

COUNCIL
30 NOVEMBER 2023

OVERVIEW OF LOCAL SERVICES PORTFOLIO

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

Climate Change

2. Work is progressing to explore a town centre Car Club for residents, business and visitors. The availability of a town centre Car Club could deliver against a wide range of objectives, including achieving net zero targets through the use of electric vehicles and reducing parking pressures and congestion in the town centre.

Local Transport Plan (LTP)

3. In March this year, Cabinet approved the LTP programme of works for 2023/24, investing £3.5M in our transport network, including maintenance schemes. Below is an update on delivery of the LTP:
 - (a) Officers are reviewing responses to safe routes to school consultation at Hurworth School and St. Augustine's Primary School.
 - (b) Design work is progressing for safe routes to school schemes at Abbey School, Hurworth Primary School and Reid Street Primary School.
 - (c) Officers are reviewing the current town centre cycle parking provision, with a view to making improvements enabling parking to be safer and ensuring that supply is adequate and appropriate for use.
 - (d) Design work is nearing completion for a link forming part of the 26-mile Stockton and Darlington Railway walking and cycling route. The section runs in between the railway line and the A67 between both Mill Lane roundabouts on the A67 near Middleton St. George.
 - (e) Temporary bus stops are being installed on the route of service 6/6A in Hurworth and Middleton St George, to reflect two-way operation.
 - (f) Woodland Road Phase 1 (Local Cycling and Walking Improvement Plan (LCWIP)). Work commenced on the Duke Street section of this scheme on 26 February 2023 with the work split into seven phases of work to minimise disruption to businesses. The scheme opened in October 2023, with some minor works still to complete. Officers, including our Darlington Travel Advisors, are working with the Sustrans Active Travel Hub to ensure that relevant local groups are familiar with the new route from Woodland Road to Duke Street, through guided rides, linking in with Learning and Skills.

Highway Maintenance Programme

4. Highway Maintenance Schemes on site:
 - (a) A67 Merrybent (Phase 3): Carriageway Reconstruction (0.426km)
 - (b) C39 Walworth Road, Heighington: Carriageway Recycling (0.668km)
 - (c) Unclassified Priestgate / Prebend Row: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.227km)
 - (d) B6279 Staindrop Road: Carriageway Patching (0.323km)
 - (e) Unclassified Coombe Drive: Carriageway Patching (0.534km)
 - (f) C34a Lime Lane: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.585km)
 - (g) Unclassified Bates Avenue: Footway Refurbishment (0.108km)
5. Highway Maintenance schemes due to start:
 - (a) C71 Houghton Bank, Heighington: Drainage Repairs/Carriageway Reconstruction (0.188km)
6. Highway Maintenance Schemes completed:
 - (a) Parapet Upgrades: Safety Kerb/Guardrail installation (seven sites)
 - (b) C38a Neasham Road (Phase 2): Carriageway Reconstruction (0.320km)
 - (c) Unclassified Burnside Road (Phase 2): Carriageway Construction (0.440km)
 - (d) Unclassified Barnes Road (Phase 2): Carriageway Reconstruction (0.406km)
 - (e) A167 Feethams Avenue: Carriageway Reconstruction (0.174km)
 - (f) Carriageway Micro Asphalt Contract: 31 sites (5.595km)

Bus Services

Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP+) New/Enhanced Services

7. TVCA is progressing with the procurement of BSIP+ funded service enhancements. Operators have been invited to submit tenders to operate these services with a deadline of 20 October. Officers from DBC will assess the tenders with colleagues from TVCA. TVCA's timeline estimates that if tenders are acceptable then new services could begin operating in January/February 2024. The Darlington services out for tender are below:
 - (a) Service enhancements in West Park
This proposal seeks to restore the link to the hospital via an alternative route that also serves the rapidly growing residential and retail developments at West Park Village. TVCA has been instructed to ask for costs for extending the service Monday – Saturday daytimes with options for evenings and Sundays.
 - (b) Lingfield Point/Allington Way
Arriva withdrew from Lingfield Point in April 2023. TVCA has asked for expressions of interest to restore this lost link and to better align services to shift patterns of key employers on the site.
 - (c) The Tees Valley Combined Authority have been given an indicative allocation of £3.851m from government to deliver against the priorities of the Bus Service Improvement Plan in 2024/25.

Electric Vehicle Charging Points (EVCP)

8. TVCA are currently producing a region-wide Electric Vehicle Charging Delivery Plan. The final draft is expected imminently and will be shared with members. This Delivery Plan will enable officers to seek approval of a policy for Darlington for provision of electric vehicle charging infrastructure. A number of internal working groups have been set up within the Council in readiness for this and the subsequent infrastructure roll-out required.
9. DfT allocated TVCA tranche 1 of the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure fund (LEVI) which requires an application form and draft procurement documentation to be submitted by 30 November 2023. DBC officers are working with TVCA on the submission which will allow on-street charging facilities to be provided in areas of high demand for those residents who do not have off-street parking available.

Town Centre Transport

10. In July 2023, parking charges were reintroduced in council-operated car parking facilities following the end of funding on 1 July 2023 that was agreed by the previous Council Administration. While there remains too little data to draw a conclusion about the full impact of parking charges on patterns of use in the town centre, below is an update on recent activity:
 - (a) The number of pay and display tickets issued has remained consistent through July to October 2023. The total number of parking tickets issued is lower than in the corresponding period in 2019 but usage of the Feethams Multi Storey Car Park has increased.
 - (b) The income from parking ticketing in all months since the reintroduction has exceeded pre-offer years.
 - (c) Current data suggests that the average length of stay in council-operated parking areas has increased.
 - (d) Since the reintroduction of parking charges, the number of people boarding buses in the town centre is up 10 percent compared to the same period in 2022.

Head of Steam

11. Following funding received from Making a Mark, Head of Steam's 'Museum on the Move' engaged with 542 children and over 100 parents and visitors with the Traveller Living Wagon, which visited St Teresa's Catholic Primary from 26 to 28 September. This work was carried out in collaboration with the Council's Traveller Education and Achievement Team, schools, a storyteller and Salford City Council Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Team, who built the wagon. Workshops were delivered to visiting schools to share Traveller heritage with children, to promote understanding between Travellers and non-Travellers in Darlington. Making a Mark is supported by the National Portrait Gallery, funded by Department for Education and is part of the Arts Council's Museums and Schools initiative.

Hopetown

12. Hopetown has been launched as the new name for the Rail Heritage Quarter project. This is a massive investment in Darlington's visitor economy that celebrates our rail heritage. The project is set in a massive 7.5-acre site encompassing the refreshed Museum alongside new and restored heritage buildings.
13. The Hopetown name and brand identity, launched on 26 October and has been developed by the Railway Heritage project team with support from external brand specialist Hemingway Design, led by Wayne Hemingway. The name Hopetown will be accompanied by a flexible visual identity, featuring a range of straplines, a palette of nine colours and several rail-inspired fonts (which come together in the logo), and will help to drive 300,000+ visitors annually to the attraction.
14. Consultation on the brand included a series of 1:1 interviews, group workshop sessions and high street surveys across the region as part of the preparatory work for the Stockton and Darlington Railway 2025 Celebration. The development process also took on board consultation carried out to inform the overall 'grand narrative' for this project during October 2019, with participants including rail heritage organisations, businesses and higher education institutes, primary and secondary schools, people not in employment, education or training (NEETS), local authority representatives, arts and community organisations, and Darlington Association on Disability (DAD).
15. Hopetown is more than rail heritage facility. This family visitor attraction will encompass the former Head of Steam (renamed "North Road Station Museum"), and will include an exhibition hall for blockbuster exhibitions, a 4D virtual reality time travel ride, an adventure playpark, a café, shop, and events space for festivals as well as onsite partners including the A1 Steam Locomotive Trust, North Eastern Locomotive Preservation Group (NELPG) and Darlington Railway Preservation Society (DRPS).
16. We are at the start of our journey getting ready to welcome visitors to Hopetown next year and activity will build up under the new brand. A holding page has been launched at the URL hopetowndarlington.co.uk to help with search engine optimisation and data capture. Since the name and visual identity were launched, there have been over 300 new sign-ups to the email database and more than 1000 new followers on social media. Work is underway to further raise awareness of the new attraction through both digital and traditional channels, including the rail heritage press and destination marketing organisations. Marketing activity is being tailored to appeal to the different core audience segments such as facilities and rail heritage enthusiasts. Meetings have been organised to further brief Members and Rail Interest Groups as part of the development and promotion of the brand.

Darlington Hippodrome

17. A busy autumn programme got underway at the Hippodrome, with the theatre presenting West End Musicals 'Heathers' and Gary Barlow & Tim Firth's 'Calendar Girls The Musical'; a re-imagined Frankenstein also received great reviews in October. In addition, two large theatre hires from Darlington Operatic Society ('Footloose') and Sandra Welsh School of Dance, offered audiences the opportunity to watch home grown talent.

18. During October half-term the Hippodrome hosted a 'Curious Takeover' event in partnership with Curious Arts. The free family event offered creative activities for all the family, with costs supported by the theatre's Place for Everyone Fund and Arts Council England.
19. The eclectic programming of the season supported the theatre to reach a younger age demographic, providing a pathway to the next generation of audiences.

Libraries

20. Crown Street Library reopened on Saturday 9 September following a major capital investment to restore the beautiful 1885 building. The project focused on carefully restoring heritage features, while updating and modernising facilities to improve access. More than 5,000 people visited the updated Library in the first week, engaging in a range of activities, and visitor numbers have remained between 4000-4500/week.
21. The result of the project is a majestic space with light flooding in through the glass skylights in the roof throughout. The Children's Library has an enchanted forest theme to capture the imagination with performance space incorporated. The Hive offers a modern, vibrant area for people to meet and collaborate, with a full complement of technology to support learning. The Study provides a place to work in comfort, while the Centre for Local Studies offers access to the Town's archive and expert knowledge to support this. Crown Street Gallery offers the chance to view works from the Borough Collection as well as other artists.
22. The building will be the base for an 'engagement led' approach from the Library Service going forward, with a strong programme throughout the year for residents.

Creative Darlington

23. Kay Greyson delivered a fully booked 'BIG Little Gig' in Darlington Library on Saturday 14 October. The event was promoted by Tracks Darlington, during Black History Month with Darlington Borough Council's Heritage & Culture Fund budget and with support from Darlington Library. BIG Little Gigs offer opportunities for families with young children to enjoy live music across a range of genres. A ticketed 'Hark! The Sound of Stories' event, featuring live bands alongside readings, addressing the themes of Halloween and spooky stories was held at Darlington Library on the evening of Friday 27 October.
24. Steve Bainbridge's Splendour of Steam exhibition, which ran from Saturday 9 September to Thursday 2 November included some works that were sold and saw the artist create new work while in the gallery. Exhibitions by other artists celebrating and exploring railway heritage are programmed for September 2024 and 2025.
25. A new exhibition by Leanne Jackson, bringing together three years of work exploring themes from femininity and relationships to loneliness and aging, opened for display at Darlington Library on Saturday 4 November and will run until Wednesday 13 December.

26. Tees Women Poets held three adult workshops at Darlington Library on Saturday 11 November, Saturday 25 November and Saturday 9 December, each led by a different writer. Workshops covered themes including writing other people's stories, writing characters from factual sources and writing playful poetry stories, as part of a three-year programme which has received Arts Council England Project Funding support, with Darlington Borough Council Heritage and Culture Fund budget support.

Town Centre Partnership and Events

27. A new video showcasing Darlington to attract new businesses to the town has been received positively, with over 30,000 views across all social media channels.
28. A mobile app has been launched with support from Brightwater and Heritage Lottery Fund. The 'Historical Trail' app is accessible and will continue to adapt, with the flexibility to add new trails specific to a topic, accompanied by text, visuals and audio.
29. To attract footfall and encouragement movement around the town centre, a trail was programmed in conjunction with the Trolls movie launch on 21 October, and during half term Halloween-themed characters were positioned around Darlington for visitors to find. The animations were designed to encourage people to visit and explore areas and shops in the town centre.
30. To celebrate the Diwali Festival of Lights on Saturday 11 November, an artist was commissioned to work with five schools to make lanterns. This was the first year of a lantern parade in Darlington to showcase this celebration and the Events team will look to further develop this going forward. Darlington College also worked on the event and lanterns created by the students were on display in windows along the parade route. The lanterns for Diwali utilised LED battery powered lights and were not released into the air.
31. The Christmas Lights Switch On was programmed for Sunday 19 November, attracting thousands of visitors to the town centre. The popular annual event is supported by Darlington Round Table who bring Santa's Sleigh to the event.

Environmental Services

32. Following success in Northumbria in Bloom, Darlington was invited to represent the region in the RHS Britain in Bloom Awards in the 'Business Improvement Districts/Town Centres and City Centres' category. Darlington was successful once again and awarded Category Winners and Gold in the national awards.
33. The Winter maintenance season commenced on Monday 2 October, with all teams prepared and ready to undertake duties as required.

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Local Services Portfolio