

COUNCIL
26 SEPTEMBER 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 1,258 requests for service in Quarter 1 2024/2025. The main categories of these requests are:

(a) Food	114
(b) Licensing	118
(c) Noise	235
(d) Planning Enquiries	75
(e) Refuse	88
(f) Pest	263
(g) Personal searches	188

3. The food safety team have carried out a number of visits to retail shops to investigate the sale of packaged foods that do not have labelling in English as required by food safety laws. A significant amount of incorrectly labelled food has been seized from those premises.
4. Officers are currently visiting all Tanning shops in the Borough following complaints of under 18s using the premises illegally. All salon owners have received a visit and a letter detailing their responsibilities.
5. The Air Quality Annual Status Report has been submitted to Defra and positive feedback received.
6. Officers recently attended the Self-Neglect and Hoarding Conference organised by Darlington Safeguarding Partnership. Environmental Health have noticed an increase in reports of concerns regarding filthy conditions within residential properties and continue to work closely with colleagues from Social Services on these often-complex cases.

Climate Change

7. The advisory report on progress to date is presented to Council and appears elsewhere on this agenda. As can be seen from that report, we are continuing to reduce our emissions, year on year.
8. We are also revisiting the heat network feasibility study that was carried out in 2021. We have been approached by businesses interested in providing a no-risk to the council option and we are currently investigating, with the Procurement Team, our next steps.

Development Management

9. The application for the New Treasury Building is now with the Council following a formal announcement from the Government. Further discussions have been had with the applicant's agent to further improve the design of the scheme. These discussions have been productive and are now complete. A further meeting with residents to explain further the details of the scheme has taken place in conjunction with the Deputy Leader and Local Ward Members.
10. The matter was presented to Members of the Planning Committee on 7 August 2024. A decision was made to approve subject to the signing of a 106 agreement.
11. Further work is ongoing following the Outline Approvals for housing recently Granted at Coniscliffe Park. A 106 legal agreement has now been signed. Discussions have been held with the developers regarding the further involvement of nearby residents prior to a formal detailed submission. This meeting has now taken place. The details and modifications because of this engagement have been incorporated into plans which will form part of the detailed planning submission.
12. Enforcement reports relating to unauthorised development are still currently increasing. Most reports continue to be solved at officer level. All more significant cases where there are ongoing investigations, Members are updated confidentially at Planning Committee on a monthly basis.
13. The National Infrastructure Project at Byers Green for solar panels is now progressing. Unlike most applications a decision on the matter will be dealt with by a Government Inspector, not the Council. The matter will be heard at a Public Inquiry. The Council will be making submissions to the Inquiry in due course following engagement with interested parties.
14. Delivery onsite continues along Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancements completed to a significant number of properties and to the public realm. The planning application for Coniscliffe Road public realm proposals has been approved.

Building Control

15. Building Regulations applications and works progressing as normal, no issues to be reported.
16. Building Safety Regulator:
 - (a) Three Surveyors are now fully competence validated for the BSR, with one remaining surveyor progressing toward validation, allowing the service to function legally under the Building Safety Act 2022. The remaining surveyor post is being filled this week (part time) by an experienced competence validated surveyor.
 - (b) KPI's have been submitted to the BSR, although the BSR has just announced they are delaying KPI submission until January 2025. The work done this far is not wasted, as effectively we are now a step ahead for January.

17. Dangerous structures:

- (a) Fire at Valley House - Remaining wall structure not in immediate danger of collapse, owner has been advised to secure the building and demolish what remains of the dilapidated roof.

Business Investment

- 18. The number of business investment enquiries remains constant, with the main area of interests from the hospitality and hair and beauty sectors. There has also been a substantive enquiry for an engineering facility at Ingenium Parc.
- 19. The new UK Government has initiated its intention to develop new Local Growth Plans across the country. Combined authorities have been asked to produce a new high-level economic growth strategy that aligns with a new national industrial strategy, and which will feed into national spending and budget reviews. Council officers are working with peers across Tees Valley to help develop this policy document and ensure it meets local needs and ambitions. At this early stage, much of the discussion is focussed on the development process and the outcomes, and criteria that support flexibility, allowing localities to determine what contribution they will make to improve local economic growth.
- 20. The roll out of UK Shared Prosperity Funded business support activities is now complete. A range of support measures are now in place offering advice, guidance, development programmes, technical expertise and financial support to local businesses, including:
 - (a) *Business Start Up*: Tees Valley Entrepreneurs; Tees Valley Expertise
 - (b) *Business Growth*: Tees Valley Securing Investment; Tees Valley Supply Chain; Tees Valley Digital Transformation; Made Smarter Adoption North-East
 - (c) *Business Innovation*: Tees Valley Innovation Challenge; Tees Valley Net Zero; Tees Valley Labs
- 21. The Business Team are working collaboratively with the Tees Valley Combined Authority and the service providers to raise awareness of these schemes and encourage Darlington businesses to engage and participate.
- 22. Darlington Innovation Growth Lab - a series of events where local business owners share insights on how they overcame the common challenges of growing a business – has returned. The September event discussed how sales are the very heartbeat of any business and how to develop longstanding customer relationships with impact and integrity.
- 23. Over 100 exhibitors are expected at Darlington Jobs Fair Wednesday 2 October. The free event brings together employers, support organisations and education providers. Attracting both public sector organisations and private businesses, the jobs fair boasts a wealth of opportunities for people of all ages, interests and backgrounds. Job sectors including construction, engineering, healthcare, logistics, manufacturing, professional services, retail, transport and uniformed public services will be represented at the event

and attendees will have the chance to explore different careers, hear about local opportunities and speak in person with recruiting employers and support organisations.

Towns Fund

24. Delivery onsite continues along Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancements continuing to a significant number of properties. Planning approval is now in place for the Coniscliffe Road public realm proposals, with works targeted to commence in Autumn 2024.
25. Hoptown Darlington is now open to visitors, part funded by the Town Fund.
26. Our development partner Adavo are undertaking work to secure the required statutory consents for progression of the redevelopment of the former Northern Echo building. It is anticipated that the work will be completed to the ground floor in August 2025, with completion of the building in 2026.
27. Minor amendments to the design of proposals for the number 156 Northgate project have been finalised. These amends will now be reviewed in line with statutory requirements, subject to which the project will progress to tender for the works.
28. The design of proposals for the Edward Pease House are being finalised. Planning and Listed Building consents will be applied. Subject to approval and appointment of a suitable contractor, works are proposed start on site early in 2025.
29. The design of several property enhancements along Victoria Road continues to be developed, with progress made on several properties on site.
30. Negotiations with the owners of Northgate House have commenced with the appointment of an independent valuer agreed by the Council and the building owners. This work is ongoing and further updates on the progress of these discussions will be shared with members in due course.
31. Notwithstanding the above a planning application for the above building and the adjacent land along Gladstone Street/Kendrew Street is progressing which will form part of any forthcoming CPO process.

Estates

32. The acquisition of the Wilko leasehold interest has now completed, and measures are in place to keep the premises secure while potential interim occupiers are explored.

Planning Policy

33. The Government have announced a consultation on amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), this reflects the Government's commitment to housebuilding

and growing the economy. The consultation ran until 24 September.

34. The key elements of the amendments are set out below. In summary the key proposed changes out for consultation are as follows:
- (a) Housing targets will be mandatory using a new Standard Method. For Darlington this will be 500 per annum. Reference to 'exceptional circumstances' we used to justify a higher figure has now been removed.
 - (b) The new method will include a stronger affordability ratio driver and the removal of the clause about previous oversupply in an area.
 - (c) All authorities will need to have a Local Plan in place – there will be an end to changes to planning policy which have stalled Plan making and a commitment to the Government stepping in where authorities fail to deliver.
 - (d) Easier means to deliver major infrastructure. Revisions to NSIP threshold. (Byers Gill would have been our decision to make for example)
 - (e) Removal of reference to 'beautiful' and 'beauty' in favour of 'well designed'.
 - (f) Increased support for renewable energy proposals.
 - (g) Stronger encouragement to identify land for 'modern economy' uses such as tech, data centres, gigafactories etc.
 - (h) Public service infrastructure now extended to include early years and post 16 education.
 - (i) There are several other significant changes around Greenbelt and urban uplift which aren't relevant to Darlington.
35. You will note that Darlington's target of 500 is only slightly above the current Local Plan target of 492, whilst for example County Durham jumps from their current Plan target of 1,129 to 2,210 and Stockton's from 444 to 861.
36. Our main response to Government is that Local Planning Authorities who allocate enough land to meet their requirement under the new standard method should not be penalised if housebuilding does not meet the target.
37. A report will be prepared for a future Cabinet explaining the implications for our current Local Plan.

Conservation

38. We are currently out for consultation on the Northgate Conservation Area Appraisal, which suggests amendments to the Conservation Area boundary. Once the consultation period has ended a report will be prepared analysing the comments and making recommendations to the Council.

39. Work is currently on-going on a Conservation Area Appraisal for Middleton St George, a report will be prepared seeking approval for consultation on a new Conservation Area, this will be considered in the New Year.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio