on accommodation provision, including specialist housing and support provision.
 - (d) Securing funding to increase accommodation and resources.
37. In reviewing the Council's approach to empty homes the number of problematic long-term empty properties has been found to be very low. A review of empty homes and the legislation used by the Council will be carried out and a will be report produced on developing the recommended approach and the resources required.
38. As reported in the previous performance report the new build housing sector has seen a slow down in delivery largely due to the impact of the nutrient neutrality designation, it is anticipated that this will continue throughout this year. Recently applications have been progressing and gaining consent.
39. Demand for Council housing is high with over 2000 households currently registered on the waiting list. A council house build programme is currently underway, part funded by Homes England:

- (a) By March 2025 tenants had moved into the first 40 homes at Neasham Road. The site will deliver 150 new homes by mid 2026.
 - (b) Phase 2 of Sherborne Close is due in September 2025 and will deliver 14 new homes.
 - (c) Building of new shops and 16 new homes is due to commence in Skinnergate in 2025 following demolition of the existing commercial buildings.
40. A draft new homes strategy has been prepared and is currently under review by Cabinet members, it is intended that the strategy goes to Cabinet in July 2025 seeking approval for public consultation.
41. Work continues to deliver greater energy efficiency in existing properties. The Council has been successful in all three waves of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF):
- (a) Wave 1 is complete and supported 23 Council homes.
 - (b) Wave 2 commenced in September 2024, is supporting 130 council homes and is due to complete in June 2025.
 - (c) In March 2025 the Council was successful in bidding for £3.5m which will help deliver upgrades to around 1600 Council homes over a three-year period. This funding and resources from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Expenditure will significantly increase the percentage of Council homes rated EPC C or above, which is currently 54.8%.
42. Ensuring the effective use of the Disabled Facilities Grant to enable people to remain in independent in their homes for longer. Occupational therapists support residents by assessing the family and home and identifying need; the council will then provide technology and building adjustments to enable people to live in their own home for longer.
43. At 20.77% Darlington's private rented stock is higher than the national average and highest in the Tees Valley. In support of improving private rented sector homes the Council has identified the following schemes for further investigation:
- (a) A voluntary landlords charter;
 - (b) The introduction of licensing for homes of multiple occupation. The council are now consulting on an Article 4 Direction to control the change of use from a dwelling to a small house of multiple occupation;
 - (c) The introduction of selective licencing in areas with a high number of private sector rented homes.
44. The Renter's Rights Bill, expected to be introduced in 2025, will have a significant impact on these proposed schemes. A report on the development of the Council's approach to enforcement responsibilities will be updated following the introduction of the bill.

LIVING WELL – a healthier and better quality of life for longer, supporting those who need it most

CASE STUDY: DARLINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL ADULT SOCIAL CARE SERVICES RATED 'GOOD' BY THE CARE QUALITY COMMISSION

The adult social care service has been rated 'Good' with an overall score of 73% by the Care Quality Commission (CQC). The CQC inspected the Council in January 2025 in relation to compliance with the Care Act Part One.

The report highlights numerous strengths including:

- A consistent strength-based assessment programme
- Effective hospital discharge arrangements and reablement services
- High satisfaction amongst unpaid carers
- A responsive and person-centred approach from social workers
- Strong multi-agency partnerships and a commitment to continuous improvement

The 'Good' rating reflects the council's ongoing commitment to putting people first, promoting independence, and delivering high-quality care for everyone in Darlington.

45. Detailed analysis of key data indicators can be found in the appendix, and there have been some big changes in key data sets. Headlines to note:
- (a) The prevalence of smoking amongst people over 18 years (7.9%) has seen a big decline, and the most significant reduction has been in routine and manual smokers (from 21.2% to 9.5%);
 - (b) The percentage of women who smoke at the time of delivery (10.6%) is also in decline. Since 2020 there has been a reduction every year and a narrowing of the gap with the North East, whilst this is positive the health and wellbeing strategy has a focus on accelerating the reduction and reducing the inequalities which exist within Darlington, this was a focus of discussion at the last Health and Wellbeing Board;
 - (c) Excess weight for primary school pupils in Reception and Year 6 is declining slowly and now below the NE average, although longer term trends show minimal change overall;
 - (d) There has been an improvement in the number of adults in treatment at specialist drug and alcohol misuse service; the numbers of young people in treatment have also increased;
 - (e) Emergency hospital admissions for intentional self-harm (all age) is declining at pace and now at national levels and lower than the NE. But the most recent statistics for 2023 show an increase in suicide rates and work is underway with partners to develop a suicide prevention plan for Darlington.

46. Following the publication of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy in December 2024 its implementation is being monitored by the Health and Wellbeing Board. This will take the form of an annual review and a deep dive into 2 of the 8 thematic priorities each year. The first deep dive in June will look at pregnancy and early years.
47. The development and delivery of public health strategies continues in partnership with local stakeholders:
 - (a) The physical activities strategy is complete has been approved by Cabinet;
 - (b) The healthy weight plan, oral health promotion strategy and local suicide prevention plan are being developed with local stakeholders;
 - (c) The County Durham and Darlington Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Executive Group partnership board leads strategic priorities and actions; the Domestic Safe Accommodation Strategy is currently being refreshed; and a multi-agency domestic abuse local working group established to develop actions for achieving compliance with local authority duties;
 - (d) Additional government funding has been confirmed for drug and alcohol treatment services.
48. Work continues to explore joint working with the NHS and key partners to support people to stay in their homes for longer and reduce hospital stays. The task and finish group reviewing the intermediate care offer is currently exploring best practice across the region and developing option appraisals to share with partners. Work is also ongoing to explore discharge hub models with the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust (TEWV), Trust and four other Tees Valley Local Authorities.
49. The adult social care service has a clear transformation plan which is reviewed on a monthly basis. Key aims of the transformation plan are to prevent, reduce and/or delay the need for care by supporting people to manage their own care and wellbeing. The service has recently been inspected and received a 'Good' rating. The plan will be reviewed to take account of any areas for development outlined in the CQC inspection report.
50. The development of the adult social care engagement and co-production strategy is now complete. Work continues to develop an action plan that supports the delivery of the strategy.
51. The Council has taken a consultative approach to developing a Market Position Statement and Commissioning Strategy with an associated Accommodation with Care and Support Needs Strategy to support adults and a Sufficiency Statement to support children. These documents are important in providing information about the care market and how it is likely to change to support existing and prospective providers. Outcome based contracts have been relet or retendered across key areas for service provision including homecare, residential care and supported living.

52. Following the reopening of the pool complex in the Dolphin Centre school holidays in October and February have proven highly successful with both breaking records on footfall and income. Membership continues to rise and numbers of events held in the centre are increasing including Mixed Martial Arts and the Stronger Community Awards. The new facilities at Eastbourne Sports Complex have been a success and the team is now exploring funding options to improve the wider grass pitches and further increase the number of service users of the complex.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE – the best start in life, realising the potential and raising aspirations

CASE STUDY: Inspectors Say Children with SEND are ‘Valued, Visible and Included’

Following a full public consultation on a new SEND strategy in December 2024 by the local area partnership for Darlington inspectors for Ofsted and Care Quality Commission published their report on how their services in the area support children and young people with SEND. The report was very positive with some areas for improvement which will be picked up in the SEND strategy implementation plan.

Highlights include:

- The partnership is ambitious for children and young people with SEND, with Leaders working closely together to improve local provision.
- Children and young people are involved effectively in co-producing the Darlington SEND strategy
- Children and young people who are in care, and have SEND, are successfully prepared for adulthood.
- Disabled children receiving support from children’s social care experience smooth transitions to adult social care.

Darlington Borough Council and the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB) are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services for children and young people with SEND in Darlington.

53. Detailed analysis of the key quantitative indicators can be found in the appendix, key points to note:
- (a) Looked after children numbers reduced by 14% in the last year to 265 children;
 - (b) A rise in suspensions and permanent exclusions in primary school, and in secondary school permanent exclusions have fallen and are below the NE average. The Inclusion Charter provides the strategic approach to addressing these high levels of suspension;
 - (c) The percentage of pupils with an EHCP educated in mainstream settings has risen to 43.1% in 2024. This is in line with the national average but higher than the NE;
 - (d) The percentage of pupils reaching expected standard for Key Stage 2 (end of primary school) for reading, writing and maths is slightly below regional and national averages but is increasing. Whilst the percentage of pupils achieving a 9-5 pass in English and Match at Key Stage 4 is decreasing, reflecting regional and national trends.
54. There has been an increase in Local Authority Foster Carers recruited during 2024/25, with 11 new Foster Carer Households approved at Panel, compared to 5 in 23/24 and seven in 22/23. Whilst the overall number of carers can fluctuate due to resignations and changes

of circumstances in carers, the increased number of new carers approved is a result of the Placement Sufficiency Strategy and enhanced support offer to foster carers.

55. A key part of the strategy is to ensure that where children require care, placements within their family are identified for these children. There have also been increases to the number of Kinship Foster Placements supported by the Council with 53 placements in 2024/25 (31% of all Children in Care) compared to 41 placements in 2023/24 (24.2% of all Children In Care).
56. The Darlington Inclusion Charter was launched at an all-school event in June 2024. It is underpinned by evidence-based research and exemplifies four pillars of inclusive practice: presence, engagement, achievement and belonging. All schools and colleges in Darlington have signed up to the Charter as part of their commitment to inclusive practice. The Charter is now the focus of collaborative work, led by the Education Strategy Group (ESG), to develop practice further across the borough. The ESG has entered into a National Evidence Exploration partnership to support this work and the Darlington Education Psychology Service is trialling a model of training with school staff and explore what it means for school systems and practices.
57. The Holiday Activity and Food programme (HAF) provides free holiday club places to primary and secondary aged children on benefits-related free school meals, as well as other vulnerable children. It provides extra-curricular activities and healthy meals during the school holidays. In the Christmas school holidays over 1600 places were booked for children aged 5-16 years old, 908 free school meal children attended, 29% were SEND children. Teams continue to do what they can to encourage more eligible children to take part.
58. Work continues to support the Department for Education and Education Village Academy Trust to ensure the free school for children with SEND is developed on schedule. The latest position from the Department is now at the value for money consideration stage in the process and a further up date will be provided shortly.
59. Teams continue to work in partnership with the early years sector and health services. On school readiness, after a dip in the percentage of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception most recent data shows an increase. A working group has been established to improve levels of school readiness, especially for children with free school meal status or SEND.
60. On delivering the expansion of funded childcare entitlement six DfE funded capital projects are underway to deliver an additional 65 wraparound places, 36 entitlement places for 2 year-olds, and 30 entitlement places for mixed ages. Four schools have been successful in their applications to DfE for the School-Based Nursery Capital Grant enabling them to open or expand their nursery in September 2025.
61. The Council continues to ensure more opportunities for children and young people to be involved in the design and commissioning of services. A notable example this year have been the development of the new young carers service.

62. The revised Children and Young People's Plan 2024-27, which was produced earlier in the year with extensive engagement with children, young people and key stakeholders was launched in November 2024.

63. The Safety Valve plan for the education budget is on track to have eliminated the deficit within the terms of the agreement with DfE by the end of 2026/27. The plan is in place to reduce the deficit of the Dedicated Schools Grant resulting from pressures on high needs budgets. Darlington is achieving an in year balance on the high needs block for this period alongside the previous two years.

COMMUNITIES – safer, healthier, and more engaged communities

CASE STUDY: Supporting Town Centre Businesses via Shopwatch

The Shopwatch scheme is a considerable success, it was relaunched to support business and assist the police in dealing with shoplifting. Information shows that in 2024/25, 567 incidents were logged through the scheme which enables the Police and Community safety staff to take action as and where appropriate. Shoplifting offences in the town centre have reduced by 21.8%.

The scheme has now expanded into new areas including Yarm Road and North Road retail parks providing these businesses with greater support against retail related crime. The Council continues to contribute to the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner's 'Safer Businesses Group' and as part of the Government's Safer Streets Summer Initiative is offering additional businesses the opportunity to trial the Shopwatch scheme over the summer months.

64. The number of reported crimes (10,391) is showing a decrease of 13.4% compared to the previous year; and anti-social behaviour has seen an increase of 16.7% in reported incidents in the last year.
65. All bodies continue to work well together as part of the Community Safety Partnership. Information shows that in January to March 2025 there was an overall reduction in crime of 9.8%. There were marked reductions alcohol related incidents (16.9%) and violent crime (5.5%). Effective work has also been undertaken on priority themes with the number of violent crimes being reduced which is linked to training across the Partnership, multi-agency working and supporting numerous projects such as Harbour, Purple flag, pub watch and Project Vigilant. The Community Safety Plan runs until March 2026 and a planning exercise and an updated Community Safety plan are currently being progressed.
66. Work continues with partners in the Borough to address anti-social behaviour and crime issues in communities:
 - (a) The Shopwatch scheme continues to be a success as highlighted in the case study;
 - (b) Number 40 supports visitors to the town centre's evening economy and is supported by a committed group of volunteers;
 - (c) Of the 467 cases of fly tipping and waste reported across the year 439 are closed. This has resulted in 12 prosecutions;
 - (d) Begging figures show a reduction in reports of 11.5%. This represents a relatively small number of people who partners regularly engage with to offer support.

67. The Holiday Activity Fund and the Household Support Fund fund the main interventions supporting families and residents with the cost of living. The Council is also working with partners to reduce the cost of living and convened a meeting with eight of the Borough's foodbanks where it was agreed collaboration would be helpful, a survey is planned to help further discussions.
68. Partnership work with voluntary and community groups in the borough enabled by the Voluntary and Community Sector Engagement Group. Alongside the three working groups on social inclusion, financial inclusion and children and young people; the group selected four of its members to join the Neighbourhood Board. These members will play a key role in delivering community engagement.
69. To ensure the safety and security of the borough's communities the Community Safety Partnership's thematic group is supported by the Unity Group with members from all sections of the community. North Road and Northgate Community Cohesion Panel has been set up to address issues negatively affecting the communities. Involvement by partners and residents is good and with initial grant funding a number of projects have been funded: improved lighting in areas of concern on North Road, installation of six defibrillator and bleed kits along the North Road corridor, and funding two youth provision initiatives in the North Road area.
70. A key area of focus on ensuring business activity is regulated to protect the health and wellbeing of Darlington's communities has been on imported fizzy drinks and confectionary. These products imported from the US contain chemicals banned in the UK or additives which may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children. The campaign to raise awareness has included liaising with local businesses and asking them to withdraw non-compliant stock. Environmental Health inspections found confectionary containing dangerous ingredients, to the value of £1600, in eight local shops.
71. A draft strategy framework has been produced to be discussed with members of the Voluntary and Community Sector Engagement Group. It proposes a focus on: structured volunteering, employer supported volunteering, and community volunteering. The purpose is to deliver an enhanced volunteering programme to support areas of greatest need across the borough.

LOCAL ENVIRONMENT – a well-connected, clean and sustainable borough

CASE STUDY: Hopetown Darlington Wins Three Major Awards

Hopetown Darlington opened to the public on 16 July 2024 with an official opening on 27 September - the 199th birthday of the Stockton and Darlington Railway. The attraction has since won three major awards:

1. The Visitor Economy Award at the County Durham Together Awards 2024
2. North East Culture Award for Best Museum or Cultural Venue 2024
3. Welcome accolade and Quality Assessed Visitor Attraction accolade awarded by VisitEngland

The S&DR200 festival was launched in February 2025 at Kynren in Bishop Auckland with the 'All Change' show, attracting an audience of over 6,500 people. A programme for the Festival has been developed to run through to October 2025, including 'Railway Pioneers – celebrating the railway rockstars of the past' a display of early locomotives launched at Hopetown Darlington on 4 April 2025 and on show until 22 June 2025.

Hopetown Darlington will also host Destination STEM in the Autumn 2025 to inspire the next generation into STEM education and careers.

72. Work continues to deliver a well-connected, clean and sustainable borough. Overall satisfaction with public transport has increased from a four-year low at 44% in 2023 to 48% in 2024. This is below the Highways and Transport Network average of all local authorities, but the gap is reducing.
73. The City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) programme is delivering investment for the Darlington mainline station upgrades, improvements on key bus corridors to improve journey time reliability and construction of active travel schemes such as Woodland Road Phase 2, A68 to Cockerton and Faverdale, and the Yarm Road to Teesside International Airport corridor. The Council continues to work closely with the TVCA to develop projects for the second round of the transport settlement programme.
74. Darlington has been awarded the Purple Flag in recognition of the safe and vibrant evening economy; and gold at the Northumbria in Bloom 2024 awards earning the prestigious opportunity to represent the region at the 2025 Britain in Bloom competition.
75. The annual events programme continues to attract visitors to the town centre, offering free and welcoming activities. The Council collaborates with high street businesses to develop a dynamic range of events that increase footfall and dwell time across the town centre. Examples include large scale music events such as Rhythm and Tunes Weekend and animation days such as Dinosaur Day.

76. Visitor numbers to Darlington Library on Crown Street have increased by 16% from the previous year, encouraged by a range of events and services for people of all ages beyond just traditional book lending. Annual audience attendances at Darlington Hippodrome are higher than the previous year, whilst attendance at the Hullabaloo is down. A review of programming has taken place which will deliver a focus on performances that have attracted higher attendances.
77. Hopetown Darlington has been an extremely complex project, one of the largest capital projects delivered by the Council with multiple partners contributing to deliver a world class visitor attraction. The successes are discussed in the case study, but there have been challenges from a slightly later than anticipated opening with some of the key facilities, such as Experiment, the showfield and the private siding being completed after opening. This has affected the programming and first-year performance against the original targets and forecasted income. There is continuous review and monitoring of the business plan with further changes planned to manage the overall costs of the site.
78. There has been a fall in the amount of waste that is recycled, composted or reused in recent years, however the figures for December 2024 show performance is now above the NE average. The Council's recycling performance sits at over 31%. Efforts are being progressed to further expand the garden waste subscription service.
79. Measures have been agreed by Cabinet to increase the amount of waste that is recycled and provide enhanced opportunities for residents to recycle as much of their waste as possible. Cabinet approved the introduction of weekly food waste collections from April 2026 in line with government's simpler recycling reforms, and to move to weekly collections of other recycling materials at the same time as the food waste launch. These measures should help increase overall recycling rates.
80. The performance of the council for the percentage of overall waste collected by the Council used for energy recovery is availability of markets to treat the waste at an affordable cost. The more waste, after recycling, that is sent to energy recovery reduces the amount landfilled. The Council is below the regional average as most other local authorities in the region have a primary contract through energy recovery facilities. In recent years more waste has been sent to energy recovery which has led to a reduction in the overall percentage that is landfilled (currently 19.2%).
81. Work continues with studies on flood risk in the Borough, including a focus on mitigating climate change. The Darlington Northumbria Integrated Drainage Partnership (NIDP) study identified a priority scheme covering West Beck and Cocker Beck watercourses, including the Cockerton area. The stage 1/2 report will be complete by the end of 2025. The Flood Asset Risk Study identified a scheme on West Beck which was incorporated into the NIDP; and a scheme at Killerby the business case for which, with costed options is under assessment by the Council.