
LEADER'S OVERVIEW

Cabinet

1. I have chaired two meetings of Cabinet since my last report to Council at which a number of issues were discussed including a report from the Social Affairs and Health Scrutiny Committee's action learning scrutiny project 'Darlington: A Breastfeeding Friendly Town' and the development of an Academy for Darlington.

Education in Darlington

2. Providing all the town's pupils with modern facilities, equipped with the very latest technology, that are safe and fit for teaching and learning in the 21st century is a top priority for the Council. New schools have already been built at Firthmoor, West Park and Harrowgate Hill and the pupils are thriving in their new surroundings.

Other new schools are under construction at Skerne Park and Middleton St. George together with the Education Village, which will provide a new home for the Houghton Community College, Springfield Primary School and Beaumont Hill School. The good progress made for primary schools has enabled a renewed focus to go on improving attainment, and improving school buildings for our secondary age children. The proposed academy plays a key part in our vision to ensure that parents and children within Darlington have a real choice from six high performing schools, accessible to the communities where they live. At the present time there is a substantial programme of information sessions underway to assist parents, teachers, employers and all others with an interest in education to hear about our plans, and what they can offer.

While change is always difficult, and it is acknowledged that the academy proposal does particularly affect parents whose children currently attend Hurworth, I am confident that the opportunities presented by this funding, and by our partnership with the Church of England, will enable excellent education to be extended to many more of our children.

Central Park

3. Plans for the £170 m Central Park development have been given the final go ahead. The Central Park regeneration project is a key element in the future prosperity of the Tees Valley and could create 2,000 jobs in the region. The plans, submitted by Tees Valley Regeneration include proposals for 600 new homes, a hotel and conference centre, new parks, public squares and playgrounds, shops, restaurants, pubs, cafes and a health centre. The planning application was submitted to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister who decided to let the Council proceed with granting permission, which will happen when a legal agreement is signed. The first phase of the work will be carried out from 2007 to 2012, with the hotel and conference centre, multi storey car park and 274 houses being built.

Work on the new £34.5 m Darlington College of Technology, which is part of the scheme, is already well underway.

Social Inclusion Strategy

4. This Council's work to ensure everyone can play a full role in society has been held up as a model of good practice by the Government. In 2003, work started on developing a social inclusion strategy for Darlington called 'All Together Now'. The aim of the strategy was to improve chances in life for people who were experiencing, or at risk of experiencing discrimination or disadvantage. The strategy looks at issues such as unemployment, poor educational achievement, older people and ill health to see how different groups can be helped to be more involved in society.

I attended the launch of the DVD 'Information for All' on 8th December, 2005. The DVD, believed to be the first of its kind in the country, was launched to give everyone in Darlington, particularly those whose first language is not English, information about services in the Borough and what support is available to them.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

5. For the second year running, the Council has been awarded the top rating (now four stars, previously Excellent) in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment by the Audit Commission, which rates the Council compared to other local authorities. This puts Darlington in the top quarter (26.5%) of Councils. In awarding this rating, the CPA looked at the main services provided by the Authority, how it uses resources and how it was run. The CPA for 2005 awarded the top score to Darlington and said it was improving well, working well with local communities, and among other areas, had improved its social care, housing and benefits services.

Community Survey

6. The results from the latest community survey show that the majority of the Borough's residents support what the Council is trying to achieve with 65 percent of people being satisfied with the way that the Council is running the Borough. It is particularly pleasing to note that the results of the survey have come at a time when the Council has a number of ambitious, on-going, high profile projects, which involve major change.

The Council is constantly asking residents for their views, using a variety of consultation methods, and listening to what they say, in order to shape the services that the Council provides.

Regional Police Force

7. I have written to the Durham Police Authority expressing the Council's views on the proposed restructure of the police and creation of a Regional Police Force. Although there is a case for change to deal with more serious crimes, the opportunity must be taken to restore a Basic Command Unit that serves Darlington instead of South Durham. The answer

is to have local police, who would be part of a regional force. This system would allow the police to develop good community relations and identify possible problem areas, as they would have the knowledge and expertise to deal with local community problems.

Town Centre Board

8. I chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Board held on 24th November, 2005 at which a number of items were discussed, including possible initiatives and ideas to encourage and support the independent retail sector within Darlington Town Centre; key performance indicators; the Pedestrian Heart Scheme, other developments and managing change; and key findings from the travel research undertaken as part of the 'Darlington: A Town on the Move' project.

Darlington Partnership Board

9. The meeting of the Darlington Partnership Board held on 12th January, 2006, which I attended, discussed a number of issues including the future development of the Local Strategic Partnerships; proposed changes to the configuration of Primary Care Trusts; and inter faith working.

NHS Public Consultation Event

10. I attended the NHS Public Consultation event at the Dolphin Centre on 16th January, 2006, about the future of Primary Care Trusts. It is vital that the community makes its views felt on this important topic, recognising the big improvement in local health services since a Darlington PCT was established three years ago. This improvement would be put at risk if we lost our co-terminosity with the PCT. I therefore urge everyone in the Darlington community to write to the SHA arguing for Option 2 (which achieves this aim) before the deadline for responses which is 22nd March, 2006.

Meetings

11. In my capacity as Leader I have attended a number of meetings including the Durham Tees Valley Airport Board, Tees Valley Leaders/Mayors and the Association of North East Councils. I have also attended the Darlington Association on Disability Access Awards and AGM; official opening of Memphis at Lingfield Point; and an informal lunch in respect of Chartermark for Democratic Services.

John Williams
Leader