
LEADER'S OVERVIEW

Peer Review

1. The Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge took place between 4 and 7 June 2013 and addressed the five core components, plus three additional areas requested by the Council. The core components are understanding local context and priority setting, financial planning and viability, political and managerial leadership, governance and decision making, and organisational capacity, with the three additional areas being to look at the actions taken to deliver change and drive down costs, test and constructively challenge current plans and proposals, and identify any other potential measures to manage down demand, reduce or deliver services in more cost-effective ways, including through whatever delivery mechanism.
2. In preparation for the Peer Challenge a Position Statement was produced and forwarded to the Peer Challenge Panel. During the visit the Team met with the Leader of the Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Chairs and a representative group of non-executive Members; Corporate Management Team; Assistant Directors; and representative focus groups of employees from all levels of the authority. In addition, the team met with a wide range of partners from all sectors – business, voluntary and public services. In all, some 140 people spoke to the Peer Team.
3. The review team fed back to the Council on 7 June 2013 with a full report due in four to six weeks. I am particularly pleased by the feedback. The Council was found to be 'well run' with 'sound financial management' and a 'solid track record of achievement since 1997'. Given that Darlington Borough Council is the country's third smallest unitary council, and has faced significant pressures in recent years, this is welcome affirmation of our strengths. The Review Team had a series of recommendations for the Council, all of which I welcome. In particular the need to more strongly drive change programmes, clearly articulate our vision and celebrate the good things happening that the Council is contributing to.

Town Twinning

4. Celebrations took place between 6 and 9 June, which coincided with the 150th Anniversary of Darlington Markets, to mark the 60th Anniversary of Darlington's Town Twinning. Representatives from our twin Towns Amiens and Mulheim visited Darlington to commemorate the anniversary, together with representatives from Opole, Poland, who signed a Friendship Agreement during their stay.

150 years of Darlington Markets

5. I have also been involved in arrangements to mark the 150th anniversary of Darlington's Covered Market Hall and Clock Tower. To celebrate the event, the Council held a Victorian-themed weekend of fun, activities and events in the Market Square and Covered Market Hall over the weekend of 7 and 8 June 2013.

Budget Advisory Panels

6. A number of consultation events were held during June and July to discuss, in detail, the future of public services in Darlington. Every single service the Council currently provides will be affected in some way – whether it is reduced or simply cut altogether. The events gave members of the public the opportunity to come along and learn about the difficult choices the Council will have to make in the coming months and have their say about the future services of Darlington. Following the consultation events it is intended to hold 'The Big Debate' on Saturday 20 July 2013 where the public will again have the opportunity to hear from Members and have the opportunity to make their voice heard.

General Updates

7. I attended a meeting in June to discuss the future of the Darlington Credit Union. This was the first in a series of quarterly meetings that will be held and I have promoted the concept of Credit Unions within the Leaders meetings of the Association of North East Councils (ANEC).
8. The fifth Armed Forces Day 'Fly a Flag for Our Armed Forces' ceremony was held on Monday 24 June 2013. This is an annual ceremony, and enables the whole nation to show their appreciation for the contribution made by all those who serve, or who have served, in Her Majesty's Armed Forces. A ceremony was held in the Market Place where a flag was raised followed by a prayer, read by the Reverend Robert Williamson from St. Cuthbert's Church. A flag was also raised over the Town Hall. The ceremony was welcomed by all those veterans in attendance.
9. I attended a number of other meetings including the Local Government Association Annual Conference, for the first time in a number of years, and welcomed the opportunity to hear from a wide range of speakers on local government.

Health and Well Being Board

10. The first meeting of the Health and Well Being Board, following the transfer of certain Public Health functions to the Council on 1 April 2013, was held on 11 June 2013 and I continue to Chair meetings of the Board in my capacity as Leader of the Council.
11. At this first meeting of the Board a number of issues were discussed including an amended Terms of Reference for the Board; reports from the Clinical Commissioning Group on the Clinical Programme Board and a Primary Care Model for Care Homes in Darlington; a report and presentation on Securing Quality in

Health Services from NHS England; and update reports on Darlington Healthwatch and the Francis Report.

12. Following the transfer of responsibility for Public Health from the NHS to Local Government, it is important that the Council continues to receive support and advice to ensure that we work as effectively as possible to improve health and tackle inequalities.
13. I am pleased that, together with Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, Middlesbrough Borough Council and the Clinical Commissioning Group, we have submitted a proposal to be a Pioneer for Integrated Health and Social Care.

Department for Education (DfE)

14. I am delighted that up to four hundred public sector jobs are set to move into Darlington Town Centre following the acceptance, by the Department for Education (DfE), of this Council's offer to build an office block at the Town Hall to accommodate DfE staff as they move from their out-dated offices at Mowden Hall, Darlington. The new arrangements will see the formation of a public sector hub in Darlington – the first of its kind in the country. The new offices will be linked to the existing Town Hall. This will enable the sharing of facilities by both organisations such as reception, meeting rooms, ICT, and video conference facilities. Co-location will enable other options to be explored including training, joint apprenticeship schemes and shared career progression for staff across both areas.
15. The news is a huge boost to the local economy especially as the move will see up to four hundred more people working close to the town centre and shopping and eating there, leading to more trade for local businesses. It is hoped that the new offices will be completed by the end of 2014. Plans are underway to minimise disruption whilst the work is underway.

Darlington Partnership

16. I attended the Darlington Partnership Board meeting on 22 May. Darlington Partnership has decided that 'Developing a Good Neighbour Scheme' will be its single Action Priority for 2013/14. The Partnership has already been deliberating how it could support elderly and vulnerable people in the community and therefore agreed that it would like to see an early focus on these groups.
17. The Partnership has fostered discussions between Durham Constabulary and Age UK Darlington in exploring how Neighbourhood Watch might play a part in a good neighbour scheme. The proposal is that a network of Good Friends will be established across Darlington, these people will keep a watchful eye on their older and vulnerable neighbours, providing support and friendship and assisting them with a range of issues which if left unaddressed could compromise their ability to live safely and well independently. They would make brief contact to check up on vulnerable people who live nearby but would escalate the contact during known difficult times e.g. cold weather or when alerted to a specific problem.

18. The potential for the initiative to improve elderly and vulnerable people's quality of life are self evident. However the scheme will also help public agencies avoid costs and reduce demands put upon statutory public sector agencies.
19. A project outline was presented to a meeting of stakeholders chaired by the Chairman of Darlington Partnership, Alasdair MacConachie. The proposal was met with warm approval and the following organisations agreed to explore funding the first year as a pilot:
 - (a) Darlington Borough Council;
 - (b) Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust;
 - (c) Tees Esk and Wear Valley Foundation Trust;
 - (d) Darlington Clinical Commissioning Group; and
 - (e) Durham Constabulary.
20. This is an example of Darlington Borough Council working with Darlington Partnership in engaging agencies from across all sectors in focusing on an emergent need in an innovative way which will deliver tangible results.

Regional and Tees Valley Updates

21. Work is progressing on negotiating the Tees Valley City Deal with Government.
22. I have attended two recent meetings of the Tees Valley Unlimited (TVU) to which Local MP's were invited to attend, and a working lunch. TVU's two decisions to provide Growing Place Fund loans to help facilitate both the building for the DfE and also the moving of the Council depot (to allow housing to be built at Central Park) are both welcome.
23. As the current Vice Chair of the TVU, I attended the launch of the Annual Report, which sets out a strong track record of achievement.
24. I continue to attend meetings of the Durham Tees Valley Airport Board, which I am appointed to by this Council.
25. I met with Baroness Hanham in June, when she visited the region to talk about the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) – Business Growth initiative. I was delighted that ERDF and the Homes and Communities Agency have agreed to fund a Business Growth Hub in Darlington, to help increase the number of new businesses here.

Rail Services

26. I attended a meeting with Rail North in July to discuss the potential for the North East to participate in a devolved franchise for the operation of local and regional trains in the north as part of Rail North. This meeting follows on from continued detail analysis of the potential for a North East Business Unit to give a regional input to the management of the franchise within the region. I and my fellow Leaders/Mayors remain supportive of the principle of devolving the client role for rail franchises to local administrations away from the Department for Transport, but

we continue to seek the best way of providing passenger rail services that facilitate economic growth and other outcomes in the North East.

27. I continue to participate in the East Coast Main Line Consortia, which is seeking to influence the decision making process for investment in the East Coast Main Line both before the potential construction of the High Speed 2 railway line to Leeds and after it. The Consortia currently includes 21 Councils from areas along the line with others seeking to join. Officers from member Councils are developing a business case that will help demonstrate the economic and other benefits that would be gained from investments such as the improvement of Darlington Station.

Policing and Community Safety

28. The Durham Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC), Ron Hogg, hosted a meeting for the PCC's from Cleveland and Northumbria in Darlington in May. As the meeting was held in Darlington, it gave me the opportunity to meet with the PCC's informally over lunch and to talk through the settling down period in the newly created role and highlight how Darlington was benefiting from Ron Hogg, Durham's PCC, spending one day per week in Darlington, to deal with Darlington's issues.
29. The Community Safety Partnership have supported two recent events held by the Police and Crime Commissioner. The first was around Hate Crime and the second around Domestic Abuse. Officers are linking in to working groups established following these events to help progress the issues.
30. Locally, a Hate Crime Action Plan has been developed and awareness training is to be given to a wide variety of agencies in the town to enable them to support victims. It is also intended to train 'Champions' in each agency and to explore options for extending Third Party Reporting Centres and the 'Safe place to be' initiative.
31. With regard to Domestic Abuse a report has been written which was commissioned via the Vulnerability Strategic Group, which explores the experiences of victims when seeking help. The 'Voices' report shows that there is a lot of positive work taking place to support victims in Darlington, however, there are still lessons to be learned and the Vulnerability Group will be looking at these issues in the coming months.
32. The Chair of Darlington Neighbourhood Watch Scheme has won a National Neighbourhood and Home Watch Award for outstanding achievement. He was presented with this award by the Crime Prevention Minister at the House of Commons in June. Membership of Neighbourhood Watch has risen from 12 per cent in October 2012 to its current figure of 28 per cent. Neighbourhood Watch volunteers are also playing a major part in the 'Good Friends' Scheme, which is being developed by the Darlington Partnership.

33. A special operation entitled 'Staysafe' was run on 24 May to coincide with the schools breaking up and to ensure that young people were celebrating safely and not consuming alcohol. A range of agencies were involved in this including the Police, Council Anti-Social Behaviour Team, School Nurses and the Emergency Duty Team. Numbers are still being collated regarding the total numbers of young people spoken to by partner agencies, however, thirteen were brought back to Central House Annexe for follow up support by the Anti-Social Behaviour Team.

Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT)

34. The DAAT has formally transferred from PCT to this Council alongside Public Health. Contracts for commissioned services have been successfully transferred and there is on-going work with colleagues and providers around the new-look contracts and processes.
35. The adult integrated 'Connected Recovery Service' has moved from implementation to its second year and a final report of the Independent Service Implementation Review was presented to the DAAT Board in June.
36. The Connected Recovery Service is also about to launch the second phase of the recovery journey, with the opening of the Recovery Centre for those who reach abstinence and/or are discharged from structured treatment. There will be a formal launch at a later date.
37. The young people's SWITCH service improved numbers of Planned Exits yet again in 2012-13, demonstrating the quality of the work being provided to this vulnerable group of young people.

Bill Dixon
Leader