
LEADER'S AND ECONOMY PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW

1. The period since my last report to Council has seen some significant developments for the town and for the Council.

One Darlington Perfectly Placed

2. Following extensive consultation with the public and with a wide range of partners in the public, private and voluntary sector, the Darlington Partnership agreed a new vision for Darlington on 4th March. All in attendance agreed that One Darlington : Perfectly Placed represents a strong expression of our ambitions, our challenges and our determination to take our borough forward. One Darlington provides a clear focus for our efforts to narrow the gap in life expectancy, in achievement and in economic wellbeing that still blights our town. Perfectly Placed captures the strengths and opportunities we have to attract and retain investment, and will focus our efforts on maintaining and enhancing our environment.
3. The Council has a critical role to play in supporting the delivery of this fresh vision and I am pleased that at its meeting in February Council agreed a Corporate and Financial Plan that gives us some extra capacity to ensure that One Darlington Perfectly Placed is delivered.
4. The Darlington Partnership also reviewed its own structures and capacity to drive and support delivery of the Strategy and I was pleased to see such strong and renewed support for our partnership.

Celebrating Success and Achievement

5. The impact that partnership working can make was on show at a celebration of the people who make Darlington so special. The Darlington Partnership arranged a 'Best of Darlington' Awards Ceremony, sponsored by Darlington College, on Friday, 15th February, 2008. The ceremony, which was supported by this Council and the Northern Echo was arranged to celebrate the achievements of unsung heroes of all ages and in a range of different categories. The event was well attended and the winners of the awards were well deserved.
6. Another important celebration took place on Friday, 7th March when Darlington hosted the town's first Academic Awards Ceremony. We celebrated the achievement of those students who had completed their University course of study at Darlington College. The Governors, Chancellor, academic staff and partners processed around the town centre, led by the Mayor, prior to receiving their awards at the Dolphin Centre.
7. The ceremony was well attended by family and friends of the students. Alasdair MacConachie, Chair of the Darlington Partnership received an honorary Doctorate for his tremendous work for Darlington.

Darlington – A “University and an Enterprise Town”

8. The event was important in signalling the closer relationship being forged between the Council, the University and the College over the last year, and which has been demonstrated by the University’s determination to create a stand alone University centre as part of the Central Park development. This will fulfil our ambitions to be a “University” town and is a key plank in the delivery of One Darlington Perfectly Placed.
9. A key challenge for us however is the need to raise the aspirations of our young people to get the right skills and to develop their own entrepreneurial spirit and acumen. A meeting the Chief Executive and I had with Duncan Bannatyne has produced a business challenge for our schools launched recently as Bannatyne’s Bright Sparks. This sees teams from our secondary schools competing to come up with a business idea that will impress the judges, led by Duncan Bannatyne and including Alan Noble, Citizen of the Year. Supporting the development of stronger partnerships between business and schools will provide the motivation and pathways to higher aspirations.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

10. The Council’s self-assessment document for the forthcoming Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) inspection for 2008 was submitted to the Audit Commission on 4th February. The Corporate Assessment Team (CAT) were based in the Town Hall between Wednesday, 27th and Friday, 29th February, 2008, as part of their Analysis Week and in advance of the full inspection which is scheduled to commence on Monday, 31st March, 2008, for two weeks. As part of this Analysis Week, a Roundtable meeting was held, which I attended with the Deputy Leader of the Opposition and the team were also taken on a tour of the borough. The tour provided a valuable opportunity to showcase the huge changes and improvements in Darlington since the last inspection in 2004.
11. The inspection while challenging will undoubtedly offer fresh independent insights into those areas of our performance where we can continue to improve.

Review of Corporate Governance

12. The Corporate Governance Group, established to review this Council’s Governance Arrangements, has now completed its work. Two further meetings were held on 11th February and 6th March, 2008, at which proposals to enhance public involvement in the Council decision-making process, changes to the Council Chamber and Area Working were discussed. The recommendations from the Review Group can be seen elsewhere on this agenda. I am grateful for the input and support from across the Council in the review and I believe that it offers us solid foundations to grow and develop our approach to public engagement in our work.

Post Office Proposed Closures

13. I share with colleagues and the public of Darlington serious concern at the proposals to close five Post Offices within the Borough. I am pleased to note that a robust response to the consultation exercise is being drawn up and we should thank the public for adding their voices to ours. I have asked Officers to explore other opportunities to pursue our case against the closures, and to investigate whether there are any sustainable options to retain these valued services if our lobby should prove unsuccessful.

Economy Portfolio

14. The Town Centre Board met in February and there was useful discussion on the draft Business Plan for 2008/11. It was pleasing to note that the members of the Board from the independent sector had reported that, in general, trade over the Christmas period, through to mid-January, had been good, and that the economy in the North East, was fairing better than many other parts of the UK.
15. Two further meetings of the Working Group, established by the Town Centre Board to look at options for the Feethams/Beaumont Street sites have been arranged. The first meeting will consider the draft planning and development brief for the sites prior to public consultation. The second meeting will consider the results from that consultation and finalise the brief.
16. I, along with the Chief Executive and Town Centre Manager, have continued to meet the Town Centre Businesses, on an informal 1:1 basis, in order to discuss any issues or concerns they may have. Clearly there has been public concern, which I share, with the plans for Waterstones to transfer their lease on High Row to Poundland.
17. I chaired the meeting of the Darlington Planning Forum held on 7th February, 2008. The meeting was called to consider a report on the issues and options for the Darlington Local Development Framework Core Strategy. A number of comments were expressed at the meeting which will be taken into account when preparing the preferred options for the Core Strategy.

John Williams
Leader and Economy Portfolio