

COUNCIL
28 SEPTEMBER 2023

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.

Darlington Station

2. Work on the project is progressing well. Demolition and site clearance on the Eastern Gateway is complete, piling work is complete and work has begun to erect the steel frame for the new station building and multi storey car park. CGI images of the new station have also been released to give a sense of what it will look like when complete.

Bus Services

3. Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) was allocated £1.5m of BSIP+ funding for 2023-24. Working collectively with all local authorities, TVCA has already used some of the funding to intervene on several of the service withdrawals made by Arriva. Further details are available at connectteesvalley.com. The second phase of work will involve 'kick-starting' a package of service enhancements where there is the potential for them to become commercial over time. In Darlington, this includes a West Park extension and a Lingfield Point connection. Procurement of the services is now underway.
4. The DfT funded £2 fare cap has been extended until October 2023. This will be followed by a longer-term fare cap of £2.50 that will run from 1 November 2023 to 30 November 2024.
5. In terms of the Arriva concessionary fares settlement appeal, TVCA has now submitted all evidence to the adjudicator. The adjudicator's decision is now awaited, but TVCA has not been provided with a timeframe within which the decision will be made.

Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) fund

6. TVCA has been successful in applying for £572,000 of LEVI capability funding to provide increased capacity up to 2025 to deliver the LEVI capital fund project. TVCA and all the local authorities are working collaboratively to bid for £6.5m from the LEVI capital fund, which needs to be submitted in November 2023. A Tees Valley Strategy is also being developed to inform future infrastructure roll-out and will be used to shape the application.

Climate Change

7. Following Council's revision to the Council's climate change target – both in terms of our target date of 2040 to become carbon neutral and resolving to play a role in working with other organisations across the Borough - we have new representation on the Cross Party

Climate Change Working Group. The Leader is now a full member of the group along with one representative from each of the Political Parties.

8. At the first meeting of the Group since the elections on 24 August, Councillor Snedker was re-elected as Chair of the group. Meetings will be held every two months.

Durham Constabulary Chief Constable

9. As members will be aware, Jo Farrell has been appointed as the new Chief Constable for Scotland. I'd like to place on record my thanks for her work as Durham Constabulary's Chief Constable. She will be missed by her colleagues, and the wide range of partners with whom the Police work, including this Local Authority.
10. I was part of the interview panel which appointed a new Chief Constable – Rachel Bacon – who is currently serving as Deputy Chief Constable of South Wales Police. At the time of writing this report the appointment is pending the confirmation of the Police and Crime Panel.

Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA)

11. At the TVCA Cabinet meeting on 22 September the portfolios for each of the 5 Tees Valley leaders were agreed as follows:
 - Education, Employment and Skills - Councillor Bob Cook;
 - Business Growth and Net Zero - Councillor Alec Brown;
 - Inward Investment – Mayor Chris Cooke;
 - Creative Place - Councillor Mike Young;
 - Transport and Infrastructure – Councillor Stephen Harker
12. I have attended a number of regional transport related meetings. In particular, I attended the Transport for the North, Rail North Committee on 13 September. The committee was presented with a draft response (which the meeting agreed to endorse) to the ticket office closures that is currently being consulted upon. Understandably, great concern was expressed over these proposals. The report noted that 85% of stations in the North faced closure, and in the North East only 2 would remain open. In summary the report made the case that: the consultation process is flawed; the proposals will have a detrimental impact on the North and will have a particularly adverse effect on more vulnerable groups; the proposals do not have a strong business case and are therefore poor value for money. The report acknowledged that there has been a shift in how people purchase rail tickets, but that there is still a significant proportion of rail travellers who still use ticket offices. It is also the case that having staffed ticket offices is one means of ensuring safety for travelling passengers.

External meetings and engagement

13. Finally, in conclusion, I have continued to meet with local third sector, public sector and businesses. In any circumstance such meetings help to build relationships with the Local Authority, but more so in the current climate it is vital so that organisations that are working with the most disadvantaged in our communities can collaborate most effectively.

Councillor Steve Harker
Leader of the Council Portfolio