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**LEADER'S AND ECONOMY PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW**

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1. Since my last report, there have been a number of significant developments for both the Borough and for the Council.

**Economic Downturn**

2. The strength of our partnerships and relationships across the private, voluntary and public sector will be of particular value and importance in the current economic climate. With the UK and other world economies facing a severe downturn it is vital that we understand the likely impacts on our residents, our economy and our Council, and I have asked the Chief Executive to establish an Officer group to monitor the developing situation and report regularly to Cabinet. The Chief Executive and myself will also update the LSP Board on the position.
3. Alan Milburn and myself have initiated further discussions with local businesses and on the 20th November, Alasdair MacConachie chaired a Business Summit to consider the effects of the recession on Darlington businesses. I am keen to ensure that there are good channels of communication open to understand the difficulties companies are facing and also to explore and develop options for the Council to offer its support to mitigate these.
4. However I believe that there are grounds for optimism that here in Darlington we have a degree of resilience given the work undertaken through the Partnership to strengthen our economy and present opportunities to investors.

**Corporate Assessment**

5. On the 18th November the Audit Commission published our Corporate Assessment report. The report is very positive and specifically comments on political and officer leadership being “highly effective and well regarded” whilst adding that “value for money is excellent”. The report also mentions that “partnership working is a strength... ensuring the ambition is supported strategically and practically. Consequently (the Council) is making good progress in top priority areas...”.
6. The overall score for the corporate assessment is a 3, with the Ambition element scoring the maximum 4. In the region only Stockton have secured a higher score. Nationally only two unitary authorities received a higher judgement. This means that the Council retains its overall 4-star status, with the next review due in February 2009. Only 14% of authorities nationally have scored higher. With Darlington's score at the very top end of a 3, the Council compares extremely favourably.

## **One Darlington: Perfectly Placed**

7. The adoption of the Feethams Planning and Development Brief addresses a number of priorities within the Sustainable Community Strategy, 'One Darlington: Perfectly Placed'. Darlington has a number of economic aspirations set out in Prosperous Darlington such as attracting high quality well paid jobs, the building of a stronger economy and capitalising on Darlington's distinctive character. The Brief seeks to provide the right conditions to meeting those aspirations, through increasing the attractions of the Town Centre, maintaining the viability of the markets and enhancing the quality of life through a diverse mix of uses.
8. The development of Central Park is important in delivering outcomes that meet the themes of Prosperous, Aspiring, Greener and Safer Darlington, of the Sustainable Community Strategy, and is a key component in the Strategy's Perfectly Placed priority. In order to progress the Central Park development and accommodate the new University of Teesside, a number of proposed necessary amendments have been made to the Heads of Terms of the Development Agreement.

## **Economy Portfolio**

9. At the meeting of the Town Centre Board held in November a number of issues were discussed including, how the Board should respond to the recession; current trading in the Town Centre; update on the work of the Town Centre Management Team including the statistical information on footfall figures in the Town Centre; promotions that are being held in the town and a report on the *Dine Loyalty Card* success which now has over 2000 members. The progress of the Darlington Town Centre Traders Association; an update on the Winter Programme of events to be held in the Town Centre; and how the Council fared in Britain in Bloom 2008 were also discussed.
10. Work is continuing on the Local Development Framework (LDF), with approval being given to the Core Strategy: Preferred Options, as a basis for carrying out public and other consultations in line with regulatory requirements and the Council's commitments to community engagement, as detailed in the adopted Statement of Community Involvement. Once the LDF Core Strategy is adopted, it will replace many of the policies in the adopted Borough of Darlington Local Plan and will set out a spatial vision, strategic objectives and locational strategy for the period upto 2026. Approval was also given to the arrangements for responding to consultations from adjacent Local Planning Authorities on their emerging LDF documents.
11. It was pleasing to note the success of the Joint Tees Valley Housing Growth Point Expression of Interest. This successful bid will enable the five Tees Valley Authorities' to access potentially significant funding from two main funding streams, namely the Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF) and the Housing Growth Point Fund (HGP). A number of road infrastructure schemes have been submitted for Community Infrastructure Funds under the project name of "Darlington Urban Package" and if this is successful will result in a further £3.3 million investment in Darlington's road network. A Programme of Delivery (POD) for supporting the acceleration of housing development has also been submitted for the Tees Valley Authorities. If that is successful then a further £4 million could be available for investment in Darlington. An announcement on the funding bids is

anticipated during December.

12. In addition, a revised policy for Non-Council Markets, including car boot sales, has been approved; agreement has been given in principle to the Imperial Express Café to convert carriageway to pavement for the purpose of creating a pavement café, subject to decisions on planning and other applications; disposal of Council-owned land at Beaumont Street to facilitate the development of this town centre site, in accordance with the Feethams Planning and Development Brief; and work is continuing on the project established to look at revitalising the Covered Market, in order to secure its long-term viability as a market-retailing outlet.
13. I am pleased to announce that at the time of writing this report, Darlington was in the National Final of the Green Markets Competition 2008, having already won the Regional Final.

**John Williams**  
**Leader and Economy Portfolio**