
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. Following approval of the Council's Medium Term Corporate Plan by Council at its meeting held on 25th February, 2010, four departmental plans have been presented and considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 30th March, 2010. The departmental plans are important documents as they underpin the Council's Medium Term Corporate Plan and translate the outcomes of the Sustainable Community Strategy, Local Area Agreement and the Medium Term Corporate Plan into a plan of action for each of the Council's departments.
3. The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act, which received Royal Assent in November, brought into force new arrangements for the development of a single regional strategy for every English region outside London, with participating authorities being given a key role in the development, implementation and monitoring of the strategy. One of the ways of undertaking this role is through the establishment of a Leaders Board, and I have been nominated as this Council's representative on the Board for the North East Region, in my capacity as Leader.
4. I am pleased to report that work has commenced on the expansion of the University of Teesside (Darlington Campus).
5. As part of the programme of activity to support the community of Darlington during the recession, the Council have agreed an increase of 15 Apprentices for the 2010/11 financial year bringing the number to 42. The aim is not to create significant numbers of new posts, rather to consider planned recruitment and whether lower level positions might be considered for apprenticeships. Activity is also focussed on engaging with the wider public sector operating within Darlington to determine the appetite for the use of apprenticeships. Partners involved include the Fire Service, the Police and various NHS organisations.
6. I was pleased to see that a report was considered at the special Council meeting held prior to this meeting, that dealt with the renewal of the Freedom of the Borough to The Rifles. Dialogue has been ongoing to make sure that the people of Darlington can show their respect and appreciation of our troops serving overseas.

Economy Portfolio

7. Darlington's Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) claimant rate has marginally decreased from 5. per cent in February 2010 to 5.4 per cent in March 2010 with 3,271 registered JSA claimants. There are 89 more claimants than March 2009. Darlington's rate has, however, increased at a slower rate than the rest of Tees Valley over the last 12 months. In March 2009 Darlington's rate of 5.2 per cent was 0.6 per cent below the Tees Valley average of 5.8 per cent. Darlington's March 2010 rate is 1.1 per cent below the Tees Valley average of 6.5 per cent. Darlington's rate is equal to the North East average of 5.4% and has maintained its relative position to the national rate of 1.2 per cent above the national average.

Planning

8. The residents of Darlington have been hit hard by the financial downturn and in order to help tackle this, a Financial Inclusion Strategy has been adopted, in order to improve the access to financial services for those on a low income. In addition to this, £50,000 has been allocated to the Darlington Credit Union, to increase the provision of affordable credit. This funding is over two years, and it is anticipated that the Credit Union will reach a position of self-sustainability through the implementation of its business plan, by the end of the two years.
9. The Darlington Credit Union was established in 2009, following the merger of the four existing small credit unions that previously existed within the town. The Union, which operates over the whole of the Town, and enables residents of Darlington to save with an ethical, community based savings scheme, recently launched a salary deduction scheme
10. Two further Conservation Area Character Appraisals have been approved by Cabinet, at its meeting held on 30th March, 2010, one for the Town Centre and the other for the West End. Both of the Character Appraisals included four boundary additions, which received support from those who were contacted as part of the consultation process. Approval of the documents will enable sound decisions to be made on planning applications received for development within the Conservation Areas and they will help ensure that they are preserved and enhanced.
11. Over the next six months a series of events will be held to enable residents of the town to have their say, and make suggestions, on what might be included within the Town Centre 'fringe'. The 'fringe' is the area lying to the north and east of the Town Centre extending from Bank Top Station to North Road Station, and is a strategic location in relation to Central Park and the proposed Teesside University. This area has suffered over recent years from being outside the ring road and through changes in economic conditions and the receipt of funding from One NorthEast is helping to produce a masterplan for the development of the area over the next twenty years. The aim is to produce a sustainable and exciting part of Darlington that will add to its unique and high quality attractions.

Town Centre

12. **Town Centre Board** – I chaired the meeting of the Town Centre Board held on 29th April, 2010, at which a presentation was given to the Board on the ‘Best Bar None’ scheme, together with reports on the Retail Skills Academy, Summer Events Programme and the Traders Association Board Meeting. Board Members in attendance at the meeting also gave feedback on current trading conditions within the Town Centre.
13. **Footfall in the Town Centre** - Adding together all of the seven counters throughout the town centre, footfall for December 2009 was 2,298,756, an increase from December 2008 (2,027,931).
14. **Retail Skills Academy** - This project is moving forward with our Expression of Interest being accepted by the NSA and the £10,000 funding for a consultant to complete the business case, being ready for release. At a recent meeting with the NSA we were informed that Redcar & Cleveland have also submitted an Expression of Interest and that the NSA would prefer if we work in partnership with Redcar to extend the Retail Skills Training offer across the whole of the Tees Valley. It has therefore been suggested that we have a Tees Valley Retail Skills Academy which has a Darlington Retail Skills Academy and a Redcar Academy - thereby offering accessibility to customers from all over the area. Working in partnership will also allow us to attract further funding from One NorthEast.
15. **Town Centre Heritage Trail** - Darlington Town Centre Management, in partnership with local community groups, is seeking to create a Darlington town centre heritage trail. The trail will incorporate interpretive elements such as pavement markers, wall plaques, an associated printed leaflet/map and a website presence, allowing the trail to be interactive with the public. The trail will be designed to ensure it visits every retail area of the town centre ensuring that every business has the opportunity of benefiting from increased footfall and retail visibility.
16. The project is aimed at helping residents and visitors to enjoy Darlington’s heritage on a self-guided trail and will also help to boost footfall and trade for Darlington town centre businesses. Potential external funding for the project is being sought and there are plans to expand the trail through digital media interpretation for Phase II of the project.
17. **Dine** - The dine scheme continues to prove successful with the number of members now standing at 6,652. Support from the local restaurateur sector is also strong, with restaurant members putting forward just under 40 offers for the Spring 2010 newsletter (March, April and May).
18. **Unique** - The scheme has now attracted 3271 members with an average of 228 new members per month. New members are joining the scheme through friends/relatives as advertising the scheme has been reduced.
19. **Home Office Grant for CCTV** - Ten CCTV cameras have now been installed in both Clark’s and Buckton’s yards. The cameras have been integrated into the wider CCTV scheme for the entire Town Centre.

Business Engagement

20. **Work & Skills Plan** – A Work & Skills Plan is being developed on the back of the research findings from the Worklessness Research project. This is currently being considered by the Prosperous Darlington Group of the Darlington Partnership.
21. **Events & Seminar Programme** – The third workshop in the ‘Bite Size Business Basics’ series took place on 22 April – ‘*Cloud Computing*’. The workshop focussed on the potential business applications in respect of this new technology. The ‘*Greener Business*’ seminar held on 10 March attracted a total of 32 delegates. Due to demand from local businesses a second session of the ‘*Supplying the Public Sector – Simplified*’ workshop took place on 28 April – these sessions provide ‘hands-on’ practical advice around forms and processes for submitting a tender to the public sector. The second session was limited to a total of 12 delegates, with a wait list of 4 businesses. Due to demand evidenced, there are plans to run this workshop on a regular basis, the next date being 8 June. Other future events include: a ‘*Flipchart Roadshow*’ – an interactive business to business ‘inter-trading’ exhibition on 26 May to be held at Evans Easyspace and a ‘*Business Process Redesign*’ seminar with MAS NEPA (Manufacturing Advisory Service) to be hosted at Cummins – date to be confirmed. A ‘*Webwise*’ workshop is planned for June – date to be confirmed. A further ‘Bite Size Business Basics’ session is scheduled for 6 July ‘*Crucial Customers*’ (workshop on improving customer service).
22. **Future Jobs Fund** - 57 job opportunities were created in the initial Darlington bid and to date 47 have been successfully filled (although 19 are presently subject to CRB checks and/or references). Job starts will continue over a 6-month period across a range of host organisations. A Future Jobs Fund ‘Jobs Fair’ event was held on 6 April at the Community Fire Centre where applicants had the opportunity to be interviewed by prospective employers for a total of 6 jobs – all were filled on the day. A further successful bid was submitted for an additional 46 jobs, with a funding allocation of £299,000.
23. **Enterprise Coaching** - In partnership with Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council an ERDF application was submitted to provide Enterprise Coaching within the most deprived wards in Darlington. An allocation of £60,000 match funding for this purpose has been made available by the BAT Legacy Panel. This will bring in an additional £60,000 of ERDF resources into Darlington. The ERDF has been secured - initially we will utilise the services of a Redcar & Cleveland Enterprise Coach (a resident of Darlington) on a half day a week ‘call off’ basis, prior to recruitment of our own Enterprise Coach for a fixed term contract to 31 March 2013.

John Williams
Leader and Economy Portfolio