

STRUCTURE OF FINAL COUNCIL PLAN

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FOREWORD

Our thanks to all who took part in the consultation on our draft plan, took the time to complete our survey and talk to myself and my Cabinet colleagues about what matters to you. We are also pleased to have had responses to our survey from every ward in Darlington.

This plan sets out our long-term ambitions for Darlington and priorities for action over the next few years.

Our Council is focussed on ensuring everyone has the opportunity for a good job, home and social connections - the building blocks of good health. We know Darlington is a great place to live and work. We are committed to making Darlington fairer and greener for everyone, building on opportunities and successes and facing up to the difficult challenges.

Over the previous decade inequalities across our communities have worsened. The inequality in life expectancy between the best and worst areas across Darlington is 10.6 years for women and 13 years for men.. The North East has seen the highest increase in child poverty over much of the previous decade which has restricted the chances for children to flourish. Children born in different areas of our borough have very different life chances. There are many more examples of inequalities that result in not everyone having the same life opportunities. We face long-term challenges which need long-term commitments.

Our ambitions for Darlington are for an inclusive and sustainable economy; people living well and staying healthy; with thriving places and connected communities. This is a long-term vision and the beginning of our journey that we want to make together.

At the plan's heart is our vision to be one of the best places in the UK to live, learn, work and invest - with a strong and sustainable economy, healthy thriving communities and opportunities for all. Three core principles will shape everything we do and lead to a better quality of life in the long term. All three are important and require multi-level stakeholder and community action:

Addressing inequalities - Darlington is a wonderful place to live and work and we want opportunities to be accessible to everyone. We will have a long-term focus on understanding and addressing the causes of inequality ensuring our communities are safe and can thrive.

Tackling climate change - the changing climate impacts all our lives now and we know this is particularly important to our younger residents. One of the first things we did when we came to office was bring forward by 10 years the Council's commitment to being carbon neutral to 2040.

Efficient and effective resources - we will remain focussed on the financial sustainability of the council, ensuring good governance, and delivering the best services possible with the resources we have for our residents, communities, and businesses.

The Council faces unparalleled financial challenges. Reductions in public spending between 2010 and 2019 meant the Council's budget was reduced by £46m in real terms, a 36% reduction in budget. After covid, we have seen the cost of living increasing, income

deprivation and poverty rising, high inflation and interest rates, along with a significant increase in demand for adult and children's services consuming over two thirds of our budget.

We face competing priorities – a need to address rising inequalities in our communities, at a time when we face an unparalleled reduction in the Council's budget – and so means we face challenging times.

Our plan sets out six priorities for the Council for the next three years: economy, homes, living well, children and young people, communities and the local environment. We were pleased to see clear support for our ambitions, priorities and core principles in our survey; and receive support and challenge in areas important to you. These insights have informed the development of this plan.

This is an ambitious plan that we cannot deliver alone, it requires collaboration, within the council, and with the voluntary and private sectors, key stakeholders and communities. These are both exciting and challenging times for Darlington, and we are looking forward to delivering for you. If you want to work with us, please get in touch.

[Add signature of the Leader and photo]

INTRODUCTION

The Council Plan outlines the Council's long-term ambitions for Darlington and its priorities for the next three years (2024-2027). It gives strategic direction to the Council and council services, defining priorities and shaping delivery; making clear what we will do and how we will do it.

The plan recognises the fundamental link between health, wellbeing and the economy. It is shaped by the building blocks of good health with a focus on a good job, home and social connections. The plan has six priorities: economy, homes, living well, children and young people, communities, and the local environment.

Six core themes shape our approach: data driven and intelligence led; embed core principles into decision making; deliver through key strategies and plans; model core values in our work and behaviours; collaboration and partnership working to reduce siloed working and deliver greater impact; and share key challenges and celebrate success.

We will demonstrate progress against the deliverables in six-monthly reports to Cabinet which will present the impact of our work, discuss key challenges and celebrate the successes.

OUR PLAN FOR DARLINGTON

Core Principles

Addressing inequalities

Efficient and effective use of resources

Tackling climate change

What Success Looks Like – Our Ambitions

Inclusive and sustainable economy

Living well and staying healthy

Thriving places and connected communities

Vision for the Borough

Darlington is one of best places to live, learn, work and invest in the UK, with a strong and sustainable economy, healthy thriving communities and opportunities for all

Our Priorities

Economy:

A strong sustainable economy and highly skilled workforce with opportunities for all

Homes:

Affordable and secure homes that meet the current and future needs of residents

Living Well:

A healthier and better quality of life for longer, supporting those who need it most

Children & Young People:

Best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations

Communities:

Safer, healthier and more engaged communities

Local Environment:

A well connected, clean and sustainable borough

Our Approach

Collaborate and work in partnership

Data driven and intelligence led

Embed core principles in decision-making

Deliver through key strategies and plans

Model core values in our work and behaviours

Share key challenges and share success

CORE PRINCIPLES

We will consider our three core principles in everything we do. They are a long-term commitment to enhancing the well-being of all residents and ensuring the council is able to deliver the greatest impact within available resources.

The scale and complexity of the challenge means the council cannot tackle these issues alone, but being the level of government closest to communities we have an important role to play.

Addressing inequalities

Darlington is a wonderful place to live and work and our economy is resilient and growing, but this is not felt by everybody. The gap between the people and places with the best and worst outcomes is unacceptably high and worsening. There are unacceptably high levels of child poverty and disadvantage, demonstrated by 25% of Darlington's children living in low income families, with the highest ward reaching nearly 47%. We want opportunities to be accessible and to benefit everyone. We will:

- Develop a cross-council approach based on an in-depth understanding of inequalities and their causes, with a focus on local communities experiencing disadvantage
- Ensure all new strategies and plans consider inequalities, starting with the development of an inclusive growth strategy and a review of the health and wellbeing strategy
- Strengthen partnership working with key stakeholders and the voluntary and community sector, with a long-term focus on opportunity and addressing the causes of inequality; and short-term focus on reducing the burden of the cost of living. We will work with communities to understand first-hand the challenges they face.

Tackling climate change

This is about more than reducing carbon emissions. The climate is changing, which has an impact on our lives from the risk of flooding and more extreme weather to health impacts for our most vulnerable residents. We are also all facing increasing energy costs and potential threats to energy security. There is a role for national and local government to invest in our future. We will:

- Deliver the climate change action plan to make Darlington Borough Council carbon neutral by 2040
- Involve all parts of the council in a cross-council approach to sustainability and climate change
- Work alongside our business community, collaborating with groups such as the Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership to transition to net zero
- Work with partners, government, public and private sectors and residents for a resilient Darlington so we are able to respond and adapt to change.

Efficient and effective resources

The council is facing unparalleled financial challenges with rising costs and a significant increase in demand for services. We have a responsibility to ensure residents get value for

money for their council tax and that every pound is spent efficiently and effectively. We will remain focussed on the financial sustainability of the council, ensuring good governance and delivering the best services possible with the resources we have for our residents, communities, and businesses.

Our people are our best asset and we will lead a culture of collaboration, innovation and creativity, respect, delivery and compassion, whilst maintaining focus on continuous improvement. We will:

- Deliver a balanced Medium Term Financial Plan and positive Value for Money outcome
- Deliver high quality governance and decision making
- Review and refresh the Asset Management Plan and Procurement Strategy
- Build on the Capital Project Management process by introducing an enhanced ICT system to improve efficiency and effectiveness
- Review and deliver the workforce strategy
- Maximise income through new joint venture companies, increase levels of business rates by growing the local economy, and maximising grant opportunities
- Explore opportunities to exploit digital assets to create efficiencies and increase productivity, including online delivery
- Continue to build strong relationships with partners, residents and communities.

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE – THREE AMBITIONS

An Inclusive and sustainable economy will have:

- More people of all ages in good work
- Key sectors and sites innovating and growing by creating jobs, attracting more business and investment
- A healthy, productive and vibrant business community
- A business friendly public sector supporting businesses to locate and grow
- Increased skills levels in the local labour market
- Vibrant town and neighbourhood centres providing services, retail and work for all generations
- A growing economy that supports our environment and heritage.

Living well and staying healthy will mean:

- Health outcomes are improved, and inequalities reduced
- Children and young people have the best start in life
- People are supported to be independent
- Homes are affordable, healthy, secure and meet needs
- Households are more financially secure
- Residents live longer, healthier, more productive lives
- People are active and involved.

Thriving places and connected communities will have:

- Climate resilience where places are prepared for change and can adapt, with reduced CO2 emissions
- Access to good services
- Happy, safe and secure communities with improved safety in public spaces
- Cultural, heritage and community assets
- Well-connected people and communities, with links to places within and outside the borough
- Digitally connected residents who are benefitting from opportunities offered online
- Attractive, relevant and welcoming places
- Sustainable and integrated transport across the borough and beyond.

PRIORITIES

ECONOMY - building a strong sustainable economy and highly skilled workforce with opportunities for all.

We want Darlington to have a strong economic outlook, with more businesses, good jobs and inward investment; building a strong platform for our ambitions to tackle health inequalities in Darlington. We believe in a fair society where growth benefits everyone and everyone can enjoy the high quality of life that Darlington has to offer. A good education, quality jobs and reliable income should be accessible to all.

Darlington is a great place to work, run a business and invest, and there are many opportunities for the economy to grow further. Business confidence is growing, with many new developments being brought forward by the private sector. But there are people living in poverty who cannot afford the essentials; 25% of children living in Darlington are in relative poverty.

We will work with partners to invest in the conditions needed for the economy to grow and be successful, providing opportunities for more people to benefit. This will include working closely with Darlington Economic Campus to fully realise the investment and confidence in Darlington. Furthermore, we will continue to develop our partnership with Teesside University, Darlington College, CPI and commercial occupiers at Darlington Science Park.

Key Deliverables

1. Develop and deliver an inclusive economic growth strategy to create the conditions for businesses and the economy to thrive and provide good work opportunities for residents
2. Establish a place-based partnership to support the continued renewal of the town centre delivering more jobs and more homes
3. Ensure that the Borough is safe, clean and maintained to levels that support the economy and encourage inward investment
4. Work with employers, national and local employability providers, and Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) to promote good jobs and career opportunities for all, particularly young people and those with barriers to work, to access good employment outcomes
5. Provide more education and skills opportunities for residents by delivering the Adult Skills Centre and collaborating with providers and TVCA
6. Work with Market Asset Management to deliver improvements to the historic indoor market
7. Accelerate the delivery of key sites to the market to attract private sector investment including Darlington Science Park, Ingenium Parc and Faverdale Business Park
8. Deliver the Towns Fund projects, including the refurbishment of the Northern Echo building to secure new business occupiers
9. Work effectively with Darlington Economic Campus to fully realise the opportunities this investment presents to the town and its communities.

HOMES – *affordable and secure homes that meet the current and future needs of residents*

Good housing should be affordable, safe, secure and of decent quality. Good housing is important for the health and wellbeing of residents and communities, it revitalises communities and encourages businesses to locate and create jobs.

We want to enhance the quality and availability of housing for our residents focusing on building affordable and social homes to meet demand; improving standards of existing housing; improving the energy efficiency of existing and new housing; and meeting the needs of our population as it changes, particularly our ageing population by supporting independent living.

We want to make sure that we can have a more joined up approach to homes in the borough, both within the Council and with partners in the social housing, charity, housing development and private landlord sectors.

Key Deliverables

1. Review and refresh the preventing homelessness and rough sleeping strategy, working with partners to ensure the provision of the right support and services to help people avoid homelessness and support those who are
2. Review our approach to empty homes across the borough so more quality homes are available
3. Support the delivery of more social houses and supported accommodation by building more council homes and working with other social landlords and charities
4. Develop and deliver a new homes strategy, to address housing need, including ensuring social and affordable homes across the borough, in accordance with the Local Plan
5. Continue to improve the quality of housing, through healthy home design principles and ensuring developers create greater energy efficiency in new homes
6. Continue investment in Council housing to ensure quality and greater energy efficiency
7. Ensure effective use of the Disabled Facilities Grant to enable people to remain independent in their own homes for as long as possible
8. Introduce additional licencing for homes of multiple occupation, a voluntary landlords charter and work towards the introduction of selective licencing in areas with a high number of private rented sector homes.

LIVING WELL – a healthier and better quality of life for longer, supporting those who need it most

More years in good health leads to more fulfilling lives, and a better standard of living. However, there are inequalities in Darlington across all stages of life which are influenced by broader social factors including education, employment, housing and income. We believe all residents should have the opportunity to live longer, healthier lives.

We want to support residents of every age to live well. This will require significant engagement and collaboration with the NHS, local businesses and third-sector partners. Our council has committed to improving our contact with carers and working to create a network of support for better health and wellbeing outcomes. We will support those who need it most and signpost for access to other provision and support where appropriate; and improve and promote access to activity in our community leisure facilities, to keep people healthy and active.

Key Deliverables

1. Continue to develop joint working with the NHS and key partners to support people to lead healthier lives, stay in their homes for longer and reduce hospital stays
2. Health and Wellbeing Board to agree and deliver a new strategy to improve health outcomes and reduce inequalities, and lead the creation of a health and wellbeing network
3. Develop and implement a new public health strategy, focussed on tackling health inequalities. Including developing strategies on domestic abuse, drugs, alcohol and physical activity
4. Widen participation in recreation and leisure facilities including the Dolphin Centre and Eastbourne Sports Complex
5. Deliver the key aims of the adult social care transformation plan to prevent, reduce and/or delay the need for care by supporting people to manage their own independence and wellbeing
6. Shape a sustainable and accountable care market which delivers support focussed on promoting, regaining and maintaining people's independence and wellbeing
7. Develop an Adult Social Care engagement strategy to ensure people requiring care and support, and their carers are involved in service development and commissioning activity.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE – *supporting the best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations*

Our children and young people are the future of the Borough. It is important that they are supported to be healthy, educated and confident, and live in a stable and supportive environment. We believe that all children should have the opportunity to realise their potential, and to make a positive economic, social and environmental contribution to Darlington.

The Council has a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people, ensuring their needs are met and their rights protected. We are seeing more vulnerable children with increasingly complex needs requiring help and support, with a 33% increase in children in our care since pre pandemic levels.

We want to make sure that all children and young people have good access to health, care and education provision. The following actions have been developed to meet needs and enable the best opportunities.

Key Deliverables

1. Provide a safe and supportive living environment for children cared for by the Council by enabling more children to be placed in Council foster care and, when appropriate, council run residential homes
2. Work with multi-academy trusts and schools to develop a high quality and inclusive education sector in Darlington
3. Work with the Department for Education and the successful academy trust sponsor to ensure the free school for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is developed on schedule providing vital additional specialist capacity in Darlington
4. Develop more meaningful services by ensuring children and young people are involved in service development and commissioning activity
5. Widen access of eligible children to the Holiday Activities and Food Programme which focusses on health, wellbeing and raising aspirations
6. Work in partnership with the early years sector and health services to promote school readiness and the delivery of the expansion of funded childcare entitlement
7. Refresh and deliver the Children and Young People's Plan working with services across the council, key stakeholders and children and young people in Darlington
8. Continue the successful management of the Safety Valve plan for the education budget to improve outcomes for young people with SEND, eliminate the historic deficit on funding and deliver a financially sustainable system.

COMMUNITIES – *working together for safer, healthier and more engaged communities*

Our communities are the heart of our Borough and play an important role in shaping our health and wellbeing. Safe and engaged communities are healthy places that support good health and the wellbeing of residents; attract business investment and create jobs; enable trust and collaboration; increase participation on activities that support the environment; and improve the overall quality of life for residents.

Our diversity of rural and urban communities and a thriving town centre is central to making Darlington a great place to live and work; but like all places the high cost of living is affecting residents and businesses, and there is crime and anti-social behaviour. When communities feel valued, heard and connected challenges can be more effectively tackled by working together.

We will work with communities and partners to develop multi-agency strategies to deliver action on shared challenges and opportunities that secure a thriving community environment across the Borough. Collective action will be focused on developing a shared understanding of the challenges, working together to bid for more funding and investment into the borough and our communities.

Key Deliverables

1. Support communities to remain safe and resilient by working with key agencies and communities to address anti-social behaviour and crime issues in the community
2. Work with partners to reduce the burden of the cost of living with a focus on food and fuel insecurity
3. Support and strengthen partnership working with voluntary and community groups with a focus on addressing the causes of inequality, financial inclusion, social exclusion, and vulnerable families with children and young people
4. Support a strong Community Safety Partnership to ensure the issues affecting the safety and security of our communities are addressed collectively, including addressing hate crime
5. Ensuring business activity is regulated, licensed and enforced effectively to protect the health and wellbeing of residents, visitors and businesses
6. Work with the voluntary and community sector to develop a strategy for informal volunteering which empowers people to volunteer and directs volunteering to areas of greatest need, including working with Darlington Cares to deliver an enhanced volunteering programme.

LOCAL ENVIRONMENT – *a well-connected, clean and sustainable borough*

Darlington is a thriving borough known for our railway heritage and our mix of urban and rural communities. We are the transport gateway into the region, with a vibrant family friendly town centre and growing economy. Our town centre is a destination for events and experiences alongside a growing independent retail offer. Our access to nature, parks and green spaces is often recognised as a big contributor to making Darlington a great place to live and work.

Working with TVCA, service operators and residents, the council will deliver good and affordable transport, infrastructure and digital connectivity that enables safe travel, exercise and access to employment and education. Investing in our heritage and culture is important in preserving the identity of our communities, delivering regeneration and economic impact.

Updating our planning documents will ensure that future developments are sustainable and positively impact our local environment. We will also continue to work with residents and other partners to protect and enhance our borough's parks and open spaces. The following key actions are focussed on delivering these core foundations.

Key Deliverables

1. Enable improvements in transport systems by working in partnership with TVCA and public transport operators to deliver the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement programme and the improvement of bus facilities and reliability of services
2. Work with local stakeholders and businesses to promote a diverse and accessible programme of events that maximises footfall in the town centre and has a positive impact on the local economy
3. Introduce food waste collections and support residents to increase overall recycling rates to move towards the national average
4. Celebrate the opening of Hopetown and deliver a successful 2025 festival programme that helps to promote Darlington as a destination for visitors and investment
5. Work with statutory bodies to progress studies of flood risk in Darlington and access funding to mitigate the impact of climate change.
6. Deliver revised supplementary planning documents that guide better design in new developments and contribute to a sense of pride in place.

OUR APPROACH

Collaborate and work in partnership

Working in partnership is a fundamental principle of how we intend to deliver the Council Plan, we will collaborate across services and externally to maximise the impact of our work. We will nurture and enhance our long-term relationships with businesses, voluntary organisations, our communities and other public sector agencies based on trust and mutual respect. We will utilise existing partnership arrangements such as the health and wellbeing board, public sector executive group and the voluntary and community sector engagement group and where needed we will establish new partnership arrangements for example for the new Long-Term Plan for Towns.

Data driven and intelligence led

We will base our strategies, plans and key decisions on key data, intelligence and insights, particularly from engagement with the public and our stakeholders. This will help us meet the needs of our residents, address current issues, target interventions, make timely decisions and plan ahead for future challenges and opportunities. We will develop a comprehensive update of key data and publish the analysis in the Darlington Profile 2025. We will share key data and intelligence with stakeholders and partners to help develop a shared understanding of opportunities and challenges.

Embed core principles in decision making

Our long-term strategic commitment to address inequalities, tackle climate change and ensure efficient and effective use of resources will be embedded in our work across the council, from decision-making to delivery. It will help staff understand how their objectives link with those of the council plan. Key areas of focus will include: requiring Cabinet and Council papers to explain how the relevant core principles are being met and the intended impact; and service plans articulating how core principles relate to the delivery of priority actions.

Deliver through key strategies and plans

The vision and ambitions of the council plan will be delivered through the council's key strategies and plans which will clearly set out the actions they will take to deliver, how they will embed the core principles, and the impact they expect to make on Darlington's residents, economy and communities and how this will be measured. Their development will take a collaborative approach with key services in the Council working together and where appropriate working in partnership with key stakeholders and residents.

Model our core values in our work and behaviours

Council employees have worked together to agree four core values that they model:

- **Respect:** be respectful towards the council, each other as colleagues as well as our community, residents, service users, stakeholders and wider partners
- **Innovation:** be innovative in everything we do and voice improvements to ensure we offer quality services
- **Collaboration:** act collaboratively and ensure collaborations help us to maximise opportunities and achieve success
- **Deliver:** deliver quality services to everyone and strive to always deliver the best we can with the resources available

Share key challenges and celebrate success

We will communicate our challenges and celebrate success across our wide range of services. We will be open in our communication with residents, businesses and stakeholders to ensure they feel informed about the decisions we make and understand why we make them. This will help residents, businesses and stakeholders stay informed and become advocates for Darlington whilst building pride in our collective achievements and building confidence in the future.

PERFORMANCE REPORTING

Progress with the Council Plan will be reported every six months to Cabinet. Both the mid-year and end of year reports will provide a summary of progress against the agreed performance indicators, with the end of year report also including analysis of how the plan is delivering against the key principles and priorities. Using the well-established arrangements, individual scrutiny committees will identify the performance measures most important to them and continue to receive regular reports.

ANNEX 1 – OUR BOROUGH: KEY DATA INFOGRAPHIC

TO BE DESIGNED AND INCLUDED IN THE FINAL COUNCIL PLAN PDF.

ANNEX 2 – SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES

The Council Plan 2024-27 public consultation took place between 6th March to 25th April 2024. Residents were given the opportunity to have their say on the Council Plan through a survey that was available online and on paper in the Dolphin Centre, Darlington Library and Cockerton Library.

The consultation was promoted in the One Darlington magazine, by the Council social media channels (reaching over 20k people), Cabinet members through their social media, emails to key stakeholders and meetings with residents, agenda items at meetings of key stakeholders and all Councillors were briefed and asked to raise with their residents and networks. A publicly available email address was also provided for both residents and stakeholders to contact the Policy and Strategy team.

The survey had 315 responses with 100% of those online. Every age category aged 84 or younger was represented, of those that answered the question about their sex, 45.5% were male and 54.5% were female; and there were responses from every ward in Darlington.

Key headlines (the % are the proportion of people answering that question):

- All participants answered the core principles question, with clear support for all three. The most supported core principle was efficient and effective use of resources
- The majority of people agreed with every ambition. Living well and staying healthy had the highest support at 75%
- There was clear support for all 6 priorities with 5 priorities receiving 77-81% support. Economy was the priority with the most agreement at 81%

The key themes from the comments:

- Green spaces and the impact of new housing
- Road infrastructure, maintenance and potholes
- Valuing nature and biodiversity
- More good jobs and skills
- Town centre – good jobs, empty/variety of shops
- Unaffordability of new homes
- Safe places
- Opportunities for children and young people

Overall satisfaction towards the Council Plan was positive with 79% of those answering the question being satisfied or neither satisfied/unsatisfied with the plan and 21% dissatisfied.