

Corporate Plan 2006 - 2009

Executive Summary

Every year the Council publishes its plans for the medium term. This is an ongoing, rolling process that starts from the agreed long term vision for the town described in the Community Strategy. This vision was itself developed in consultation with the public and adopted by the Council and partner organisations in 2003. It sets out how the quality of life for Darlington's residents will be improved by working together.

The Council then reviews annually its contribution to the community strategy to take account of:

- What the public have told us about our services and the progress we are making against our strategy;
- How we are performing against the targets we have set ourselves in the strategy;
- What the government requires from local authorities;
- The resources that the council has available to deliver the strategy.

The results of this process are summarised in our Corporate Plan, which is a fully costed business plan that takes account of the opportunities and risks faced by the authority.

The Community Strategy Vision

The Council shares with its partners the vision set out in the Darlington Community Strategy 'Where quality comes to life'.

Together our community will expect and strive to achieve:

- **An area creating and sharing prosperity** – enhancing our economy and sharing the benefits with all our community.
- **A location for learning, achievement and leisure** – raising aspirations and attainment, promoting creativity and leisure.
- **A place for living safely and well** – reducing crime, making people feel safer and improving health.
- **A high quality environment with excellent communication links** – making the most of our heritage, market town appeal and location.

Corporate objectives

Aligned to the goals and themed aims of our shared vision, Darlington Borough Council has adopted five corporate objectives to shape its corporate and service planning.

1. Shaping a better Darlington.
2. Providing excellent services.
3. Putting the customer first
4. Ensuring access for all.
5. Enhancing our capacity to improve.

What the Public told us

Results from the Annual Community Survey for 2005 show that:

- General satisfaction with the Council (at 64.5%) is top quartile and has remained relatively stable in recent years;
- Satisfaction with local neighbourhoods is high overall (at 76.7%) but this is variable, ranging from rural wards (88.3%) to the most deprived areas (67.5%);
- Pleasingly those who lived in Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy priority areas were more likely than others to think things had got better in their neighbourhood over the past two years.

Comparison of responses from the 1999, 2003 and 2005 Community Surveys shows a largely positive trend in residents' perception on the success of dealing with the themes of the Community Strategy, i.e. improving the local economy, raising educational attainment etc.

Three services stand out from the survey as being most important to the public and most in need of improvement:

- The achievement of low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour – in response, the council has mainstreamed funding for the neighbourhood warden service after government grant expired and appointed anti-social behaviour co-ordinators. External funding was obtained to increase the number of police community support officers.
- Activities for teenagers – more money has been invested in the youth service and additional funding was attracted through the Local Area Agreement to invest in improving opportunities for children and young people.
- Clean streets – a review of street scene services was carried out leading to the creation of five area teams which will have much higher public profile. Services will be improved and efficiencies secured.

How are we performing?

The clearest indication of how well we are performing is our independent, external opinion from the Audit Commission. In December 2005, we retained the top score for local authorities of four stars. Taken together with our direction of travel assessment of 'improving well', Darlington is now in a position where only 5 authorities in the country have a better rating.

The Audit Commission stated that *“Services are of increasingly good quality, supporting community and Council priorities. The Council is working well with local communities and partners to meet local needs. Adult and children's social care, housing and benefits services have improved. The Council continues to help to strengthen the local economy and to make communities more inclusive. Major investment in education is delivering improvements. Electronic and multilingual access to services has improved and in 2004/05 more Council buildings became accessible to people with disabilities. The Council has robust improvement plans. It is identifying early signs of underperformance for action, strengthening partnerships and challenging the value for money of its*

services. The Council currently achieves good value for money in most services and is developing a more rigorous approach to procurement ”

We have continued our strong track record of improvement on performance indicators: achieving over 10% improvement from last year; 40% are now in the best quartile nationally and 66% are above average. This again places us as one of the best performing authorities in the country. We avoid complacency however, by continuing to identify and focus on those areas where the authority is not performing strongly. In 2006/07 we will focus on:

- Community safety – a review of the authority’s approach to community safety is underway to improve performance
- Waste – a review of waste is underway to reduce the amount of waste landfilled and constrain costs.

What the government expects from local authorities

Our corporate plan has also been shaped by our interpretation of emerging trends in policy development including:

- Gershon and the need to demonstrate increasing value for money;
- Greater citizen choice in public services
- Community engagement – how councils engage with the communities they serve.
- Collaboration with other authorities in the provision of services and to promote economic regeneration.
- The increasing rigors of external inspection.

In addition the government has brought out white papers that will significantly alter children’s services, adult services and schools. Continued national focus on antisocial behaviour and proposed changes to police and NHS arrangements have also been accounted for in our plan.

Resourcing the Plan

The council has a strong track record for managing its finances and providing value for money services. Darlington’s council tax continues to be the lowest in the region and external assessment verified that the council provides very good value for money – only 3 authorities in the country were judged to provide better value for money. In March 2005, the Council agreed a budget of just under £112 million which included provision for responding to the citizens priorities outlined above.

Conclusion

Looking back, 2005/06 was another successful year for Darlington Borough Council which can clearly demonstrate that it is performing well. However the authority is not complacent. There are significant challenges ahead from the numerous building and development projects that are currently underway to the continued need to identify efficiencies whilst meeting enhanced public expectations. This plan summarises how we intend to address these challenges and become a leading edge authority.