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**DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE BUSINESS PLAN**

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**Responsible Cabinet Member -  
Councillor Chris McEwan, Economy and Regeneration Portfolio**

**Responsible Director – Ian Williams, Director of Economic Growth**

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to seek Members approval of the Darlington Town Centre Business Plan.

**Summary**

2. These are challenging, yet exciting times for the Town, soon we will have a new nine-screen Cinema at Feethams, in February 400 civil servants moved to the new office alongside the Town Hall; and the Central Park development, is bringing new high prestige jobs, an expansion of education facilities and new housing just a few minutes' walk from the Town Centre.
3. The business of Town Centres is highly complex, requiring energy, skill and enterprise; it is more than just retail, it encompasses businesses and services in all guises, private and public sector; it is a dynamic community which must change with the times.
4. In 2014 more than 150 Town Centre business people took part in a Town Centre Conference, jointly promoted by the Council and Distinct Darlington (Business Improvement District). The event highlighted the passionate connection people have for the Town Centre, brought into the spotlight concerns over how the changing nature of Town Centre retail would impact on Darlington and importantly identified a number of key themes for future action.
5. It is very clear our Town Centre has a great deal going for it, good accessibility, a unique and distinctive heritage character giving rise to a strong sense of place, a good leisure offer, and a substantial local catchment area of 300,000 people living in Darlington, North Yorkshire, County Durham and the Tees Valley.
6. Through working together, the Council, Distinct Darlington, Town Centre Businesses and all those with a stake in the future of Darlington Town Centre we can ensure that the Town Centre retains its place at the social and economic heart of our community.

## Recommendation

7. It is recommended that Members approve the Darlington Town Centre Business Plan.

## Reasons

8. The recommendation is supported by the following reasons:-
- (a) The Town Centre Business Plan responds to the findings from the Town Centre conference and other recent consultation (e.g. Town Centre Regeneration game) and draws together in one document policies and proposals (Local Plan, Transport Plan & Car Parking Strategy, Economic Strategy, Distinct Darlington Business Plan Feethams Brief etc.) impacting upon the Town Centre.
  - (b) The Business Plan provides a statement of vision, ambition, outcomes and priority actions aimed at securing the future success of the Town Centre.

**Ian Williams**  
**Director of Economic Growth**

## Background Papers

Town Centre Business Plan 2015-2020  
Darlington Retail Study

Owen Wilson : Extension 6305  
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S17 Crime and Disorder	No issues raised
Health and Well Being	The Town Centre plays an important role in providing good access to goods and services and through leisure, events and community activities supports social cohesion across all communities in the Borough.
Sustainability	A Vibrant Town Centre is key to achieving Economic, Environmental and Social sustainability objectives.
Diversity	No issues raised
Wards Affected	Central Ward
Groups Affected	Residents and business within and immediately adjacent to the Town Centre.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend a change to the Council's budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision
Urgent Decision	For the purpose of the 'call-in' procedure this does not represent an urgent matter.
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The Town Centre Business Plan contributes towards the corporate priorities of One Darlington Perfectly Placed.
Efficiency	The Town Centre Business Plan pulls together existing policies and delivery plans with an impact on the Town Centre.

## MAIN REPORT

### Information and Analysis

9. With the benefit of a key strategic location at the gateway to the North-East, a distinctive character and a great quality of life, Darlington Town Centre is well placed to retain its vibrancy and vitality, despite the challenging economic and social trends impacting upon Town Centres.
10. In recent years Darlington Town Centre has remained relatively resilient, with vacancy rates staying at or below the national average and better than the regional figure. Nevertheless Darlington, like all town centres, has seen some planned development stall, greater volatility in the number of vacant units and loss of a number of key retailers, many of these national chains reducing their high street presence or in a number of cases ceasing to trade.
11. To thrive in the future the Town Centre offer must adapt to national trends and other external influences such as:-
  - (a) Online retail increasing (the amount spent online increased by 13.4% in summer 2014 compared with summer 2013)
  - (b) Demographic changes (35,000 people currently living in Darlington today who are aged 50 or over. This is set to increase to over 40,000 by 2021)
  - (c) Significantly reduced public spending
  - (d) Increased perception of retail as part of a leisure experience, underlining the importance of a high quality customer experience throughout their visit to the Town Centre.
  - (e) Competition from out of Town Centres – Tindall Crescent Bishop Auckland / Teesside Park / Metro Centre, proposed Scotch Corner Retail outlet
12. Through its planning and economic regeneration functions Darlington Council has a key role in working with partners to influence the future shape of the Town Centre, the nature of economic activities taking place (retail, leisure, professional and business services etc..) and degree to which residential dwellings form a part of the mix of Town Centre uses.
13. The Council, and in partnership with private sector, also plays an important role in supporting new and existing businesses, in promoting the Town Centre through events and marketing and in managing the Town Centre Environment, quality / cleanliness of the street environment.
14. The Town Centre Business plan details key Town Centre actions the Council has delivered in recent years, these include:-
  - (a) Regeneration of main area of Town Centre
  - (b) Refurbishment of Dolphin Centre
  - (c) Department for Transport public sector hub opened February 2015
  - (d) Cinema and Leisure Development (opening early 2016)
  - (e) Major transport infrastructure works – ring road improvements
  - (f) Recent resurfacing of car parks and plans to develop Multi Storey Car Park

- (g) Refurbishment of Town Centre units through High Street Innovation Fund
15. Planning for the future, the Council, Distinct Darlington, Town Centre Businesses and others with a stake in the future of the Town Centre all have an important role in ensuring that it retains its place at the social and economic heart of our community.
16. The Business Plan provides a statement of Vision, Ambition, Outcomes and Priority Actions and sets out actions the Council will lead on delivering, such as:-
- (a) Bring new customers to the Town Centre through encouraging new residential and commercial development in and close to the Town Centre.
  - (b) Work with Darlington market traders to re-vitalise the covered and outdoor markets
  - (c) Invest in maintaining and improving transport infrastructure, roads, footways, cycle routes, car parks
  - (d) Maximising opportunities to benefit from Darlington's rich rail heritage and cultural offer, including an £8M refurbishment of the Civic Theatre in 2016.
  - (e) Work with partners (Tees valley Unlimited, University of Teesside, Distinct Darlington and others) to provide support to Darlington businesses
  - (f) Support events and promotional activities e.g. Christmas lights, Darlington 10K run
17. The Business Plan also identifies actions where other stakeholders, notably Distinct Darlington and Town Centre Businesses have responsibility, for example:-
- (a) Events and promotional activities
  - (b) Marketing, using a traditional and social media
  - (c) Adapting to social changes, in particular the move to online retail

### **Outcome of Consultation**

18. The Town Centre Business Plan has been developed in response to the findings from the Town Centre Regeneration Game findings and outputs from the 2014 Town Centre Conference.
19. Members of the Town Centre Board were consulted in November 2014 and January 2015 with comments and suggestions incorporated into the completion of the Business Plan.

### **Financial Implications**

20. Actions identified within the Town Centre Business Plan will come from existing Strategies and delivery plans where funding has already been identified within Council budgets.
21. Should feasibility work identify funding requirements outside of existing budget allocations, this will be subject to future Cabinet approval.
22. The Town Centre Business Plan has been developed during a period in which the Council has substantially reduced funding from Central Government, with further

funding reductions projected over the coming few years. Consequently, the Council is unlikely to have the resources to invest in significant new projects. Future investment plans will need to demonstrate a very strong business case and are only likely to go ahead where a package of public and private sector funding is secured.

### **Equalities Impact Assessment**

23. The Town Centre Business Plan Brings together in one place the policies and proposals (Local Plan, Transport Plan & Car Parking Strategy, Economic Strategy, Feethams Brief etc.) impacting upon the vitality of the Town Centre. It does not recommend any changes to Council Policy and is therefore not subject to an Equality Impact Assessment.