

PART ONE – LOCAL AUTHORITY PROFILE

Darlington Borough Council is a small unitary authority in the North-East of England. Darlington itself is a traditional market town with a historic town centre. The borough comprises a central urban area, surrounded by a larger rural area, which contains 32 villages and hamlets.

Darlington has a rich industrial heritage, which includes the initiation of the first public passenger railway in the world, and which celebrates its bicentennial in 2025. Industry still flourishes and Cummins Inc. employ some of the best engineers and scientists to build power solutions, generators and engines for cleaner power. More recently service industries have become more prominent in the town.

Darlington was previously administratively part of Durham County Council, however in 1997 Darlington obtained unitary status and is now one of five unitary authorities within the Tees Valley. Darlington covers an area of 197km² and currently has a population of 109,469, with population growth between 2012 and 2022 of 4%. Darlington has 53,426 households, with household growth between 2014 and 2024 being 9.2%, reflective of our growing town.

Ethnic diversity in Darlington is lower than the regional and national averages. As of 2021, around 101,700 Darlington residents (94.4%) were in the 'White' ethnic group in comparison to around 6000 residents being in any other ethnic group. This is higher than the Tees Valley at 92.1% and the national average is 81%. In 2021 2.8% of residents in Darlington identified as 'Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh'; 1.4% identified as 'Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups'; 0.9% identified as 'Other Ethnic Groups'; and 0.7% identified as 'Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African' (Source: ONS Census data).

69.5% of Darlington residents live in a household with either one or two people, with the most common household size being two people at 35.3% in 2021. The proportion of households with two people in Darlington has decreased from 35.7% in 2011 to 35.3% in 2021 (Source: 2021 Census data).

Darlington Borough Council is currently made up of 50 Councillors representing 20 wards (10 three member wards and 10 two member wards). There are currently 12 parish councils in the Borough of Darlington and 14 parish meetings. The following link provides details of the membership of our Parish Councils - [Parish councils contact details Darlington Borough Council](#)

The Council holds 'all-out' elections once every four years. Following the Local Government Elections in May 2023, the Council was left in 'no overall control', and the political balance of the Council is currently 24 Labour Councillors, 13 Conservative Councillors, 6 Green Party Councillors, 5 Independent Councillors and 2 Liberal Democrats. The 24 Labour Councillors, two Liberal Democrats and one Independent Member are currently party to an agreement and form the ruling group on the Council.

Every four years, the Council's 50 Councillors elect a Leader. The Leader appoints a Deputy Leader and appoints Members to the Cabinet.

The Mayor is elected annually by Full Council and is the “first citizen” of the Borough. In addition to chairing meetings of the Full Council, the Mayor is responsible for representing the Council at any civic functions and also undertakes fundraising activities for his/her designated charity/charities. The Council also appoints a Deputy Mayor who is authorised to chair meetings of the Full Council if the Mayor is unavailable, and will also deputise at various civic events, as and when required.

The Council has faced significant financial challenges stemming from reductions in public spending between 2010 and 2019 where the Council's budget was reduced by £46m in real terms, a 36% reduction in budget. This financial position was further compounded in the aftermath of covid as demand for services rose along with an unstable economic climate, where the country saw the cost of living increasing, high inflation, income deprivation and poverty rising. It is a challenge for everyone including the Council with a spiralling increase in cost and demand for services in particular Adult and Children's Social Care and homeless with numbers of people in temporary accommodation rising significantly over the last couple of years, all of which have a direct impact on the Council's contracted expenditure.

Over two thirds of our expenditure is on Adult and Children's social care, caring for our most vulnerable residents and children. Inflation, the National Living Wage and interest rate levels directly impact on our adult care contracts which increased by 7.93% over the last year, in addition, since the pandemic there has been a continual rise in the demand for children's care services. We are seeing more vulnerable children with increasingly complex needs requiring help and support, there has been a 50% increase in contacts from partner agencies and people concerned for a child's welfare, a 45% increase in referrals and an 11% increase in children in our care since pre-pandemic levels. These are our largest budgets, and we have a statutory requirement to provide these services, this consequently impacts on the funding available for all other Council services in particular discretionary areas which keep our town clean, vibrant and safe.

Darlington currently has the second lowest Council Tax in the North-East and as such we cannot raise sufficient income from Council Tax charges to fund the spending pressures we face, every 1% increase in Council Tax increases revenue by approximately £0.67m. Darlington has a low tax base with 44% of our properties in Band A and 79% Band A - C, this along with the Council Tax level means we generate significantly less Council Tax than some other more affluent areas. If Darlington had the average England Band D Council Tax level, we would generate an additional £8.7m per year.

Indices of Deprivation (IMD)

INDICIES OF DEPRIVATION (IMD)		2015		2019		Rank change 2015 to 2019		
WARD RANKING (smallest is most deprived)		6,810	wards	6,799	wards			
Area Code	Area Name	Average LSOA Rank	Ward Rank	Average LSOA Rank	Ward Rank	Better / Worse	Number	%
E05010412	Bank Top & Lascelles	6,577	622	5,287	427	Worse	-195	-31%
E05010413	Brinkburn & Faverdale	22,598	4,772	19,768	3,862	Worse	-910	-19%
E05010414	Cockerton	8,469	997	7,840	858	Worse	-139	-14%
E05010415	College	28,120	6,318	28,102	6,258	Worse	-60	-1%
E05010416	Eastbourne	10,026	1,339	9,047	1,107	Worse	-232	-17%
E05010417	Harrowgate Hill	21,702	4,462	20,521	4,109	Worse	-353	-8%
E05010418	Haughton & Springfield	13,069	2,031	11,373	1,618	Worse	-413	-20%
E05010419	Heighington & Coniscliffe	23,211	4,958	21,816	4,521	Worse	-437	-9%
E05010420	Hummersknott	29,955	6,640	29,550	6,561	Worse	-79	-1%
E05010421	Hurworth	23,372	5,010	24,554	5,399	Better	389	8%
E05010422	Mowden	30,608	6,708	31,327	6,751	Better	43	1%
E05010423	North Road	9,440	1,202	8,172	920	Worse	-282	-23%
E05010424	Northgate	4,770	355	3,810	246	Worse	-109	-31%
E05010425	Park East	5,756	482	4,969	378	Worse	-104	-22%
E05010426	Park West	22,309	4,669	22,370	4,702	Better	33	1%
E05010427	Pierremont	13,349	2,106	12,207	1,818	Worse	-288	-14%
E05010428	Red Hall & Lingfield	9,470	1,211	9,603	1,239	Better	28	2%
E05010429	Sadberge & Middleton St George	22,664	4,785	23,115	4,937	Better	152	3%
E05010430	Stephenson	6,385	589	4,559	331	Worse	-258	-44%
E05010431	Whinfield	18,007	3,308	16,444	2,879	Worse	-429	-13%

Darlington is a relatively deprived area and whilst 25% of wards reflect an improvement over the last recorded period (2015 to 2019), 75% reflect a worsening picture. This deprivation brings a series of challenges such as alcohol misuse, smoking, obesity and crime and anti-social behaviour.

In Darlington, the average female life expectancy is 81.4 years, with the average male life expectancy slightly lower at 77.6 years. Average life expectancy is lower for males than females, but lowest for both in the most disadvantaged wards. In the latest three-year range from 2021-23. Using the latest three-year range figures (2021-2023), inequality in life expectancy at birth across wards is higher in females, with a variation of 15 years between the lowest and highest, whereas there is a variation of 13.3 years in males (Source: Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) – Fingertips).

Darlington's Strategic Priorities

The Council has adopted a Council Plan (2024-2027) which outlines the Council's long-term ambitions for Darlington and identifies priorities for action over the next few years. It provides strategic direction to the Council and council services, defining priorities and shaping delivery; making clear what we will do and how we will do it. Our Council is focussed on ensuring everyone has the opportunity for a good job, home and social connections - the building blocks of good health. The Council are committed to making Darlington fairer and greener for everyone, building on opportunities and successes and facing up to the difficult challenges. This is an ambitious plan that we cannot deliver alone, it requires collaboration, within the council, and with the voluntary and private sectors, key stakeholders and communities, and our Councillors maintain a leading role in delivering on the Plan.

Over the previous decade inequalities across our communities have worsened. The inequality in life expectancy between the best and worst areas across Darlington is 10.6 years for women and 13 years for men. The North-East has seen the highest increase in child poverty over much of the previous decade which has restricted the chances for children to flourish. Child poverty in Darlington is 25.2%, with the inequality in child poverty across Darlington Wards being 42.6%. This means that children born in different areas of our Borough have very different life chances. There are many more examples of inequalities that result in not everyone having the same life opportunities. We face long-term challenges which need long-term commitments.

Our ambitions for Darlington are for an inclusive and sustainable economy; people living well and staying healthy; with thriving places and connected communities. This is a long-term vision and the beginning of a journey that we want to make together with our communities. At the plan's heart is our vision to be one of the best places in the UK to live, learn, work and invest - with a strong and sustainable economy, healthy thriving communities and opportunities for all. Three core principles will shape everything we do and lead to a better quality of life in the long term. All three are important and require multi-level stakeholder and community action:

- **Addressing inequalities** – The Council believes that Darlington is a wonderful place to live and work and we want opportunities to be accessible to everyone. We will have a long-term focus on understanding and addressing the causes of inequality ensuring our communities are safe and can thrive. The Council Plan commits us to developing a cross-council approach based on an in-depth understanding of inequalities and their causes, with a focus on local communities experiencing disadvantage; ensuring all new strategies and plans consider inequalities, starting with the development of an inclusive growth strategy and a review of the health and wellbeing strategy; and strengthened partnership working with key stakeholders and the voluntary and community sector, with long-term focus on opportunity and addressing the causes of inequality and short-term focus on reducing the burden of the cost of living.
- **Tackling Climate Change** - the changing climate impacts all our lives now and we know this is particularly important to our younger residents. The Council are committed to being carbon neutral by 2040, and in order to achieve this we are committed to delivering the climate change action plan to make Darlington Borough Council carbon neutral by 2040; involving all parts of the Council in a cross-Council approach to sustainability and climate change; to working alongside our business community, collaborating with groups such as the Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership to transition to net zero; and to work with partners, government, public and private sectors and residents for a resilient Darlington so we are able to respond and adapt to change.
- **Efficient and effective resources** - we will remain focussed on the financial sustainability of the council, ensuring good governance, and delivering the best services possible with the resources we have for our residents, communities, and businesses. Our people are our best asset and will lead a culture of collaboration, innovation and creativity, respect, delivery and

compassion, whilst maintaining a focus on continuous improvement. We are committed to delivering a balanced Medium Term Financial Plan and positive Value for Money outcome; delivering high quality governance and decision-making; reviewing and refreshing the Asset Management Plan and Procurement Strategy; building on the Capital Project Management process by introducing an enhanced ICT system to improve efficiency and effectiveness; reviewing and delivering the Workforce Strategy; maximising income through new joint venture companies, increased levels of business rates by growing the local economy and maximise grant opportunities; explore opportunities to exploit digital assets to create efficiencies and increase productivity, including on-line delivery; and continue to build strong relationships with partners, residents and communities.

PART TWO

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Council Meetings

Decisions in relation to non-Executive functions, which are not covered by the quasi-judicial committees, are taken at meetings of the Full Council. All Members are summonsed to meet as the Council, and the Mayor chairs the meetings. Six Ordinary Meetings of the Council and one Annual Meeting of the Council are scheduled at the start of each Municipal Year, however Special Meetings and Extraordinary Meetings are held when required.

The Full Council are responsible for setting the Medium-Term Financial Plan, setting the Council Tax, considering recommendations from Cabinet, changes to the Constitution and dealing with matters which are not the responsibility of Executive.

In addition to business reports, each Cabinet Member currently submits a report to each Ordinary Meeting of the Council providing an overview of the work undertaken under their Portfolio during the last cycle of meetings and Members are permitted to ask questions of the Cabinet Member on any aspect of their Portfolio.

Typically, in recent years, Ordinary Meetings of the Council taken between four to six hours. Attendance levels are high, with an average attendance during the Municipal Year 2023/24 being 89.5%, and during the Municipal Year 2024/25 being 87.6%.

Members of the Public may ask questions of Cabinet Members or Committee Chairs at meetings of the Council, and public participation in Council Meetings has increased in recent years. During the Municipal Year 2023/24, 28 questions from members of the public were submitted, with this increasing to 43 questions during the Municipal Year 2024/25.

Executive Arrangements

The Council has adopted the Leader and Cabinet model as its political management structure. At the Annual Council meeting on 25 May 2023, Councillor Steve Harker was appointed as Leader for a four-year term of office. Councillor Harker appointed

Councillor Chris McEwan as the Deputy Leader and a further six Members to form a Cabinet. Each Cabinet Member has a portfolio for which they are responsible. The current Cabinet Portfolios are as follows:

- Adults
- Children and Young People
- Economy (held by the Deputy Leader of the Council)
- Health and Housing
- Local Services
- Resources
- Stronger Communities

Full details of the Cabinet Portfolios can be found at [Part 2 - Responsibility for Functions Schedule 2.pdf](#)

Cabinet Meetings

The Cabinet Members meet monthly, and Cabinet Members have a general responsibility to ensure the effective management and delivery of services within their areas of responsibility, and within the following framework:-

- (a) the Council's overall strategic, corporate and policy objectives;
- (b) the budgets set for the services and this Council's Financial Procedure Rules; and
- (c) the Law and the Constitution.

Ordinary Meetings of the Cabinet usually take anywhere between 30 minutes and two hours, depending on the size of the Agenda. As well as Cabinet Members, the Leaders of the Opposition Groups are invitees to a meeting, sit at the table alongside Cabinet Members and hold them to account as decisions are considered.

Scheme of Delegation

The Executive has delegated some of its functions to an individual Cabinet Member and/or Officers, and these decisions are taken under the 'Scheme of Delegation to Individual Cabinet Members', or the 'Scheme of Delegation to Officers'.

Where an individual Cabinet Member is making a decision under the Scheme of Delegation to Individual Cabinet Members, the individual Cabinet Member will seek advice from relevant Officers and ensure that proper records are kept of all decisions they take, in accordance with legal requirements. Where the individual Cabinet Member has a prejudicial interest (as defined in the Members' Code of Conduct) in relation to any decision, he/she will not take that decision, but will ask the relevant Officer to refer the matter to the Cabinet for determination.

Cabinet Members also sit on several outside bodies to represent the interests of the Council.

Leader of the Council	<p>Local Government Association</p> <p>Association of Councillors – General Management Committee</p> <p>Association of Councillors – Northern Branch Committee</p> <p>Association of North-East Councils – Leaders and Elected Mayors Group</p> <p>Tees Valley Combined Authority – Cabinet</p> <p>Tees Valley Combined Authority – Transport Committee</p> <p>Association of Rail North Partnership Authorities – Rail North Ltd</p> <p>Association of Rail North Partnership Authorities – Rail North Committee</p> <p>Association of Rail North Partnership Authorities – East Coast Mainline Authorities Group</p> <p>Crown Street Library Trustee Board</p> <p>Darlington Town Centre Deal Board</p>
Deputy Leader and Economy	<p>Local Government Association</p> <p>Education, Employment and Skills Partnership Board</p> <p>Poor Moor Fund/Charity</p>
Adults	Darlington Safeguarding Partnership
Children and Young People	<p>Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)</p> <p>Darlington Safeguarding Partnership</p> <p>Darlington Young People's Engagement and Justice Service Board</p> <p>North-East Child Poverty Commission</p> <p>North-East Strategic Migration Partnership</p>
Health and Housing	<p>Association of North-East Councils – Health and Wellbeing Chairs Network</p> <p>Integrated Care Partnership Tees Valley</p> <p>North-East Ambulance Service</p>

	Northern Housing Consortium
Local Services	<p>Association of North-East Councils – North-East Culture Partnership</p> <p>Tees Valley Combined Authority – Transport Committee</p> <p>Creative Darlington</p> <p>Darlington Railway Museum Trust</p> <p>Stockton and Darlington Railway Heritage Board</p> <p>Teesside International Airport Limited - Consultative Committee</p>
Resources	<p>Association of North-East Councils – Collaborative Procurement Sub-Committee</p> <p>Association of North-East Councils – Resources Task and Finish Review Group</p> <p>Tees Valley Combined Authority – Audit and Governance Committee</p> <p>Durham County Pension Fund Committee</p> <p>North-East Regional Employers Organisation</p> <p>North-East Regional Employers Organisation – Executive Committee</p>
Stronger Communities	<p>Darlington Cares</p> <p>Teesside International Airport Limited – Board</p> <p>Parking and Traffic Regulations Outside London (Patrol) Adjudication Committee</p>

Group Chief Officers Meetings

These are meetings of the ruling group at which briefing papers from Officers are presented by Chief Officers at the request of the ruling group. These meetings are chaired by (the Leader of the Council) and Cabinet Members will take a lead on reports presented within their portfolio. These meetings are usually held on a monthly basis.

Cabinet / SLT Meetings

These are joint meetings of the Council's Senior Leadership Team and the Cabinet, which are used to discuss emerging issues, to prepare the annual budget, and to develop high level Council policy and strategy. These meetings take place regularly

and are scheduled monthly, though additional meetings may be arranged at key times.

Portfolio Holder Briefings

Portfolio Holders regularly meet with Senior Officers who operate within their area of responsibility. These meetings are scheduled regularly and take place with varying regularity, from weekly to monthly.

Each Portfolio Holder has Opposition Shadow from both the Conservative and Green Groups, and the Shadow Portfolio Holders also meet and receive a briefing from Senior Officers.

Other Committee Responsibilities

Cabinet Members also sit on other Committees of the Council, as follows:

Planning Applications Committee – 1
General Licensing Committee – 1
Licensing Act 2003 Committee – 1
Members Standards Hearing Committee – 1
Human Resources Committee - 5
Human Resources Chief Officers Appointments Panel – 5
Human Resources Panel - 2

Outside Bodies and Partnership Working

The Council appoints members to a range of outside bodies. Members also sit on outside bodies as part of either their community role or specific areas of responsibility, for instance as a Cabinet Portfolio Holder. The details of all the bodies that Members are formally appointed to by the Council or the Executive can be found at [Council Report](#) and [CABINET REPORT](#)

Details of the amount of time spent by members sitting on outside bodies formed part of the questions in the Member Survey and is detailed in the summary and information in relation to the Survey at **Appendix 1**.

Tees Valley Combined Authority

The Tees Valley Combined Authority was created in April 2016, with the purpose of securing investment, creating jobs and growing the economy within the Tees Valley. The Authority is a partnership of the five local authorities within the Tees Valley – Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton-on-Tees, who work closely with the Local Enterprise Partnership, wider business community and other partners to make local decisions to support the growth of the economy within the Tees Valley.

The Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) is made up of several statutory boards, committees and groups, with support from a team of experts in aspects of economic development. The Elected Mayor of the Tees Valley Combined Authority is Ben

Houchen, and he chairs the Tees Valley Combined Authority Cabinet. The Cabinet is made up of representatives from the five Tees Valley Local Authorities and has strong engagement with the business community through the chair of the Tees Valley Business Board. Councillor Stephen Harker, Leader of the Council, sits on the TVCA Cabinet and holds the Portfolio for Transport and Infrastructure.

The TVCA has a number of other committees including the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Audit and Governance Committee, the Transport Committee, the South Tees Development Corporation Board and the Tees Valley Business Board. Councillors Haszeldine, Kane and Keir represent Darlington on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with Councillor Mandy Porter, Portfolio Holder for Resources, representing Darlington on the Audit and Governance Committee.

Councillor Stephen Harker and Councillor Libby McCollom, Portfolio Holder for Local Services, represent Darlington on the Transport Committee.

More information on the work of the TVCA can be found at [Tees Valley - Anything is Possible](#)

Combined Fire Authority

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority is responsible for setting the strategic direction, policies and priorities of the Service. In doing so it must ensure the Fire and Rescue Service has the people, equipment and training needed to carry out its duties in relation to:

- fire prevention
- fire safety
- firefighting and rescue
- road traffic collision extrication and rescue
- other emergency rescue activities, e.g. responding to flooding or terrorism

County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Authority is a combined authority created by the Durham Fire Services (Combination Scheme) Order 1996.

Membership comprises of 21 Elected Councillors from Durham County Council and four from Darlington. The Combined Fire Authority is a legal body with statutory duties and responsibilities. It makes sure that County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service is run to the highest standards of efficiency and effectiveness.

Members of the Combined Fire Authority will:

- Make informed decisions in relation to Service policy and strategy aligned to the Authority's vision, priorities, objectives and values.
- Approve the Service's budget and ensure they receive sufficient money from local council tax.

- Monitor the Service's performance to ensure it is efficient, effective and economical.
- Appoint the following positions:
 - Chief Fire Officer
 - Clerk to the Fire Authority
 - Deputy Chief Executive (who is also the Treasurer to the Fire Authority)
 - Deputy Chief Fire Officer
 - Directors
- Act as the final level of appeal in employee disciplinary and grievance procedures.

The governance framework for the Combined Fire Authority comprises the systems and processes, culture and values, by which the Authority is directed and controlled, and its activities through which it is accountable to and engages with local communities.

Darlington is represented on the CFA by Councillors Anderson, Lee, Ray and Snedker, and Darlington has one seat on each of the following Committees - Audit and Finance Committee, Performance Committee, the Human Resources Committee, Appeals Committee, Joint Consultative Committee, and the Pension Board Committee.

More information on the Combined Fire Authority can be found at [Combined Fire Authority | County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service](#)

Police and Crime Panel

The Police and Crime Panel (PCP) scrutinises and supports the work of the Durham Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC).

The panel is composed of seven councillors from Durham County Council and three councillors from Darlington, plus two independent co-opted members. The panel has a number of powers and responsibilities, including to:

- review the draft police and crime plan,
- publicly scrutinise the PCC's annual report,
- review and scrutinise decisions and actions by the PCC,
- review and veto the PCC's proposed precept levels,
- review the PCC's conduct,
- review and confirm the PCC's proposed appointments of Chief Constable, Chief Executive, Chief Finance Officer and Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner, and
- administer complaints in relation to the handling and determination of complaints against the PCC and / or Deputy PCC.

Darlington's three representatives on the PCP are Councillor Johnson,

Councillor Lee and Councillor Kevin Nicholson.

More information about the Police and Crime Panel can be located at [Police and Crime Panel - Durham County Council](#)

ACCOUNTABILITY

Overview and Scrutiny Functions

Scrutiny in Darlington comprises a Monitoring and Co-ordination Group and five Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Schedule 3 of Part 2 of the Council's Constitution, Scrutiny Procedure Rules (see [SCRUTINY PROCEDURE RULES](#)) details the role of Scrutiny in Darlington.

The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees play a key role in developing and reviewing policy through a facility to call-in Cabinet decisions for review or by undertaking pre-decision scrutiny. They also have powers to scrutinise the activities and decisions of some partner organisations, including partners in health organisations and the Safeguarding Board.

Overview and Scrutiny is also one of the most important ways in which Councillors can champion their constituents. Any member of the public can approach a Member of the Council to ask that an issue is referred to a meeting of Scrutiny. This is referred to as a Councillor Call for Action (CCfA).

Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Memberships

The Overview and Scrutiny Committees are thematically based, mainly aligning with our Cabinet Portfolios, and Darlington's current Scrutiny structure comprises:-

- Monitoring and Co-ordination Group;
- Adults Scrutiny Committee;
- Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee;
- Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee;
- Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee; and
- Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee.

The five Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees form the membership of the Monitoring and Co-ordinating Group, and there are 10 seats on each of the five Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Each Overview and Scrutiny Committee is politically balanced. The Working Group believe that it is important to retain Overview and Scrutiny Committees of this size. Given scrutiny's role in amplifying the voices and concerns of the public, it is essential that the Committees, as far as possible, include Members that represent different areas of the Borough, including both the urban and rural areas. Smaller Committees would reduce the ability to achieve that geographical balance.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committees meet six times per Municipal Year but may arrange Special Meetings as and when required. The average length of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting is approximately 2-3 hours

Darlington's Scrutiny Committees have a designated Scrutiny Lead Officer (Assistant Director / Head of Service), generally from the relevant service area, however this is very much a facilitating role. Overview and Scrutiny Committees do not have a dedicated Scrutiny Support Officer for the Members. The Overview and Scrutiny process is facilitated by Democratic Officers, who provide administrative support and information as required, however scrutiny in Darlington has been very much, since its inception in 2000, been seen to be 'Member-led'.

Prior to each meeting of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a pre-Agenda Meeting takes place involving the Chair, Vice-Chair, Scrutiny Lead Officer and the Democratic Officer attached to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. These meetings play a key role in providing guidance and advice to Members in terms of their role as scrutineers.

Relevant Cabinet Members are invited to each meeting of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and may be invited to address the Committee at the discretion of the Chair or asked to answer questions accordingly.

Darlington is also a member of the Tees Valley Joint Health Scrutiny Committee (comprising three Members from each of the five Tees Valley authorities) and the Joint Committee meets on a quarterly basis.

Overview and Scrutiny Workload

The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees have always enjoyed wide powers to scrutinise all aspects of the Council business and have made significant contributions to key policy changes the Council has undertaken.

In terms of workload, the compilation of Work Programmes are a matter for the individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees themselves, although the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group monitor Work Programmes to ensure that the workload and impact of Scrutiny is monitored. The Monitoring and Co-ordination Group ensure Work Programmes are aligned to maximise the effectiveness of Scrutiny and ensure the greatest impact.

The Monitoring and Co-ordination Group recently introduced Annual Scrutiny Briefings, which take place between the Annual Meeting of the Council (at which the membership of Committees is agreed) and the initial meeting of the Municipal Year. The purpose of the Annual Scrutiny Briefing is to enable Members, some of whom may be new to the Committee, to receive an overview of the remit of that Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to develop an understanding of existing workloads and any work that might be forthcoming within the forthcoming twelve to eighteen months which might require Scrutiny attention, and ensure that the Key Performance Indicators reviewed by the Committee remain fit for purpose.

Members use these Annual Scrutiny Briefings to inform their decisions around developing the Work Programme for that Committee over the forthcoming Municipal Year. Members also pay due regard to the Forward Plan in order that they can input on

matters due before Cabinet.

Scrutiny Work Programme

As mentioned, each Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a Work Programme which timetables what items the Committee will receive throughout the Municipal Year. The Work Programme is formally agreed at the first meeting of the Municipal Year, however the Work Programme does appear as a standing item on the Agenda for each Ordinary Meeting.

Once agreed, Members can submit requests for an additional item to be added to the Work Programme using a Quad of Aims (**Appendix 2**).

The Chairs provide an update at each Ordinary Meeting of the Council on the work undertaken in the previous Committee cycle.

Scrutiny Activities between Formal Meetings

Members undertake a number of activities between formal meetings, mainly in the form of Task and Finish Groups.

In deciding what Scrutiny Reviews are to be undertaken, Members take the following into account:-

- Will the outcome make a difference?
- Discussions with senior management on reviews that can be undertaken to assist with the workload of the Service Group; and
- Local views and priorities (what the community would want scrutiny to get involved in to improve service delivery).

In recent years, Scrutiny Committee Members have led on some extremely in-depth Task and Finish Reviews. Members of the Adults Scrutiny Committee conducted a review into Adult Social Care during Covid (concluded in 2024), which also involved Members of the Task and Finish Review Group hosting a Hearing to hear testimony from those working in, and with, the Adult Social Care Sector during Covid. The Adults Scrutiny Committee has also recently held a review on Care Homes in Special Measures (2024).

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee also held a Task and Finish Review into the Effects of the Pandemic on Children and Young People and their Families (2024) and have also recently formed Task and Finish Groups to examine the Performance Indicators used in Performance Management (2024) and Childcare Sufficiency (2024).

Some Scrutiny Committee Members have also worked directly with Lead Officers, undertaking work outside of the scrutiny process to drive policy improvements, with examples including Residents Parking Zones, Road Harm Reduction and Active Travel Neighbours.

Regulatory Committees

All regulatory Committees currently have a membership of 14 Councillors, with a quorum of four Members. There is one Planning Applications Committee, and two Licensing Committees – the General Licensing Committee for general business and the Licensing Act 2003 Committee for Licensing Act 2003 responsibilities. Sub-Committees of these two Committees (five Members on the General Licensing Sub-Committee and three Members on the Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee) meet to determine individual applications or reviews.

Licensing

We have two Licensing Committees in Darlington – The General Licensing Committee and the Licensing Act 2003 Committee. The Licensing Act 2003 Committee also considers Gambling Act contested applications. The legislation is pretty specific on what can and cannot be delegated. In Darlington, the majority of business is delegated to Officers (i.e. non-contested applications etc.), or to a sub-committee of three members where the application is contested.

The General Licensing Committee sits every six weeks. If, for any reason, there is no business the meeting is cancelled. Sub-committees of the General Licensing Committee are called on an ad hoc basis and sits immediately after meetings of the General Licensing Committee, or as required. Sub-Committees of the General Licensing Committee comprise five Members and meet to determine an application for a Hackney Carriage Licence or review an application.

The Licensing Act 2003 Committee sits on an ad hoc basis and the membership replicates that of the General Licensing Committee. Generally, if required, the Licensing Act 2003 Committee sits direct after meetings of the General Licensing Committee, however, can meet as a stand-alone committee. Sub-committees of the Licensing Act 2003 Committee meet to determine and review premises licences.

During the Municipal Year 2023/24, nine General Licensing Sub-Committee meetings were held, and seven Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee meetings were held. During the year 24/25, six General Licensing Sub-Committee meetings were held, and one Licensing Act 2003 Sub-Committee meeting was held.

Planning

The Planning Applications Committee is a single committee of 14 Members with a quorum of four. Meetings take place every four weeks. Members on the Planning Applications Committee receive training on an annual basis, with ad hoc training sessions held where specialist or technical knowledge on an application may be required.

The workload for a Member on the Planning Applications Committee can be quite heavy as reports submitted to Committee tend to be lengthy and detailed, with further background information on each application available to Members via the Planning Portal. Approximately 92% of Planning decisions are delegated, with the remaining applications coming to the Planning Applications Committee.

Generally, attendance at a meeting of the Planning Applications Committee is at a good level, with no more than two or three Members missing per meeting. Meetings generally range from two to three hours in length, however, can continue longer if more complex applications, or a larger number of applications, appear on the agenda. A meeting will normally have approximately three or four applications on the Agenda, with standing items to discuss appeals submitted, appeal decisions and ongoing enforcement action. With longer meetings some Members may leave for other engagements, however this rarely leads to a meeting becoming inquorate.

Other Committees

The Council also has the following Committees, Panels and Working Groups:

Council Decision-Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group

A Motion agreed at the Ordinary Meeting of the Council on 28th September 2023 established the Council Decision-Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group. The purpose of the working group is to consider how Council decision-making and the scrutiny function can be strengthened, involving the public in deliberations, and making recommendations to Council thereon. The working group comprises ten Members and is politically balanced (five Labour Members, three Conservative Members, one Green Member and one Liberal Democrat), with the Members being nominated by their respective political groups.

To date, the Council Decision-Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group has met on eight occasions. In relation to Scrutiny work, sub-groups were initially established to look at the themes of:

- Work Programming;
- Meeting Format;
- Member Awareness, Engagement and Training;
- Public Engagement; and
- Officer Engagement / Resources.

As with the Overview and Scrutiny function, there is no dedicated Officer attached to this Working Group. Support and guidance is provided by the Assistant Director, Law and Governance, and the Democratic and Elections Manager, with administrative support provided by a Democratic Officer, however Members of the Working Group have undertaken their own research and evidence gathering in relation to these key themes.

Members have also considered the decision-making process at Council Meetings and public involvement in those meetings. The working group met on 16 September 2025 to draw together their final recommendations, however a further meeting is required to finalise these. It is proposed that those recommendations which require constitutional amendments will be considered by the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee and the Audit Committee in January 2026, before being forwarded to Council for consideration. The formation of this cross-party Working Group demonstrates the Council's willingness to reflect on and examine its own

governance arrangements and strengthen those arrangements, where necessary.

Climate Change Cross Party Working Group

Following the decision by the Council to declare a Climate Emergency at its meeting on 18th July 2019, a Climate Change Cross Party Working Group was established to identify ways to reduce Carbon emissions and achieve a carbon neutral status for the Borough of Darlington. The Working Group does not have decision making powers, however progress on the Council's Climate Change objectives is reported to the Ordinary Meeting of the Council on a six-monthly basis.

The remit of the Climate Change Working Group has recently expanded following the agreement of the Nature Restoration Motion by Council in May 2025.

Health and Wellbeing Board

The Health and Wellbeing Board brings together key local leaders to improve the health and wellbeing of the population of Darlington and reduce health inequalities through:

- Developing a shared understanding of the health and wellbeing needs of its communities from pre-birth to end of life including the health inequalities within and between communities;
- Providing system leadership to secure collaboration to meet these needs more effectively;
- Having strategic influence over commissioning decisions across health, public health and social care encouraging integration where appropriate;
- Recognising the impact of the wider determinants of health on health and wellbeing.

Five elected Members are appointed to the Board, and meetings are chaired by the Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Health and Housing. A copy of the Terms of Reference for the Board can be found at [Terms of reference](#)

Members Standards Hearing Committee

The Council maintains a Members Standards Hearing Panel, with five Council Members and two Parish Council Members. The Committee hears complaints against Member for alleged breaches of the Code.

Audit Committee

The Audit Committee has six elected Members. It has responsibility for considering the annual report of the Head of Corporate Assurance, considering individual audit reports. The annual audit letter of the external auditors and to consider a range of corporate governance issues including whistleblowing.

Human Resources Committee (including the Appointments Panel, Joint Consultative Committee and the Appeals Committee)

The main committee has eleven elected Members including positions for five Cabinet members. It deals with Member appointments (staff at deputy Chief Officer level or above) and deals with staff dismissal and grievance appeals. Sitting as the JCC it has responsibility for liaison with the trade unions.

Rights of Way Panel

The panel makes decisions in relation the modifications of the definitive map of rights of way. There are three elected Members appointed to this panel.

School Governors Appointments Committee

The Committee has responsibility for the appointment and dismissal of school governors. There are five elected Members appointed to this Committee.

Corporate Parenting Panel

All elected Members are Corporate Parents, and the Corporate Parenting Panel oversees the care, support, and security of children and young people who cannot stay at home safely. The main responsibilities of the Panel include ensuring that the Council fulfils its duties towards children looked after corporately and in partnership with other statutory agencies.

There are seven elected Members appointed to this Panel, and the Panel is chaired by the Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Children and Young People.

Crown Street Library Trustee Board

Crown Street Library was opened on the 23 October 1885. The library was a great philanthropic gift to the Town by the Pease Family, and it has contributed very significantly to the education, advancement and wellbeing of the people of Darlington.

The Crown Street Library Trustees Board was established in 2020 with the aim of giving more formal recognition to the wider community. The first meeting was held on 23 October 2020 to mark the 135th Anniversary of the opening of the library. The Leader of the Council represents the Council on the Board.

Members Allowances

Each Member of the Council receives a basic allowance of £9524.30 (which is inclusive of the recently agreed local government pay award) at a cost of £476,215 to the Council's budget. In addition, Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) amount to a further £224,763.42. A copy of the Members Allowances Scheme can be found at [Part 5 -Members Allowances Scheme.pdf](#)

In accordance with the 2006 Statutory Guidance no more than 50% of Members are paid an SRA, as if we pay more than 50% the local electorate may rightly question whether this is justified. At present, 21 Members in Darlington are in receipt of a Special Responsibility Allowance. Any reduction in Members may necessitate further consideration by the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) of the Special Responsibility Allowances.

Savings achieved directly by a reduction of Members without other changes such as a reduction in Committee Membership or changes to governance arrangements are therefore a small amount of administrative costs at the outset of the Members term and the basic allowance. The basic allowance is inclusive of Members' IT costs, which means that Members are responsible for meeting the costs of their own IT. Members are also unable to claim any additional travel and subsistence within the Borough.

Training and All-Member Briefings

At the start of each term of office, Members receive a programme of training to assist in the discharge of their duties for the next four years. This training is usually provided in-house, or by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS). Recent discussions held in meetings of the Council Decision Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group suggest that Members feel a little overwhelmed during this initial period, and that training opportunities should be spread out more evenly across the first year of a term of office, with further refresher training incorporated throughout the term of office.

As it currently stands, following the initial training provided, Members undertake training primarily on an ad hoc basis, however there are annual training sessions held on Equality and Diversity and the Code of Conduct. Following comments made in the meetings of the Council Decision Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group, plans for a more robust training programme are currently under review and Officers have recently been linking in with Ed Hammond at the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to facilitate this.

More specifically, Members of the Planning Applications Committee receive an annual training session to assist in the discharge of their responsibilities and may also receive additional training around emerging themes or changes in planning legislation to ensure that decision-making continues to be sound. Whilst our Members do already receive an annual training session, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill currently being considered will include a measure that all Committee Members across the planning system receive training that covers at least the key principles of planning. The objective of this measure is to ensure that where Members make planning decisions, they do so on proper planning grounds, in accordance with material considerations, justifiable and defensible.

All-Member Briefings are arranged on an ad hoc basis to address local issues or provide information to Members in terms of forthcoming decisions, or to roll out national guidance. Within the last few months all-Member Briefings have been arranged to provide Members with information about Hopetown (Darlington's latest visitor attraction), EV Charging, guidance in relation to proposed constitutional

changes, information and advice in relation to Operation Ford, and in relation to the Tees Valley Energy Recovery Facility (TVERF) Project.

PART THREE – COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Working in the Community

Members undertake work in different ways within the community. Some Members have very active roles and are also members of Residents Associations, Community Partnerships or attend Police and Community Together (PACT) meetings. Members are involved in leading on or stimulating community projects or serving on formal bodies such as Parish Councils. Councillor Lee currently also serves as a Parish Councillor on Heighington Parish Council, however many other Councillors in rural wards attend Parish Councils meetings as non-members, or in their capacity as the Ward Councillor.

As can be seen from the results of the Members Survey (**Appendix 1**), the vast majority (84.62%) of those Members who responded produce a newsletter. Members have the option of having their newsletters printed by the Council, however all such newsletters are checked by Senior Officers before being issued, as they must remain politically neutral if produced using Council resources. Members may choose to produce and print their own newsletters, and many do so, as this provides greater autonomy in terms of what they can say, including the addition of political content.

All of those Members (100%) who responded to the Members Survey indicated that they hold Ward Surgeries. Ward Surgeries provide an opportunity for any ward resident to go and talk their local Councillor face-to-face and these take place on a regular basis. There was quite a range of responses in terms of regularity, with some respondents holding Ward Surgeries fortnightly, some on a monthly basis and others at varying frequencies. Some Members adopted a mixed approach, utilising the traditional approach of holding the Ward Surgery in a local community venue, whilst also adopting 'Street Surgeries'.

One Member contacted Officers to highlight that Members in their Ward undertook 'Street Surgeries bi-monthly, which entailed the collection and bundling of newsletters (30 mins), delivery (1 hour), and the street surgery itself (2 hours)'. This response also provided details that the Members in this ward also undertook 'action days' during lighter nights, which occurred fortnightly and lasted an hour.

It is notable that the work required to undertake 'street surgeries' can be greater than their more traditional counterparts as Members need to undertake a preparatory visit to inform residents when they will be in the area and drop of the 'Street Surgery' Stop notice to be displayed in the window, and then subsequently re-visit the area to meet and discuss matters with those residents who have indicated that they would like a visit. The benefits of 'Street Surgeries' are that residents do not have to travel to them, making them a convenient option for electors, and that Members are engaging with residents who have actively identified that they wish to be called upon.

In terms of casework, the Council does not have a case management system, so this is not formally recorded, and there is no dedicated Officer support to help Members deal with casework. Given that the size of Darlington's workforce has shrunk over

the last 15 years, Councillors are faced with seeking information and advice from a much-depleted Officer structure. Members are responsible for monitoring cases and also for resolving any issues raised with them themselves.

As part of our Members Survey, Members were invited to provide information about how many hours per week they spent on dealing with casework, including the time required to obtain information to respond to residents, with 8.70% of respondents claiming to spend 61–90 minutes on resident queries, 13.04% of respondents advising that they spent 91-120 minutes on resident queries, 21.74% of respondents stating that they spent 121-180 minutes on resident queries each week, and 13.04% of respondents informing the Working Group that they spent 181-240 minutes on resident queries each week.

Other responses received reflected the variance across Members with responses including 240-300 minutes, an average of a day per week on casework, 360 minutes, two hours per day, 400 minutes per week, 180-240 minutes but if there is a particular current issue affecting many residents it can be a lot more hours, and six hours per week.

This variance in time was reflected in the response to the question in relation to preparation for formally constituted meetings, with the majority of respondents either spending 91-120 minutes in terms of preparation, or 121-180 minutes in relation to preparation (both 21.74%). Other responses included 540-720 minutes per week, 300 minutes per week, one Member spends 2 hours per day reading and has one full day reading in preparation every 2-3 weeks (it should be noted that this Member identified as being the Vice-Chair of two Overview and Scrutiny Committees). This perhaps also highlights the amount of research Members are required to undertake themselves as there is no dedicated Overview and Scrutiny support to gather evidence and prepare and provide research and briefing papers.

All those who responded to the question in relation to social media profiles stated that they maintained a Councillor social media profile, which perhaps reflects the shift in the way members of the public expect to be able to communicate with Members. The time spent by Members engaging with residents on social media varied greatly too, with one respondent spending up to 30 minutes per week engaging with residents via social media, to those who spent between 181-240 minutes per week engaging with residents via social media.

One Member reported averaging 45 minutes per day for five days per week across the last 90 days, with another Member suggesting that “running an effective Facebook page takes eight hours plus (per week)”.

Time Spent on the undertaking the role of a Councillor in Darlington

As demonstrated from the responses to the Members Survey, it can be extremely difficult to identify an average number of hours per week that Members spend on undertaking their role as a Councillor. Variations in the type of ward that a Councillor represents will have an influence on the issues that may be raised by residents, how many co-Councillors also represent the ward and how ward work can be effectively split between them is a further consideration, alongside the number of hours that a

Member can make available due to other commitments, such as employment, family, caring issues, etc., which will all have an impact.

Indeed, one Member contacted Officers to highlight that it was difficult to capture “the hours and hours I spend talking to residents on an informal basis at village shows, events and even more so at Community meeting points such as the Grange, coffee pot, mustard tree, village hall, all the pubs, church, walking the dog, etc.”.

Another Member specifically highlighted the difference in expectations on a rural Councillor – “at village events and other meetings there is an expectation from residents that we are present. Eg. village shows, acting as a judge for children and animals, country fairs, coffee mornings, the list is endless”.

In reviewing our Members’ Allowances in November 2023, our Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) examined the latest LGA Census of Councillors (England) (2022), which demonstrated that Councillors in unitary authorities who hold no positions of responsibility spend an average of 22.8 hours per week on “Council business”. This included dealing with ward issues, community-related meetings and other associated work such as responding to e-mails, reading and preparation. It excluded group and other political party business. This equates to 148.2 days per year on an 8-hour working day.

The IRP felt that Members in Darlington were typical of the average and adopted 148.2 days per year as the time expectation to recalibrate the Basic Allowance.

Political Group Work

Darlington does not have any political advisors as some authorities do, and therefore all research in relation to group proposals is conducted by Members themselves. Members do receive basic administrative support from Democratic Services in terms of the preparation of Motions at meetings, and Members will receive support in the development of policy and strategies from appropriate Officers, however in terms of political or strategic direction, Members are required to take a strong lead.

PART FOUR - SUMMARY

The Council’s submission has been developed by a cross-party Working Group comprised of all four of the Group Leaders on the Council, and which has been informed by evidence about current activity levels, and contributions from Members through a Member Survey. The Group Leaders have reviewed and challenged the existing governance arrangements and have also considered alternative arrangements, and the narrative and reflections are outlined within this section of the submission.

From the outset, the Working Group recognised and acknowledged that Darlington was a significant outlier in terms of over-representation and were very keen that due and serious consideration was given, and seen to have been given, to this submission.

Members of the Working Group expressed the wish to submit a proposal to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England that did take into consideration the

current position, however provided realistic consideration of Darlington's position, both in terms of remaining faithful to the need for good governance and one which continued to meet the challenges faced by the Council and the residents of Darlington.

The Working Group allowed for a robust consultation process and ensured that the views from all political groups were sought and taken into consideration within this submission, meeting on six occasions between July and September. The Council welcomed the opportunity to consider its size, and this proposal was considered at an Ordinary Meeting of the Full Council on 2 October 2025.

Governance Arrangements and Accountability

The Council's governance arrangements are typical of the arrangements of many other Councils and have no outstanding features. Cabinet is currently two short of the legal maximum size of ten, though the Council's own Constitution does cap the size of Cabinet to a maximum of nine. Cabinet members attend many meetings in addition to formal Cabinet meetings and spend time sitting on outside bodies as part of their Portfolio responsibilities. Given that Cabinet is currently operating at less than the maximum permitted size and taking into consideration the amount of time Cabinet Members spend sitting on and supporting outside bodies such as the Tees Valley Combined Authority, to reduce the size of Cabinet would invariably increase the time requirements on those fewer Portfolio Holders.

The current Cabinet membership comprises five male and three female Members, with four Members currently employed externally in some capacity. The ages of Cabinet Members range from early thirties to early sixties. A reduction in the size of Cabinet, and the increased time requirement placed on those fewer Cabinet Members, may subsequently make taking on such a role prohibitive to some resulting in a less diverse Cabinet membership.

Likewise, the Council's Overview and Scrutiny arrangements are not too dissimilar, or out of step with, other authorities. Whilst it is recognised that some Councils do have a smaller number of larger Overview and Scrutiny Committees, many within the immediate region have a similar number of thematically based Overview and Scrutiny Committees (**Appendix 3 – Scrutiny Structures in the North-East (Sept 2024)**), and Members were satisfied that this arrangement currently works well in Darlington and aligns well with the current Portfolio allocation. The scoping exercise at Appendix 3 also demonstrates that many North-East authorities have dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Teams or Officers, which Darlington does not have,

The size of Darlington's Scrutiny Committees is also not out of step with the guidance provided by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), who hold the view that committees work best when they number between 9 and 13 Members ([Structures, resources and formal powers - a practice guide - CFGS](#)).

Darlington allocate ten seats per Scrutiny Committee, so our number of seats already sits at the lower end of this suggested range. The CfGS state that this is not a rigorously scientific conclusion, more a figure that reflects:

- The purpose of scrutiny as a space in which Members are coming together to discuss matters of common interest, and the need therefore to ensure a decent spread and plurality of views and perspectives;
- The need for political proportionality, especially in councils with several political groups and/or a lot of independent Members;
- The logistical unwieldiness of particularly large groups – and difficulties in ensuring the full engagement of those larger groups.

Darlington is a Council which already has four political groups represented on the Council, and five Independent Members. Results in recent local elections in the immediate locality suggest that a further political group may gain seats at the next local elections, and therefore the argument to be able to accommodate political proportionality also becomes even greater.

Given the ongoing work of the Council Decision Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group in terms of reviewing and strengthening our Overview and Scrutiny function, the Working Group were also reluctant to make any changes to the Overview and Scrutiny structure at this time.

When examining the membership of the regulatory committees, the Working Group noted that the Planning Advisory Service's (PAS) 'Modernising Planning Committees National Survey 2025' (<https://www.local.gov.uk/pas/applications/planning-committee/modernising-planning-committees-national-survey-2025>) reflected that 75% of respondents had:

- A single Planning Committee made up of 9-12 members
- Planning Committee is held once a month
- The agenda is 4 or less items
- The meeting last 3 hours or less
- A delegation rate of over 90%

Darlington is very similar to most respondents in this survey in having a single Planning Applications Committee, with meetings once every four weeks and a delegation rate of 92%. Meetings will usually have three or four items on the Agenda and last between two and three hours. The only area in which Darlington slightly differs is in having 14 Members on our Planning Applications Committee, and the Working Group acknowledged that there may be scope for a reduction of Members on this Committee.

In terms of the Licensing function, each Licensing Authority must establish a Licensing Committee consisting of at least 10 but no more than 15 Members of the authority. Again, whilst not out of step with the requirements placed upon the authority, Members recognised that there may be scope for a reduction from the current number of 14 on this Committee.

Capacity

As mentioned at the start of this submission, Darlington is a small unitary authority and one which does not have the resources of some of its regional counterparts. Whilst we feel that the Council punches well above its weight, this is not without challenge and a reliance on Members to provide strong strategic governance whilst also being active leaders and enablers within their own local communities.

Like many local authorities, the workforce at the Council has reduced significantly over the last 15 years, which has meant that the support available to Members has been steadily reducing as well. As has been demonstrated throughout this submission, Members in Darlington receive little dedicated Officer support in comparison to other authorities in the region. Members are responsible for the management of their own casework, with no casework system in place to assist them, and no dedicated Officer support to help manage this workload. Members are required to liaise with Officers at a service level to obtain information and responses on behalf of residents and communicate these back, or signpost members of the public accordingly themselves.

Darlington does not have any dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Officers. Our Overview and Scrutiny Committees are supported by Democratic Officers, who also perform other roles, and only provide support in terms of meeting management. Many other authorities within the region have dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Officers whose role it is to conduct research, gather evidence, give policy advice, produce briefing papers and reports and provide administrative assistance to the individual Overview and Scrutiny Committees, and those Members. Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members in Darlington are required to conduct their own research, gather their own evidence seek out policy advice and guidance and produce their own reports.

Given the recent aspiration to improve the Overview and Scrutiny process in Darlington through the work of the Council Decision Making and Scrutiny Process Working Group, and considering the lack of any further meaningful resource or Officer support with which to undertake this, the onus will inevitably fall on Members, alongside the Statutory Scrutiny Officer, to drive the changes required to strengthen the Overview and Scrutiny function.

Community Leadership

The representational role of Members and their position as community leaders within their Wards has always been considered important in Darlington, with Members evidently reaching out and engaging with residents as demonstrated by the production of Ward Newsletters, holding Ward Surgeries and Street Surgeries. Since the last review there has been a significant increase on the reliance of social media for engagement and the distribution of information, with resident expectations greater in terms of the immediacy of response.

There has been a long-standing shift towards Members becoming enablers within their communities, helping to identify needs, develop solutions and deliver required

outcomes to meet the specific needs of their communities. Many Members are involved in specific projects within their Wards, leading and driving on community initiatives, especially within those Wards where deprivation is high and the needs are greatest. Members have leading roles volunteering at food banks, within 'Friends' groups ('Friends of the Denes', 'Friends of the South Park', etc.), and in the Cockerton Business Group, for example.

Members regularly attend Community Partnership meetings, Police and Community Together (PACT) meetings and Residents Association meetings. Those who represent rural Wards serve as Parish Councillors or attend Parish Council meetings and regularly take part in Parish events. The focus on Members being visible within their wards immense.

Continuity

All Group Leaders were keen that the new Council Size figure was not seen to be prohibitive to the future composition of the Council. The members of the Working Group were cognizant of the existing demands on Member time, both in terms of governance commitments and within their communities, and expressed concerns that a large reduction in terms of Council Size might result in those with other commitments or concerns, such as employment, family commitments, caring commitments, health conditions, low income, disability, etc. feeling that they would be unable to commit the time and stand for election. This would potentially result in a very narrow field of candidates standing for election – ie. those with free time and of independent means – and that the Council would consequently lack diversity.

Financial Savings

Members of the Working Group were keen that a reduction in Council Size was not purely seen as an opportunity to achieve savings. Indeed, the savings that would be achieved by a reduction in Council Size would only reflect a reduction in the number of basic allowances payable, which would be limited without a corresponding reduction in Special Responsibility Allowances. Likewise, the cost of administration would not be reduced due to a reduction in Council Size unless there was a corresponding reduction in the number of committees, committee size and membership. As Darlington currently operates well within the suggested guidance for the size of the Executive and the Scrutiny function, and as there is no desire from all the Group Leaders to change this structure, the potential to realise financial savings are limited, and this is not considered to be a significant factor in determining Council Size.

Council Size

Members of the Working Group were invited to consider options.

Increased Council Size

The Working Group recognised from the outset that Darlington represented a significant outlier in terms of over-representation, and if the decision on Council Size was purely based on the 'councillor to electors' ratio alone the requirement would be for a large reduction in Council Size.

Whilst not directly linked to Council Size, there is also a recognition Darlington is currently facing a financially challenging period, and an increase in Councillors would not seem appropriate in such circumstances and Members remained conscious of public perception. It was therefore suggested that the Council Size proposal be no greater than the current number of Members, and therefore to upper limit of any consideration should be 50 Members.

Large Reduction

After consideration, all Members of the Working Group agreed that they did not wish to see a large reduction to the number of Members. The Working Group considered a Council Size in the low thirties. Having agreed that they were minded to retain the current Executive and Scrutiny structures on the basis that they felt that it provided the best governance for Darlington, this would mean that the remaining 'backbench' Members would need to serve on an increased number of committees each.

By way of an example, a reduction to a Council Size of 33 Members, less 8 Cabinet Members, would leave 25 Members to take 50 Overview and Scrutiny Committee seats, and whilst that might imply an average of two Scrutiny Committees per Member, in reality this would not necessarily be the case due to the political balance arrangements on our counting committees. Some Members of the ruling group may be required to sit on at least three Overview and Scrutiny Committees, with the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee then also sitting on the Monitoring and Co-Ordination Committee.

Even if the Group Leaders considered a reduction in the size of the Executive to six Members, at such a reduced level this would not make a significant difference to the additional workload that would be imposed upon the 'backbench' Members but may significantly impact the workload of the fewer Cabinet Members.

Whilst Cabinet Members may sit on regulatory committees, this has always been limited in Darlington with Members keen to avoid the perception that Cabinet has undue influence over the regulatory committees. In Darlington there is currently only one Cabinet Member sitting on the Planning Applications Committee, one Cabinet Member sitting on the General Licensing Committee and only one Cabinet Member sitting on the Members Standards Hearing Panel.

This would mean that the vast majority of those 'backbench' Members who would be required to sit on multiple Overview and Scrutiny Committees would also be required to sit on the politically-balanced regulatory committees, in addition to the many other Committees which would also require representation. The Working Group concluded that there would be insufficient capacity at this figure to attend the regulatory committees and carry out other Council governance effectively.

The Working Group also raised concerns about reducing the size of the regulatory committees too greatly, as if Members had an interest in a planning application or a licensing application, for example, they may be required to recuse themselves from the meeting, and should attendance not be high, this may comprise the ability to successfully fulfil the ability to make decisions.

The Working Group examined the time spent by Members within their wards and recognised that this is a significant aspect of the role, and the Working Group expressed grave concerns that a large reduction in Council Size would reduce the ability of individual Members to serve their communities at a time when demand for support is high.

A huge concern to the Group Leaders was that should a large reduction be made, not only would there be a real threat to the good governance that currently exists in Darlington and the extensive work undertaken by Members within their communities, but the opportunity to rectify any large reduction would be extremely limited, with the next review not being scheduled for a further 12-16 years. The Working Group were aware of authorities who had seen extensive reductions in Members at previous Electoral Reviews, who were now increasing Members at subsequent Electoral Reviews, and wished to avoid such a scenario.

To provide the viable good governance that the structure in Darlington required, and to ensure that there was minimal drop-off in the work undertaken by Members within their local communities, the Working Group concluded that a more measured reduction was required, and consideration started to coalesce around a Council Size in the lower forties, which, whilst not the large reduction referenced above, the Working Group felt would still represent a significant reduction in Members. Discussion focused on a suggested Council Size within the range of 41 Members to 43 Members.

Discussions took place on figures at both ends of the range, and the suggested merits of an odd number over an even number in terms of future governance. Group Leaders were split as to whether an odd number was preferable to an even number.

The Labour and Conservative Group Leaders agreed that a proposed figure of 41 Members would enable the Members of Darlington Borough Council to continue to provide convenient and effective strategic leadership and governance within a structure that the Group Leaders had already agreed worked successfully in Darlington and was not out of step with its statistical neighbours.

They felt that this figure would enable sufficient capacity for the Council to maintain its accountability arrangements, without compromising the ongoing work being undertaken to strengthen its scrutiny and decision-making function. A proposed Council Size of 41 Members would allow for an Executive of eight Members whilst still maintaining sufficient capacity to enable the Council to discharge its scrutiny and regulatory functions effectively.

There was a consensus that a figure lower than this might negatively impact both the governance function, and concerns were expressed that the ability of Members to undertake their Community Leadership role to the same extent that they currently do would be compromised.

The Group Leader of the Green Group proposed a Council Size of 42 Members, on behalf of his Group.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group has indicated that she would welcome an odd number in the lower forties.

It was felt that a Council Size proposal of 41 Members represented a significant reduction to the existing membership (18%), and this was the view that the majority of the Group Leader's wished to submit to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England as the Council's position. A Council Size of 41 Members was proposed and endorsed by Members at an Ordinary Meeting of the Council on Thursday, 2nd October 2025.

The Council further agreed that that a minority view representing the Green Group's proposed Council Size of 42 Members be included within the submission, which it was felt also constituted a significant reduction to the existing membership (16%).