

COUNCIL
21 MARCH 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. The Environmental Health Section has responded to 1,034 requests for service in Quarter 3 2023/2024. The main categories of these requests are:

(a) Food	112
(b) Licensing	103
(c) Noise	194
(d) Planning Enquiries	73
(e) Refuse	59
(f) Pest	164
(g) Personal searches	154

3. Officers from the Commercial Team of Environmental Health have been carrying out food hygiene inspections as part of their normal work. It has been noted that in some elements of the food business sector, notably in takeaways there has been a marked reduction in standards post Covid. As a result of this there has been a number of premises whose Food Hygiene Rating has been reduced due to a lack of compliance with relevant food hygiene legislation. Additionally, there has been the following enforcement action:
 - (a) Thai Lemon 149 Northgate was formally closed due to a significant rodent infestation. The Food Hygiene Rating was reduced to 0, however the premises has not re-opened and the owner has vacated the premises.
 - (b) Curry Express 2 High Northgate was voluntarily closed due to a lack of hot water and a failure to meet hygiene standards. It reopened shortly afterwards following remedial work and the Food Hygiene Rating reduced to 1.
 - (c) Shawarma Time 151 Northgate was voluntarily closed due to a lack of hot water and a failure to meet hygiene standards. The Food Hygiene Rating was reduced to 0, however the premises has not re-opened and the owner has vacated the premises.
4. Environmental Health continue to work with the Environment Agency regarding the odour in and around Darlington found to be coming from the landfill site at Aycliffe Quarry. This site is authorised by an environmental permit issued by the Environment Agency.

Climate Change

5. We have received and accepted an invitation from Defra to take part in a local authority pilot for the adaptation reporting power granted to the Secretary of State by the Climate Change Act 2008.
6. We have begun work to undertake a risk assessment of the Borough's preparedness for climate change. This must be completed and our response to Defra submitted before the end of the year.
7. We are busy planning this year's Eco Fair, which will be in the Market Square and around the town on Saturday 8 June.

Building Control

8. Building Regulations applications and works progressing as normal, no issues to be reported.
9. In the last six months major changes to the Building Regulations, responsibilities and operating procedures, have been introduced by the Building Safety Regulator under the umbrella of the HSE for the Building Control function. Already experienced and fully qualified surveyors are now required to prove competency every four years with a professional competence audit check every two years. Surveyors are registered now with the Building Safety Regulator in line with changes to legal requirements under the Building Act 1984 and Building Safety Act 2022, to allow the service to continue from 1 April 2024. The Building Safety Regulator will now be the effective auditors of the Building Control service. Extensive procedural internal planning is in progress to align Building Control KPI's and recording of those KPI's back to the Building Safety Regulator. These changes and additional requirements/roles/responsibilities are putting further stress on the resources available.
10. Regarding Dangerous structures:
 - (a) Working together with Environmental Health, further improvements have been made by the owners to upgrade the security fencing to Northgate House.
 - (b) British Steel – Whessoe Road retaining wall. Recent structural surveys have been made by the engineers Billingham George & Partners on behalf of British Steel as to the current condition of the wall. Remediation has been recommended. Monitoring is ongoing by British Steel and their engineers.

Development Management

11. Enforcement reports relating to unauthorised development are currently increasing. Most reports continue to be solved at officer level. All more significant cases where there are ongoing investigations are updated confidentially at Planning Committee on a Monthly basis.

12. Planning permission has recently been Granted for large scale housing development at Coniscliffe Park, after a significant pause awaiting confirmation on Nutrient Neutrality and strategic highway issues.
13. Further significant housing development has also been granted planning permission on Land at Blackwell and on land opposite the former Fighting Cocks at Middleton St George.

Business Investment

14. The number of business investment enquiries remains constant, with the main area of interests from the hospitality, and leisure sectors. There has also been new enquiries for large footprint (>50,000 sq.ft) warehouse/manufacturing space.
15. The roll out of UK Shared Prosperity Funded business support activities has continued with the launch of the Tees Valley Supply Chain delivered by RTC North. The scheme offers support to help Tees Valley businesses diversify and grow by engaging in supply chain opportunities. 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.
16. More than 1500 people were welcomed to Darlington Jobs Fair, at the Dolphin Centre on the 8 February 2024. The free event was hosted by Darlington Borough Council and coincided with National Apprenticeship Week. Attracting both public sector organisations and private businesses from industries including healthcare, life science construction, engineering, professional services, manufacturing, retail, transport and logistics, the jobs fair boasted a wealth of opportunities, including local apprenticeships, for people of all ages, interests, and backgrounds.
17. Children from over 20 local schools were welcomed to the renowned STEMFest exhibition, which seeks to inspire and encourage young people to pursue careers in industries including science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Hosted in Darlington for the first time, this annual festival gives attendees the chance to take part in a series of fun-filled, hands-on activities relating to different STEM careers, while helping them to make real world connections between what they are learning in the classroom and the work environment. Over 40 local STEM businesses supported the two-day event, which was sponsored by Cummins.

Estates

18. Work has commenced on the re-development of Blackwell Parkland with restoration of the pond commencing in mid-February. Further works to the historic Parkland will continue throughout 2024.
19. Negotiations with Homes England on the infrastructure development agreement for Burtree Garden Village are continuing. If planning consent is obtained for the site work for the development of circa. 700 new homes will commence in late 2024 with the Council responsible for the building of circa 240 new homes.

Town Fund

20. Delivery onsite continues on Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancements completed to a significant number of properties and to the public realm. Public realm proposals are being developed alongside this.
21. The Rail Heritage Quarter, part funded by the Town Fund, project continues.
22. 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.
23. A feasibility options study for the Edward Pease House is being progressed.
24. The design of a number of property enhancements along Victoria Road are well developed and will be commencing onsite early in 2024.

Planning Policy

25. The Local Development Scheme (LDS) was approved by Cabinet on 6 March. The LDS is a timetable of development plan documents that the Council will prepare over the next 3 years. It is a Statutory Requirement that the Council publish a LDS and send a copy to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The LDS states we will prepare a Climate Change Development Plan Document and an update to the Design Supplementary Document.

Nutrient Neutrality

26. On Friday 26 January 2024 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) designated the Tees Catchment under the Water Industry Act (1991) as a sensitive catchment area for nitrogen. It has been designated due to the Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast habitat site being in a poor condition due to nitrogen pollution.
27. In the Tees Catchment, water companies now have a duty to ensure specified wastewater treatment works, including Stressholme and Aycliffe, are upgraded by 1 April 2030. Stressholme is located to the south of Darlington and Aycliffe serves some settlements in the northern part of the Borough.
28. This means, as a Local Planning Authority, when we are considering planning applications for development draining via a sewer to Stressholme or Aycliffe wastewater treatment works we are now required to assume that these upgrades will have been completed by 1 April 2030. This will be done by taking the upgrades in to account when calculating the nitrogen generated by a development proposed. To help with this Natural England has published an updated Nutrient Budget Calculator for the Tees Catchment that applicants will now be required to use.
29. The duty to upgrade wastewater treatment work should reduce the amount of nutrient mitigation that developers will be expected to provide by transferring some of the requirement to reduce nitrogen pollution to sewerage undertakers. However, any additional nitrogen pollution generated by a development proposal will still need to be mitigated and it be demonstrated that it is nutrient neutral.

Biodiversity Net Gain

30. On 12 February 2024 the statutory requirement for 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) as required by the Environment Act 2021, came into force for major applications. This means that all major applications submitted after that date have to prove they are showing a 10% BNG. This will come into force for other applications in April (There are exemptions including householder applications).

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio