
LEADER'S AND ECONOMY PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW

Cabinet

1. I have chaired one ordinary meeting of Cabinet since my last report to Council at which a number of issues were considered, including reports on the findings of the consultants appointed to evaluate the implementation of the Darlington Gateway Strategy; a Co-operation Agreement for the Central Park development between the preferred developer and the Joint Venture Partners; and the release of funding to undertake feasibility studies leading to an action plan for a major regeneration project for the eastern fringe of the town centre, which is one of the top priorities of the 'Leading Edge' Corporate Plan 2007/10. The report on the Darlington Gateway is particularly significant, since it provides solid evidence of real success in our strategy to date, and valuable proposals to sustain this.
2. The Leaders of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Groups, the Independent Member, Chair of the Monitoring and Co-ordination Group and the Chair of the Darlington Partnership, continue to be invited and attend Cabinet meeting and contribute to the discussions thereon. Their presence and input is much appreciated by myself and other Cabinet Members.
3. At the last meeting of Council a number of changes were made to the Cabinet Portfolios and the Council's Scrutiny Committees. As a result of those changes, I now hold the Portfolio for Economy. We continue to publicise the opportunity for the public to attend Council and ask questions on items to be considered. Up to now, no-one has taken the opportunity to do so and this is an issue that needs the consideration of the Governance Review Working Group.

Town Centre

4. I chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Board, which was held on 11th September, 2007. Reports were presented to the Board reviewing the launch weekend for the pedestrian heart scheme on 30th June and 1st July, 2007, and the Summer Market Spectacular, which was held on August 2007; promoting the independent sector; the 'Oval' development; the introduction of the 'pay by phone' car parking system; and the new Christmas decorations and Christmas events and promotion. It was pleasing to note that the general consensus of the private sector board members in attendance, was that trade was improving since the completion of the pedestrian heart works and particularly during the Summer Market Spectacular.
5. The work of the Feethams and Markets Working Group is continuing and further meetings have been held. One of the main outcomes of the Working Group to date has been the relocation of the Outdoor Market. The focus of the group is now the Indoor Market and the production of a masterplan for the Feethams site. Community and private sector partners are

making a valuable contribution to the Group.

Darlington Partnership Board

6. I attended the meeting of the Darlington Partnership Board held on 13th September, 2007. At the meeting feedback was given by the Enquiry Groups, which had been established to map out the way forward for Darlington. The Chairs of the six groups, drawn from a range of agencies independent of the Council, are to be applauded for their work. Alan Milburn and myself were keen to ensure that the future vision for Darlington was informed by a broad range of voices, views and experiences. All of the Chairs and Groups have achieved this, and delivered a sustainable blue print for Darlington's future.

Deprived Area Funding

7. The Council has supported four organisations to obtain Deprived Area Funding from JobCentrePlus to support individuals to improve their prospects for employment. Contracts to the value of £68,000 to Morrison Trust, YMCA, CABLE and First Stop Darlington. The Council provided £10,000 as additional funding. These projects support individuals with job search, life skills and confidence building to obtain employment.

Corporate Governance Working Group

8. At the last Council meeting an all party Working Group was established, to review the Council's Governance Arrangements. One meeting of the working group has been held to date with future meetings planned. It is anticipated that the recommendations from the group will be reported to Council in the new year.

Darlington and Stockton Partnership

9. I was interviewed by the 4ps Gateway Review 1 on 1st August, 2007. The primary purpose of this review is to confirm that the business case for the Darlington and Stockton Partnership is robust and that, in principle, it meets business need, is affordable, achievable with appropriate options explored and likely to achieve value for money. I am pleased to note that the outcome of the Review was indeed positive.

Regeneration and Renewal Awards

10. The Council was shortlisted for the 'Local Authority of the Year' Award for our Darlington Gateway economic regeneration programme. This was a considerable achievement for an Authority of our size.

Independent Retailers Group

11. A group of independent retailers has been formed and is working with the Council on ways of giving more profile to Darlington's independent retail sector, to attract more business to them and to Darlington. I will continue to give the support of small independent businesses my highest priority.

The Oval Development

12. Following the announcement of VUE as the operator for the multi-screen cinema, complementing Debenhams as the department store, Discovery Properties have been working hard to achieve a start on site in early 2008, with some earlier preparatory work. The Cabinet has agreed a licence to enable preparatory work to start. Officers are engaged with the developer to ensure that the developer plans well for the construction process, and to ensure there is good communication and liaison between the developer, business and the public.

New Public Sector Jobs in Darlington

13. The announcement of the Investigation and Safeguarding Agency taking offices at Morton Palms (when added to the establishment of the Students Loans Company at Lingfield Point) means that over 700 new public sector jobs will be coming to Darlington in the next year. Given the background of Darlington not initially been seen as a potential place for public sector relocations in the Lyons Review of Public Sector Location, this represents a substantial success for the Darlington Gateway Programme, the Council and our partners. Our ambition has won through here.

Central Park

14. A co-operation agreement being signed with the developers will enable work to progress before development takes place at Central Park. This will enable the design of the new Council depot to begin and work is continuing to progress on the new allotments at Arnold Road.

Meetings

15. In my capacity as Leader I have attended a number of events including the Ministerial Visit to the Tees Valley Leaders and Mayors by the Rt. Hon. Nick Brown M.P., the Minister for the North East ; a presentation to George Flynn for his work as a historian and local guide for the town; the official opening of Eastbourne Climbing Boulder at Eastbourne Sports Centre by the Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn M.P.; and the Darlington Volunteering Awards Ceremony. In addition, I was interviewed by an assessor, as part of this Council's re-accreditation for Investors in People.
16. In addition to those meetings, I have attended meetings of the Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee under my Economy Portfolio.

John Williams
Leader and Economy Portfolio