
LEADER AND ECONOMY PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW

1. Since my last report, there have been a number of significant developments for both the Borough and for the Council.
2. I am pleased to confirm that the Audit Commission has judged the Council to be performing strongly, demonstrating 4 star overall performance whilst providing excellent value for money in the 2008 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). This is an improvement on the Four Star Improving Well score we have held since 2005 and is in fact the best score a Council can be awarded.
3. This is the last year when the performance of the Council will be reported in this format. I have had, with the Partnership Executive, helpful discussions with Phillipa Corner (Audit Commission) on the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) that comes in during 2009. Member training is being organised and I would like to encourage good participation. This is quite a different approach that will embrace the role of our partners more comprehensively than CPA.
4. It is not known how long that the recession will last, but in response the Council is continuing to take a pro-active approach across a range of issues to address the effects being felt. The work of the Economic Downturn Working Group is continuing and, in addition to the initiatives that have already been implemented, a number of new initiatives have been proposed including a campaign to encourage the take up of Free School Meals and the development of a Financial Inclusion Strategy. The Financial Inclusion Strategy will embrace areas of work to help ensure that people who may be struggling on low incomes have access to household insurance, and to debt and money advice. The valuable work underway with the Third Sector will be reflected within the Strategy. An economic downturn has in the past lead to an increased demand for Council services and a higher number of benefit claimants. The performance indicators will be monitored to assess the effect on the Council.
5. Given the importance of restoring confidence, I am pleased that we are to run a regular business column in the Town Crier. This will give opportunities to recognise positive business developments as well as ensure business have updated advice and information.
6. With the agreement of partners, the meeting of the Local Strategic Partnership Board held in March 2009 was dedicated to the consideration of the economic downturn and recession. At the meeting each sector provided an overview of how the current circumstances were affecting their own particular operations and activities to enable cross cutting issues, further responses and joint working opportunities, to be identified. Consideration will be given to amending the Delivery Plan for the Local Area Agreement as a result of the meeting.

7. The first year review of the new Local Area Agreement (LAA) has been completed and reviewed by the Government Office North East (GONE), who officially confirmed that they have no areas of concern. The Council is currently in negotiations with GONE in order to meet their deadlines of delivering a first year refresh by the end of March 2009.
8. Following approval of the Council's Medium Term Corporate Plan, approval was given to the Council's four departmental plans. These plans translated the top-down direction of the Sustainable Community Strategy, Local Area Agreement and the Medium Term Corporate Plan into a plan of action for each department. The plans form the work programmes with milestones, measures and priorities for each department.
9. As I indicated at the Special Council meeting on 26th February, the Cabinet is retaining its sharp focus on achieving and accelerating efficiency. I have been briefed on progress in relation to the targets within the MTFP and, with Cabinet colleagues, are in discussion with officers on new areas for investigation.

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10. The Cabinet endorsed the submission of a bid to become one of a small number of national pilots for City Region Status. This submission, which if successful, will be the subject of further reports to Cabinet, offers the opportunity to bring decision making closer to the people of Darlington on matters related to economic development and regeneration. A briefing for members on the Metropolitan Area Agreement (the MAA) has already taken place, and I have asked that further briefings be taken to the Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee when appropriate.
11. Agreement has been obtained for the procurement of an Electronic Document Management System for the Development Control Service. The procurement of this system continues the drive to improve customer access to our planning services.
12. On 24th February, I attended a Business Seminar which had been organized by the Council's Business Engagement Team jointly with Darlington Partnership. Participants at this event heard from Kate Barker, a member of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee, who spoke on the current economic situation and answered questions from the audience. The event was well attended by a good cross section of over fifty Darlington businesses.
13. Another business seminar – Money, Money, Money - took place on 11th March and focused on finance and how best to weather the storm of the recession. Participants at this event heard from a number of specialist speakers on how to survive a recession, issues to remember in relation to redundancy and employment law, as well as grant assistance available for capital expenditure.
14. As part of the work to assist businesses during the downturn, additional targeted promotion of Small Business Rate Relief has taken place, resulting in around £200,000 going back into the local economy at no cost to the Council or council tax payers. Around 200 businesses have been helped.

15. I attended the Prosperous Darlington Theme Group meeting on 12th March, which received the final version of the Prosperous Darlington Delivery Plan. The group was informed of work being undertaken to progress previously identified priorities and heard how the Council and its partners were responding to the economic downturn.

Town Centre

16. I continue to chair meetings of the Town Centre Board. The last meeting of the Board was held on 12th March, 2009, at which a number of issues were discussed, including the revised policy for Pavement Cafes in the Town Centre; Civil Parking Enforcement; Local Motion Travel Marketing Initiative; and an update on the work of the Town Centre Management Team. Members of the Board in attendance at the meeting were given the opportunity to give their views on the current trading position within the Town Centre.

17. As part of an on-going initiative to assist Town Centre businesses during the economic downturn, the Town Centre Management team have arranged to hire two billboard sites outside of the Darlington boundary, at Middlesbrough/Teesside Park/Stockton and three off the ring road and approaching sites, in order to promote free Sunday parking in Darlington. The sites have been chosen very carefully in order to attract shoppers from outside of the Darlington area. Within Darlington the campaign is also promoting a 50p bus fare offer from Arriva. This promotional campaign will start on Friday 20th March and run for at least 4 weeks in order to encourage shoppers at the start of the build-up to Easter.

18. To complement the Sunday Parking promotion and to ensure that the Darlington name is kept in the public view, a new television advert has been commissioned to promote Darlington as the 'Darling Town' of the North East. The advert will appear in 20 different spots in the south of the region (13 off peak and 7 peak) and will run for 30 seconds. The campaign will run throughout the two-week Easter period.

19. I am very pleased to report that the Dine scheme, which was launched last August with the aim of increasing business for the Darlington town centre restaurant sector continues to attract new members. A recent evaluation exercise has been undertaken, confirming that 3,000 members have now been recruited to the scheme, producing almost 850 new dine bookings for the participating restaurants. This is an amazing response in just six months and restaurants continue to provide monthly offers to attract new business.

20. I was delighted to see Robin Blair win Citizen of the Year at the Best of Darlington Awards. The award was well deserved; Robin is a passionate advocate for the Markets and I have been pleased to support many of the ideas he has brought to the table.

John Williams
Leader and Economy Portfolio