
LEADER AND ECONOMY PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW

1. The period since my last report to Council has seen some significant developments for the borough and for the Council.

One Darlington Perfectly Placed

2. Following approval of the Council's first combined Medium Term Financial Plan and Corporate Plan, the Council's four departmental plans and the set of Performance Indicators contained with the Corporate Plan, have been approved. The departmental plans translate the top-down direction of the draft Sustainable Community Strategy entitled 'One Darlington: Perfectly Placed', the Local Area Agreement and the Corporate Plan. The plans are based upon the new Sustainable Community Strategy and the Corporate Plan, which were the subject of extensive consultation with the public and a wide range of partners in the public, private and voluntary sector. A successful corporate approach to service planning continues to be a vital component of the performance management framework which in-turn leads to the further service improvement to the public.
3. The Local Strategic Partnership and partners have been engaged in developing a robust set of indicators that will comprise the Local Area Agreement (LAA) for Darlington. The LAA is the delivery plan for the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS) and will help us to move our vision into reality.
4. The Partnership has decided to establish an Executive Group, chaired by the Council Leader, and this will play an important part in making sure that other public services align their spending with delivery of 'One Darlington: Perfectly Placed'.
5. One of the aims within the Community Strategy is to attract high quality, well-paid jobs to the borough, and to ensure that people have the skills needed to attract and compete for those jobs. In order to contribute to this aim, I am pleased to announce that this Council has today signed up to the 'Skills Pledge'. The Skills Pledge is a voluntary public commitment, to enable all employees to develop their skills which will in-turn help UK businesses to compete with other rapidly emerging economies.

Comprehensive Performance Assessment

6. The Council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) inspection took place from Friday, 31st March to Thursday, 10th April, 2008, inclusive. The inspection team met with a number of members and officers, and conducted fourteen focus groups covering major aspects of the Council's service provision. I attended the end of inspection feedback, along with the Leader of the Opposition. It is clear that all the hard work people put in resulted in some very solid evidence of achievement reaching the inspectors ears. In particular the

inspection team highlighted the common purpose and enthusiasm to achieve ambitions being shown at all levels – staff, members and partners.

7. The inspection report will offer fresh independent insights into those areas of our performance where we can continue to improve.

Complaints Policy

8. A number of changes have been made to the Council's complaints process, in order to improve the recording of complaints and make it easier for members of the public to complain to the Council. As part of the continued development of the Complaints Process, approval was also given to introduce measures to enable the Council to respond to unreasonably persistent complainants and to deal with unreasonable complainant behaviour. It is hoped that this, and previous changes to the Complaints Policy, will enable the complaints received by the Council to be dealt with in a fair and consistent manner.

Economy Portfolio

9. The Town Centre Board met in April at which a presentation was given to the Board on the initial findings of a survey which had been undertaken to ascertain peoples views, from both inside and outside of the Borough, on Sunday Trading . The new independent brochure entitled 'Unique' was circulated at the meeting, and it received very positive reviews from the Board. A number of other initiatives were also discussed including the production of environmentally friendly jute bags and a competition to engage a Town Crier for use throughout the Town Centre.
10. A further meeting of the Working Group, established by the Town Centre Board to look at options for the Feethams/Beaumont Street sites was held, primarily to update the group on the progress made in the preparation of a Planning and Development Brief for the Feethams and Beaumont Street area, prior to going out to public consultation. Once the outcome of that consultation is received, the Group will hold its final meeting to consider the final Planning and Development Brief for the site.
11. I was very pleased to receive a trophy from the Chief Executive of the National Association of British Market Authorities, on behalf of the Council, following its success in the category of Market (Attraction) of the Year. The award was for the Summer Market Spectacular, which was held in August 2007. The Market was the largest ever gathering of market traders in Darlington, with two hundred stalls selling a wide range of goods. The Market not only brought in visitors to the Market itself but brought an increase in footfall to the Town Centre as a whole.
12. A well attended meeting of the Town Centre Forum has also been held in April, in order to consult the Forum on the draft Town Centre Business Plan, which had been prepared with a view to delivering the priorities included within the new Sustainable Community Strategy, relating to creating a 'Prosperous Darlington'. The Plan was well received by the Forum.
13. I, along with the Chief Executive and Town Centre Manager, have continued to meet with Town Centre Businesses, on an informal 1:1 basis, in order to discuss any issues or concerns they may have. There is growing concern at present throughout the town in respect of trade

in general and we will continue to promote Darlington Town Centre and the businesses located within it through this difficult time.

14. Following the work of the Town Centre Board on the location for the outdoor markets, unanimous approval was given to the relocation of the Outdoor Market to Blackwellgate. The main reason for the relocation of the stalls was to respond to concerns of residents that the Water Feature was hidden by a number of stalls. Approval was also given to a number of changes to the Market Regulations in order to continue to improve and develop the overall standard of the weekly and themed markets and to ensure that they contribute to the high quality of the pedestrianised town centre.
15. Following comments made by this Council, and the other Tees Valley Authorities, a number of changes were made by the Secretary of State to the Regional Spatial Strategy for the North East. Although the Secretary of State had taken on board some of the objections it had received, the Council still had a number concerns in relation to the proposed Strategy and it was agreed by Cabinet that a number of objections and comments be submitted to the Secretary of State as part of the current consultation process on the Strategy.
16. In addition approval was given, by Cabinet, to the Bishopton and Denton character appraisals and the Council participation in a Tees Valley wide partnership submission to be designated a Housing Growth Point

John Williams
Leader and Economy Portfolio