

COUNCIL
2 OCTOBER 2025

OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING PORTFOLIO

Purpose of the Report

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the main areas of work under my Health and Housing Portfolio were as follows:-

Public Health

2. As previously shared Local authorities across the North East have been working together to implement a regional community pharmacy Patient Group Directive (PGD) for the supply of prescription only stop smoking medications. The first phase of this is now live, with seven Darlington pharmacies signed up to provide Varenicline (previously called Champix). There has been a delay to the commencement of the provision of the newer medication Cytisine via pharmacies, but it is anticipated this will be in place shortly. This new provision further enhances the offer available locally, and work continues to encourage more pharmacies to join the scheme.
3. The Lung Cancer Screening Programme is now being offered to residents of Darlington from Mowden Park Rugby Club. The programme aims to detect lung cancer early, often even before people have symptoms. Experience from other areas shows that three quarters of people who have been diagnosed with lung cancer through the programme in have been caught at an early stage (stages I or II), when lung cancer is easier to treat and more likely to be successful. Without early invention, currently less than a third of lung cancers are caught at an early stage. Patients registered at practices who are aged between 55-74 years and have a history of smoking on their medical record are being offered a lung health check.
4. The first meeting of Smokefree Darlington Tobacco Alliance was held in September, this is an important next step in developing a Darlington wide approach to reducing rates of smoking and the harm caused by tobacco. Staff from Fresh, the regional tobacco control office, attended and provided an overview of the system wide approach to tobacco control.
5. The first Suicide Prevention Operational Partnership meeting has been held at the Dolphin Centre, with around 30 representatives from a range of statutory partners and VCSE organisations in attendance. The group was introduced to the national priorities for suicide prevention and the current local picture by partners from Tees, Esk and Wear Valley NHS Foundation Trust and North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board, as well as a service update from the If U Care Share Foundation, which provides support and resources for individuals and families affected by suicide. There was constructive discussion about what already works well in Darlington and how partners can work together to identify and address local priorities. The information will be collated for future meetings and will contribute to the development of the suicide prevention action plan.

Health and Well Being Board

6. The Health and Wellbeing Board has met in June and September, with main items of discussion including the Police and Crime Justice Plan 2025-2029; Director of Public Health Annual Report for 2024-25; a deep dive on the pregnancy and early years priorities of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, alongside an annual review of all priorities; Better Care Fund and the new Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment, which is a statutory responsibility of the Board.
7. The thematic deep dive on pregnancy and early years was the first of two deep dives scheduled for this year, exploring the areas of smoking in pregnancy, breastfeeding, hospital admissions for childhood injuries and school readiness. Board members were presented with key data, including at a ward level where available, to highlight areas of progress, risk and the inequalities which exist across Darlington. There was also a detailed discussion on smoking in pregnancy which resulted in a number of recommendations being agreed.
8. The annual review of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy priorities provided a high level overview of progress to date and a summary of key outcomes, describing current performance and trends.

Housing Services

Skerne Park Community Event

9. Our Housing Services team held a community event at Skerne Park on Friday 8 July 2025 at the Coleridge Centre. This event was organised with North Star Housing, along with assistance from the Darlington Partnership.
10. The event was well attended by local residents and focused on promoting safety in the local area, including gas and electric safety. Various sporting activities were arranged, from axe throwing to balloon making and face painting for the children, and stalls were manned to provide help and advice from all agencies in attendance. An estate inspection was also completed on the day, with a litter pick concluding the event.

Housing Options – Domestic Abuse

11. Following a successful trial using Government funding, I am pleased to report that we have now made the position of Housing Options Officer (Domestic Abuse) permanent, as part of our Housing Options team, helping to support victims of domestic abuse who are experiencing homelessness. The post has grown and supports not only Housing Options and the wider Housing Services Team, but also has also supported and informed commissioning, Public Health, the Police and our third sector providers, including Harbour and Family Help. In 2024-25, the officer supported 156 victims of domestic abuse, including 25 people placed in temporary accommodation.

Ending Rough Sleeping Risk Assessment Tool (ERSAT)

12. Our Housing Options Team has been taking part in the ERSAT pilot project set up by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to help inform the routes to

rough sleeping and how it can be prevented. It is aimed toward single homeless who are non-priority need, not currently rough sleeping and not likely to meet the criteria for statutory support within the legislation. The team are completing this, in addition to the homeless assessment and gateway for support. It involves completing a series of questions, which will identify those that could be at high risk of rough sleeping and where a person scores over a certain amount, we offer accommodation and placement and encourage that person to come into services, therefore preventing and diverting them from the streets. Between January and July 2025, 223 assessments were completed with 73 people offered accommodation to prevent rough sleeping.

Lifeline Services

13. Our Lifeline Services are all about inclusion, ensuring that residents with visual impairments, for example, can take part in events in our sheltered and extra care schemes. One of our tenants at Rockwell House, who was previously a primary school teacher, used her creative imagination and produced an idea of enlarging bingo books. Tenants have trailed the new books and found that they have enabled those with visual impairments, who previously didn't take part, to now join the activities. This will now be rolled out to all our schemes, ensuring those with visual impairments are not excluded from activities – a simple but effective idea.

Tenancy Enforcement – Body Worn Videos

14. Our Housing Services Tenancy Enforcement team will now be wearing Body Worn Videos (BWV) to promote overall safety for officers, our tenants and to assist with collecting evidence for legal action taken against perpetrators of anti-social behaviour in our Council housing.
15. The use of BWVs will also help to act as a deterrent and protect the Tenancy Enforcement Officers, due the serious nature of some of the anti-social behaviour we are now dealing with. To implement the BWV, the Tenancy Enforcement Officers and Housing Team Leaders recently completed their Security Industry Authority training and were successful in passing their exam to obtain their licences.

Universal Credit

16. One of the key priorities for our Housing Services team in 2025-26 is to support those remaining tenants migrating from legacy welfare benefits (such as Housing Benefit) onto Universal Credit (UC). It is estimated that there are now less than 280 working age Council tenants who will move to UC by March 2026. Most of those left to migrate are on long term disability benefits.
17. The move to UC will be a huge change for those tenants, as they will go from receiving their benefits from weekly/fortnightly to monthly, with an initial 5 week wait for their first payment. Therefore, it is crucial that we contact these tenants as soon as possible to ensure they are receiving the correct rate of UC, provide budgeting advice and make affordable repayment plans for those who do get in arrears. Tenants who need more in-depth financial support will be referred to our Tenancy Sustainment team, who are specifically trained to give advice about welfare benefits and maximising income.

18. Currently, of those rent accounts in arrears, the average is £343, compared to the national average of £517. More specifically, accounts where UC is the primary source of income, the average level of arrears is £438, compared to national average of £581.

Dolphin Centre

19. Swimming has been extremely well attended over the summer with families and adult swimmers. A new pool party introduced on Tuesdays throughout the holidays has proven very popular with customers queuing along the front of the building to access this fun session hosted by a live DJ on poolside. The diving pool, slides and interactive toddler pool has encouraged footfall to the town from all over the northeast.
20. Soft play and bowling provided ongoing entertainment for families during this period with new offers encouraging footfall in bowling during off peak times such as Sunday evening where unlimited bowling encouraged many visits at a time that is generally quiet. Soft Play hosted themed events throughout the summer in addition to casual play which was welcomed by families with young children.
21. The team attended local colleges fresher's week to promote the strong offer at the Dolphin Centre for students in the town including the popular student's membership and discount card available on activities during the day. In addition to this Darlington college have extended the agreement with the centre whereby they fund students to attend the gym and swimming as part of their curricular activity.
22. The final phase of work continues to complete the installation of 399 photovoltaic (PV) panels on the flat roofs of the Dolphin Centre and is expected to complete autumn.

Inclusion Programme

23. Darlington Move More Teams Boccia session at the Dolphin Centre continues to be well attended on a weekly basis. We are currently working with Boccia England to set up a club and the opportunity to run a Boccia coaching course. This will allow the coaches and staff members who attend with service users to gain the Boccia coaching qualification.

Sport England Place Partnership

24. As previously shared, the council has been working closely with Tees Valley Sport to develop a local proposal for Darlington to be one of Sport England's new place partners. The purpose of the programme is to help communities become more active and tackle the inequalities that persist in physical activity, through collaborative working with residents and across sectors. The initial phase of work was focused on applying for the development award, which has been successful, with Darlington receiving funding of £221,228.
25. The development work will be delivered over the next 12 to 18 months, led by Tees Valley Sport, working alongside public health and leisure at the council, Darlington Association on Disability and YMCA Tees Valley. The funding will be utilised to develop community insights, build local capacity and further develop our local priorities and delivery proposals, which together will support a final application to be part of the Sport England Place Expansion. If this is successful, additional funding would be made available for Darlington, to reduce level of physical inactivity.

26. The work on the development phase has already commenced, with a two day Local Leadership Programme held on 16 and 17 September. The programme covered:

- Systems thinking and how it supports real change to change happen;
- Darlington's local health landscape and priorities and how physical activity can support the challenges;
- Leadership skills for collaborating across sectors;
- Reaching communities and designing systems that work for all;
- Creating a shared purpose for change.

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Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Health and Housing