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**LEADER AND EFFICIENCY AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO OVERVIEW**

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**Updates and issues**

1. I plan to use each Council report to update Council on important issues for the Borough to ensure Council is sighted on them and able to debate them. For this Council, the issues are highlighted below
2. **Town Centre** – master planning work is underway to produce a revised plan, which I have said many times before, will involve the more residential property and changes of use from retail. Councillors will have already seen such changes starting with residential conversions taken place in Grange Road and others planned in Horsemarket. A significant residential development may well result if the Northern Echo building sale is completed and such a development would potentially see the face of that area change significantly. The area, with the derelict Sports Direct building has potential for significant improvement and further residential opportunities and these will be explored as part of the master planning exercise along with consideration of what can be achieved in the Skinnergate area/the Yards and the Markets area.
3. **The Autumn Budget** - pleasingly gave help to businesses generally and Town Centres specifically. A relatively small national fund is to be set up to assist the redevelopment of Town Centres and we will be submitting appropriate bids in due course. I will also be working with Tees Valley Combined Authority colleagues to try and secure further funding to help improve the Town Centre. In the budget a new business rate relief was announced and this will further help small businesses but I do believe a more radical look at business rates in town centres is required. Finally on the Town Centre it was great to hear recently of awards for some of our restaurants, Darlington is seeing growth in the restaurant market with new and planned openings happening regularly – congratulations to Stable Hearth, Al Forno and Restaurant Celebrus for their recent awards.
4. **Environmental Enforcement** – the six month trial is underway and I am watching with interest the responses to the consultation and I would encourage people to feed back their views to influence our decision making on this topic.
5. **Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy** – I was pleased to agree this at Cabinet and the challenges we face in supporting the most vulnerable in our Borough are huge, but I believe if we and partners work hard and smart we can make a difference. Good jobs and homes are key factors so I am very pleased to see progress on Symmetry Park where 2,500 new jobs will be delivered and agreement at Cabinet to buy land at McMullen Road to deliver Phase 3 of the development, 50 excellent new Council houses. The first phase were all let in just under a week which shows

the quality of the houses, phase 2 is now under construction.

6. **Darlington Station** – I will be attending the Tees Valley Combined Authority Cabinet the day after Council and I will be supporting the approval of £25m for the Combined Authority budget to facilitate the improvements to the train network and connectivity for the Tees Valley. Such investment together with Government funding, will improve the economic viability of the region which in turn will bring more and better jobs to help tackle the inequality in the region and the Borough. See more detail about the station later in my report.
7. **Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)** – I have been working with officers and Cabinet colleagues to produce the latest four year MTFP. We are awaiting final figures from the Government but I am confident we will be presenting a four year balanced budget albeit we will need to continue to wisely use revenue balances to achieve this. It is a great credit to this Council that we are in a relatively sound financial position given the loss of £42m of government grant in real terms. It is clear we will not regain these resources in the short term so we must plan without them and it is my intention that we work hard to maximise the benefits we can from the resources we have, we need to continue to be innovative and concentrate on making a difference. To do this, growing the economy is key to underpin our financial position and create investments to help the most vulnerable, we must deliver inclusive growth where all benefit.
8. **Housing Revenue Account Borrowing Cap** – I was pleased to hear of the lifting of the cap following years of lobbying by Local Government. The flexibility will enable the Council to review its plans for investment in affordable housing and hopefully significantly increase the numbers we plan to build. Such further investment may enable us to look at converting redundant commercial buildings therefore improving the environment of the Borough.

### **Transport Portfolio – Tees Valley Combined Authority**

9. As Council will be aware as Leader I sit on the Cabinet of the TVCA which is the executive decision making body of the Authority. It is important to remind Council that no decisions can be made by the TVCA without agreement of the Cabinet which includes the five Leaders of the Tees Valley Councils and the Mayor. For the current administrative year I also fulfil the role of Deputy Mayor. The Leaders across the Tees Valley are responsible for themed portfolios and TVCA Cabinet has approved my appointment to lead on Strategic Transport, below is a flavour of the work that my portfolio includes.
10. There is a significant work programme in the portfolio that I am familiarising myself with, some key elements of the portfolio are:-
  - (a) A Strategic Transport Plan for the Tees Valley is being developed and this will be consulted upon early in the New Year. This will look to bring forward strategies for all modes of transport.
  - (b) A new Tees Crossing to increase capacity on the A19 and improve north-south access to the region is being developed. Similarly, work continues on

developing a business case for Darlington Northern Link Road and improvements along the A66 to improve east-west connectivity. There is ongoing dialogue with the Department for Transport regarding the case for funding for both of these ambitious projects.

11. The East Coast Mainline and Darlington Station are not only valuable assets for Darlington but also for the Tees Valley connectivity to the rest of the UK. At the Darlington Station Project Board the Strategic Outline Business Case was agreed and has been submitted to the Department for Transport. This is the first milestone in a new process for Rail Enhancement projects set out by the Department for Transport. Work is now progressing on the next stage of development to further make the case for funding. Darlington Station is a key building block in the Tees Valley Rail Strategy that can enable a better rail system to be developed for the area. Work is also under development at other stations on the network including Middlesbrough, to improve capacity and customer experience. The above projects are key to maximise the benefits that will arise when HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail services are operational in the early 2030's. HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail will both significantly reduce journey times making the region better connected to the rest of the UK.
12. The Transport Portfolio is significant in terms of ambition and value. This requires close partnership working with the Tees Valley Authorities and National Agencies. The Transport Portfolio provides excellent opportunities for both Darlington and the Tees Valley to secure investment in the transport network and the infrastructure to support the Economic Growth planned for the region.

### **Cabinet - Efficiency and Resources Portfolio Update**

13. Cabinet received updates of the outcome of cases which have been determined by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman (HO) since the last report in December 2017 and with details of complaints, compliments and comments which have been received by the Council during 2017/18 under the Council's Corporate Complaints, Compliments and Comment Procedure.
14. In accordance with Contract Procedure Rules, Cabinet has also received the Annual Procurement Plan and approved the assessment of strategic and non-strategic contracts.
15. Cabinet agreed the Council Tax Support Scheme for consultation with no major changes and the report is on this agenda for Council to consider.
16. Subject to receiving Housing Investment Funding, Cabinet has approved the release of that funding for the Stag House Farm housing development. It has also approved the acquisition of approximately 4.73 acres of privately owned land at McMullen Road for the development of approximately 50 Council properties.
17. Cabinet reviewed the regular quarterly financial updates on capital and revenue and its pleasing to note overall the financial position is on target however there are

pressures on the Children's services budget due to significant increases in looked after children mirroring the national picture.

18. At the Cabinet meeting on 6 November 2018, Members received an update against the agreed Capital Investment Fund, gave approval to increase the fund to £50 million and agreed that any repaid loans be recycled back into the Investment fund. Council has previously approved the principle and establishment of this fund to be used for innovative investment opportunities beyond the traditional Treasury Management Strategy in order to achieve greater returns given the low returns on investment. As I mentioned at Cabinet, Officers are working hard to use this fund to deliver income to replace lost government grant. A good example being the first housing Joint Venture which will deliver the Council income in the region of £1 million Council will be considering this report elsewhere on this agenda.

**Stephen Harker**  
**Leader of the Council and Efficiency and Resources Portfolio**