

COUNCIL
12 MAY 2022

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 and Development Management

2. The Planning Enforcement/Compliance Service currently has 83 planning enforcement cases under investigation and 77 cases have been satisfactorily resolved by the Monitoring and Compliance Officer since the beginning of September.
3. Since the beginning of August 2020, 1288 applications have been received of which 49 are categorised as major. 970 decisions have been made in this period, including Committee Decisions, Chairs Delegated and Delegated Decisions.
4. Final negotiations have now concluded regarding the applications at the Railway Quarter with Historic England and other interest groups. Planning permission and Listed Building Consent has now been granted and preliminary work has now commenced.
5. Notices under section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act [untidy land and buildings] have been served on a property in Skinnergate and Northgate House.
6. Natural England (NE) together with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUCH) announced on 16 March 2022 that the entire administrative area of Darlington Borough Council is now located within the catchment area of the Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast Special Protection Area (SPA). Under the Habitats Regulations, those planning authorities falling within the catchment area must carefully consider the nutrients impacts of any projects, including new development proposals, on habitat sites and whether those impacts may have an adverse effect on the integrity of the site that requires mitigation.
7. This has an immediate impact on all planning applications which relate to all types of overnight accommodation, such as new dwellings, care homes, student accommodation, holiday accommodation etc and impacts all developments for one dwelling upwards. It also affects other applications where development may impact upon water quality, including those seeking to discharge planning conditions relating to foul and surface water drainage for a range of development proposals. This matter will need to be considered as part of the application process before a decision can be made. It is likely to require the submission of further information from developers to enable this matter to be fully assessed and to identify if mitigation is required and how this will be provided. The Council are therefore unable to determine many types of application without full consideration of this matter. Effectively this means a pause on all residential applications. Officers are currently working with the 42 other Authorities within the catchment area to establish a way forward.

Climate Change

8. A replacement Climate Change Officer has been in post since 11 April. This officer replaces the earlier recruitment, who unfortunately left the post.
9. Milestones for the action plan are in place and will be reported to Cabinet on a 6-monthly basis.
10. We are looking at system that will help us identify the carbon footprint of our supply chain. At present, these carbon emissions are not reported as they are extremely difficult to assess. Case studies from other authorities and organisations using the system demonstrate that they have made monetary savings as well as carbon savings.
11. We have been asked by BEIS (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy) to be one of 28 pilot studies across the country testing the government's proposed approach for designating heat network zones. These are areas within which heat networks are the lowest cost, low carbon solution for decarbonising heat for an area.

Environmental Health

12. The Environmental Health Section has responded to 1233 requests for service in Quarter 4 2021/2022. The main categories of these requests are:
 - (a) Equalisation of term lengths as far as possible and the start and end of term.
 - (b) Food – 93
 - (c) Licensing – 85
 - (d) Noise – 188
 - (e) Planning Enquiries – 70
 - (f) Refuse – 80
 - (g) Pest – 163
 - (h) Personal Searches – 369
13. Officers within Environmental Health are responsible for inspecting and permitting certain industrial processes within the Borough to control and reduce emissions to air. The Council currently regulates processes which include the coating of engines at Cummins and timber manufacture at Nobia (Magnet). Other processes regulated by the Council include cement batching, mobile crushers, animal feed, petrol filling stations and vehicle resprayers. The frequency of inspection and the annual subsistence charge paid to the Council is determined by risk. Generally, within Darlington businesses are compliant and recently the new boilers installed at Nobia (Magnet) and replacement cremators at Darlington Crematorium have improved emissions.
14. As a result of the pandemic, Food Safety Officers were instructed by Government not to visit premises unless there was a risk to public health, ie in response to concerns raised. This was to limit the spread of infection.
15. As a consequence, as at April 2021 we had in excess of 400 food hygiene inspections which were overdue, some of which would be classed as high or medium risk.

16. The above figure is in addition to those which are due moving forward-approx. 500 for 21/22 and a further 250 for 22/23.
17. Additionally, we had application forms from more than 150 new food businesses, many of which were operating from domestic premises and would also be classed as high or medium risk and some remain un-inspected at the current time.
18. We have implemented a recovery plan in line with Government guidelines to clear this workload, but the timescale for this is two years from introduction **ie to be complete by April 2023**. Steps include:
 - (a) All current premises inspected in accordance with risk category A-E.
 - (b) Triage process in place looking at risk category, overdue date, scale of business.
 - (c) New premises classified as High or Low risk and priority inspected accordingly.
 - (d) Overtime available.
 - (e) Use of Food Hygiene Consultant.
19. Officers can report that the inspection process is progressing well and it is expected that the inspection process will be on track by end of March 2023 as required.

Business Investment

20. As part of the Government covid support, Darlington Council has successfully provided over £3.8million of Additional Restrictions Grants to local businesses, awarding the final payments in early March 2022. These grants have been administered alongside more than £40m of national Government grant schemes throughout the pandemic. The Additional Restrictions Grant is a discretionary grant scheme for businesses from sectors that may have been severely impacted by the pandemic and the restrictions, and that were not supported by mainstream Government grants. A wide range of business sectors have been supported with ARG funding including hair and beauty, childminders, driving instructors, garages, health & fitness, hospitality, photographers, pet care, taxi drivers, event venues and suppliers, hospitality and leisure, gym and fitness, and travel and tourism business.
21. The Council, together with key partners and stakeholders, has submitted an expression of interest for Darlington to become the location for the headquarters for the new Great British Railways. The submission highlighted Darlington as an ambitious place with a diverse and resilient economy grown out of a tradition of technological and entrepreneurial innovation. Bringing GBR to Darlington will offer a range of levelling up opportunities to the town and help the local economy thrive. The current timeline will see an announcement on which areas have been shortlisted for Great British Railways to be made in May 2022, before a non-binding public vote and finally a decision made in summer 2022.
22. Following the nationwide lifting of Covid restrictions, there has been an increasing number of business support and networking events taking place in person, targeted at a wide range of business matters. These events have included the Teesside Expo, North-East Chamber Exchange, and Darlington Business Club. These events provide an opportunity to establish and develop relationships and promote the benefits of Darlington as a business location.

23. The number of business enquiries received continues to rise, as business confidence returns following the lifting of all covid restrictions. The main areas of interest are industrial land availability and town centre retail/leisure space.

Darlington Towns Fund

24. A business case has been completed for each of the nine Towns Fund intervention projects and business case summaries were submitted to Government following agreement by the Towns Board. Three of the summary documents were submitted in July 2021, agreed and initial funding released. The remaining six were submitted at the end of November 2021. Agreement to the six has been received from government and approval given for release of 2021/22 funding, which was released to Darlington Council on 25 February 2022.
25. Further 2022/23 funding of the first three projects will be released to Darlington Council on the 25 April 2022 following satisfactory submission and review of Towns Fund Governance and Performance.
26. The acquired Northern Echo building is progressing with design and commissioning of required surveys. The T Levels project at Darlington College is currently awaiting return of tenders for the works. Skinnergate and the Yards project is progressing with the highway design and the design and delivery of shopfront/property improvements within the area.

Councillor Alan Marshall
Economy Portfolio