

COUNCIL
20 JULY 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.
2. It is an honour to be appointed to this post, which I held in the past. With colleagues, I will seek to progress an agenda of inclusive growth. Specifically, economic growth that benefits as many people as possible in the Borough. This will require a step change in engagement. Additionally, I will seek to progress and champion the Climate Change and net zero agenda, and in doing so seek to work with the wider business community, other public sector and third sector organisations and residents more proactively. I will also focus on ensuring that the Local Plan, although contentious, works for residents. I will also seek to refresh the Town Centre Strategy. Finally, as Heritage Champion, I will seek to ensure renewed focus on our heritage particularly given events planned for 2025.

Environmental Health

3. The Environmental Health Section has responded to 1,168 requests for service in Q4 2022/2023. The main categories of these requests are:

(a) Food	174
(b) Licensing	80
(c) Noise	133
(d) Planning Enquiries	83
(e) Refuse	79
(f) Pest	181
(g) Personal searches	229
4. Work has been undertaken as part of our 'Care for Clean Air' campaign and for Clean Air Day 15 June to promote the use of sustainable transport and to encourage the ditching of the car and to walk and cycle whenever possible to tackle air pollution.
5. The Air Quality Annual Status Report for 2023 has been submitted to Defra which gives more information on action taken to improve air quality by the Council and reports on monitoring results for 2022.
6. Officers continue to regulate premises that have an environmental permit issued by the Council the aim of which is to prevent, control and minimise emissions to air. These premises are inspected by officers at a frequency determined by risk assessment to check on compliance with permit conditions. Compliance is generally good.
7. Following some major accidents in the headlines about unsafe practices and poorly maintained bouncy castles, Environmental Health have issued a safety warning to anyone looking to hire a bouncy castle. Advice was given to check that the bouncy castle has been

tested regularly by a competent person and that it comes with operating instructions including information on the number of people allowed on the bouncy castle at any one time and any height restrictions.

Climate Change

8. Recognising the voices of residents and signalling increased ambition and focus, a motion to Council has been submitted to both move forward the net zero target to 2040 (or before) and recognise that the Council has a significant influencing role with business, other public/third sector organisations and the wider public.
9. Emissions for the council operations in 2022/23 were 6,461 tonnes CO₂. We are on a zero-carbon tariff for our electricity, so our carbon emissions, taking that into account were 4,381 tonnes.
10. The solar panels on the roof of the Town Hall generated 9,028 kWh.
11. At the end of 2022/23 we have been working on 126 of the actions in the climate change action plan. 50 of those actions have been completed and 72 are on track for delivery. If the Motion to Council is successful, this plan will be revised.
12. The annual report will soon be available on the council's website.

Building Control

13. Building Regulations applications and works progressing as normal, no issues to be reported.
14. Dangerous structures, the owner of 30 Haughton Rd, the fire damaged building, has agreed to place perimeter fencing to prevent access close to the building.
15. Safety at Sports Grounds. No issues to raise. The application for a Special Safety Certificate for the James concert at the Neasham Road Arena is progressing with further information to be provided for consideration.
16. Just in the past week Building Control Officers together with colleagues from Environmental Health and other agencies have been addressing issues relating to Northgate House. A comprehensive improvement notice has been issued to the owners to ensure unauthorised access to the building can no longer be achieved .

Business Investment

17. Business investment enquiries continue to increase. The main areas of interest are commercial office space, town centre retail/leisure space and industrial development land availability.
18. The Business Investment team continue to re-connect with a wide range of local businesses and stakeholders. The main feedback from these visits highlights current opportunities for growth, as well as business concerns around recruitment, labour supply and interest rates.

19. The Business Investment Team continue to promote Darlington as a place for business growth and business investment, including attending the Tees Valley Business Summit, one of the largest business support events in the Tees Valley.
20. To support some of Darlington's young businesses achieve their growth potential, a Business Growth Masterclass has been hosted in collaboration with Business Doctors. The aim of this event is to deliver an interactive workshop for early-stage businesses looking for sustainability and growth. Businesses from a range of sectors took part, and each business benefited from 1:1 mentoring support and individual business assessments.
21. Darlington Jobs Fair took place on the 29 June 2023 - bigger than ever, with more employers offering an even wider range of job opportunities on the day. Over 100 exhibitors took part, with vacancies available from a variety of sectors including finance, management, engineering, transport, IT, administration, health and social care, communications, hospitality, and many more. In addition, a new 'Support for Work Hub' was available to offer help and guidance to those individuals who wanted additional support in their search for a job, such as careers advice, childcare help, information for anyone on a health journey or with a disability or struggling with transport to work and volunteering as a first step to employment. The translation hub also made a return offering help with translation services for those whose English is not their first language.
22. The deadline for submission of designs for the proposed new Grade A office development on the Former Sports Direct site was on 30th June 2023. Officers are currently assessing the submissions and a report will be prepared for a forthcoming Cabinet meeting to go through the conclusions of this exercise with recommendations.

Estates & Property

23. Residential Development at Neasham Road continues to grow with all the foundations for the proposed Council Houses completed and several of the structures progressing well. Many the Esh/JV houses are now occupied, and sales are continuing despite the change in market conditions. Proposals to bring forward the remaining undeveloped part of site are well advanced and subject to planning permission it is anticipated that activity will start on site later this summer.
24. Ingenium Parc continues to attract occupier interest and negotiations for the development of an 8-acre site on Plot 1 for a recognised distribution operator are well advanced with potential for over 200 new jobs.

Town Fund

25. The Towns Fund continues to deliver on the 9 interventions detailed in the 2020 submission. The project to enhance Skinnergate and the Yards has achieved some notable improvements in particular regarding shop fronts and public realm. A procurement process to identify a partner for the refurbishment of the Northern Echo Building is nearly complete. The Council is seeking an imaginative development partner to design, redevelop, repurpose, and once complete to operate, manage, and maintain the entire building.

26. Progress is being made on several buildings along Northgate including 156 Northgate which was acquired in 2022. The objective is to refurbish the building into a high-quality office building and is currently awaiting a decision from the Planning Department. The preparation work for a submission of a Compulsory Purchase Order for Northgate House is continuing.
27. Improvements of buildings along Victoria Road has commenced. This work will enhance an important gateway to the town from the main train station.

Indoor Market

28. Following the successful delivery of Phase 2 of the Market Improvement Programme it is anticipated that Phase 3 will commence in a few weeks. This part of the programme will focus on the traditional trading area of the market. The plans ultimately aim to re-position the retail offer within Darlington Market to attract a younger and wider demographic and replace the current ten empty units with new contemporary outlets designed to attract a new generation of trader. That said, we must focus on evolution not revolution and ensure the market caters for old and new customers.
29. In addition to the above during June two new operators opened in empty units along High Row which have added new and exciting offers to residents and visitors to the town.

Planning Policy

30. A report will be presented to this Council meeting seeking adoption of the Skerningham Garden Village Supplementary Planning Document. This policy is necessary to protect the interest of residents. It is not the end of story; many more milestones will need to be crossed if Skerningham is to be progressed including Master Planning and Planning Applications. Further, I have made it clear that engagement must be ongoing with local people.
31. Work is ongoing on a new Housing Strategy for the Borough; it is currently at the internal consultation stage but will be coming forward to Cabinet shortly to seek approval for public consultation.
32. Guidance for applicants on Health Impact Assessments will be produced shortly. This will be an important policy which seeks to place health and wellbeing more centrally in the context of Planning.

Conservation

33. Historic England has recently agreed to remove the Victoria Embankment Conservation Area from the 'at risk register'. Officers are investigating whether or not an Article 4 Direction may be suitable for the Area.
34. Northgate and West End Conservation Areas remain on the 'at risk register', investigations are ongoing on how we can ensure they are removed.
35. Following the Heritage Action Zone Project on the Stockton and Darlington Railway (S&DR), it is proposed to enlarge the Northgate Conservation Area to include rail assets

and to create a new Conservation Area at Middleton St George associated with the S&DR. A report will be prepared for Cabinet later in the year seeking approval for consultation on the above.

Ecology

36. The Council has recently been successful in appointing a full time Ecologist. This is a critical appointment due to the ongoing issues with Nutrient Neutrality, the introduction of the statutory requirements associated with Biodiversity Net Gain and the statutory requirement for national coverage of Local Nature Recovery Strategies. Darlington will be the only authority in the Tees Valley to have an ecologist in post.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio