

COUNCIL
1 FEBRUARY 2022

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

Council's Continued Response to COVID19

1. Darlington, like the rest of the North East and the UK, is now feeling the impact of the Omicron variant, and we are now seeing new cases rising quickly in our communities. The uptake of COVID vaccinations has been identified as the key action to help reduce the impact of Omicron through reducing the spread of the virus and the severity of disease in those who do catch it. The authority also continues to support the NHS in its efforts in rolling out the vaccination programme in Darlington, including the booster which is essential to help reduce the impact of Omicron, with more community pharmacies and the Primary Care Network now offering appointments for a booster to their patients as well as the NHS Vaccination Centre at Darlington Arena continuing to offer appointments. Testing remains a vital part of the response to the pandemic and the authority continues to offer Lateral Flow Testing through the community collect programme which is available from different venues across the borough. With the impact of Omicron, the situation continues to develop and change rapidly. The authority continues to work with all partners to coordinate and support the response in Darlington.
2. As with the other industries and sectors, the Council is facing pressures in terms of the ongoing provision of services whilst also supporting the response to the pandemic. The increased number of Covid cases and requirements of self-isolation is an ongoing challenge but staff have shown incredible resilience, flexibility, and ingenuity to ensure services continue to be provided.

Strategic Transport

3. The Tees Valley Combined Authority and the Local Authorities are developing a comprehensive programme of investment in Transport. The City Region Sustainable Transport programme is a 5-year investment programme across the Tees Valley. The details are being finalised with the Department for Transport for the £310m programme of schemes that will see investment in sustainable transport. Bus operators continue to face a challenging recovery from Covid. Feedback is awaited from Government on a Bus Service Improvement Plan that will help support recovery and respond to the government policy direction to improve bus services for all.
4. I continue to work with the Tees Valley Mayor to inform the rail industry as they develop plans for future services across the Country. Meetings are planned with the industry this year to press the case for Darlington and the Tees Valley. National Highways are developing plans for their next investment period and I am engaging at a high level with National Highways, to outline the case for Darlington Northern Link Road and investment in the Strategic Road Network across the Tees Valley.

Darlington Station Improvement Project

5. The Council continues to try and secure the properties required to deliver the project by agreement with the compulsory purchase process running in parallel. A public enquiry was held in January 2022 and we await the outcome from the Planning Inspectorate. The development work to deliver the project and all the approvals necessary continue to be progressed in parallel with work being scheduled to commence later this year.

Darlington Towns Fund

Background

6. The Darlington Council, Town Investment Plan was submitted to Government at the end July 2020. This was well received and resulted in an agreed Heads of Terms allocation of £22.3M in October 2020.
7. In addition to this, application was made in 2020 for £1M Forward Funding, which was successfully received by the Council in October 2020.
8. The Darlington Towns Board is in place and meets on a regular basis, alongside this there are three sub-groups, each with a focus on a key subject matter within the investment plan.

Forward Funding

9. Yards Phase 1:
 - (a) Works to improve the environment of both Buckton's Yard and Clark's Yard has been progressing throughout 2021 and are nearing completion, with new timber conservation doors, well stocked planters, colourful new benches, lighting, improved shopfronts with professional signwriting and general improvements undertaken.
 - (b) The project has enabled preparation for further works in these Yards, including new shopfronts, accessway improvements from High Row and a green wall in Buckton's Yard. These items are now part of the main Towns Fund Skinnergate and the Yards project, which covers the wider intervention area.
10. Town Centre lighting enhancements:
 - (a) Projects have been designed and completed to provide enhanced lighting of the external of St Cuthbert's Church, the Joseph Pease statue, and the Market Hall Clock Tower. The clock tower is able to have colour variations within the installed lighting. A further lighting enhancement scheme is planned to link with the Central Library refurbishment works
11. Town Centre Wi-Fi:
 - (a) Free publicly accessible Wi-Fi has been installed throughout the town centre and along Victoria Road up to the entrance of the railway station.

12. Acquisition of Northgate property linking with the wider Towns Fund interventions within Northgate.

Town Investment Plan

13. The strategic approach adopted within the Investment Plan focuses on three key areas within Darlington:

- (a) North Road Gateway – *four projects*:

- (i) Railway Heritage Quarter
- (ii) Northgate House and North Road
- (iii) Linear Park/Skerne Valley
- (iv) Edward Pease House

- (b) Victoria Road Gateway – *two projects*:

- (i) Bank Top (Darlington Station)
- (ii) Victoria Road

- (c) Town Centre – *three projects*:

- (i) T Levels (College)
- (ii) Adult Skills
- (iii) Skinnergate and the Yards

14. A business case has now been completed for each of the nine intervention projects and agreement made by the Town Board to progress with submission of business case summaries to government. Three of the summary documents were submitted in July 2021 and the remaining six in November 2021.
15. Subject to review and agreement of the summary documents by government, the funding allocated within the Heads of Terms will be released on an annual basis, in line with an agreed financial profile.

Funding

16. Allocation total £23.3M:
£1M Forward Funding
£22.3M Towns Fund

17. Out of this £23.3M allocated, the Council has received capital to date of:

- (a) £1,000,000 Forward Funding (Yards; Wi-Fi; Lighting).
- (b) £1,065,000 for Adult Skills project.
- (c) £1,470,000 for T Levels project.
- (d) £1,372,000 for the Skinnergate and the Yards project.

(e) £948,400 5% advance programme development funding.

18. Further funding is anticipated in 21/22 (March 2022) following agreement of the submitted business cases summaries to government.

Project Progress

19. The funding received has enabled the progression of the projects:

(a) Railway Heritage Quarter:

(i) The main project is progressing alongside our partners in the Tees Valley Combined Authority.

(b) Northgate House and North Road:

(i) A draft masterplan has been completed for the Northgate House/Gladstone Street area.

(ii) A Conservation Area Study and a heritage focused Urban Masterplan has been developed with our partners in Historic England.

(iii) Engagement has commenced and will be accelerated with 2022.

(c) Linear Park/Skerne Valley:

(i) A Conservation Area Study and a heritage focused Urban Masterplan has been developed with our partners in Historic England.

(ii) Engagement has commenced and will be accelerated with 2022.

(d) Edward Pease House:

(i) One of the required properties has been acquired by the Council.

(ii) Historic surveys and reports are underway.

(e) Bank Top (Darlington Station):

(i) The main project is progressing alongside our partners in Tees Valley Combined Authority.

(f) Victoria Road:

(i) Engagement has commenced and will be accelerated with 2022.

(g) T Levels:

(i) Darlington College is identified to deliver T levels from September 2022.

- (ii) Detailed design work is now underway.
- (h) Adult Skills:
 - (i) The acquisition of the Northern Echo building has progressed and is imminent.
 - (ii) An architect has been procured to progress initial design of the facility.
- (i) Skinnergate and the Yards:
 - (i) Public Realm/Highway engagement is underway.
 - (ii) Residential/retail scheme is progressing, with a start on site targeted early 2022.
 - (iii) Continuing on from works completed within the Forward Funding, Yards Phase 1, engagement and design of numerous proposed property enhancements has progressed.

Climate Change

- 6. In October, the Cross Party Climate Change Working Group visited a housing project in Stockton owned by the Thirteen Group to learn how they have incorporated air source heat pumps into their homes.
- 7. The December meeting had presentations from consultants delivering the district heat network feasibility study and from officers on our approach to traffic management planning.
- 8. I have written the first of a new series of blogs for the Sustainable Darlington page of our website. These blogs will enable us to demonstrate what we are doing as well as invite guest bloggers to share their thoughts on sustainability and climate change and encourage local action.

Councillor Mrs Heather Scott OBE
Leader of the Council Portfolio