

COUNCIL
28 NOVEMBER 2024

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform and update Members on the Leader's Portfolio since the last meeting of Council. The following are some of the areas of work under the Leader's Portfolio.

Strategic Transport

Active Travel and Bus Priority Improvements

2. TVCA undertook a public engagement exercise over the summer to outline plans for Active travel and bus priority work across the Tees Valley. Development work is progressing on the programme with the aim of commencing on site from September 2025, with delivery anticipated over an 18-month period. Further details on individual schemes will be provided as they are developed.

Darlington Station

3. Work on the construction of the multi-storey car park and station building at Darlington Station is continuing to be delivered on programme. The first section of the building was completed as planned, in September, allowing Network Rail to commence work for the new footbridge and platforms. The concourse shell is due to be complete by TVCA in mid-November 2024 which will then allow Network Rail to commence fit out; with final completion of the whole project by the end of 2025.
4. Alongside the TVCA led works, Network Rail continue to make good progress with their parts of the project. Work for the new platforms (5&6) is progressing well, with Smithfield Road underbridge widened to facilitate the new railway infrastructure. Demolition of the WHSmith Retail unit and removal of the roof tiles of the existing station, has commenced to prepare for the installation of the new footbridge.
5. Preliminary Design of the Western Gateway at Victoria Road is complete and been through a review panel with Department for Transport. This is enabling the project to move into the detail design and delivery phases.

Strategic Infrastructure

Local Area Energy Plans

6. Following the last update, TVCA is currently procuring consultant support to develop the Local Area Energy Plans. It is anticipated that the consultant will be appointed early in 2025, and the work will take around one-year to complete.

Bus Service Timetable improvements

7. TVCA has now taken on responsibility for the updating of at-stop information and is collaborating with local authorities to make improvements. A full update across all bus stops is progressing on the 2,592 bus stops with information cases across Tees Valley.
8. Later this year TVCA will be rolling out a new timetable template which will include information to make it easier for passengers to know who to speak to if they are unhappy with their journey, and will promote the TVCA 'Improve My Journey' webpage.
9. In addition, work is ongoing to replace the Real-Time Passenger Information with a new system which is due to go live in 2024 and replace the current obsolete displays with 90 modern display screens.

Climate Change

10. The Climate Change Cross Party Working Group met on 26 September. The Working Group heard that energy efficiency work carried out has enabled us, with the price rises over the past 3 years, to avoid almost £5m in energy costs.
11. We are also waiting on the outcome of the Climate Emergency UK Scorecards. These rank councils against what Climate Emergency UK considers we should be doing. Members will remember that last year's score carried a number of errors in their interpretation of our activity, so we hope that this year will be more accurate.

Blackwell Parkland

12. I attended the official handover of Blackwell Parkland in early October. This is the newest public park in Darlington and has been restored through Homes by Esh in conjunction with Darlington Borough Council. Chris Lloyd spoke, as ever in an informative style laced with plenty of humour, about the long history of Blackwell Grange and the Allan family that spans ten generations. The restoration is complete and now boasts mown grass paths, flora and fauna, bird houses and trees dubbed a "new, safe naturalistic space".

LGA conference

13. I attended the LGA conference, this year delayed until November because of the General election. The conversations and sessions at the conference focussed on the priorities and key challenges facing our sector, with shrinking budgets, escalating costs, and increasingly complex demands that are facing all Local Authorities.
14. The Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner, addressed the conference. She expressed her gratitude to councils for their service to their communities, adding that local government is at the heart of the Government's vision for the country. The Secretary of State said Government would take a collaborative and constructive approach to councils facing financial difficulty and focus on those high-cost services and prevent people from needing them in the first place. It was a refreshing change to hear from a Secretary of State, and

her ministerial team, who genuinely understand the important role Local Authorities play in delivering vital services across the country.

Senior appointments

15. At September's Council meeting I reported that 4 senior managers had indicated their intention to retire early in the new year. Since that time Council the has started on the recruitment process, to ensure we have new appointments in place in a timely manner. I am pleased to report that there has been a healthy interest in each of the posts.
16. The HR appointment panels for each post will meet during December to consider the applications received.

External Meetings and Engagement

17. In addition to my regular meetings with outside partners, as part of my role as Leader, I have met with a number of organisations since the previous meeting of Full Council. These include: Woodlands Hospital, Lingfield Point, Darlington Building Society, Darlington Primary Care Network, Darlington College, and County Durham and Darlington Foundation Trust.
18. A special mention for the Stronger Communities awards which, with many other Councillors, I was delighted to attend. This event was first held in 2010 and provides an opportunity to publicly thank many individuals and organisations who make a positive difference to the wider community of the Borough. This year we had a record number of nominees – 422 – and a record number of people attending the awards evening.
19. In addition I have attended various meetings and engagements since the previous meeting of Council, some of which are listed below:
 - (a) Darlington Jobs Fair
 - (b) MP briefings
 - (c) Association of North East Councils
 - (d) Town Deal Board
 - (e) Annual meeting of the Darlington Library Trustees
 - (f) Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day services

Councillor Steve Harker
Leader of the Council