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**LEADER 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.
2. I was pleased to attend the first Darlington Debate on 19th January, 2010. Organised by the Darlington Partnership, the events are intended to promote debate on key matters of importance to people in Darlington. The theme of Tuesday's debate was the Economy, and we heard from some excellent local and regional speakers. I was pleased to receive positive feedback on the Council's efforts to support business in Darlington.
3. The outcomes from the first Area and Organisational Assessments, under the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) inspection regime were published on 9th December, 2009, and it was pleasing to note that the Organisational Assessment rated the Council as 'Performing Well'. The Area Assessment is a combined inspectorate judgement, assessing how the Council and other partners are delivering improvements on issues that matter to local people. This part of the assessment is not scored as such but areas of significant concern about outcomes or future prospects, where more or different actions are required, are highlighted. Again, it was pleasing to note that there were no such concerns for this Council.
4. The Annual Audit and Inspection Letter for 2008/09, provided the Council with a high level summary of the results of the audit work undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers, the Council's external auditors. The key messages included within the letter confirmed that the Council's systems and processes for managing finances were robust and performing well; comprehensive arrangements were in place to govern the organisation; and that arrangements were in place to secure data quality and systems of governance.
5. The Medium Term Financial Plan is currently out for consultation and will be considered by a special meeting of Cabinet scheduled to be held on 16th February prior to it being considered by a special Council meeting on 25th February, 2010. Members will be aware of the ongoing challenges the Government is facing in balancing the nation's budgets and this has inevitably had an impact on Local Government funding. This Council, like all local authorities, is facing a huge challenge over the next five to ten years in relation to the increasing gap between the amount of funding we need and the amount of funding available to us. This year's proposed budget is the first step towards implementing the new business model and the changes needed to meet the challenge that lies ahead.

6. I chaired the meeting of the Local Strategic Partnership Executive Group held on 16th December, 2009, at which preparations were made for a self-assessment for the Darlington Partnership, and it was agreed that the partnership use the board meeting on 13th January, 2009, as a workshop to review its effectiveness. In addition the Group received an update report on the Darlington Experiment; a report on the progress being made in providing an analysis of the achievement of the 'One Darlington' vision; and feedback on the Youth Conference. The sub-regional findings for Darlington from the 2009 North East Big Drink Debate survey were also considered. The aim of the survey was to build a clearer picture of drinking behaviour and attitudes held towards alcohol.
7. I attended the workshop held on 13th January, 2010, which was arranged by the Darlington Partnership to consider its effectiveness and to develop a model for its future tailored to the needs of Darlington. One of the strengths of the Partnership lies in the ongoing challenge to improve.
8. A Summit, 'North East Local Government 2010', was held at The Sage, Gateshead, on 8th January, 2010. The high profile event was the first of its kind for the North East Local Government, and brought together Councillors and Officers from across the North East's 12 Councils and partner organisations in order to outline its vision for the future and address how we can meet the challenges and opportunities facing the sector at this important time, in the political landscape and economic climate. Whilst I was unable to attend for personal reasons, there was still a good turnout despite the atrocious weather.

### **The Darlington Experiment**

9. This project seeks to address two frequently asked questions from those considering inward investment in the Borough. Where is Darlington and why invest in Darlington? The campaign seeks "to get Darlington's name out there" and express the richness and distinctiveness of its community and area.
10. Dx2 is based on the concept of raising the profile of the town via social media, supported by traditional PR activity. The potential audience was a global one, and the project has been successful in attracting online visitors from 49 countries around the world, including locations in the USA, South America, Australia, Asia and Africa.
11. The 12-week project began with the creation of the website and liaison with regional and national press to raise awareness of the project among journalists. Press releases issued before and after PR activity such as the Experiment Market ensured the project gained print and broadcast media coverage, which in turn helped to drive an online audience to Dx2.
12. The experiment relies on contributions from the public through various social media sites, including YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and Vimeo. These online communities are global, and profiles were created on each of them for Dx2. These profiles helped promote Darlington to a regional, national and international audience and ensured Dx2 had a presence on those networks.

13. Dx2 and its related events and campaigns gain direct exposure to nearly 6,000 people on Facebook, over a quarter of a million views of the videos in the top 10 alone, 127 submitted photos on Flickr and 365 followers on Twitter.
14. The experiment also reaches out to other online communities such as Facebook and LinkedIn, again by the creation of Dx2 profiles and the publication of Dx2 ‘headlines’ or links on those sites, helping to further drive traffic to Dx2.
15. Dx2 has succeeded in reinforcing the town’s reputation of innovation, of possessing a pioneering spirit and of not being afraid of breaking the mould and trying something different. The 12-week initiative helped Darlington maintain its position as a town of firsts. Now, not only can the town boast of having the first passenger railway but it can also lay claim to be the first town to take a civic role in introducing its citizens to the web-based communications/social media, market itself by creating a purpose-built platform for social media communication and the first town in the world to appoint an official Twitterer-in-Residence.
16. In addition to marketing the town the videos uploaded to Dx2 portray Darlington and its residents in a positive way, as being creative, vibrant, fun-loving and energetic. Contributed videos include dancers, musicians, sports people, gardeners, town centre events and school celebrations. There are also short films featuring local businessmen and women and some gregarious golden oldies at Darlington Arena.
17. Since the birth of the project in September coverage has been achieved in a variety of national media, in addition to national niche platforms. There has been 372,184,924 opportunities to see, and the value of PR equates to more than £400,000 of coverage in real-world UK-based regional and national media – the real value in terms of a direct comparison if a paid-for route had been taken (using advertising, for example) would be exponentially higher.
18. The most prominent example of positive national coverage came with the appointment of Darlington’s Twitterer-in-Residence (college lecturer Mike McTimoney). ‘The Darlo Bard’s’ unveiling caused a stir in national and international mainstream media, gaining coverage in regional, national, and overseas print titles, along with TV and radio, and 77 websites. The Guardian, Five Live, BBC, and USA Today were among those who published the story.
19. The story was also mentioned extensively within the social media publications and on the social media channels themselves, with notable examples being thenextweb.com and tweetmeme.com – both highly respected, leading social media news sources. The story was ‘retweeted’ (shared by Twitter users to their friends) from these sources more than 150 times.
20. National coverage was also gained for Darlington’s documentary film Beauty and the Bike. The initiative was featured on Guardian online, and quickly turned into a hot topic, sparking a lively debate which attracted more than 150 comments from readers. The film was also chosen as Cycling England’s Scheme of the Month (December 2009), in addition to gaining coverage on many niche websites.

21. The future of the Darlington Experiment will now be the subject of consideration by The Destination Branding Group, the Prosperous Theme Group and the Darlington Partnership Executive.

### **Economy Portfolio**

22. The Local Development Framework Core Strategy Revised Preferred Options document has been prepared and approved, which is the next stage in the process for this Council to have an adopted Core Strategy in place. The Core Strategy sets out the spatial vision, strategic objectives and locational strategy for the Borough for the period up to 2026. It includes draft policies encompassing the economy, town and district centres, housing, open space, sport, leisure and cultural provision, design, environmental protection and transport infrastructure. Once adopted, the Core Strategy will form part of the development plan for the Borough, and will replace many of the policies in the Borough of Darlington Local Plan, that are currently 'saved'. Public and other consultations will take place from late January to find out what the public and other stakeholders think of the Council's Preferred Options.
23. Cabinet agreed to the release of £153,000 of single programme funding for Town Centre Fringe Master Planning. A key output from this work will be the framework for the change required to improve connections and linkages from the Town Centre to the east of the town, via Central Park. By connecting some of the town's most disadvantaged areas within the Town Centre it is hoped that this regeneration project will bring employment opportunities and will contribute to rebalancing the wealth and opportunity Darlington has to offer.
24. Working with Tees Valley colleagues, we were informed that the 2009/10 Single Programme Investment Plan was unlikely to hit targets and as a result we were requested to identify new activities that could be delivered in 2009/10. This Council identified four projects that met one or more of the criteria and as a result of this, we were invited to develop a full Project Initiation and Planning document and Business Case for each of the projects. To enable these projects to progress, Cabinet agreed to the release of further Single Programme Funding. Particularly pleasing are funding of a feasibility study into the creation of a business incubator in Darlington and funding to acquire properties around Green Street in anticipation of that building.

### **Town Centre**

25. A new art trail guide has been produced which highlights the hidden treasures tucked away in Darlington Town Centre. 'Discover Art in Darlington Yards' guides readers around eleven large-scale art works which can be found amongst the small shops, businesses and cafes in Buckton's and Clark's Yards. The artwork has been created by local students from Darlington's Queen Elizabeth College.
26. **Retail Skills Academy:** Following on from the presentation from the Retail Skills Academy at the last Town Centre Board meeting, a group has been convened to take forward the idea of a retail skills shop in Darlington.

27. **Dine:** The dine scheme continues to prove successful with the number of members now standing at over 6,000. Support from the local restaurateur sector is also strong with restaurant members putting forward 45 (a record number) offers from 35 different establishments, for the months of December, January and February. Dine records show that the scheme now has its own momentum with the family and friends network being the key driver for new membership applications with advertising and media also bringing in very good conversion rates for new members.
28. **Unique:** We are now sending monthly newsletters to all 2,700 members, informing them about the offers and discounts put forward by the independent shops. The membership is steadily increasing but there has been less participation from the retailers within the unique scheme compared to the restaurant participation with the dine scheme. Approximately 50% of the shops featured within the brochure are currently taking advantage of the opportunity to put forward offers to potential customers. The retailers that are involved in the scheme are reporting a general increase in the interest and sales generated by the unique card. The scheme will continue to be monitored.
29. **Footfall in the Town Centre:** Adding together all of the 7 counters throughout the town centre, footfall for December 2009 was 2,298,756, an increase from December 2008 (2,027,931).

## **Business Engagement**

30. **Analysis of Worklessness in Darlington:** The research undertaken by the two graduate interns funded through Economic Challenge Investment Fund (ECIF) and working under the supervision of eVOLution; Jobcentre Plus and the Borough Council has now been completed. The interns looked at the issue of worklessness to assist in developing a strategy for Darlington. The recommendations from the research have been presented to the 'Healthy' and 'Prosperous' theme groups of the LSP and further work is now being done to implement some of the recommendations made.
31. **Apprenticeships within Darlington Borough Council:** An internal cross-departmental Working Group has been established to examine the potential to increase the numbers of apprentices employed within the Authority, as a precursor to encouraging the wider public sector and the private sector to increase their use of apprentices. The Working Group is led by HR, with support from the Business Engagement team; the 14-19 Trust; Children's Services and the National Apprenticeship Service. This work is closely related to some of the recommendations coming out of the Worklessness research, above. There is a clear ambition from the Cabinet, Chief Executive and CMT to increase the opportunities for apprenticeships in the Council.
32. **Events & Seminar Programme:** The Business Engagement team held a business networking event on 9th December, 2009, entitled '*Darlington Christmas Cracker*'. A total of 60 people attended the event, which included an address by a motivational speaker, Juliette Lee, on improving communication and engagement. Elements of the event were also filmed for the Darlington Experiment. '*Making Money from Intellectual Property*' - IP is created when an idea takes some tangible form, it can mean a brand, invention, design or other kind of creation and it can be legally owned. This seminar on 12 January explained

the legal implications and solutions to intellectual property. Further events planned include: the second workshop in the 'Bite Size Business Basics' series – '*Winning Sales*'; '*Supplying the Public Sector – Simplified*' a 'hands-on' practical session around forms and processes for submitting a tender to the public sector, and '*Practical Finance for Business*' on 11 February, which will consider various aspects including factoring, debt collection, accounts and how they work, tax and VAT.

33. **Encouraging Engineering Project:** Funded through the BAT Legacy, this project seeks to promote engineering as a career option to gifted and talented youngsters in Darlington. Agreement has been reached by the host companies that students will be rotated between the 4 companies each year, this will have the benefit of giving the undergraduates on the programme a wealth of varied engineering experience. Interviews for acceptance on to the programme are scheduled for late February.
34. **Future Jobs Fund:** 34 applications have been received for a range of jobs as at 15th December, 2009. The first 2 positions (Football Coaches with Darlington Community Football) started on 14 December. Within the Darlington bid, a total of 57 jobs were identified. Job starts will continue over a 6-month period across a range of host organisations.
35. **'Darlington into Work': Employability Project:** The contract to deliver this project (funded through the Single Programme via Tees Valley Joint Strategy Unit) has been awarded to Morrison Trust – an established provider of employability services within Darlington. The project provides information, advice and guidance together with training support to residents that have been unemployed for less than 12 months to assist them in securing employment.

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