

COUNCIL
25 JANUARY 2024

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY PORTFOLIO

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

Environmental Health

2. Officers from Environmental Health are running a publicity campaign with regard to the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme and encouraging people to “Check them out before you eat out”. This follows a marked decline in hygiene standards in certain sectors of the food trade since Covid. The digital screens across the town will display bold graphics (see below) incorporating a rating award of 5, there will be an article in the next issue of One Darlington and the message will be delivered in various Council and Business publications.



3. The ‘Burn Right’ campaign has been launched by Environmental Health to educate the public on the requirements of smoke control areas, the burning of the right fuel for the stove/wood burner and the impact of wood burners on air quality. Most of Darlington is in a smoke control area and changes to Clean Air legislation were introduced by the Environment Act 2021.

Climate Change

4. We are pleased that interviews for the new Climate Change Officer have been held, and the post was offered to an outstanding candidate who started with us on 17 January 2024.
5. The revised strategy and interim action plan were approved by Cabinet on 9 January. The new Climate Change Officer will be managing the Council’s journey to carbon neutral and will work to develop the action plan further.

Estates and Property

6. Infrastructure works to the residential development at Neasham Road (Cell C) are progressing well despite the recent inclement weather.
7. Negotiations for one of the remaining plots of land at Faverdale East Business Park are continuing and are expected to conclude early in the new year.
8. 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.
9. The planning application for the proposed residential development and parkland restoration at Blackwell Grange was considered and agreed at a Special Planning Committee meeting on 20 December.
10. Terms to acquire the leasehold interest of the former Wilko's store on East Street will be reported to a forthcoming Cabinet. Following a decision solicitors will be instructed. .

Business Investment

11. The number of business investment enquiries continues to increase, with the main area of interests from the retail, hospitality, and leisure sectors.
12. The roll out of UK Shared Prosperity Funded business support activities has commenced, beginning with the launch of the Tees Valley Net Zero programme, followed by a range of other support measures such as Digital development and Supply Chain development. The Business Team are working with the Tees Valley Combined Authority to raise awareness of these schemes and encourage Darlington businesses to engage and participate.
13. The Council have introduced a new Town Centre Shop Front Improvement Scheme to extend the successful work of the Towns Fund programme. The new scheme offers grants up to £5,000 to support:
 - (a) New shop fronts
 - (b) Replacement windows/doors/repainting of shop front
 - (c) Signage
 - (d) External lighting
14. Officers from the Business Investment Team have been working on 2 forthcoming events in Darlington:
 - (a) Darlington Jobs Fair – 8 February 2024
 - (b) STEMfest Tees Valley – 6/7 March 2024

Town Fund

15. Delivery onsite continues on Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancements completed to a significant number of properties and to the public realm.
16. The Rail Heritage Quarter, part funded by the Town Fund, project continues.
17. Proposals for the former Northern Echo building continue to progress. A procurement exercise has been completed to identify an experienced and imaginative development partner to design, redevelop, repurpose, and once complete to operate, manage, and maintain the entire building. This includes the Adult Skills facility on the ground floor.
18. The proposals for the re-development of number 156 Northgate have been submitted to the Planning Authority. This property is now owned by the Council.
19. A feasibility options study for the Edward Pease House is being progressed.
20. The design of a number of property enhancements along Victoria Road are well developed and will be commencing onsite in January 2024. The improvements to the pocket park at the junction with the ring road have been completed.

Planning Policy

21. Darlington continues to be successful in developers securing Nutrient Neutrality Credits within the first scheme introduced nationally by Natural England, this has allowed the approval of over 1,600 dwellings recently.
22. Biodiversity Net Gain will be introduced as a statutory requirement in January (the date was not known at the time of writing). Officers continue to liaise with Natural England and DEFRA on the implications for development within Darlington.
23. The Local Plan Annual Monitoring Report has now been published on the Council's website.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio