

## **COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Thursday, 12 June 2025

**PRESENT** – Councillors McGill (Chair), Cossins, Coe, Mrs Culley, Keir, Mahmud and Walters

**APOLOGIES** – Councillors M Nicholson,

**ABSENT** – Councillor Dr. Riley

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE** – Councillors McCollom and Garner.

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE** – Brian Graham (Head of Environmental Services), James McAllister (Democratic Officer), Stephen Wiper (Creative Darlington Manager) and Ben Grabham (Assistant Director Environmental Services and Community Safety).

### **CLS42 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest reported at this meeting.

### **CLS43 TO CONSIDER THE DATES AND TIMES OF MEETINGS OF THIS COMMITTEE FOR THE MUNICIPAL YEAR 2025/2026**

The provisional dates set for this Committee were approved for the new Municipal year.

### **CLS44 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY HELD ON 10TH APRIL 2025**

Submitted - The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 10 April 2025.

**RESOLVED** - That the Minutes of the Meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2025 be approved as a correct record.

### **CLS45 DARLINGTON CULTURAL STRATEGY ACTION PLAN 2024-2025**

The Creative Darlington Manager introduced a report (previously circulated) to update members on progress in delivering the priorities set out in the Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026 and the 2024/25 Action Plan. Additionally, the Creative Darlington Manager sought Member opinions of the Action Plan for 2025/2026.

The Creative Darlington Manager detailed how the Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026 (previously circulated) was approved in 2022/23 and was informed by research, including the previous Darlington focused Arts Enquiry report, development work since that date and discussion with stakeholders including: Arts Council England, Tees Valley Combined Authority and the Creative Darlington Board.

It was maintained that the priority outlined within the strategy is to focus the council's cultural vision and assist in advocating and fundraising for events taking place within the

timespan covered in the document. Therefore, it was stated that the Strategy has been shared with various parties to support successful applications for activities and commissions in Darlington borough.

A definition of culture was provided by the Creative Darlington Manager, who cited the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, with such definition covering the following areas: Arts (including visual arts, literature, music, theatre and dance), Architecture, Crafts, Creative Industries, Design, Heritage, Historic Environment, Museums and Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Film, Broadcasting and Media.

The Creative Darlington Manager touched upon successful areas of the plan in 2024/25, notably the opening of Hopetown, the Launch of the Stockton & Darlington Railway 200 (S&DR200 henceforth) festival, the first full year of the Darlington Library, and events celebrating diversity, all of which resulting in an increase in footfall in the town centre. Reference was also made to North East Films, with 70 short films being showcased and record box office sales at the Hippodrome for Sleeping Beauty.

Members then began to ask questions on the report heard at the meeting. Firstly, a concern was raised with regards to maintaining the uptake in numbers of visitors to Hopetown following the S&DR200 celebrations this year, as numbers are less than originally expected and are expected to fall lower once the festival is over. The officer answered in saying that the venue is being used to put on further events in the future which will garner further interest and income.

Members also addressed the library and asked whether any specific issues had been reported about the establishment. The Officer responded that following a tour of the library in May the response from out of Area visitors was overwhelmingly positive, with the Hive specifically being complemented.

Members asked further questions regarding the type of attractions available at Hopetown and voiced disappointment at the selection of trains being displayed at certain events held at the facility. The officer responded by noting how exhibitions are selected with the intention of building momentum, and that sometimes those advertised are required elsewhere.

Members referred back to the mentioning of North East Films and subsequently asked questions regarding the success of the service area in securing Darlington's attractions as filming events for mainstream media. The officer replied that whilst Darlington did not receive notable interest from mainstream corporations, the Council has signed up the films Council to aid this in the future.

Finally, members turned to the Action Plan, and questioned whether the action plan would result in bids being submitted going forward. The Officer replied stating that whilst no bids have been successfully received so far, there is optimism as the Arts Council has increased the scale of smaller grants that the Council anticipates to receive.

**Recommendation:**

- (a) Members note the update on progress on the 2024/25 Action Plan
- (b) Members consider the Action Plan for 2025/26

**RESOLVED –**

- (a) Members noted the update on progress on the 2024/25 Action Plan.
- (b) Members considered the Action Plan for 2025/2026.

**CLS46 TREE AND WOODLAND STRATEGY 2021-2031**

The Head of Environmental Services introduced a report (previously circulated) regarding the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy 2021-2031. It was maintained that local and central government have recognised the pivotal role trees play in achieving net zero due to their proficiency in carbon capture and carbon offset.

Therefore, it was said that the aim of the strategy is to proactively manage and enlarge the tree population of the borough of Darlington in order to protect our historical heritage of trees and provide a valued environmental amenity for future generations. With regards to how this is managed, the strategy covers how the Council manages trees that they own, protects trees on private land, and assesses needs over the next 5 years.

The Head of Environmental Services reiterated the pivotal role Trees play in achieving net zero, and therefore broke down the numbers with regards to trees planted, stating that 47,742 trees had been planted since 2021 – demonstrating an average of just under 10,000 trees being planted per annum since the adoption of the strategy, which is above the targeted number in the action plan. The Head of Environmental Services described how this looks in actuality in terms of tree canopy cover, in addition to the other Bodies that the Council has collaborated with to achieve its tree planting goals.

Furthermore, The Head of Environmental Services discussed their service areas approach to risk management, referring to the Council's reviewing and updating of its approach to risk management for Council owned trees following consultation with Zurich.

The new approach now requires that Inspection of all trees on Council land will be undertaken by a competent arboriculturist, at defined intervals according to consistent methodology, a systematic and replicable risk assessment. Trees that do not meet the defined standard of safety will be identified, and remedial measures will be specified to mitigate unacceptable risks within the defined timeframe. These will be implemented as specified, which will be verified by a competent person. A record of all activity will be kept. The Council will maintain an inventory of trees on the Treewise system, which contains records of tree condition, location, works recommendations and works completion. The inventory will be reviewed to ensure that it remains comprehensive and reliable. The timescale for the completion of each works item following an inspection will be set in proportion to the level of risk presented by the tree. The successful completion of risk management works will be confirmed by a competent person and recorded along with the date. Where a tree remains following works, an inspection will be made to update the record for that tree.

With regards to the inspection of such trees and how often inspections take place, The Head of Environmental Services maintained that all trees in high risk areas are to be inspected every 24 months as a minimum, with others to be inspected at a minimum of 24 to 36 months. The Head of Environmental Services assured Members that inspections will only be carried out by individuals who are qualified and competent enough to do so.

The Head of Environmental Services finalised their report by providing an update on Key Performance Indicators, namely: the Percentage of inspections undertaken in Zone 1 (High Risk) over a two-year period, the Number of Trees Planted, the Number of Trees Felled Compared to Number of Replacement Trees Planted, the Measure, review and report on Darlington's Tree Canopy (five yearly measurement), the Number of enquiries received, and percentage responded to within target time, the Number of repeat visits to same tree arising from the same customer enquiry or complaint, and the Number of trees removed infected with more than 50% Ash Dieback. The Head of Environmental Services did however inform members that the data for repeat visits was unavailable, and that KPI's need to be reconsidered going forward.

Members thanked The Head of Environmental Services for their report, and commented that it was positive to see scrutiny recommendations being incorporated into the action plan. A request was made that the officer provide relevant data to reassure Members of the public with regards to community safety, which was agreed to by the officer.

A further question was posed in the context of the previously mentioned consultation with Zurich. The officer assured Members that this was successful as demonstrated by the response/action rate. The officer added that this approach will be reviewed every 2 years, and that inspection data will be available at the end of inspection periods.

Members also asked questions regarding the low level of detail provided on tree applications in the context of planning, to which the officer responded in saying that they would liaise with the Planning department, but reminded Members that the authority is ultimately with Planning.

Discussion took place between Members and Officers regarding "Land grabbing". Officers explicated the concept of "No mans land" in this context, and outlined the evaluations of land taking place to assure that the Council can process any necessary actions.

Members then collectively asked that a condensed version of the strategy be formulated, so that this can be given to residents to inform them of what the Council can/can't do with regards to trees in residential areas.

Recommended – That Members note the content of the report and the proposed action plan for 2025/2026.

**RESOLVED** – Members noted the contents of the report and the proposed action plan for 2025/2026.

#### **CLS47 WORK PROGRAMME 2025/2026**

The chair commented upon the utility of the Annual Briefing of this Scrutiny Committee which previously took place, before the Democratic Officer asked officers in attendance to provide some concrete dates for items on the work programme to be brought to the committee for the municipal year.

Members then suggested further items that they would like to be included on the work programme, which the Democratic officer agreed to incorporate and liaise with officers about.