

COUNCIL
30 NOVEMBER 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.

Climate Change

2. Work is continuing with teams across the Council to pull together our new climate change action plan.
3. The climate change strategy has been revised and will be coming to Cabinet on 5 December, where our new trajectory will also be discussed.
4. The Climate Change Officer post has been advertised and we look forward to welcoming a new member to the team in due course.

Towns Fund

5. The Town Fund interventions continue to progress across the town centre and at the Northgate and Victoria Road gateways to the town centre. The tender to procure a partner to design, refurbish and manage the former Northern Echo building has been published. The tender period is due to run until the 8 November with evaluation and appointment following on from this.
6. Work on Skinnergate and the Yards is continuing with improvements to several shop fronts on Skinnergate itself and the Yards. Work to improve the public realm in Mechanics yard is designed and scheduled for completion in November/December. The redesign of Coniscliffe Road is currently ongoing. The refurbishment and redevelopment of 156 North Road into quality office space is also in the statutory planning approval process. Options and feasibility for Edward Pease House in Northgate have commenced. Improvements to Victoria Road have commenced.

Business Investment

7. Business investment enquiries continue, with the main area of interest from new businesses looking to establish either leisure or retail offers in the town centre. There are several ongoing enquiries for town centre commercial office space.
8. The Business Growth Masterclasses have continued, delivered in collaboration with Business Doctors. Businesses from a range of sectors have taken part, and each business benefited from 1to1 mentoring support and individual business assessments.
9. The Business Investment Team have been working with CPI and National Horizons Centre to establish the bioscience sector as a key priority within the Tees Valley Innovation Plan.

There are three clusters in the Innovation Plan: Bioscience, Digital and Creative, and Net Zero. The plan highlights the many business innovation assets across the Tees Valley and presents the opportunities for bioscience growth in Darlington in a positive and collaborative way, highlighting Darlington Science Park as a major asset.

10. As part of National Apprenticeship Week, Darlington Jobs Fair will return in February 2024, with up to one hundred local employers and support organisations offering current vacancies, training, and support opportunities. A wide range of local employers will be promoting their opportunities, with a variety of roles on offer including finance, engineering, transport, IT, administration, health and social care, hospitality, production operatives, and logistics. The 'Support for Work Hub' will also return, offering help and support for people to get that job, including 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.
11. As part of National Careers Week, Darlington will be hosting STEMfest Tees Valley. This two-day event (6 and 7 March 2024) aims to encourage and motivate young people in the STEM subjects. Working closely with local businesses, the event is designed to engage and inspire young people from Darlington and the wider Tees Valley in the STEM subjects. Around 35 to 40 businesses will deliver fun, interactive sessions relating to their industry, and it's anticipated that up to 1500 young people will attend. The event is free to attend for both exhibitors and attendees.

Environmental Health

12. The Environmental Health Section has responded to 1379 requests for service in Quarter 2 2023/2024. The main categories of these requests are:

(a) Food	175
(b) Licensing	89
(c) Noise	252
(d) Planning Enquiries	62
(e) Refuse	100
(f) Pest	288
(g) Personal searches	231
13. Officers from Environmental Health are taking part in a Government consultation on Unregulated Cosmetic Procedures. The government's first-ever [consultation on treatments](#) - also known as aesthetic procedures - will be used to shape a [new licensing scheme](#) for practitioners and cosmetic businesses which operate in England. This could include age limits and restrictions for high-risk procedures, including those involving injecting fillers into intimate parts of the body.
14. The aim is to make non-surgical cosmetic procedures – including Botox, laser hair removal and dermal fillers which are currently unlicensed – safer as thousands complain of 'botched' procedures. Any new licensing scheme would protect patients from potential harm associated with poorly performed procedures. This will provide reassurance to people that wherever they go to get their treatments, they will receive the same high standards of practice.

15. Environmental Health successfully prosecuted the owner of A1 Rubbish Removals Ltd for an offence under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 of disposing of controlled waste in a manner likely to cause pollution to the environment or harm to human health. This followed an investigation into the burning of waste and complaints about smoke from a field behind Whessoe Villa, Burtree Lane, Darlington. The owner was fined £649 and ordered to pay costs totalling £150 and a £64 victim surcharge.
16. The Air Quality Annual Status Report 2023, reporting on the air quality monitoring carried out during 2022 and measures to improve air quality, has been approved by Defra. Air quality levels across all monitoring sites around the Borough remain below the annual air quality objective for nitrogen dioxide.
17. Following on from the 'Care for Clean Air' campaign funding has been applied for as part of Defra's Air Quality Grant 2023 to 2024 which will award at least £6 million to Local Authorities in England. If the bid is successful, it is proposed to design and broadcast a radio campaign on the subject of engine idling, to improve public awareness, encourage behavioural change and to reduce vehicle emissions.

Planning Policy

18. A successful Developer's Forum was held in October, which was attended by more than 60 people representing various interests, subjects included: Nutrient Neutrality, Net Biodiversity Gain and Local Nature Recovery Strategies. This event continues to be well received as a positive engagement with the development industry and a unique forum in the Tees Valley.
19. The Local Plan Annual Monitoring Report will be published before Christmas.
20. The Skertingham Garden Village Design Code Supplementary Planning Document has been adopted and is available on the Council's website. The promoters of the scheme have commenced consultation on the Skertingham Garden Village Masterplan.
21. Members may be aware that the Statutory introduction of Biodiversity Net Gain as required through the Environment Act has been delayed until January. However, this Council still requires Biodiversity Net Gain through its Local Plan policy in advance of the national introduction and planning applications are being carefully scrutinised.

Ecology

22. Since starting her role at the end of July, the ecologist has been advising on many planning applications, from small scale developments to large scale projects such as at Blackwell Grange and the garden village at Burtree.
23. She has been out on-site with volunteer groups including members of DOVES, Friends of Snipe Pond, and Durham Wildlife Trust, to examine management practices on Local Wildlife Sites and nature reserves within the county. She has also met with myself at Skertingham for site walkovers.

24. She has also been working with members of the environment team, going on site to examine current management practices, and discussing future plans to work together to update the biodiversity management plans for our wildlife sites.
25. Work has commenced in conjunction with the other supporting authorities, Tees Valley Combined Authority, Natural England, and other stakeholders towards the Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the Tees Valley.
26. The ecologist has presented to a large audience at the Developers Forum in October 2023 on the subject of Biodiversity Net Gain; focusing on the basic of what it is and how it applies to developers, the legalities of implementation, and also the council's expectations when applying for planning. The feedback from the presentation has been very positive, with comments including that the presentation brought confidence back to developers regarding what is achievable with biodiversity net gain within their developments.

Estates and Property

27. Planning permission for the remaining undeveloped part of the residential development at Neasham Road (Cell C) has now been granted and the sale to the Hurworth Gardens Ltd (the Council's JV with Esh homes) duly completed. Works to Cell C have now started and good progress with regards to site infrastructure is being made.
28. The sale of one of the remaining plots of land at Faverdale East Business Park to Jaymac Pallets recently completed and works to the site are well underway and expect to be finished at the end of March 2024 weather permitting.
29. Proposals to bring Plot 1 at Ingenium Parc forward for development remain in place and while discussions continue to be positive the timeline for delivery has slipped.
30. The sale of North Cemetery Lodge has now completed, and the new owner is keen to progress a planning application.
31. The proposed residential development and parkland restoration at Blackwell Grange is continuing through the planning application process with full stakeholder engagement.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio