
DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE FOOTFALL STRATEGY

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

**Responsible Director - Paul Wildsmith,
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To approve the Town Centre Strategy.

Summary

2. Town Centres across the Country are adapting to changing trading conditions such as the increase in online shopping, Darlington is no different.
3. Significant investments have been made in the town centre in recent years to further improve what is on offer for visitors to the town centre. Much of the investments have been made by the private sector – the House of Fraser, Urban and Civic, New River (owners of the Cornmill) for example, while the Council has played a key part in bringing in more office workers to support the town and improving car parking and the riverside environment.
4. The Council has always had a key role to play in supporting and developing the town centre and following discussions with businesses the next Town Centre Strategy will concentrate on working with partners to increase footfall in the town centre by boosting the reputation of Darlington as a market town; improving the attractiveness of the town centre and removing barriers for visitors to the town centre.
5. The report identifies that funding will be sought for the strategy in the next revision of the MTFP and by seeking funding from others. Collaboration between the Council and its partners will support the delivery of the Strategy objectives. This may be in the form of sponsorship for events, as with the recent Festival of Ingenuity, or joint marketing exercises. The strategy also identifies how the performance of the town centre and the success of the strategy will be measured.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that Cabinet -

- (a) Approve the Town Centre Footfall strategy.
- (b) Receive updates on progress of the strategy

Reasons

7. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-
- (a) To ensure the Council has a focused plan to support the town centre.
 - (b) To monitor performance of the town centre.

Paul Wildsmith
Director of Neighbourhood Services and Resources

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report

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S17 Crime and Disorder	Reducing ASB in the Town Centre is a feature of the strategy
Health and Well Being	No direct impacts
Carbon Impact	No direct impacts
Diversity	No direct impacts
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	No financial impacts as a result of this report
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The strategy aims to improve the attractiveness of the Town Centre therefore directly impacting on Perfectly Placed
Efficiency	The strategy aims to utilise the Councils and partner resources in a collective more efficient manner.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Background

Town Centre Context

8. Town Centres across the Country need to constantly adapt to changing trading conditions, in particular the challenge presented by on-line purchasing, Darlington is no different. The Council has in recent years responded to these changes by focusing on three key activities – increasing the number of people who live in or close to the town centre, increasing the number of people who work in the town centre, and improving transport access to the town centre- Retailers are diversifying and embracing new approaches such as utilising the “Click and Collect” market, and focusing on customer service. There has been a significant growth in the night-time leisure offer.
9. Businesses across the town centre will respond to the changing environment and the Council has a role to play in creating the conditions where businesses can adapt and grow by helping in attracting new businesses and increased visitor numbers to the town centre. This report concentrates on the Council’s role in supporting the town centre.
10. The Council has worked with partners over many years to develop and support the town centre using its land holdings to deliver developments and create opportunities such as :-
 - (a) The Feethams Leisure Complex
 - (b) Bishopsgate House accommodating 500+ new jobs in the town centre
 - (c) The Multi Storey Car Park
 - (d) The new Riverside Park
 - (e) Bringing a new partner and investment to Darlington Markets
11. Work continues in this area with plans to attract further jobs to the town centre with office developments planned for Feethams and the Local Plan, which is currently in development, aims to deliver a flexible planning framework that gives business the best opportunities to adapt and grow in the town centre.

Town Centre Strategy

12. Previous strategies have delivered such successes as outlined above, the latest strategy has been developed in discussion with town centre businesses and the key factor raised in such discussions is raising footfall (visitors) in the town centre. With on-line shopping growing fast the goal for all successful town centres is to retain the current catchment area and to extend the reach to a wider population. The Experience Darlington report, recently considered by Cabinet, outlines the actions required to attract more visitors to Darlington. Success in that will have a direct benefit for this Strategy.

13. Set out below at the key elements of the Darlington Town Centre Footfall Strategy which will be supported by detailed action plans to deliver each aspect in conjunction with businesses and other key partners such as the Police.

Boosting the reputation of Darlington as a market town

14. Work with the new leaseholders of Darlington Markets to :-
 - (a) Re-launch and promote Darlington markets
 - (b) Redevelop the Covered Market
 - (c) Improve the Outdoor Market with a view to more frequent markets and a review of locations
 - (d) Provide specialist markets and market events during the year
 - (e) Deliver a covered market that includes a wider range of products with longer opening hours with a view to exploiting the night time economy.

Improving Attractiveness of the Town Centre

15. Maintaining and improving the physical aspects of the town centre including the public realm and private property.
16. Animate the town centre with events and activities that deliver “let’s go to Darlington there is always something to see and do” feel within the Council’s overall approach to tourism and culture.
17. Market and promote the town centre locally and within tourism outlets to raise awareness of what is available.
18. Work to reduce vacant properties and to improve the offer by attracting new businesses or by changing use. Work to retain current business.
19. Creating a DBC town centre staff resource to co-ordinate and deliver elements of the strategy.
20. Improve attractiveness of the two major routes to the Town Centre from the Railway Station, Parkgate and Victoria Road.

Removing Barriers

21. Work with partners to reduce fear of crime and anti-social behaviour
22. Improve signage and way finding so people know where things are and how to get there

23. Review ease of town centre car parking for short term collections and the overall parking policy for the Town Centre.
24. Review and develop how we can best work together to promote the town collectively – how do we do this post Business Improvement District (BID).

Resourcing the Strategy

25. Local Government Finance has seen very significant reductions in recent times so Council resources are restricted. Recent budget cuts have undoubtedly been a contributing factor to some of the issues faced in the town centre. The Council will look to reprioritise resources to the town centre where possible.
26. Key to major success is attracting funds from the Government and the Combined Authority and looking to collectively raise resources to deliver improvements that will benefit all stakeholders. Whilst this will be challenging, it is clear that collective investment is required if improvements are to be made. The loss of circa £300,000 a year raised by the BID in previous years will be hard to replace.
27. The Council will utilise the £20,000 it previously paid to the BID by way of its share of the levy to support the strategy. Bids for additional resources to deliver the strategy will be considered as part of future MTFP reviews.
28. There are opportunities, with closer working between businesses, transport providers etc. to collaborate on joint marketing, promotions and events. In this way the collective resources of all those with a direct interest in a thriving town centre can be harnessed.

How will we know the Strategy is working?

29. Although public perception of how good a town centre is can be a very good way of measuring success, the reality of regularly measuring success is key and below are the key indicators we will use to measure how successful this strategy is, with a review of its health on an annual basis. The dissemination of these indicators will assist to inform the perceptions relating to the Town Centre :-
 - (a) Total footfall in the town centre and Split by day/night/seasons
 - (b) Total Car Parking usage in the town centre
 - (c) Percentage of vacant retail units in the town centre
 - (d) Number of bus passengers to the town centre
 - (e) Residents satisfaction with the town centre measured via the community survey

- (f) Town Centre Crime Performance Indicators and data
- (g) Business Confidence – via survey of business
- (h) Town centre cleanliness – measured by the Environmental Protection standard via regular audits.