

COUNCIL
29 SEPTEMBER 2022

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform and update Members on the Leader's Portfolio since the last meeting of Council. The following are some of the areas of work under the Leader's Portfolio.

The death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

2. We were all saddened on 8 September 2022 when Buckingham Palace announced the death of Her Majesty The Queen, and we entered a period of national mourning. Plans were quickly put in place to organise for people wishing to lay flowers and a book of condolence was set up in Civic Reception for people to sign.
3. I attended the Proclamation by the High Sheriff at Durham Town Hall on Sunday 11 September, followed by the Darlington Proclamation at the Market Cross, which was well attended by the people of Darlington. On Thursday 15 September a special Service of Prayer and Reflection for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was held at St Cuthbert's church.
4. The Mayor and I have sent a letter of condolence to King Charles III to express our deepest sympathies on behalf of the people of Darlington.
5. I travelled to London to pay my respects, to sign the book of condolence at Westminster Abbey and observe The Lying-in-State of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Strategic Transport

6. The Tees Valley Combined Authority £310m City Regional Sustainable Transport Settlement Programme delivery plan for 2022/23 to 2026/27 has now been agreed with government. Investments include £86.5m on rail infrastructure projects, almost £48m in active travel schemes to encourage cycling and walking, over £46m investment in bus and almost £83m to be spent on highway maintenance and small-scale improvements across Tees Valley. The remainder is to be spent on digital transport projects, supporting decarbonisation, ensuring access to employment and education opportunities and multi-modal investments to support the Mayoral Development Corporations and regeneration of town centres.
7. The Full Business Case for the Darlington Station project was finalised and submitted by the Tees Valley Combined Authority to DfT in early August. This seeks a "decision to deliver," which would unlock the Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline Funding to support the delivery of the scheme and complement the local investment commitment to the project. The scheme contributes to the delivery of the government's Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) and is a forerunner of a number of proposed investments to improve capacity on the East Coast Main Line (ECML) as well as improving performance and reliability and capacity for services between Darlington and other parts of Tees Valley.

8. The reliability of bus services continues to be an issue that is a high priority for this Council. The Council have been meeting with Arriva to work in partnership to try and improve the situation. A strategy was put in place by Arriva to reduce the frequency of services that would enable them to focus on an improvement of reliability with the resources they had available. This strategy was introduced in June with a view to re-building service frequency over time. We are working with Arriva to ensure their recruitment plans and the impact of roadworks is also considered as part of the recovery plans.
9. Monitoring information suggests that this strategy has not been as successful that had been hoped and there continues to be issues with buses not turning up when they are scheduled to, which is reflected in feedback from passengers. Therefore, I have met Arriva senior management to seek assurance around their reliability and recovery plans.
10. Although there is some positive news in terms of driver recruitment, with a number of drivers having successfully signed up recently, the training process is such that they are a number of months away from being able to drive. We therefore continue to press Arriva on this issue, with the aim of improving the reliability situation for passengers in the more immediate future.
11. Covid has significantly impacted bus patronage across the Country and operators still requiring financial support from Government to maintain services. The recovery of bus patronage in Darlington is not as strong as other parts of the Tees Valley. Recovery of patronage is important as the fares generated support the network and without fares there could be an impact on future sustainability of some parts of the network.
12. Government have recently announced that there will be a further 6 months of bus recovery funding from October 22 to March 23, in acknowledgement of the significant challenges still being faced by the bus industry, and in the context that the role bus services have in supporting people, businesses and the economy.

Climate Change

13. The Cross Party Climate Change Working Group met on 22 August, when they discussed the Tees Valley Net Zero Strategy and progress on climate change actions.
14. On Friday 16 September I met with Councillor Snedker, the chair of the cross party climate exchange working group, for an update on the progress the group have made and the current work they are looking at. I look forward to supporting the group moving forward and will attend on an ad-hoc basis.

Darlington Economic Campus

15. DEC currently have employed over 360 people, mostly from the local area and surrounding regions. More than 1,100 roles will be based at the Darlington Economic Campus by 2025, across teams from HM Treasury, the Department for International Trade, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Office for National Statistics and the Competition and Markets Authority. In addition, the Department for Education already have a base in Darlington and will also be part of the Economic Campus.

The Government Property Agency continue to progress the development of the permanent site at Brunswick Street.

Northgate House

16. Progress continues to be made in relation to Northgate House, and the neighbouring buildings. The overall objective is to bring this site forward in future as a key development site and as such a meeting has been held with the current owners of the site on 15 August to better explore how this site can be taken forward.

Towns Fund

17. The Towns Fund Investment Plan continues to progress with work, design and engagement ongoing across all nine project interventions, in the town centre, Northgate and Victoria Road gateways.
18. In the town centre, design work is progressing at the Northern Echo building in relation to the proposed Adult Skills facility. Whilst in Skinnergate and The Yards, delivery and design work continues to provide improvement and enhancements to both the public realm and properties, in particular the improvements to the look of the entrances of Clark's and Buckton's Yards from High Row.
19. Also progressing just outside the town centre is the new T Levels facility at Darlington College, which has appointed a contractor to deliver the works.
20. In Northgate, engagement and design continues, with property acquisitions being progressed, alongside design work for the Garden Street/Weir Street area.
21. We now have the funding to enable progression of the programme, including the delivery of further enhancements for Victoria Road, and intend to progress this over the coming months.
2. Darlington's participation in the Southampton University "Feeling Towns Programme" aimed at developing an understanding of what "pride" means to different people, continues to progress well. The research team have reported progress to the Town Board.

Access to Opportunities for Young People

22. At its meeting in January 2022, Cabinet approved a programme of activity to improve the access to opportunities for Darlington's young people. Youth Employment UK have been commissioned to deliver this work. Youth Employment UK act as the secretariat for the All Party Parliamentary Group for Youth Employment and are recognised as national leaders in this field.
23. The goal is to develop a 'Youth Friendly Darlington'. This will include an on line portal which will help young people navigate the available support to gain employment and provide a route for businesses to engage with young people. In addition a 'Good Youth Employment' campaign will be launched where local employers sign up to a charter which recognises them as a high quality employer for young people.

24. Good progress has been made with both the online portal and campaign due to launch in the autumn.
25. A key aspect of the way the work is being developed is consulting with young people. A Youth Advisory Group has been formed made up of young people from Darlington which provides essential advice, guidance and support to the project taskforce.

Cost of Living

26. On 14th September Councillor Renton and I had a successful meeting with senior leaders of the voluntary and community sector in Darlington. Discussion focused on how the Council and the sector can collaborate effectively to best meet the needs of the people of Darlington. Further meetings are being scheduled to take this forward. An immediate focus will be on helping those most in need through the current rise in the cost of living.
27. The Government will shortly announce an extension to the Household Support Fund (HSF) as part of a number of measures to provide help with global inflationary challenges and the significantly rising cost of living.
28. The Council has already successfully delivered a package of measures in previous rounds of HSF helping people with the cost of food and energy. Officers are currently exploring options and we will again seek the support and advice of the voluntary and community sector.



Councillor Jonathan Dulston
Leader of the Council Portfolio