

COUNCIL
28 NOVEMBER 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 1,298 requests for service in Quarter 2 2024/2025. The main categories of these requests are:

(a) Food	109
(b) Licensing	96
(c) Noise	285
(d) Planning Enquiries	72
(e) Refuse	88
(f) Pest	217
(g) Personal searches	223

3. The Council's first Air Quality Strategy 2024 -2029 has been approved by Cabinet and outlines the actions and interventions the Council currently undertake to improve air quality and identifies new areas which are to be explored to make further improvements. Over the winter, Environmental Health is continuing with their anti-engine idling and 'Burn Right' campaigns.
4. Environmental Health has successfully prosecuted a resident of Wolsingham Terrace who failed to comply with a Community Protection Notice and continued to cause a nuisance to nearby residents from loud music and shouting persisting into the night. The court fined and awarded costs against the defendant of £1060 as well as granting the Council permission to dispose of the noise equipment which had previously been seized by officers.

Climate Change

5. We have tweaked the timings of reports to Council to bring them back in line to original timings. For various reasons, the timings had slipped, but we will bring them back to July for the full report with progress on carbon emissions reduction and January for the interim report. This means that the main report in July will be closer to the period that we are reporting on (previous year's performance).
6. The trial period for Defra's adaptation reporting power study, comes to an end in December. The report and risk assessment that must be submitted by then is being finalised. The Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer will cover this in the January report to Council.

Development Management

7. The application for the New Treasury Building has now been granted planning permission by 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 the details of the scheme has taken place in conjunction with the Deputy Leader and local ward members. The Section 106 agreement associated with the permission has yet to be signed. Whilst there is a commitment to the scheme it is likely that some further amendments to the scheme will be negotiated at the applicant's request.
8. 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.
9. 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. Planning permission has been granted. Discussions with the developer for the Northern part of the site are well under way and a detailed submission is likely before Christmas.
10. 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.
11. 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 is currently being heard at a Public Inquiry. The Council and its partners are making submissions to the Inquiry.
12. 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 and is currently underway.

Building Control

13. Building Regulations applications and works progressing as normal, no issues to be reported.
14. A non-technical team member has started a 4-year levy funded training course for Building Control, which will give some future resilience to the service.
15. We now have a replacement Admin support assistant following a recent retirement.

16. Building Safety Regulator:

- (a) Internal procedures and audit reporting methodology is now in place to align with Building Safety Regulator requirements.
- (b) 4 Surveyors are now fully competence validated for the BSR with 1 surveyor progressing toward validation.

Business Investment

- 17. The number of business investment enquiries remains constant, with the main area of interests from the hospitality and hair and beauty sectors.
- 18. The Business Investment Team are promoting the range of business support services available through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. A range of business start-up, business growth and business innovation initiatives are now available, including business advice, guidance, development activities, technical expertise and financial support to local businesses. 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.
- 19. Almost 100 employers and support organisations attend the Darlington Jobs Fair on Wednesday 2 October. 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 were represented. Early feedback has indicated that a few employers have successfully recruited new employees following the event.
- 20. On the 2 October, the Business Team, working with Darlington Business Club, hosted an event to encourage greater awareness of DEEP (Darlington Employers Environment Partnership) and to engage with small and medium-sized enterprises. As a result, a number of businesses have now joined the Partnership and agreed to sign the DEEP pledge, which includes making sustainability a priority, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and setting a target to reduce energy consumption.
- 21. The Business Investment team have attended the following Business Events:
 - (a) Network Network Business Festival – 24 September 2024
 - UK Science Park Association Conference – 17 October 2024
 - Tees Valley Supply Chain Showcase Event – 20 November 2024

Towns Fund

- 22. Delivery on site continues along Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancements completed to a significant number of properties. Planning permission is in place for the Coniscliffe Road public realm proposals and work has commenced on site.

23. The proposals for the re-development of number 156 Northgate have now received Listed Building Consent and Planning approval. The tender process to appoint a suitable contractor is underway.
24. Enabling works for the redevelopment of the former Northern Echo building, within the town centre, is underway. It is currently anticipated that the work will be completed for the new Adult Skills facility on the ground floor in the summer of 2025.
25. The design of proposals for the Edward Pease House have been submitted to the Planning Authority, alongside a Listed Building Consent application. The tender process to procure a suitable contractor has commenced.
26. The design of several property enhancements along Victoria Road are underway.
27. Following a joint valuation by the owners of Northgate House and the Council a further offer has been made to acquire the building. Awaiting response for the owners.

Estates

28. October 4 saw the official launch of the 'Blackwell Parkland', marking completion of the extensive historic parkland restoration project, which has already been admired and enjoyed by many visitors. The parkland is now open to the public and will continue to provide a naturalistic parkland for everyone to enjoy. Alongside the parkland the prestigious 'Heritage Park' residential development by Homes by Esh is progressing well with the show home due to open shortly.

Planning Policy

29. The Government has recently consulted on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework, the revised version is due before Christmas. There are several changes but one of the main changes is it is proposed that there will be mandatory targets for housing delivery for all local planning authorities. The proposed target for Darlington is 500 dwellings per year.
30. We have recently published the annual Authority Monitoring Report (AMR), which is available on our website. The AMR measures the effectiveness of the Local Plan. The headlines are that the Plan is proving very effective.
31. Headlines below:
 - (a) Development is directed to the right areas (86% of new homes in the urban area).
 - (b) Housing completions dropped to 354 from an average of around 500 in this monitoring period. This was clearly caused by the NN issue which is now resolving itself.
 - (c) Despite this lower delivery we can demonstrate a 5.4-year supply.
 - (d) 71 affordable homes were delivered in the 23/24 monitoring period. An increase from 61 the previous year.

- (e) Increasing numbers of HMOs are an issue that needs to be carefully monitored.
- (f) Take up of employment sites has been positive with more completions expected to show in 24/25. Allocations are being reduced and this will need considering in a plan review.
- (g) Town centre monitoring is now more accurate as uses in house data.
- (h) The vacancy rate for Darlington Town Centre 2023/24 is 13.9%, with 69 of 496 units being vacant. This is lower than the national average vacancy rate of around 15.3% for 2022/23 and, although based on different survey boundaries, broadly aligns with a 14.2% vacancy rate reported for 2022/23.
- (i) The district/local centres are performing very well with only 1 vacant unit in Cockerton.
- (j) Environment, Transport and Infrastructure policies are performing well.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio