
OVERVIEW OF REGENERATION AND PLANNING PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work that have been undertaken under the Regeneration and Planning Portfolio :-
 - (a) **Local Development Framework : Tees Valley Joint Minerals and Waste Development Plan Documents** – We gave approval for the Tees Valley Joint Strategy Committee, through the Joint Strategy Unit, to prepare Joint Minerals and Waste Development Plan documents on behalf of this Council and the other Tees Valley Local Planning Authorities. There is a statutory duty on local planning authorities to adopt and keep under review the development plan for their respective areas and, under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, development plan documents should include up-to-date minerals and waste policies, which may be prepared as separate minerals and waste development documents.
 - (b) **Neglected Land Review Group** - Cabinet considered the findings and recommendations of the Neglected Land Review Group, established by the Environment Scrutiny Committee to investigate Members concerns regarding derelict/vacant sites. The Group also identified possible solutions to various problems and Cabinet gave its approval to the adoption of the Action Plan that contained a range of suggested and existing activities to carry forward.
 - (c) **Darlington Local Development Framework : Local Development Scheme** – We gave consideration to revising the timetable for the preparation of the Local Development Framework Core Strategy and updating the Council’s Local Development Scheme, a three year project plan for the production of the Local Development Framework documents which will replace the existing development plans for the Borough. The changes required in the Scheme are to update the timetables in the existing Scheme and to introduce new documents. We also agreed that should the Secretary of State confirm she does not intend to intervene any updating take effect from that confirmation.
 - (d) **The Update and Amendment of Darlington’s Countryside Strategy – ‘People and Nature in Darlington’** – We gave approval to begin the process of reviewing the Council’s existing Countryside Strategy ‘People and Nature in Darlington’ with the purpose of bringing it up to date and making it more relevant for current needs. During the last ten-year period the need for positive action on biodiversity and access to quality countryside has accelerated. It is therefore felt that the production of the new Strategy needs to be consolidated and supported by all sectors.
 - (e) **Rights of Way Improvement Plan** - The final leg of the process to put the statutory Rights of Way Improvement Plan together has begun. Encouraging results from the

consultation include a high level of use, over 70% of people saying they use the network at least once a year. However, conditions survey suggests that only a very small number of 'honeypots' are used intensively while the rest are almost entirely ignored by the public.

- (f) **Rights of Way Improvement Plan Steering Group meetings** - The first two of a likely series of five, Rights of Way Improvement Plan Steering Group meetings was held. The aim of these is to see that Darlington produces an excellent ROWIP that will maximise the potential of this much loved facility for the next ten years.
- (g) **New Countryside Ranger post** - One new Countryside Ranger started at West Park as part of the North East Community Forest contract aimed at encouraging a rapid increase in appropriate use of the Park through the delivery of a comprehensive Countryside events programme. The funding of the post will be largely from the West Park levy being drawn from the new housing estate at West Park.
- (h) **Fourth Award for Local Nature Reserve Steering Group** – received for counteracting anti-social behaviour. This award comes from the Home Office and recognises the Geneva Woods group for its sterling work in turning the reserve into a highly valued part of the town's green infrastructure. The group boasts a total of 20 committed members as well as 2 highly motivated volunteer Countryside Rangers. The full time Rangers and the volunteer Rangers services are coordinated by our Local Nature Reserves Officer.
- (i) **Countryside Events at the new West Park** - A series of successful countryside events were held at the new West Park, advertising the new site and getting local people involved in running and caring for it along with Darlington's North East Community Forest partners who manage the site. This has included building a willow sculpture of some considerable size at the main entrance.
- (j) **Maidendale** - Held a very well attended event at the new Firth Moor Local Nature Reserve known as Maidendale where 40 people turned up for a pond dipping exercise. There are a number of similar events at Maidendale which are really helping the new and old communities at Firth Moor to get together over common issues, which is one of the big strengths of the green as well as biodiverse environments.
- (k) **Launch of D2E e-Commerce Project** - Year 2 of the D2E e-commerce project was launched at an awards presentation to five successful businesses that had made tremendous gains in terms of increased sales, market share, efficiency gains and work life balance. Last year 33 businesses benefited from the scheme. £250,000 was spent with Information and Technology suppliers, and an additional 57 jobs have been forecasted as a result of the project. This year it is intended that 40 businesses may benefit from the British American Tobacco Fund legacy with similar results.
- (l) **The Economic Regeneration and Tourism Section, Planning, and Building Control teams held a property workshop on 12 July 2006** - The event was used to launch the new Vacant Sites and Register Website. A demonstration was give to local estate agents, surveyors, architects and property developers. The online Vacant Sites

and Premises Register is one of the most popular pages within the Business Section of the Council’s Website. It will now have a facility for agents who will be able to upload property information, so that the details are current, and as well as reducing the amount of Council administration time maintaining the site it will provide an improved service to customers. The workshop provided the audience with guidance as to how to submit Planning and Building Control applications on-line, as well as information on new Building Regulations.

- (m) **Planning Speed Statistics** – One of the key Corporate Performance Assessments Best Value Indicators relates to the speed of processing and deciding planning applications. Although levels of performance have been satisfactory over recent years, it has been recognised that improvements were necessary. An officer team identified various service improvement actions, which when implemented have led to a marked improvement in performance to a level consistently above Government targets (see table below).

		Target	Year to June 2005	Year to May 2006
BV109a	Major applications	60%	51%	75%
BV109b	Minor applications	65%	63%	79%
BV109c	Other applications	80%	84%	87%

- (n) Notwithstanding these improvements, an Action Plan has recently been drawn up to improve various processes and procedures aimed at improving service delivery further.

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Regeneration and Planning Portfolio