
LEADER'S OVERVIEW

Cabinet

1. I have chaired two ordinary meetings of Cabinet since my last report to Council at which a number of reports were considered outlining a new way of working for the Council and proposing ways of engaging the Community. In addition a number of other issues were discussed including reports on the governance arrangements for Tees Valley Unlimited and a draft promotional plan and Marketing Strategy for the Town Centre
2. For the first time, 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, were invited to attend, and be involved, in meetings of the Cabinet. Members of the public and other Council Members were also invited to make any relevant representations on Cabinet agenda items at the last meeting. I am confident that these initiatives will add real value to our deliberations and allow Cabinet to gain a fresh perspective on items that they discuss.

Town Centre

3. I chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Board, which was held on 22nd May, 2007. A number of reports were presented to the Board relating to the promotion and marketing of the Town Centre, including a promotional plan and Marketing Strategy; the 'branding' of the Town Centre; and the introduction of familiarisation visits. In addition, consideration was also given to the Board's involvement in the appointment of the new Town Centre Manager.
4. I also chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Forum, held on 26th June, 2007, at which a presentation was given on the proposed shopping and leisure complex in Commercial Street, by the architects of the development. Those in attendance at the Forum were impressed with the design for the centre and were pleased to see that the comments they had made about the design had been taken into account. The Centre is expected to be complete by Christmas 2010. Details of the 'Retail Therapy' scheme were also presented to the Forum, the aim of which was to give free advice to independent retailers within the town to help their businesses thrive. A number of other issues were discussed at the Forum, including an update on the work of the Feethams and the Markets Group and the draft Town Centre Business Marketing Strategy and Draft Strategy and Promotional Plan for the Town Centre. Following the meeting the businesses were invited to speak to the Town Centre Board members and to the various speakers at the Forum on a 1:1 basis.

5. The work of the Feethams and Markets Working Group is continuing and further meetings have been held, at which a representative from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment attended to highlight best practice and benchmarking with town centre developments elsewhere, urban design opportunities and the next stages in preparing a brief for the sites. As a result of these items, a visit was arranged to Leeds to explore the regeneration ideas from the Holbeck area of the city.
6. As a result of the work of the Feethams and Markets Working Group, a number of changes have already been implemented in respect of the markets, the main change being the relocation of the outside market.
7. A major publicity campaign for the town centre, planned with the help of town centre businesses is taking place, including television and radio advertising, town centre events, newspaper supplements and other activities. The Town Crier will focus on promoting Darlington's independent retailers.

Pedestrian Heart

8. Works on the town centre's Pedestrian Heart is now complete with the only remaining work being snagging items. Over the last few months there has been a dramatic change to the appearance of the town centre with the completion of paving, laying of the final steps and hand rails on High Row, installation of Life Pulse on Blackwellgate and final commissioning of the Water Feature in the centre of High Row, the appearance of which has been complimented by the majority of the public. In conjunction with the Darlington Carnival, a major event took place on Saturday 30 June and Sunday 1 July to celebrate the completion of the construction works and launch of the new town centre. This attracted large numbers of people to the town and a good time seemed to have been had by all.

Darlington Partnership Board

9. I attended the meetings of the Darlington Partnership Board held on 17th May and 18th July, 2007, which considered reports on the voluntary sector; an update on social inclusion and neighbourhood renewal; and adult learning, leisure, culture and international partnership. In addition, presentations were given on the development of a sustainable Community Strategy for Darlington and the Community Engagement Strategy.
10. A number of Enquiry Groups have been established as part of the way forward for the Darlington Partnership, and I have attended a number of meetings of Enquiry Group 1.

Central Park

11. The Consortium of developers for the Central Park site, were announced at a launch event held on 27th June, 2007, which I attended. The appointment of three of the most influential names in the business means that work will now begin on delivering a development that Darlington and the region can be proud of. Affordable housing will be a key priority of the scheme and many other facilities will be provided including health and child care facilities, shops, restaurants, bars, community linked public art and open spaces. A top quality hotel and conference centre is also planned immediately adjacent to the railway station. The

development represents an investment of £200M and will create 2,000 new jobs as well as another 400 during the construction process.

Meetings

12. In my capacity as Leader I have attended a number of events including the Tees Valley Leader's and Mayors meeting; the first meeting of the Tees Valley Unlimited Leadership Board; a ceremony marking the opening of the first phase of the major building project for Carmel RC College; a tree planting ceremony, with the Mayor, to mark the 20th anniversary of the Nursery School Association at the South Park; and the annual meeting of the Association of North East Councils.

John Williams
Leader