
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. The Audit Commission attended Cabinet on the 31st March to present their Annual Letter for 2007/08. This confirmed that the Council in the last year of the Corporate Performance Assessment arrangements had secured the highest assessment, Four Star, Improving Strongly. In the Annual Letter, inspectors highlighted significant achievements in boosting the local economy, raising academic standards and promoting inclusive communities. The letter also gave particular praise to the Council's financial management and its Use of Resources. The Council's External Auditors noted that in scoring 4 out of 4 for Use of Resources Darlington Borough Council is one of the top performing Councils in the Country.
3. Darlington's economic competitiveness was rated the second most improved in the country, as average wage levels rose in response to the roll out of our economic development strategy, Darlington Gateway. The Council was also praised for helping to secure more public sector jobs, with the relocation of the Student Loans Company and the establishment of the Investigating and Safeguarding Authority. Whilst unemployment and economic conditions have deteriorated in Darlington since 2007/8, as nationally, I believe that Darlington entered the recession from a strong base which will help our recovery.
4. The Audit Commission also recognised that services for children and young people have improved, as Darlington posted a record 69 per cent GCSE pass rate at Grades A* to C last year. Inspectors also offered praise for the Council's efforts to engage and consult with its community, noting the importance of initiatives such as 'Talking Together' which have given fresh opportunities for residents to air their views to the Council.
5. This year sees the introduction of Comprehensive Area Assessment and I am aware that a number of Members took up the opportunity to attend training on the new arrangements, which will give a sharper focus on the outcomes that all members of Darlington Partnership will want to achieve for the people of the Borough.
6. The Council continues to keep a close eye on the impact of the recession on Darlington, and opportunities for the Council or its partners to help, through a working group chaired by the Chief Executive. We have highlighted a number of initiatives being undertaken. A twelve point plan to co-ordinate initiatives was launched on the 25th March and brings forward key elements of the Council's capital programme, further promotion of Small Business Rate Relief and other targeted activities to stimulate business growth. Fresh initiatives underway cover support to the establishment of a borough wide credit union, development of a multi-

agency Health and Energy Affordability Team (HEAT) to tackle fuel poverty and promotion of welfare rights and related advice as part of a new Financial Inclusion Strategy.

7. Our work received an important boost from One North East, with the allocation of £160,000 to Darlington to help tackle issues of employability and worklessness.
8. The Darlington Partnership had a full and very useful discussion on the downturn with presentations from James Ramsbotham from the CBE, Job Centre Plus, the Police and the Councils' Chief Executive. Each of the Themed Groups are now considering how they need to amend their work plans to ensure an appropriate response to the challenges we face.
9. The first meeting of the Association of North East Council's (ANEC) Economic Climate Task and Finish Review Group, which I attended, was hosted by Darlington. The Review Group was established to enable the Association's elected Members to work together at a regional level, to share intelligence, data and good practice and to stimulate collaboration where it would add value and local actions.
10. We received news that in the budget statement that Tees Valley Unlimited, the sub regional economic partnership of which we are a member, was not selected as one of two national pilots. Manchester and Leeds were selected. The other unsuccessful cities were Birmingham and Leeds.
11. Tees Valley were invited to bid by Government because of our track record of partnership working, our success in growing our economy and our innovative ideas – set out in one of the first Metropolitan Area Agreements signed by Hazel Blears last summer.
12. With the growing economic challenges I am told that the deciding factor for the national pilot programme was the scale of contribution to the national economy that Leeds and Manchester are able to offer. To have been assessed in this context is indicative of the regard in which we are held, and the opportunities we offered.
13. Darlington College hosted the first Tees Valley Unlimited Quarterly Business Dinner in May, to which businesses located within Darlington and the Tees Valley, were invited to attend. The dinner provided an opportunity to examine the progress already made by Tees Valley Unlimited, debate its ambitions for the future and exchange views on how things could be done better in the future. It reaffirmed the significant business support for our partnership working.

Economy Portfolio

14. The Development Agreement for Central Park has now been signed and in another development work has started on the clearance of the recently vacated Hundens Lane Allotments site following its relocation to an alternative site in the town. The clearance of the former allotment site, which is part of the development area for the Central Park development, will enable this development to progress.

15. I am pleased that the recommendations of the Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee in respect of its review of Development Control were considered and endorsed by Cabinet at its meeting held on 28th April, 2009. The review was established following concerns in respect of the Council's performance against the Best Value Performance Indicator BVPI 109, and I appreciate the advice of Scrutiny in supporting improvement in this important service.
16. A workshop was held on Friday, 24th April, 2009, entitled 'Branding and recessions – what should we know and what can we do?' The workshop was delivered by Design Bridge, an international branding agency, and was open to all Darlington businesses to attend. The workshop gave an insight into what businesses should be doing to protect and promote themselves through the recession and allowed them to share their concerns and thoughts about what their company and its brand should stand for when the going gets tough.
17. The Business Engagement Team continues to offer a wide range of business services with the principal objectives of creating and safeguarding jobs in Darlington, stimulating business opportunities, attracting new investment from outside of the Borough and helping new businesses to set up and existing businesses to expand.
18. They are working hard to raise awareness of the services available, through the business column in the Town Crier, and a recent article promoted 'Inter-face', the quarterly newsletter for Darlington businesses which provides businesses with information on the issues that affect them, and the newly launched on-line 'Darlington Business Directory'. The on-line business directory provides businesses with the potential to promote themselves, free of charge. It also seeks to encourage local businesses to trade with each other and is a useful source of information to identify potential suppliers.

Town Centre

19. I continue to chair meetings of the Town Centre Board. The last meeting of the Board was held on 12th May, 2009, at which a presentation was given by representatives from B. Supplied, on retailers assisted through Council funded initiatives in the 2008/09 financial year. Consideration was given by the Board to the summer programme of events that were scheduled to be held during 2009. The events were varied and included specialist markets, Streets of Brass, the Food Festival, Darlington by Sea, etc., all of which were designed to add to the value of the shopping experience for visitors and help enhance the visitor experience in Darlington. The Town Centre Manager updated the Board on the work of the Town Centre Management Team, which included reference to the Bus and Television Advertising Campaign, launch of the second edition of Unique 2, re-launch of the 'Shop Watch' scheme and outlined the possibility of introducing a scheme entitled 'Best Bar None', the objective of which would be to provide an incentive for the operators of licensed premises to improve their standards of operation to the level of a commonly agreed national benchmark. Members of the Board were given the opportunity to give their views on the current trading position within the Town Centre.

John Williams
Leader and Economy Portfolio