
LEADER'S OVERVIEW

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

1. We were very pleased to receive confirmation that the Authority is now rated as 'excellent' under CPA. This followed our successful appeal against the original inspection team's judgement. The result confirms our own self -assessment and is further evidence of the improvement we have made since becoming a Unitary Authority. We know, however, that being excellent is not the same as being perfect. We still have areas where we need to improve further and we are addressing these. The rating is therefore a cause for celebration but not complacency.

Cabinet

2. Since the last ordinary meeting of Council, in addition to the ordinary meetings of Cabinet, there have been two special meetings which considered the Council's Capital and Revenue Medium Term Financial Plans (MTFP), Housing Revenue Account and the Treasury Management Strategy. The Capital and Revenue MTFP's were referred to a Special Meeting of the Resources Scrutiny which I attended with Councillor Bristow, the Chief Executive and Directors in order to present the report and respond to any questions raised.
3. Progress on the implementation of the Corporate Plan 2004 to 2007, which was a three year plan published in June 2004, set out the Council's plans for improving the quality of life for the residents of Darlington by implementing its part of the Community Strategy, improving services which were provided to local people and improving as an organisation in order to continue to deliver better services. The report confirmed that the Council was on track to meet the targets in respect of its contribution to the community strategy and its corporate objectives, as many of the targets were already or likely to be achieved. Where this was not the case corrective action was proposed.
4. The corporate approach to service planning is now entering its third year, with the role of Executive Members being that of agreeing the content of plans and having overall accountability for delivery. Improved service planning arrangements were identified in the 2004 Corporate assessment, with the Audit Commission stating in its inspection report that the service planning framework has improved links between strategies, plans, priorities and budgets and the Council has continued to improve the systems it uses to prioritise its work. The five departmental plans and the Chief Executive's Plan 2005/06 were considered and adopted by Cabinet at its meeting held on 15th March, 2005.
5. Approval was also given to a number of other reports which were under my remit as Leader including the 2003/04 Audit and Inspection Letter and the Calendar of Council and

Darlington Town Centre 'Pedestrian Heart' Scheme

6. The Conservation Area Consent (CAC), Listed Building Consent (LBC) and Planning Applications were submitted in January 2005 and a three-day public exhibition was held to ensure the public were given the opportunity to comment on them. After a 28 day consultation period the CAC and LBC have now been referred to GONE for the Secretary of State to take a decision. The two Planning Applications were considered and approved by the Planning Committee on 16th March, 2005.

Following approval by Cabinet and the release of Single Programme (SP) funding the works in respect of the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) for the phase one enabling works including a new bus lane on St Cuthbert's Way commenced in February 2005. The remaining Single Programme funding, Local Transport Plan funding and Corporate Resource has been released in order to complete the funding package for the scheme.

A Town On the Move

7. Darlington has been chosen as one of only three towns in the England to pilot a three-year scheme that aims to encourage people to leave their cars at home and choose other travel options. As part of this initiative a travel summit was held on 15th and 16th March at which members of the public were invited to give their views on current and future travel in Darlington. The benefits of the 'Town on the Move' initiative are already being seen with the commencement of a number of schemes including:- free cycle training; training for seven to eight year olds to increase road safety awareness; and the development of school travel plans.

Benefits

8. The Deputy Leader, Councillor Dixon joined Alan Milburn, MP to launch a campaign to encourage Darlington residents who could be missing out on thousands of pounds worth of benefits which are rightly theirs. The benefits are a welcome boost for hard-working families and pensioners in Darlington, and the campaign is aimed at helping those that need it most. The campaign has been a great success to date with £25,000 of unclaimed benefits having been identified.

Investment in Schools

9. As part of the Council's continuing investment in Schools, work on the construction of the new Skerne Park Primary School has commenced and I attended the 'turf cutting' ceremony. The project is innovative being the first of its kind in the region. It represents a new way of thinking and puts schools at the very heart of the community, there to be used by all ages and for more than just lessons. The school will provide the best start for children and will nurture, encourage, educate and raise aspirations in order to turn out well-rounded citizens who are happy, healthy and ready to make the most of the world. The building will include integrated early years and adult education services, and will work in conjunction with Sure Start, Neighbourhood Nursery and the Adult Education Service, in order to form a one-stop

centre for the community.

10. Work is also progressing on Darlington's Education Village which is scheduled for completion this year. The project will bring together Haughton Community College, Springfield Primary School and Beaumont Hill School. The new school at Firthmoor is already established as a key element of the community's regeneration and the new primary school for Alderman Leach opened in February and I attended the official opening of the school with Alan Milburn MP. Harrowgate Hill Primary will open later this year with other new schools planned for Middleton St. George and Cockerton. Since the Council became responsible for delivering education services in Darlington, over £20m has been spent on refurbishing schools and building new classrooms.

Town Centre Board

11. I chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Board held on 17th March, 2005, at which the plans from the four short-listed developers for the Commercial Street development were displayed to allow Board Members to comment on the proposals in advance of a decision being made by Cabinet. Consideration was also given to the production of an Environmental Strategy for Darlington Town Centre; the work being undertaken on the Crown Street car park site; and update on the Darlington 'Pedestrian Heart' scheme; the establishment and adoption of key performance indicators; and an Events Strategy for the Town Centre.

Darlington Partnership Board

12. I attended the meeting of the Darlington Partnership Board held on 10th March, 2005, at which consideration was given to the delivery of a Social Inclusion Strategy for Darlington; the development of a Draft Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for Darlington; the Community Strategy Action Plan 2005/06; the Business Plan; and an update on the bid for Action Learning Project Funding for 'Darlington: A Breastfeeding Friendly Town'.

UK Youth Parliament

13. I attended the Annual UK Youth Parliament Elections which were held in the Council Chamber, and gave a welcome speech to those in attendance.

Meetings

14. I attended a number of meetings in my role as Leader of the Council including a special meeting of the Tees Valley Joint Strategy Committee; Tees Valley Partnership meeting; Association of North East Council's Plenary meeting; North East Assembly Plenary meeting; and a meeting of the Durham Tees Valley Airport Board.

Chief Executive

15. The appointment process for the new Chief Executive has commenced, and I have been involved in the shortlisting process for the post. Final interviews will be held on the 14th April, 2005.

Darlington Developments Showcase

16. I attended the Darlington Developments Showcase event in London at the Chartered Institute of Surveyors on 23rd February, 2005, at which investment in Darlington worth more than £350m was demonstrated to a national audience of more than 50 developers, retailers, agents, leisure interests and the press. Darlington was portrayed as a prime opportunity for investment in the North East.

Alan Milburn M.P. was the keynote speaker and the audience were told about the developments taking place at Faverdale East Business Park, Morton Palms, and Lingfield Point, as well as the potential development opportunities at Central Park, Durham Tees Valley Airport and Commercial Street. Private sector investors already in Darlington, including Marchday plc, City & Northern, Peel Airports and Argos Retail Group, generously praised the Council for its “can do” approach and said that Darlington was a Council that was serious about attracting investment to the town.

They also commended Darlington for its accessibility, quality of life, skilled workforce, housing, offices and leisure opportunities which made Darlington and the Tees Valley an attractive area to locate new business. The event was hosted jointly by Darlington Borough Council and Tees Valley Regeneration, including sponsorship from British American Tobacco, (BAT) and the European Regional Development Fund, (ERDF).

Councillor John Williams, Leader