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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. The Medium Term Financial Plan incorporating the Corporate Plan was considered and approved by a special meeting of Council held on 25th February, 2010, following extensive consultation. The Corporate Plan marked an important transition towards new ways of working in response to the challenging impact of the economic recession on public sector finances. The Council's new Business Model aims to transform the Council, to one of leadership and co-ordination across the public sector as a whole, ensuring that high quality services continue to be provided and that the quality of life for everybody in the Borough continues to improve, whilst living within the Council's means.
3. The final refresh of the targets contained within the Local Area Agreement 2008/11, was considered by Cabinet, at its meeting held on 2nd March, 2010. The Local Area Agreement covers a three year period and is reviewed annually, to ensure that the designated targets reflect changing circumstances.
4. I attended the meeting of the Darlington Partnership Board held on 10th March, 2010, where we received presentations from Philippa Corner of the Audit Commission on the Comprehensive Area Assessment workplan for Darlington and Seth Pearson, Partnership Director on the development of the Analysis of 'One Darlington'. We also considered the revised targets within the Darlington Local Area Agreement and the key issues which the Third Sector were currently actively engaged in. An important discussion on the 'One Darlington' priority within the Sustainable Community Strategy. Data showed that progress has been made in many areas to narrow the gap in outcomes between our most and least disadvantaged wards and sections of the population. However, there is still much to be done and the Partnership renewed its focus on this vital strand of work.
5. Darlington hosted the annual ceremony to commemorate the Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) on Wednesday, 27th January, 2010, at Darlington Arts Centre, to mark the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The theme of this year's HMD was 'The Legacy of Hope' and we were asked by the HMD Trust to host the North East Regional Event. I was pleased to read the Statement of Commitment at the Ceremony to re-affirm the Council's commitment to the day. The ceremony also included a welcome from The Worshipful the Mayor, Councillor Jim Ruck, personal testimonies from Sylvia Hurst, a Kindertransport Refugee and Dr. Tom Shakespeare, a renowned sociologist and bioethicist who spoke at the National Event in 2007 on the Nazi policies against disabled people, a dramatic representation from Windermere Productions, interpretative dance from the Innovate Dance Company, readings, music and prayer. The Ceremony was well attended and we received positive feedback from many of those in attendance.

## **Celebrating Success**

6. The Darlington Partnership arranged the sixth 'Best of Darlington Awards', which were held on 26th February, 2010, in order to recognise the achievements of some of the town's outstanding residents. The winner of this year's Citizen of the Year was Steve Davies with Brandon Holloway being awarded the Young Citizen of the Year. Brandon is a ten year old pupil from Mount Pleasant School who picks up litter around the school grounds, in his own time, to help keep the area looking tidy.
7. Steve Davies, a world class cyclist has really put Darlington on the map and is a fitting ambassador for our cycling town.
8. Another important celebration took place in the town on Friday, 5th March, 2010, when Darlington hosted the town's third Annual Academic Awards Ceremony. We celebrated the achievement of those students who had completed their University course of study at Darlington College. The students processed around the town centre, led by the Mayor, prior to receiving their awards at the Dolphin Centre.
9. The Darlington College hosted an event entitled 'Celebrating 2009: Building on Success' which I was delighted to attend. The Chief Executive of the North East Chamber of Commerce, James Ramsbotham attended the event and spoke on the importance of education and training in driving growth and productivity in the North East.
10. Emily Christer's term of office as Member of the Youth Parliament (MYP) for Darlington ended this month. The election for the new MYP took place during the week commencing 22nd February, 2010, and all 11 to 18 year olds were able to participate and cast their vote. The Big Count Event took place on Tuesday, 2nd March, 2010, where Ben Million was elected as the new MYP for Darlington. At the count recognition was given to previous MYP's to celebrate the United Kingdom Youth Parliament's 10th Anniversary. Again it looks as though Darlington will be amongst the top performers nationally in terms of participation in the election.

## **Economy Portfolio**

11. Darlington's Job Seeker's Allowance claimant rate has marginally increased from 5.5% in December 2009 to 5.6% in January 2010 with 3,389 registered JSA claimants. There are 549 more claimants than January 2009. Darlington's rate has, however increased at a significantly slower rate than the rest of Tees Valley. In January 2009 Darlington's rate of 4.7% was 0.6% below the Tees Valley average of 5.3%. Darlington's January 2010 rate is 1.2% below the Tees Valley average of 6.8%. Darlington's rate is also below the North East average of 5.7% and has maintained it's relative position to the national rate of 1.3% above the national average.

## **Planning**

12. The Local Development Framework Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), together with the responses to comments made during consultations, were considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 2nd March, 2010, where it was agreed the SCI be recommended to Council for approval. A report on this can be seen elsewhere on the agenda.

13. Local residents have been involved in planning the future of Darlington Borough over the next 15 years. A revised Local Development Framework Core Strategy has been put together which outlines where and when the majority of new development will take place over the next 15 years including new housing, businesses, shops and community services. The revised draft strategy has been prepared, taking account of comments made on the previous version and new information. It sets out the vision of what Darlington Borough will be like in 2026, seeking to ensure that the Borough continues to have a thriving and modern town centre, with attractive and affordable places to live, and more and better job opportunities.
14. A Talking Together event was held for the residents of Darlington's Central Ward, to give people the opportunity to comment on the first draft Character Appraisal for Darlington's Town Centre Conservation Area. The draft Character Appraisal provides a history and analysis of the character and architecture of the Conservation Area and will guide decisions made on planning applications received in the area. It was pleasing to note that those who attended were generally supportive of the purpose and contents of the Appraisal.
15. Member Workshops have been held as part of early discussions to form an engagement strategy that will be important in creating a vision for the Town Centre Fringe.

## **Town Centre**

16. I am very pleased to report that the Market Cascade in Darlington Town Centre has won a national award from the Fountain Society. The Fountain Society, which is dedicated to the building, restoration and development of fountains, water features and cascades, judged Market Cascade to be the joint best water feature or fountain created within the last five years. The Cascade creates a central focal point within the Town Centre and represents 'washing down the streets' after busy market days in the Victorian period. It celebrates the town's heritage and continuing status as a market town.
17. I chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Board held on 2nd February, 2010, at which the views of the Board were requested on : the planning application received from Sainsbury's in respect of the proposed redevelopment of their store on Victoria Road, Darlington; the proposed Events Programme for 2010/11 in light of efficiencies that were required to be made in respect of the Cultural Services Events Budget; and the relocation of some of the Outdoor Markets, which the Board supported moving on a four month trial period. Consideration was also given to reports on the Darlington Winter Programme 2009; Darlington Town Centre Traders Association Board Meeting; and the views of the Board Members on current trading within the Town Centre.
18. A campaign has been launched to promote the unique attractions of Darlington's historic markets and boost trade. The markets have been an integral part of the town's proud heritage for decades and are regularly praised for their high standards of customer service. Through the campaign it is hoped that more people will be encouraged to discover the bustling atmosphere and the bargains to be had in the indoor market and in the general and specialist outdoor markets.
19. John Denham, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, held a round table meeting in Darlington on 4th March to discuss successful ways of promoting town centres. The Secretary of State chose to visit Darlington to see the creative ways we are

using the Empty Shops Grant given by Government to town centres.

20. **Visitor Survey Analysis** - As part of the ONE North East Data Survey, a visitor survey was carried out to gauge the opinion of visitors to Darlington, particularly in relation to their views on the recently pedestrianised area. The results of the survey were positive, and it was pleasing to see that more than half of those surveyed preferred the pedestrianised town centre.

## **Business Engagement**

21. **Analysis of Worklessness in Darlington** – Further work is being undertaken to implement some of the recommendations made from the research project undertaken by graduate interns, (the research project culminated at the end of December 2009).
22. **Apprenticeships across the wider public sector** – Activity is presently focussed on an analysis of historical vacancies and the appetite for the use of apprenticeships across the wider public sector operating within Darlington and County Durham, together with the identification of potential funding streams. Partners involved include the Fire Service, the Police and various NHS organisations.
23. **Events and Seminar Programme** – A second workshop in the ‘Bite Size Business Basics’ series took place on 26th January– ‘*Winning Presentations*’; with a total of 35 delegates. The workshop focussed on presentational techniques. ‘*Supplying the Public Sector – Simplified*’ on 17th February provided a ‘hands-on’ practical session around forms and processes for submitting a tender to the public sector. A total of 26 delegates attended. Future events include: ‘*Greener Business*’ seminar on 10th March; ‘*Cloud Computing*’ – the 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop in the ‘Bite Size Business Basics’ series on 22nd April and a further interactive Procurement Workshop on 28 April.
24. **Future Jobs Fund** - Within the initial Darlington bid, a total of 57 jobs were identified. A total of 19 job starts have commenced; eleven successful applicants are awaiting satisfactory CRB checks and/or references. 16 positions are being interviewed for currently. These figures were correct as at 9th March, 2010. Job starts will continue over a six-month period across a range of host organisations.
25. A further bid has been submitted for an additional 46 jobs and we have received notification that we have successfully navigated the first sift of applications. The final decision in respect of the bid is awaited and is due within the next 4 weeks.

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