

**COUNCIL**  
**20 JULY 2023**

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**LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW**

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**Purpose of the Report**

1. This is my first overview report since the May elections this year. It is a huge responsibility, and a privilege to be elected as the Council's Leader. I have spent much of my time since being elected meeting with officers being updated on the issues facing the Local Authority. The following are some of the areas of work under the Leader's Portfolio.
2. Meeting officers has reminded me of the fact that we have a work force that is committed to providing the best services possible for Darlington. Many officers work to address some very challenging situations faced by some residents of the Borough. In addition officers are having to contend with the fact the Local Authority continues to face very severe financial pressures. In my report I wanted to acknowledge the dedication of our work force.
3. It is abundantly clear Council faces very difficult financial challenges. The current MTFP, set by the previous administration, shows an annual overspend, on average, of £7.5m over the next four years. This overspend will deplete our unallocated reserves entirely. This is clearly not sustainable. It is clear too, we continue to face increasing demand, especially in adult and children's social care. However, despite these challenges there are many, many positive things happening in our Borough. My report and other Cabinet reports give an overview of some of the things we should celebrate, together with the challenges we must address.
4. A focus of many of those meetings with officers, and Cabinet colleagues, has been on the Council Plan. The current Council Plan covers the period 2020-2023 and is due to be refreshed. This document articulates the Council's vision for the coming years. The refresh will be influenced by a number of factors. Its direction must be underpinned by data, for example from the evidence provided by the Darlington profile report. The Council is being led by a Labour / Liberal Democrat partnership, and election manifesto promises by those Councillors will need to be reflected in the Plan. The wider impact of global factors such as post-Covid, Russia/Ukraine conflict will inevitably impact on the Council plan.

**Darlington Station**

5. Work on the Darlington Station project is progressing well with the temporary car park on the cattle market site now complete and operational. On the west of the station demolition work is progressing. On the east, demolition is complete and piling work for the multi-story car park is underway.
6. We will continue to support TVCA, who are the lead on the project with support from Network Rail and LNER, to deliver this major project that is a key building block in TVCA's rail strategy.

## **Bus Services**

7. When the Tees Valley Combined Authority was formed it became the Local Transport Authority for the Tees Valley area and with this came responsibility for public transport provision. The duty of the Combined Authority is to consider both the need for services and then ultimately decide on whether to provide services or not. The financial responsibility for the provision of supported services also sits with the Combined Authority, so they must consider supported bus services as part of wider investment plans and financial planning.
8. Public Transport is essential in so many ways, getting people to work, education, into town centres and to health appointments. As a Borough our residents, businesses and visitors will be impacted by any decision on bus services by bus operators and the Combined Authority. Therefore, both officers and Members will continue to work to influence the best outcome for Darlington.
9. TVCA have responded to the recently announced £1.5 million of Bus Service Improvement Plan+ fund for the Tees Valley for 2023/24. Whilst it is good news that TVCA have decided to use some of the Government funding to protect some of the services proposed to be cut by Arriva, there may be a gap in provision whilst new arrangements are mobilised. Unfortunately, not all of the services proposed to be cut by Arriva are going to be protected or reinstated.

## **Climate Change**

10. Labour's local election pledge to bring forward the target date to reach carbon net zero to 2040 will be debated via a motion put to the Council later on the agenda today. Tackling climate change is a challenging task for the Local Authority – but it is not a task we can delay.
11. The council's first sustainability event was successfully held over 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> June. A wide variety of stalls were present to showcase some of our local businesses and community groups and to provide lots of free activities for families.

## **Armed Forces Day**

12. On Friday 23 June I attended the annual flag raising for Armed Forces Day in the market square. The event was well attended by Deputy Lt Christopher Cunningham-Shore, the Mayor of Darlington, Councillors, representatives of the armed forces, uniformed services and around eighty Year 5 school children from various Darlington schools. The organisation of the event was a collaboration between Democratic and Events staff working with 50 Squadron Royal Signals, the various veterans' associations and Royal British Legion.
13. Our Armed Forces champion - Councillor Rebecca Baker - together with many Councillors attended the event. It is an important event in the calendar. It is an occasion to speak to both serving members of the Armed Forces and veterans, and a time to reflect on the varied work undertaken by our Armed Forces, and in some instances the sacrifices made by individuals.

### **LGA conference**

14. I attended the LGA Annual Conference in Bournemouth from the 4-6 July 2023. This is an excellent chance to meet with Councillors and MPs (Angela Rayner, Lisa Nandy, Michael Gove and Ed Davey amongst others) from across the political spectrum, and officers. It is an ideal opportunity to hear best practice and discuss experience from around the country.
15. A common theme from across the country, and across the political divide, was that all Local Authorities are facing very difficult financial times, to a greater or lesser degree. Over a decade of funding cuts by Government have left most Local Authorities struggling to properly fund statutory services that provide essential support to vulnerable residents.

### **Hullabaloo in the Park**

16. There is an exciting programme of events to take place in the South Park during the Summer holidays aimed at children under 10 years old and their families, and I joined other key sponsors at a breakfast launch on Thursday 29 June to promote this and confirm Darlington Borough Council's support.
17. Theatre Hullabaloo is a pioneering organisation that makes, tours & promotes theatre for young audiences, aged 0 – 16 years old. Theatre Hullabaloo believe that access to high quality theatre is a cultural entitlement of all children. Through their work in communities, they create unique creative opportunities that enrich young lives and support young people to negotiate an increasingly complicated world.

### **Meetings with key partners**

18. Since being elected as Leader I am keen to develop important relationships. As a small Local Authority to ensure we provide the best we can for our communities we must continue to work with a range of partner organisations. To help foster those relationships I have been meeting with a number of key partners – and will continue to do so on an ongoing basis.

**Councillor Steve Harker**  
**Leader of the Council Portfolio**