

COUNCIL
30 JANUARY 2025

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. Environmental Health have been working on a significant project with the Council's Public Health team. The project involved carrying out environmental sampling visits to nursing and care homes to look at cleaning and infection control compliance. Approx. 180 swab samples were taken from random surfaces in catering areas which were analysed at a laboratory. Any failures were investigated, and advice given on best practice. Early indications have shown a significant yearly reduction in sickness outbreaks in care homes since the project started.
3. Environmental Health are consulted on and respond to approximately 260 planning consultations each year aiming for any development to achieve a high standard of amenity, to ensure any land contamination is remediated via the planning process and any adverse impacts on health and quality of life from noise are reduced to a minimum.
4. Environmental Health are continuing with the Care for Clean Air Campaign and progressing with actions to improve air quality that are included within the recently launched Council's Air Quality Strategy. This work has recently received media interest from ITV regional news and radio stations with Reid Street Primary School helping to spread the anti-idling message to parents and carers to switch off the engine when parked outside schools. The 'Burn Right' campaign is continuing this winter and providing advice on smoke control and the health impacts of wood burning stoves.

Climate Change

5. The six-monthly report is on the agenda for this meeting, so items will be covered under that item. However, I can report that we are making progress on the actions that were behind schedule at the end of 2023/24.
6. I regret to say that the Climate Change Officer has left the Council. We have commenced recruitment for a replacement.

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. Following further discussions with the applicant it has been agreed that they will now progress with the 106 legal agreement to enable the Council to issue the decision.

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 the above 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 which have included extensive pre application discussions which have resulted in significant improvements to the scheme. A detailed submission is expected shortly.
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. There is an increase in the use of Stop Notices to prevent the progression of unauthorised works, which has had a noticeable impact on staff resources.
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, which is now drawing to a close.
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, which when complete will achieve a much-improved public realm.

Building Control

13. Building Regulations applications and works progressing as normal, no issues to be reported.
14. Following the major changes to the Building Regulations, altered responsibilities and operating procedures have been introduced by the Building Safety Regulator under the umbrella of the HSE for the Building Control function. The Building Control team have been working hard to prepare all relevant reports which will soon need to be submitted to the BSR. Following these submissions, the BSR may request to undertake an audit of the DBC Building Control service. Extensive procedural internal planning is continuing to ensure alignment between Building Control KPI's and recording of those KPI's back to the Building Safety Regulator. These changes and additional requirements / roles / responsibilities are putting further stress on the resources available.
15. The government's Building Safety Levy will soon come into effect. We await the outcome as to whether Building Control will be the collectors and administrators of the Levy within

DBC. The Building Control team are taking every opportunity to learn about the expectations from MHCLG. This may take up further, considerable resource from the Building Control service. MHCLG have confirmed a burdens fund will be available in relation to the introduction of the Levy which may need to be explored.

16. Regarding Dangerous structures:

- (a) Working together with Environmental Health, we continue to monitor the situation with Northgate House and take any action necessary under The Building Act.
- (b) British Steel – Whessoe Road retaining wall. Following structural surveys by the engineers Billingham George & Partners, recommended remediation works are being monitored. Further monitoring is ongoing by British Steel and their engineers.
- (c) General – It has been noted that there has been a higher than usual number of reported dangerous structures reported following vehicle collisions in recent months. All have been dealt with accordingly in relation to Building Control involvement, ensuring safety of the public within the Borough.

Business Investment

- 17. Business investment enquiries continue, with the main area of interests from the hospitality, hair and beauty, and health/well-being sectors.
- 18. The Business Investment Team continue to promote 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. Working with DWP, the “Experience Counts” Support for Work hub at Darlington Job Centre was delivered. The event, specifically targeted at jobseekers over 50 years of age, provided career advice, guidance, and opportunities as well as additional skills development help, transport assistance and a range of personalised support measures. The Support for Work hubs provide a vital role in improving an individual’s employment prospects.
- 20. The Business Investment team have attended the following Business Events:
 - (a) IMPACT: 2024 Successes and 2025 Plans– 12 December 2024
 - (b) National STEM Centre Learning Visit – 16 December 2024
 - (c) Department for Business & Trade - BT Acceleration and Intervention Delivery Team Darlington Site Visit – 24 January 2025
 - (d) Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership - Network and Learn Event – Hoptown Darlington - 29 January 2025

Estates

21. The Blackwell parkland has been well used since it opened with many positive comments. The recent heavy rain and increased use over the Christmas period has highlighted some issues with the surface of the paths but these have been reported to the maintenance company for the parkland and will be addressed as we move forward into 2025. The 'Heritage Park' residential development by Homes by Esh is progressing well with a number of early purchases and the show home due to open shortly.
22. The proposed Burtree Garden Village development which includes the Council's land at High Faverdale Farm is still moving forward with an anticipated start of the infrastructure works in February, subject to Cabinet approval.

Planning Policy

23. The Government published the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on Thursday 12 December. One of the main change's centres around the Government's commitment to build 1.5 million new homes by the end of this Parliament.
24. The Government have published mandatory yearly housing targets for each local planning authority. The figure for Darlington is 440 homes per year which is below the Local Plan target. The Government have again emphasised the importance of up-to-date Local Plans and have asked Local authorities to update their Local Development Scheme within six weeks of the publication of the NPPF. The updated LDS should include clear, realistic, and specific dates for consultation and submission of the local plan.
25. The Government have also published a working paper setting out a new approach to development and nature recovery. It proposes that developers pay into a 'Nature Restoration Fund' for improvements to nature as a quicker and simpler way of meeting their environmental obligations.
26. The aim of the new approach is to free up and accelerate development while driving nature recovery. The proposals will support more efficient and effective discharge of obligations arising from the Habitats Regulations and other legislation.
27. The measures are designed to be mutually beneficial for housing delivery, the economy and nature.
28. Officers will be providing feedback on the working paper.

Towns Fund

29. Delivery onsite continues on the Skinnergate and the Yards project, with enhancements continuing to a significant number of properties. Construction work is underway on the Coniscliffe Road public realm scheme, with completion expected in March 2025.
30. Planning approval is in place and our development partner Adavo are progressing enabling and refurbishment works at the former Northern Echo building. It is currently anticipated that the work will be completed to the ground floor in August 2025, providing the Adult

Skills centre, with completion of the building in 2026.

31. With Planning and Listed Building consents in place, the proposals for refurbishment of number 156 Northgate have been through a tendering exercise. A successful contractor has been selected and works are due to commence in March 2025 and will take approximately 40 weeks to complete.
32. Planning and Listed Building applications have been granted for proposals at the Edward Pease House in Northgate. The tender process seeking an appropriate contractor will now progress. Subject to which, the intention is to start on site in 2025.
33. The design of several property enhancements along Victoria Road continues to be developed, with progress made on several properties on site.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy Portfolio