

COUNCIL
30 JANUARY 2025

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

Darlington Station

2. As we move into 2025 and the 200th anniversary of the birth of the modern railway, improvements at Darlington Station continue to progress. Construction of the station building was completed on time in November 2024, enabling TVCA to handover this part of the project to Network Rail, allowing the fit out of the concourse to commence. Work to the multi storey car park and external areas is continuing ahead of scheduled completion in mid-2025.
3. Installation of the new platform 6 track has commenced and as of December was 70% complete. The remaining elements to the platform will be completed by the end of February. Preparatory work continues for the installation of the bridge, to connect the old station buildings and platforms with the new, and this is scheduled to be completed in early March 2025.
4. The preliminary designs for improvements to the Western Gateway have now been agreed with Active Travel England and detailed design work has commenced. Demolition of the remaining properties is expected to commence in early 2025 to enable the improvements work to commence later in the year. LNER are continuing their own designs for the Porte Cochere works and the interfaces between these two schemes are being carefully managed.
5. As a warm up to the celebrations this year for the 200th anniversary of the birth of the modern railway, I was delighted to attend the naming ceremony of LNER Azuma train, 801207. The train has of course been named "Darlington".

Strategic Infrastructure

Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) update

6. In the Autumn 2024 budget, the Government announced further funding to support and improve bus services in 2025/26. TVCA has been provisionally allocated £7.28m of funding in 2025/26 to support the delivery of the Tees Valley BSIP, which is an increased allocation compared to previous years.

7. The proposed BSIP investment programme for the year ahead is currently in development, with consideration being given to the existing activities funded by BSIP in 2024/25. Further details on the 2025/26 BSIP investment programme will be announced in early 2025/26. The BSIP investment programme will need to align with the emerging Local Growth Plan objectives and support the government's focus on increasing the employment rate as set out in the Get Britain Working White Paper.

Active Travel and Bus Priority Improvements

8. TVCA will undertake further public engagement in February / March 2025 on scheme designs for Active travel and bus priority work across the Tees Valley, with statutory consultation then expected to commence in March / April 2025.
9. Development work is progressing on the programme with a target date of June 2025 for the schemes funded by £17.8m secured from the Levelling Up Fund. The City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) funded schemes are expected to commence on site from September 2025, with delivery anticipated over an 18-month period.
10. Within Darlington, Woodlands Road Phase 2, which extends the current scheme towards Cockerton, is expected to be in delivery from early 2025 as design works are more advanced and has now been through a final design review with Active Travel England.

Highways Maintenance Funding

11. In the November 2024 budget the Government announced it will be investing almost £1.6 billion to maintain and renew the nation's roads, an increase of £500 million on 2024-25. Details were published prior to Christmas with TVCA set to receive up to £4.873 million in additional funding for 2025/26 on top of the £16.578 million already allocated per annum through the CRSTS Programme. Whilst a formal grant offer letter with further details is currently awaited, the published information highlights that DfT intend to introduce an incentive element, holding back 25% of the funding to ensure that best practice in sustainable highways asset management is followed.

Climate Change

12. The Cross Party Climate Change Working Group met on 6 December and had a presentation from an external consultant on a tool for measuring scope 3 emissions. There are other consultants offering a similar service, so we are using this presentation to kick-start internal discussions of what we need to do.
13. We have signed an agreement with SSE for them to explore a heat network for the town centre. This will mean that with no financial risk to the council, there could be a low carbon heat option for us, the hospital and other commercial buildings in the town. We have not entered into any commitment that we will take heat from this heat network, and any future contract will be subject to the usual procurement procedures.

Senior appointments

14. Due to impending retirements a number of key senior management roles have recently been appointed to. These are:
 - (a) Chief Executive – Rose Rouse, currently Chief Executive at Pendle Borough Council, to take over from Ian Williams, with a start date end of March.
 - (b) Assistant Director, Law and Governance – Amy Wennington, currently Head of Public Appointments and Governance at HM Treasury, though prior to that with Darlington Borough Council for over 15 years, taking over from Luke Swinhoe. Amy will start back with us on 7 April 2025.
 - (c) Assistant Director, Environmental Services and Community Safety – Ben Grabham, currently Head of Environmental Services at City of York Council, taking over from Ian Thompson who will be staying with us for a short time to ensure key projects are completed. Ben is due to start with us on 5 March 2025.
 - (d) At the time of drafting a Members panel has been reconvened for 23 January 2025 for the Executive Director, Economy and Public Protection role.

External Meetings and Engagement

15. I attended the 80th anniversary remembrance service in honour of the selfless sacrifice made by Pilot Officer William McMullen (428 Sqn CAF). McMullen was a Canadian pilot, whose Lancaster bomber caught fire during a training exercise. He sacrificed his own life to ensure the stricken aircraft landed in empty fields away from Darlington town.
16. In addition, I have attended various meetings and engagements since the previous meeting of Council, some of which are listed below:
 - (a) Mayor's Carol Service
 - (b) Citizenship ceremonies
 - (c) Transport for the North Board meeting in Manchester
 - (d) Darlington Town Deal Board
 - (e) LNER train naming
 - (f) Association of North East Councillors
 - (g) Various meetings with partners; Phil Forster, MD Teesside Airport; Ciaran Irvine, Durham Police DCC; representatives from SSE; Michelle Cooper, Point North (formerly County Durham Community Foundation).

Councillor Steve Harker
Leader of the Council