
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 chaired the Local Strategic Partnership Executive Group meeting held on 2nd September, 2009, at which verbal updates were given on recent standards of achievement and attainment in schools and on the progress with the Comprehensive Area Assessment. A new and innovative approach to publicising and promoting Darlington, using new media as a tool was discussed, entitled 'Destination Darlington – The Darlington Experiment'. The proposal will use social networking media to promote positive stories about Darlington. Consideration was also given to a report detailing the results of an evaluation that had been undertaken on the Darlington Pilot Local Area Agreement (LAA). The evaluation found the pilot to be highly successful, piloting new ways of working locally, and advised that the partnership should ensure that this good practice is rolled out and that agencies, such as the Improvement and Development Agency, be involved in sharing this good practice across other areas and organisations.
3. For the second year running, Darlington hosted a stage start for the Tour of Britain Cycle Race on Sunday, 13th September, 2009. This exciting event brought 96 of the world's top riders, including several of Britain's Olympic Champions, to Darlington. It was a great achievement for Darlington to once again host this event, which brought many spectators, from all over the region, to the Town Centre.
4. I attended the inaugural meeting of the Institute for Local Governance (ILG) Governing Board on 14th September, 2009, following agreement to its establishment by the Association of North East Councils. The aim of the Institute, which is expected to be formally launched in October 2009, is to establish an internationally recognised centre of research excellence, knowledge exchange and learning, in current and future local governance practice in the North East, providing capabilities to meet the needs of local government and public services, including innovation, service improvement and better efficiency.
5. I was delighted to attend a ceremony, at which Sir Paul Nicholson, the Lord-Lieutenant of County Durham, presented the Queens Award for Voluntary Service to the Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre. The award was well deserved by the Centre for the excellent work and invaluable service that they provide.
6. The Council received the annual letter of the ombudsman, and it is pleasing to note that the letter was complimentary about improvements made in the speed of response and a fall in the number of complaints received against the previous year.

7. I was delighted to hear that the results from a recent Government survey indicated that 80 per cent of residents living in Darlington were happy with where they live. The survey aims to give service providers, such as the Council, health organisations and the police, information on the public's perception of what life is like, highlighting what is done well and areas for improvement. The Council will continue to work with its partners to build on these pleasing results.
8. The annual Community Survey also gives positive results. The proportion of people fairly satisfied or very satisfied with Darlington Borough Council increased from 62 per cent in 2008 to 67 per cent in 2009. The most recent all England's average by comparison was 51 per cent. Again the Council and our partners will continue to use the survey to assess how services can best address people's needs.
9. I, along with other Leaders and Elected Mayors from across the region, met with Rosie Winterton MP, Minister for Local Government and Regional Economic Development and Coordination, for a round table meeting to discuss key issues facing the region, our recent successes and the challenge the region is facing. Representatives and key staff from the Government Office for the North East (GONE), One North East (ONE) and Association of North East Councils (ANEC) were also at the meeting. The Minister was complimentary about the strength of partnership working within the region and the strong leadership shown in tackling the impacts of the downturn.

Economy Portfolio

10. Darlington Borough Council has received a Future Jobs Fund grant for the provision of 57 job placements on behalf of a wider partnership that are committed to assisting medium-term unemployed residents of Darlington into sustainable employment. The total value of the grant is £370,500 for Darlington. This grant is to assist 19-24 year olds from across Darlington and people within its unemployment hotspots (Bank Top, Central, Cockerton West, Eastbourne, Haughton East, Lascelles, North Road, Northgate, Park East and Pierremont), back into sustainable employment by addressing barriers to employment and offering training opportunities. Darlington does not receive the key regeneration funds that the other four Local Authorities within the Tees Valley receive. Therefore by accessing the Future Jobs Fund, the Council is able to provide a project which is unique for Darlington, in assisting long term unemployed residents into sustainable employment – by addressing barriers to employment and through the use of training. This will also have a wider positive effect of creating opportunities for employment in Darlington, in response to job losses suffered as a result of the combined impact of the credit crunch and economic downturn.
11. Cabinet agreed to the release of funding to support the proposed Teesside University development at Central Park and agreed, in principle, the draft Heads of Term for the Funding Agreement. The securing of the University development in Darlington is an important step in achieving wider educational skills, prosperity and market positioning for Darlington, in line with the two priorities and Prosperous and Aspiring themes in One Darlington: Perfectly Paced.

12. Approval was given to the proposed disposal of the former Beaumont Hill School sites to a developer, subject to the receipt of Homes and Communities Agency funding and planning permission being obtained for the development. The proposal will lead to the delivery of affordable housing and bring forward the development of these sites earlier than could otherwise be achieved in the current housing market.
13. I have attended a number of Business Engagement visits, one of which was to Rockcliffe Hall, Hurworth, to see first hand the excellent facilities that are on offer at the Hall following its redevelopment. The investment has transformed the Hall and its grounds into a luxury five star hotel, golf course and spa resort, offering excellent facilities. Other visits that I have attended include Capita and Clipper Logistics. Clipper Logistics employs 190 staff in Darlington and specialises in Third Party Logistics with a range of clients, including approximately 75 per cent of UK retailers.
14. The Business Engagement Team has formulated a Business Events and Seminars Programme, based on the information received from the Employer Skills Survey, which was undertaken in July. The programme covers wide ranging and diverse topics such as Marketing on a Shoe String, Funding for Small Businesses, public sector procurement, ICT, PR and Marketing and business finance. These events are open to all Darlington businesses to attend and will be promoted through the 'Inter Face' newsletter.
15. The Team is continuing to raise awareness of the services available to support businesses through the business column in the Town Crier and through the 'Inter Face' newsletter.

Town Centre

16. I chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Board held on 1st September, 2009 at which a presentation was given on the Department for Children and Families development at Beaumont Street. A number of other issues were considered including the proposed development of 'smart public transport ticketing' in the North East of England, including Darlington; the success of the Summer Market Spectacular, which was held between 13th and 16th August, 2009; 'Destination Darlington – The Darlington Experiment'; key performance indicators; and the activities of the Town Centre Management Team, in promoting the Town Centre. Members of the Board in attendance at the meeting gave an overview of current trading in the Town Centre, and it was encouraging to hear that some retailers were performing better than last year.
17. Darlington hosted its third Summer Market Spectacular in August, which brought over 350 stalls to Darlington. The Market again proved to be a great success, and ran for four days in August. As part of the Market Spectacular, entertainment took place throughout the Town Centre together with a two day Town Crier competition, which was hosted by the Town Centre Traders' Association. The competition proved to be a great success, and as a result, Darlington is hoping to host the British Championship next year.

18. The temporary car park on the site of the former bus depot site in Feethams, is now open to the public. The car park has been created to ensure that there is sufficient car parking in the town centre ahead of the work commencing to build new offices for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) on the Beaumont Street car park site. The development by DCSF is part of the Council's overall vision to make the Feethams area a vibrant part of the town centre providing offices, premises for small businesses, car parking, as well as a public square and open spaces along the riverside for people to enjoy.

John Williams
Leader and Economy Portfolio