

COUNCIL
26 JANUARY 2023

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY PORTFOLIO

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

Development Management

2. There have been 236 complaint cases recorded in 2022. 191 closed with justification.
3. Since the beginning of August 2020, 1,490 applications have been received of which 63 are categorised as major. 2044 decisions have been made in this period, including Committee Decisions, Chairs Delegated and Delegated Decisions.
4. 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. Satisfactory conclusions have been arrived at, relating to both buildings, which will involve significant external appearance changes to the betterment of the Town Centre, supporting the work currently being undertaken under the Towns Fund. Work has now commenced.

Nutrient Neutrality

5. Since the last overview report, progress has been made with colleagues across the Tees Valley to deal with this issue on a catchment area basis. Our Local MPs have also been briefed and have raised the issue at Westminster. Since the last report, further guidance has been issued by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, supported by a Ministerial Statement, which has clarified the position for all authorities within the catchment area, including Darlington. Essentially for the moment, new development involving overnight stays is paused until early this year, by which time Natural England will hopefully have in place a system for developers to purchase mitigation credits relating to nutrients, which will allow planning permissions for overnight stays including housing to be recommenced. There is a degree of uncertainty since the change in Government Leadership on how this issue will progress or change in the coming weeks. Guidance is awaited. Solutions have however been found on a limited number of sites to ensure that a limited supply of implementable permissions is ongoing and available.

Environmental Health

Student EHO

6. Officers from Environmental Health are currently investigating opportunities to give one or more people a role as a Student EHO, whereby they spend part of their time at college and part of their time working with us doing training/gaining the necessary experience. It is envisaged that they would spend the whole of their "gap" year with us working.

7. We have secured some funding from Public Health which is to be used to facilitate this and the post is currently undergoing Job Evaluation with a view for it to commence in academic year 2023/24

Food Hygiene Ratings

8. Post Covid officers from Environmental Health have noticed a downturn in standards in a minority of food premises, which has resulted in enforcement action and a significant reduction in their Food Hygiene Rating. Many businesses have been under the impression that if corrective action is taken a good rating can instantly be restored. However, the reality is it can take a number of inspections for officers to have confidence that these improved standards can be maintained.
9. Therefore officers, with the help of the Communications team, have recently run a social media campaign advising businesses of the importance of good food hygiene practices and the impact that failures can have on their Food Hygiene Rating.

Climate Change

10. Work is continuing to develop an adaptation plan, with the Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer speaking to SMTs. We are hoping to have an action plan for Cabinet approval by the beginning of the next financial year.
11. We have also started to look at our approach to offsetting any residual emissions that we are not able to remove through energy efficiencies and other actions.

Planning Policy

12. The consultation period on the second draft of the Skerningham Design Code has now ended. At the time of writing the consultation period had not ended so I am unable to give a written update, but I will give a verbal update at the meeting. A further report will be submitted to February Cabinet and hopefully a Design Code can be adopted in February.
13. I am pleased to confirm a new Conservation Officer has been appointed who will commence employment towards the end of February. It is important we have conservation advice not only to advise on the exciting projects that are happening in our historic quarters but to ensure we meet our statutory obligations in relation to Conservation Area Appraisals and support our Development Management Team.
14. The housing market remains buoyant with starts and completions meeting targets which reflects the economic confidence in the Borough despite the global economic and environmental challenges.
15. Officers are working with colleagues across the Tees Valley and wider area to tackle the challenges of Nutrient Neutrality and Biodiversity Net Gain, I will give further updates in a future report.

Business Investment

16. Darlington Jobs Fair is back, bigger and busier than ever. Last year's event was a huge success with hundreds of people visiting and taking advantage of the chance to meet with employers and training providers. For those seeking new employment, the Darlington Jobs Fair is the place to be when it returns to the Dolphin Centre on Thursday 9 February 2023. There will be opportunities for all levels of experience and education backgrounds from over 70 different employers with hundreds of job opportunities available. Amongst the organisations already set to attend are: Aldi, Lidl, Durham Police, Arriva, EE, NHS, Darlington Economic Campus, Darlington Borough Council, Premier Inn, Royal Air Force, Nobia, Rockcliffe Hall, Premier Inn, Student Loans and Darlington College.
17. 2023 sees the end of many of the European Structural Funded business support programmes. Already, a number of business support activities in the Tess Valley have been either terminated or scaled down. There is now a transition phase, as plans are underway to develop and implement new support mechanisms via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and will see new business support activities roll-out during 2023.
18. Businesses are facing many challenges as a result of the rising costs of living. The Business Investment Team have collated a range of information and resources to help local business access the support it may need. Further details can be found at:
<https://www.investindarlington.co.uk/cost-of-living-business-support/>

Towns Fund

19. Delivery onsite continues on the Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancement to properties and public realm. Construction continues on the college T Levels project, with a forecast completion date of February 2023. In addition, the Rail Heritage Quarter, part funded by the Town Fund, project continues.
20. Works associated with the west of station improvements at the top of Victoria Road are progressing, with the enabling demolition work now contracted.
21. Elsewhere design work continues at the Northern Echo building in relation to the proposed Adult Skills facility.
22. In Northgate and the Garden Street/Weir Street, design and property acquisitions/negotiations being progressed. Including the acquisition of number 156 Northgate and ongoing acquisition negotiations for Northgate House.
23. The development of the Creative Strategy for Victoria Road is in final draft form and has been shared with the local community at an engagement event, held on the street. This will assist in identifying opportunities and a clear strategy for further enhancements to the street leading up to Bank Top Station. Including improvements to exterior of selected properties and the re-establishment of the pocket park at the junction with the ring road.

Councillor Jamie Bartch
Economy Portfolio