

COUNCIL
24 SEPTEMBER 2020

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Economy Portfolio.

Planning, Development Management and Environmental Health

2. One of the large housing sites between Burtree Lane and the A167 has moved closer to commencement as they have signed their S.106 legal agreement. Development on the early phases of Stag House Farm including the link road are underway.
3. Further work is being undertaken relating to the Development Management Charter, which sets out the reasonable expectations of both developers and objectors within the Development Management System. This is an important document which sets out how the development process operates in an open and transparent manner. In addition, a report is being finalised which will form a new planning enforcement protocol. This will demonstrate how we deal with planning matters when things go wrong within the planning process. A report will be brought to Members of the Planning Committee for consideration when complete.
4. A planning application has been approved for the refurbishment of the crematorium with associated chapel and facilities.
5. Further negotiations are continuing with regard to the Burtree Garden Village Government designation.
6. The Development Management process is continuing to operate as normal, including the delegated process and Chair delegated process, despite most members of staff working from home. The interim consultation processes that were introduced initially following the lockdown have now been reinstated and are operating as normal.
7. The Planning enforcement/compliance service is now working as normal including site visits seeking to resolve planning disputes and breaches. Members of the public can access this service either via our web site or contacting the officer via his telephone.
8. Members of the Planning Committee agreed at the last virtual meeting in August to grant planning permission for housing at Neasham Road, which incorporates a large proportion of affordable housing which will contribute significantly to the identified shortfall of affordable housing stock within the Borough.

Environmental Health

9. The 2020 Air Quality Annual Status report has been submitted to Defra and forms part of the Review and Assessment process under the Environment Act 1995. The report details the results of the nitrogen dioxide diffusion tube monitoring carried out at 15 locations across the borough and demonstrates compliance with national air quality objectives. In addition, the report includes information on steps taken to address air quality such as a strategy to expand the vehicle charging point network, raising awareness to members/public on impacts of poor air quality, highway improvement works and reductions in license fees for taxi vehicles that are electric, hybrid or use other sustainable fuels. The conclusions within the report were accepted by Defra and the feedback positive advising that the Council continue their good work.

Covid-19

10. Environmental Health Officers have been busy dealing with the Governments Covid 19 guidance in relation to the retail and hospitality sector. Officers have been advising businesses on compliance which has allowed the majority of the businesses in the town to reopen. A particular emphasis has been given to the hairdressing and beauty sector who have received a visit as the controls in place in those premises is particularly important. Officers have also carried out night time visits in partnership with Durham Constabulary to licensed premises to ensure that track & trace procedures are in place and that licensees are aware of their responsibilities.

Gypsies & Travellers

11. Environmental Health Officers have dealt with 11 illegal encampments in the Borough since lockdown began. This year has been particularly busy due to the cancellation of the traditional Appleby fair. Officers used legal powers to move the camps from public land and ensured that the areas were vacated quickly.

Commercial Waste issues

12. Covid-19 has been a particular problem in relation to commercial waste bins as restaurants and take-aways have closed or waste companies have struggled to collect waste. Environmental Health Officers have dealt with many businesses to ensure that the responsible owners have taken remedial action to clean up their bin areas.

Local Plan

13. The Local Plan was placed on deposit on Thursday 6th August for 6 weeks and this period ended on 17th September. The Governments White Paper suggests radical reforms to the Planning System including new look Local Plans. This will not affect the current Local Plan as we are at a point where it will be progressed under current regulations.
14. A briefing note will be prepared for Members on the significance of the changes suggested in the White Paper.

Climate Change

15. Following Cabinet's approval of the Strategy in July and subsequent clearance through call-in, work is progressing on a rolling action plan. Initial conversations have been held with each of the Lead Officers tasked with developing actions for their areas. We are also exploring potential funding sources to ensure we take advantage of all opportunities as they arise.

Town Centre

16. Since non-essential retail has been allowed to reopen followed by the hospitality trade, we have seen the town centre slowly become busier and more vibrant. A large amount of signage and floor stickers are in place to remind people to socially distance and we must continue to reinforce this message to help keep people safe and show Darlington is a safe and secure town to visit. Officers and Cabinet colleagues have worked closely with town centre businesses as we have introduced changes to enable social distancing and will continue to monitor and adapt the changes required as guidance is updated and requirements change.
17. In Coniscliffe Road, Skinnergate and Blackwellgate, we are running a pilot scheme of road closures to allow the hospitality businesses in those areas to put pavement cafes out into the road enabling them to trade safely increasing their capacity. The road closures are in place Thursday to Sunday, 4.30pm to 10.30pm, allowing pavement cafes to operate from 5pm to 10pm. The pilot started in August with a planned end of late September/early October. Officers have also put out bunting and flags to improve the overall feel and atmosphere of the area. At the time of writing, the pilot has been well received by the businesses in the area and customers who have enjoyed the experience. We will review the overall success of the pilot with the businesses involved and, if they are keen to continue in future years, officers will look at how more permanent arrangements can be put in place that will enable a similar offer to operate throughout the summer months.

Business Investment Team Update

Business Enquiries

18. Business development enquiries are starting to slowly pick up following the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, enquiries for development land availability and new business start-up opportunities appear to be at the forefront.

Covid-19 Response & Recovery Work

19. The Strategic, Response and Recovery Roles:
 - (a) Strategic Role – working across Durham/Darlington and Cleveland LRFs to monitor the economic impacts
 - (b) Response Role – based on the feedback from data monitoring, develop appropriate responses to emerging situations

- (c) Recovery Role – signposting and supporting business enquiries, and establishing business development workshops to help local SMEs

Local Impacts

- 20. In terms of local impacts, there are a few available measures which demonstrate the impact on the local economy in such a short period of time and in real-time.
 - (a) Claimant Count: - The most immediate measure is the unemployment rate – the claimant count. The claimant count has significantly increased after March 2020, and in particular, within the age grouping 25-49 which has increased by over 1,000
 - (b) Footfall Count: -Latest data from the footfall cameras provides a good proxy measure on the responsiveness of the town centre to opening again.
- 21. Key headlines from this data shows:
 - (a) Footfall for the year to date is 17.9% down on the previous year.
 - (b) The number of visitors counted for month commencing 6 July 2020 was 598,605.
 - (c) The busiest day in month commencing 6 July 2020 was Saturday 1 August with 40,576 visitors.
 - (d) The peak hour of the month was 11:00 on Saturday 1 August 2020 with footfall of 5,027

Local Actions

- 22. The commencement of lock down brought many challenges to the economic life of Darlington.
- 23. Since lockdown was first introduced, there has been a rapid increase in the number of businesses seeking advice and support from the Council. Most of these enquiries were seeking emergency financial assistance.
- 24. The Council has managed and developed grant schemes to business on behalf of the Government. The approach has been to try and make the schemes as user-friendly as possible, within the confines of Government guidance, and to ensure public money is safeguarded against fraud. The Council worked hard to get funding to businesses as quick as possible, and as a result, the Council featured in the top 10 quickest LA payers in the country.
- 25. The Business Support Grant system saw 2,093 businesses receive grants of £10,000 and £25,000 with a total of £23.765m being awarded.
- 26. Business rates discounts worth £16.6m were also efficiently awarded to 682 local retail, hospitality and leisure businesses providing full exemption for business rates for 2020/21.
- 27. A Discretionary Grant scheme has been implemented with a total of £1.2m Government funding, 105 businesses qualified for grant support.

28. There has been a wide variety of Government support to business, not administrated by the Council, and although the Council's Business Support team have provided support as appropriate, the Tees Valley Combined Authority agreed to be the single point of contact for business support across the region and the established a call centre for this purpose.
29. As a Council we have worked to help businesses in the town centre open safely, which has not been without challenges, but our overriding guidance in such decision-making, must be public safety.
30. Throughout the Covid-19 crisis, Darlington Borough Council have continued to provide business with a wide range of other support, including:
 - (a) DBC have refreshed on-line content for the Covid-19 business Support web pages to provide a clearer approach to the information, guidance and support for businesses, employers and employees
 - (b) Promotion of TVCA grant programme for kickstarting leisure and hospitality restart.
 - (c) Significant town centre promotion, including Thursday to Sunday road closures to encourage evening economy
 - (d) Pease Pudding traders market restarted in Town Centre
 - (e) £25m Town Bid submitted to Government
 - (f) Looking to extend YEI and DWP programme to help unemployed and NEETS

Recovery Planning

31. The impact on the local economy has yet to be fully realised, but already, there is an emerging picture of differential impact, across industry sectors, occupations and places. As a more granular understanding is developed of the intensity and scale of impact, it's already clear that some parts of the economy will face long term obstacles to growth, and others that may never recover.
32. Because of the impact of Covid-19, Darlington's entire economic base has been adversely affected. Throughout the summer, officers have been working with colleagues and stakeholders across Tees Valley to develop a Tees Valley Recovery Plan, setting out how the Tees Valley can form a key part of rebuilding the UK economy. The key priorities/themes of the draft Recovery Plan include:
 - (a) Confident People, Confident Businesses: Ensuring our businesses and residents are resilient and confident during the re-opening of the economy. This theme of activity will encourage people spending and enjoying Tees Valley again, which will help firms survive and build confidence in the region.
 - (b) Education, Skills & Jobs: This theme of activity will provide opportunities for young people, preventing long term scarring as a result of unemployment and developing the skills necessary to support productivity driven growth.
 - (c) Agile Companies & Competitive Workers: This theme of activity will enable firms to be agile and our workers to become more competitive, enabling these key components of our economy to readily adapt to changing economic conditions. More broadly, this will enable a rebound from the crisis and ensure resilience to the evolving demands of a changing world.

- (d) The Building Blocks for Growth: This theme of activity will deliver transport, business and digital infrastructure to attract firms and investment, creating jobs for decades to come. This will create construction sector jobs for today, whilst building to support the future economy.
- (e) Tees Valley - fit for Health & Social Care: Putting Tees Valley at the forefront of ensuring a resilient UK by delivering critical services to the national economy and securing long term jobs in our area is another theme of activity.
- (f) Bringing Business Home: The final theme of activity is establishing Tees Valley as an exemplar region in green technologies, leading the way in low carbon sectors, delivering innovation and meeting the UK's net zero target.

Business Week 2020

33. Plans are underway for this year's Darlington Business Week 2020. With the significant challenges faced by all our businesses, this year's activities will focus on recovery and diversification. In the circumstances and the challenges of social distancing, this year's programme of events will be entirely virtual and on-line. Topic themes and ideas include:

- (a) Business Resilience planning
- (b) Diversification and utilisation of technology
- (c) Building Your Business through Workforce Skills Development
- (d) Marketing, engaging with old customers and attracting new ones.
- (e) Retail and Leisure sector support

Promoting Local Procurement Opportunities

34. The redevelopment of Darlington, Middlesbrough, Hartlepool and Teesside Airport Railway Stations will be transformational for the Tees Valley region and provide thousands of passengers with faster, more frequent services. Work is due to start soon on these projects and it is important that local businesses and local workers feel the benefits from these investments. To support this, local supplier events are to be held to engage with local SME's and share information on forthcoming opportunities.

Councillor Alan Marshall
Economy Portfolio