

Darlington Borough Council

Organisational Assessment

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Provided under embargo



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for an independent overview
of local public services

Perfectly Placed: Describing Darlington as a place and helping to shape investment decisions, spatial planning and care for the environment.

The Council manages the work necessary to achieve its priorities through five identified work themes:

- Prosperous Darlington
- Aspiring Darlington
- Healthy Darlington
- Greener Darlington
- Safer Darlington

Darlington's priorities and work themes match the concerns of local people and the Council is delivering well in relation to them.

Organisational assessment

Prosperous Darlington

As with all parts of the country the recession has hit Darlington hard. The impact has, however, been limited by the number of new employers and new jobs brought into the area by the Council. Wage levels have increased in recent years and are high compared to the rest of the North East. Over 2,000 new jobs have been created over the last three years. Darlington's 'Into Work' programmes had made progress in improving employment rates in the most deprived areas. However, the recession in late 2008 into 2009 set back much of this progress.

People are supported to find work and if they need help in a crisis. Work is being undertaken to improve the skills of the work force to make them more employable. Services are also in place to support people who need help - for example because they have lost their job. Services for people who find themselves homeless are very good.

Council residents enjoy a high quality of accommodation with houses exceeding the national decent homes standard. The Council has also successfully used Government funds to build more houses that people can afford. Despite this there are still not enough homes that people can afford to buy.

Gypsies and Travellers are the largest ethnic minority group in Darlington. The council has considered their needs and carried out major improvements to the local accommodation site. These include upgrading the electricity supply, toilet facilities and street lighting. The number of caravan pitches has also been increased and better facilities for children have been put in place. Further changes are necessary but Darlington will need to work with the other authorities to improve things locally and across the Tees Valley region.

Aspiring Darlington

Ofsted's assessment of children's services for Darlington Borough Council is that they perform well. The performance of schools in Darlington is good overall. Nurseries and primary schools do well and secondary education is also good. The fostering agency is good as is the special school. Private fostering arrangements are inadequate as is the pupil referral unit and one of the four children's homes. But overall there is good provision for safeguarding children.

Educational standards are improving. Exam results have improved and are better than those of similar authorities for children at age 11 and are as good as the national average at age 16. The difference between the highest and lowest performing secondary school has also narrowed. Children and young people who are on free school meals achieve lower school results. Darlington is aware of this issue and targets resources at pupils living in the most deprived areas. Local data shows that more pupils from these areas obtain good GCSEs.

Overall, pupils recorded by schools as having some level of special educational needs in 2008 did less well in Darlington than in similar areas. Partners have analysed the reasons for this and more specific information shows that these pupils make at least satisfactory progress over time at school. An inspection in 2007 said that Darlington's Special Needs School was judged to be good, with many outstanding features.

Two local colleges have been judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted. Increasing numbers of 16 to 18 year olds are employed, are in education or training. By the age of 19 satisfactory exams and qualifications are being achieved. There are, however, less young people from low income backgrounds achieving these standards.

Problems with high rates of pupil exclusion are being tackled with considerable success. This has resulted in a big reduction in permanent exclusions over the last two years.

There are some things that need to improve. A survey of children said that too many are worried about bullying. This is being addressed through the anti-bullying strategy and there are training events to ensure that key staff are equipped to deal with this issue. An anti-bullying co-ordinator has been appointed to lead on this work.

Fewer young people are getting involved in crime for the first time. This is as a result of actions taken by the council and its partners. Moving looked after children from their placement is avoided as far as possible. Recent data indicate that more young people now stay with the same carer for longer.

Healthy Darlington

There are big differences in the health of people in different parts of Darlington. People in the least deprived wards live between 10 and 14 years longer than those in the most deprived wards. The Council works closely with its partners especially in the NHS to help people live healthier lives and good progress is being made in some important areas.

People in Darlington get good outcomes from their social care services. The Care Quality Commission has assessed Darlington Borough Council's adult social care services as performing well. More older people are being supported to live independently - and fewer people are going into long-term residential care. They are making good use of technology as well as major and minor adaptations to homes. Extra care is in place and works well for older people.

Fewer people are smoking now - Darlington has one the highest numbers of 'quitters' in the country. Smoking increases the risk of killer diseases that are common across Darlington.

The number of women breast-feeding is increasing but is still well below the national average. High levels of breast feeding can considerably improve the prospects of better health for people - not just in childhood but throughout the rest of their lives. Darlington has achieved an international award as a 'breast-feeding' friendly town.

Action to reduce obesity has produced good results. The number of obese primary school children in reception year and in year 6 has fallen faster than across the rest of England. Obesity levels in children are still high compared to the rest of the Country.

The number of pregnant teenagers in Darlington has also fallen but is still 33 per cent above average. The numbers of children and young people admitted to hospital is far too high. This is in particular linked to under age drinking but is also for other reasons including unintentional and deliberate injury.

Health improvement of Darlington residents depends on several things together such as education, employment, housing and leisure facilities. Even then, much depends on how people respond to efforts to help them.

Greener Darlington

People who live in Darlington are happy with the local area, in particular its parks and open spaces. Children and young people express the highest levels of satisfaction with parks and play areas in the North-East. The Council has also been good at encouraging and introducing environmentally friendly approaches to travel and transport. Public satisfaction with local bus services is however low.

People are making fewer car journeys - with increases in walking and cycling. The Local Motion project has influenced the travel choices of Darlington residents. Also fewer children travelled to school by car in 2008/09 compared to the previous year. This is good for the environment but also good for the health and well-being of the residents of Darlington.

The management of waste has been an issue, with recycling and composting rates below the levels achieved in other areas of the Country. This is expected to improve following the award of a new waste management contract in April 2009.

Action to lessen the impact of climate change is being taken. A number of

things have been done to reduce CO2 emissions including reducing energy consumption in Council buildings and working with the voluntary sector to support people to reduce fuel costs in their own homes.

Safer Darlington

Crime in Darlington is reducing. Crime in Darlington has decreased over the last three years. Between March 2007 and March 2008, overall crime reduced by 17 per cent. Since then the trend has continued in the right direction with total crime in 2008/09 reducing by a further six per cent. The level of crime is just below that of other similar areas in the country. The number of young people who re-offend has also fallen but too many young people are still getting involved in crime.

Road traffic accidents have reduced with big reductions in the number of people killed or seriously injured from 66 in 2006 to 34 in 2008.

Local people's fear of crime is understood by the Council and action is being taken with the police to target areas where crime and disorder are a particular problem. An example of this is the 'Summer Nights' campaign which sees agencies working to tackle problems to do with alcohol. The annual campaign sees a crackdown by the police and specialist anti social behaviour teams in known hotspots.

Despite this alcohol abuse issues remain particularly in relation to under age drinking. There are too many young people admitted to hospital for alcohol problems. Alcohol misuse often leads to anti social behaviour, crime and health problems.

Leadership, capacity and capability

Effective leadership is provided by the Council to deliver improvements that are important to the residents of Darlington. The Chief Executive and Council Leader work closely together, in partnership with other organisations and in direct engagement with the residents of Darlington. There is a good relationship between councillors and officers that is reinforced through joint training events.

Effective partnership working is making a difference. The Council's priorities are consistent with and delivered through partnerships with other key organisations such as the NHS and Police. For example it has a public services partnership with Stockton Council to save money but also increase capacity and capability. The Council is also working with the local hospital, Mental Health Trust and Primary Care Trust to improve services for people with Dementia.

Areas of weakness and underperformance are recognised and actions are taken to deliver improvements. For example performance in relation to waste management has not been good enough in recent years. The Council has from April 2009 entered into a new contract to treat, recycle and dispose of all Darlington Borough Council's municipal waste tied to ambitious targets to achieve an acceptable standard within a 12 month period.

The Council is aware of the need to address resource and capacity issues and has both short and long term plans in place to do this. In the short term the Council is implementing an efficiency program to reduce costs while maintaining the standard of services. Management capability is also being improved by reviewing and where necessary revising current management training programmes. Management capacity, however, has been reduced during a period of recruitment to senior posts. A longer term strategy is under development to ensure the Council is structured in the most appropriate way to best deliver services in an increasing challenging economic environment.

Performance is managed effectively. Performance management arrangements are well established and demonstrated as effective. Budget monitoring is very robust and overspending is not an issue. Members are effectively engaged in the process and scrutiny arrangements are strong.

CAA looks at how well local public services, working together, are meeting the needs of the people they serve. It's a joint assessment made by a group of independent watchdogs about the performance of local public services, and how likely they are to meet local priorities. From 9 December you will find the results of Comprehensive Area Assessment on the Oneplace website - <http://oneplace.direct.gov.uk/>



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