

COUNCIL
17 JULY 2025

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Darlington Cultural Strategy Action Plan 2024-2025

2. Members received a comprehensive update from the Creative Darlington Manager on the progress of the Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022–2026 and the 2024/25 Action Plan. We also discussed early proposals for the 2025/26 plan.
3. The Strategy aims to focus the Council’s cultural vision while supporting advocacy and funding efforts for local events. Highlights of this year included the opening of Hopetown, the S&DR200 festival launch and the strong performance of Darlington Library.
4. Members raised constructive concerns around sustaining visitor numbers post-S&DR200, diversity of attractions at Hopetown as well as Darlington’s visibility in the context of film and television filming. Officers reassured us of ongoing efforts to address these challenges, including future event programming and joining the UK Films Council to attract further filming opportunities.
5. We also discussed potential future bids to the Arts Council. While no applications have yet been successful, optimism remains due to increased small grant availability.
6. As a committee, we noted the update on progress on the 2024/2025 Action Plan and considered the Action Plan for 2025/2026.

Tree and Woodland Strategy 2021-2031

7. Members received a detailed report from the Head of Environmental Services on the implementation of the Council’s Tree and Woodland Strategy 2021–2031. The strategy has ambitious aims to expand and managing Darlington’s tree population, with over 47,700 trees planted since 2021 - surpassing annual targets.
8. The Committee welcomed the introduction of a more robust, risk-based inspection regime, developed in consultation with the Council’s insurers, Zurich. This now includes scheduled inspections by qualified arboriculturists and use of the Treewise system to monitor and maintain Council-owned trees.
9. KPIs, which were updated after this report came before the Committee last year, were reviewed. They covered tree inspections, planting versus felling, ash dieback management, and public enquiries. While most indicators showed positive performance, members noted the need for improved data on repeat visits.

10. Members raised issues around community safety, tree planning and land ownership. Officers committed to improving coordination with the Planning department and producing a resident-friendly summary of the strategy to clarify Council responsibilities in residential areas. This was with the intention of providing this condensed document to residents to clarify what the Council can and can't do with regards to trees in residential areas.

Work Programme 2025/2026

11. We discussed the utility of the Annual Briefing of this scrutiny committee which had taken place the week after the week After Annual Council in May. This Annual Briefing allowed Members to suggest items that they would like to be incorporated into the work programme with relevant officers and establish time frames that officers could bring such items to Committee.
12. A productive number of items were suggested and therefore a substantial work programme has been agreed.
13. My thanks go to the Democratic Officers, Officers and Members for embracing this new improvement to the work programme process.

Councillor James McGill
Chair of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee