
OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND REGENERATION PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Economy and Regeneration Portfolio:
 - (a) **Economic Strategy** – We gave approval to a review of the Economic Strategy to be carried out in order to validate the findings of the Local Economic Assessment and provide a focus for involvement by business sectors (through Enquiry Groups) in the development Economic Strategy. This will provide a common template to guide discussion about the future of the local economy and a refreshed Strategy is critically important to position Darlington within the Local Enterprise Partnership for the benefit of local prosperity. Economic and funding conditions have also changed substantially since the last refresh of the Borough’s economic strategy ‘Taking forward Darlington Gateway’. On 18th October 2011 the Enquiry Group Chairs attended a launch event, which focussed on the process, timescales and support available going forward.
 - (b) **Central Park Enterprise Zone** – The Cabinet has agreed to the principles of an Enterprise Zone on Central Park as part of the Tees Valley Enterprise Zone package. The Enterprise Zone will offer two practical advantages to Digital Businesses wishing to set up on Central Park. Firstly they would be exempt from Business rates for a period of 5 years up to a maximum of £55,000 per annum. Secondly the Cabinet has agreed to the principle of a Local Development Order that simplifies the planning processes. In addition to this Central Park will be on the national map that brings marketing and promotional advantages.

It is being recommended to Council that the details of the Local Development Order be delegated to the Planning Applications Committee because an LDO is essentially a form of conditional planning permission. It is anticipated that the LDO could only be implemented in accordance with an agreed Master Plan for the site. Consultations will take place on the LDO as if it was a planning application and those representations will be considered by the Planning Applications Committee in due course.

It is proposed to complete these processes so that the Enterprise Zone is in place by April 2012.

- (c) **The Local Housing Offer** – Consideration was given to the implications for this Council in responding to the recent Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) grant offers and made recommendations on how the Council might respond to the Registered Providers proposals and the grant opportunity. We have recommended the disposal of the Haughton Road site to deliver 12 new affordable homes, the acquisition of up to 26 new affordable apartments at Melland Street and the disposal of surplus land at Buxton

Moor to facilitate the development of 20 new affordable homes. The Director of Resources has also been given delegated powers to agree the final terms and conditions in relation to these arrangements. There is a significant shortage of affordable housing in Darlington and these proposed new developments will help address the current shortfall.

(d) **Feethams – Town Centre Development Proposals** – We have considered development proposals for Feethams and the various options available to the Council have recommended as the preferred option the release and redevelopment of the Feethams site for a cinema multiplex and associated uses with possible hotel development. Any release of the site will be managed as not to undermine the provision of the Town Centre parking provision.

(e) **Business Engagement and Education** - There are a significant number of policy changes in the education arena at present. These include:

- The reduction in local authority funding for the Connexions service and the new requirement on schools to provide independent, impartial careers guidance from September 2012;
- The planned removal of the statutory requirement for pre-16s to undertake work experience, and
- Changes to the curriculum and educational offer including a review, and possible reduction, of the vocational education offer.

These changes have the potential to result in fewer young people being supported by a more fragmented careers guidance offer without access to key labour market information. It will also result in less young people having access to work related learning opportunities. These changes will mean that young people may well leave school less aware of, and less ready for the world of work.

In order to develop these workers of the future and respond to the economic agenda in Darlington there is a need to bring together employers and schools to work in partnership. In particular, there is a need to:

- Raise the aspirations of young people;
- Increase awareness amongst parents, teachers and young people of local labour market developments, and
- Increase awareness amongst parents, teachers and young people of engineering and manufacturing (and associated) career options for young people, including local opportunities in the future (e.g. Hitachi careers), and the importance of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects.

Following discussions at the 14-19 Partnership, a working group has been convened to consider the needs of educational establishments and employers and a draft programme of events across the town is being developed by this group.

(f) **BID Project moving forward** - The Business Improvement District (BID) project for Darlington town centre continues to move forward. The project is being driven by the BID Task Group, which includes representatives of all business sectors across the town

centre.

The first formal stage of the consultation process, the Business Improvement Survey, took place over July and August. This survey enabled town centre businesses to say what was important to them, and what sort of projects could help improve their business. Over 160 responses were received, which was over 15% higher than the average BID survey response rate.

Following the survey, a series of business meetings were held, in September and October, where close to 100 businesses came along to hear more about the BID, and to give their views on what improvement projects would help their business and what could be put into the forthcoming Business Plan.

Details of the project priorities that came out of the business meetings, together with details of what happens next in the BID process will be included in the November edition of the newsletter 'BID News', which town centre businesses will be receiving a copy of soon.

Further details on the BID project are available at www.distinctdarlington.co.uk

- (g) **Local Development Framework (LDF)** – a Members Briefing was held on 20 October to update Members on progress with the latest stage of the LDF. Officers presented a report on the emerging Planning Obligations Supplementary Planning Document highlighting the issues around obtaining developer contributions as part of planning applications, focussing on the need for prioritisation. Other presentations were given on 3 key areas for policy development going forward with the Making Places Accommodating Growth Development Plan Document including housing sites, revised development limits, and sites for gypsies and Travellers. Members debated the issues and questioned the officers, and welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the development of the statutory planning framework.
- (h) **Regional Growth Fund (RGF) Approval Process** – Cummins has been successful in securing a grant in Round 2 of the RGF. As part of the approval process, the company is now undergoing a due diligence exercise.

2. Since the last meeting of Council, I have :-

- (a) On 29th September had a productive meeting with the Director of Operations and Site Manager at Darlington Orange. Discussion took place around environmental matters; corporate social responsibility; better involvement with schools, Teesside University and business exchange. Progress will be mapped at quarterly meetings and support provided from the Council's Business Engagement Team/Services for People.
- (b) Met with the Managing Director of Mech-Tool Engineering on 7th November to gain a more detailed understanding of their business. Mech Tool operate from three sites, namely Dawson's in Middlesbrough (fit out etc.); Albert Hill (main operation) and Shessoe Road (office base). The company specialises in the design, manufacture, project management and installation of cladding systems, explosion/pressure relief systems, equipment modules and enclosures that protect personnel and equipment from the environmental hazards of fire, thermal radiation, explosion and noise. Mech-Tool

are an active participant in the Council's 'Encouraging Engineering' scheme, which seeks to encourage undergraduates to consider a career in engineering.

- (c) On 29th September met with Professor Caroline MacDonald, Deputy Vice Chancellor with responsibility for Partnerships and Student Experience at the new Teesside University Campus in Darlington. I have encouraged her to meet with schools/QE over the coming months as links with the University are positive. There are further opportunities to collaboratively benefit from on both sides.
- (d) On 30th September visited two Town Centre businesses namely Marks and Spencer and Poundland to help gain a better understanding of current trading conditions during these difficult times. The Council's Town Centre Management Team continue to offer support to retailers.
- (e) In my position as Design and Heritage Champion on 7th October, I met with officers to promote better understanding of design and heritage issues in the Borough.
- (f) On 17th October I hosted a "Skills" meeting with secondary school Heads, College Principals and Businesses. The aim of the meeting was to enhance the collaboration between secondary schools, local businesses within Darlington to further promote the skills agenda. Although there is a move to Academy status and an independence emerging, we must all seek to retain the shared vision of collaboration in the best interest of children and young people and in my role as lead for Economy and Regeneration, that is what I want to achieve. The intention of the meeting is to form a small working group to drive the skills agenda forward.
- (g) On 18th October I attended an introductory meeting for the "An Economic Strategy for Darlington" Enquiry Group. An introduction to the enquiry group process was made by Mike Airey, Chairman of the Prosperous Darlington Group. The event was attended by 7 of the 9 Enquiry Group Chairs (Mech-Tool Engineering, Resonant Digital, 3 Point Media, Handelsbanken, Amec Construction, Education Village, Bliss Gifts), representatives of Prosperous Darlington Group and Darlington College along with support staff from the Economic Policy Team. The event kick-starts the Enquiry Group process with the findings from this work feeding into the development of an economic strategy for Darlington.
- (h) On 21st October a joint meeting with Teesside University, Tees Valley Unlimited and private sector providers took place to discuss Digital Health Industry Opportunities. The work is concentrating on Telehealth and Telecare opportunities as social and economic drivers. Existing private sector providers were found to be operating telemetry enabled services and were keen to work in partnership with the Council, PCT and University to seek to enhance Darlington's profile as a location for digitally enabled health and care companies and infrastructure services.

- (i) On 1st November attended (with the Chief Executive) an introductory meeting with Steve Gill, newly appointed Director of Durham Tees Valley Airport.
- (j) Attended a Multi-agency briefing Re: Albert Hill Skip Hire on 14th November.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy and Regeneration Portfolio