

**COUNCIL**  
**27 MARCH 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**

**New ECML Timetable – December 2025**

2. The Darlington Station project is part of the infrastructure upgrades north of York on the East Coast Main Line (ECML) to create capacity to enable additional new services to be delivered in the future.
3. Members may recall that a previous ECML timetable proposal, which was to have been implemented in May 2022, drew significant criticism and was subsequently not progressed. Following further development, a new timetable for the East Coast Main Line (ECML) has now been approved in principle for implementation in December 2025.
4. As well as long distance services on the ECML itself, this timetable also covers local and regional services in the North East, so in fact includes every rail service which operates in the Tees Valley. Network Rail is now taking the timetable through the necessary industry approval processes.
5. In terms of Tees Valley services, the timetable is very similar to that for December 2024, with the quantum of long-distance service calls remaining as they are now at Darlington, Middlesbrough and our other key stations on the LNER, CrossCountry, Grand Central and TransPennine Express routes. There are only very minor timing changes on these routes. Provision is made for an increase in the number of services between Middlesbrough and London in the future, when infrastructure upgrades are completed to enable this to be delivered.
6. The quantum of all local/regional services in the Tees Valley, as operated by Northern, also stay as they are although there are some more significant timing changes for some services, for example on the Durham Coast and Middlesbrough-Nunthorpe routes, which helps improve certain connections. The timetable changes in December 2025 also enable the introduction of the full hourly semi-fast service between Middlesbrough and Newcastle on the Durham Coast, although this is still subject to funding approval for the DfT.

## **Darlington Station**

7. The Network Rail led fit out of the new station concourse is ongoing. The closure of the East Coast Main Line for 6 weekends from 8 / 9 February until 15 / 16 March has been essential to allow key rail infrastructure work to take place. Work at Darlington includes renewal of some of the existing track and new tracks to enable trains to access the new platforms. Most significantly the weekend of 22 / 23 February saw the new footbridge connecting the new and existing station being successfully lifted and then slid into place through the hole which had been created in the train shed roof.
8. The TVCA-led work to the multi storey car park is continuing ahead of scheduled completion later this year. Good progress has been made on the external works with the transport interchange area being at an advanced stage of construction. Final designs for the associated highway works are in the process of being agreed to enable the multi-storey car park and station building to come into operation at the end of the year.
9. Detailed design for the Western Gateway scheme is underway in close collaboration with LNER to ensure the design and programme aligns with their plans for the Porte Cochere. Letters have been provided to residents informing them of upcoming demolition work. Further surveys are required to be undertaken before physical demolition can commence, but we are expecting the demolition to be completed in early Summer, which will then allow the highway and public realm improvements work to commence later in the year.
10. A number of Councillors have participated in the three site visits which have been organised to view the progress which has been made with the scheme.

## **Strategic Infrastructure**

### **Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) update**

11. In the Autumn 2024 budget, the Government announced further funding to support and improve bus services in 2025/26. TVCA has been 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.
12. As accountable body for the funding, on behalf of the Enhanced Bus Partnership, TVCA have now established a proposed BSIP investment programme for the year ahead, with confirmed or provisional allocations being made to extend existing activities funded by BSIP in 2024/25. This includes:
  - (a) Extending all supported service contracts until March 2026 (where possible) – confirmed allocation of £2.898m, with a further provisional allocation of £1.495m where procurements are required (see details at point 14).
  - (b) Extending the timetable printing and posting contracts until March 2026 – confirmed allocation of £75k.
  - (c) Funding to support the Connect Tees Valley service - confirmed allocation of £125k from the Capacity and Capability part of the 2025/26 BSIP allocation.

13. From the remaining funding, consideration is being given to the potential provision of new services, the extension of the U21 Fares Offer which is currently planned to run until June 2025 and the introduction of new fares offers. The costs of these options are currently being calculated, and further details will be announced in coming weeks.
14. Bus service extensions until March 2026 for the services detailed below have now been agreed:
  - (a) Services 17/18 (Darlington), to be operated by Arriva.
  - (b) Services 6/6A (Darlington & Stockton), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (c) Services 1&2 (Redcar and Cleveland), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (d) Service RP1 to Riverside Park (Middlesbrough), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (e) Services X40/X41 to Wynyard (Stockton & Hartlepool), to be operated by Stagecoach.
  - (f) Services 3&4 (Darlington), to be operated by Arriva.
  - (g) Service 29 (Middlesbrough), to be operated by Arriva.
  - (h) Service 3 (Redcar and Cleveland), to be operated by Arriva.
15. In addition to the services above that are being extended to March 2026, TVCA are also making extensions to the below services:
  - (a) Service 16 (Darlington) to be operated by Stagecoach until June 2025 to allow for a further procurement exercise, which will allow the service to continue until March 2026.
  - (b) Service 101 to Teesport (Middlesbrough), to be operated by Stagecoach until August 2025. A further extension of this service is dependent on another Stagecoach contract continuing, as the same buses are used to operate both services.
  - (c) Tees Flex, to be operated by Stagecoach until August 2025. The vehicles used to deliver Tees Flex are now reaching end-of-life and are a risk to the continued performance and reliability of the service. In addition, the planned conversion of Stagecoach's Stockton depot to be fully electric will likely have an impact on operational requirements.
16. TVCA have also been made aware of some proposed cuts to local services as a result of the operators experiencing cost pressures due to the increase in employer National Insurance contributions. Working with the operators to understand the impact of the cuts, it was understood that three services so far are due to be wholly withdrawn from the network. These are:

(a) Service 13/13b Coulby Newham – Middlesbrough – Stockton – Salters Lane

(b) Service 35 Stockton – Norton Grange – Billingham – Wolviston Court

(c) Service 39 Middlesbrough – North Ormesby – Park End

17. After looking at the passenger usage in comparison to the proposed cost of intervention, TVCA are in the process of temporarily, direct awarding service extensions whilst a procurement takes place to formally award the services to March 2026, in line with the rest of the supported network.
18. The above service support equates to a total allocation of £4.393m from the 2025/26 BSIP, with £2.898m of this funding confirmed, and the remaining £1.495m of funding set aside as a provisional allocation, subject to procurements.

### **Active Travel and Bus Priority Improvements**

19. During February TVCA have undertaken further public engagement for a number of Active travel schemes to be delivered using Levelling Up Funding. Statutory consultation on these proposals is expected to commence in March / April 2025 and a target date of June 25 for commencing works on site.
20. Design work for the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) funded Active Travel and Bus Priority schemes is also continuing to progress and are expected to commence on site from 2026, with delivery anticipated over an 18-month period.
21. Within Darlington, Woodlands Road Phase 2, which extends the current scheme towards Cockerton, is expected to be in delivery from summer 2025 as design works are more advanced and has now been through a final design review with Active Travel England.

### **Climate Change**

22. The Climate Change Cross Party Working Group met on 6 December and had a presentation from SmartCarbon on the services they offer and how they could help the Council to carbon neutral. The Group met again on 20 February, when the first of a series of updates from Assistant Directors were heard to update the group on their work to support the Council's carbon neutral target.

### **External Meetings and Engagement**

#### **Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership (DEEP)**

23. I attended the Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership (DEEP) Event held in Central Hall. The Net Zero Market Place event enabled a host of businesses – from the very local to multinational – to share knowledge and display sustainable initiatives. Three new companies - Willmott Dixon, SSE, and Chestnut Biopolymers – joined on the day of the event. DEEP now has a membership of 38 businesses and organisations.

24. Formed at the start of 2024, DEEP acts as the local champion for the business community to support achieving carbon reductions. was to enable businesses and other organisations in the Darlington area to work together on environmental challenges.

### **Employment**

25. I visited Darlington Jobs Fair, which was once again very well attended by a very varied range of employers, and large numbers of people looking for work, or a change of career. There were over 100 stalls, and over 1,200 people attended the event. Also attending the event were a range of organisations who provide support to people seeking employment.
26. Together with Councillor Baker, our Armed Forces champion, I attended a graduation at Darlington College. Building Heroes is a fantastic charity who help former military personnel by providing training that opens access to construction employment opportunities. Building Heroes provide support to help former military personnel have a seamless transition into the civilian workplace through this training.

### **Safer Streets**

27. I attended a roundtable event hosted by Rt Hon Darren Jones MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury. As part of a national 'tour' this event was hosted at DEC, with various partners from the criminal justice system invited. Darren is using the events to hear first-hand about current organisational challenges and how Government can help with addressing those challenges. This focus links to the Government's Safer Streets Mission.
28. Since the last meeting of Council I have attended and/or met:
- (a) Northern Echo editor, Gavin Foster
  - (b) Darlington Employers Environmental Partnership (DEEP) Event
  - (c) Amazon drone trial consultation
  - (d) Darlington Jobs Fair
  - (e) Building Heroes Graduation
  - (f) Darlington Towns' Deal Board
  - (g) Citizenship ceremony
  - (h) Mayor's song contest
  - (i) Association of NE Councils (ANEC)
  - (j) Deputy Chief Constable Ciaron Irvine
  - (k) Transport meetings and briefings

**Councillor Steve Harker**  
**Leader of the Council**