

COUNCIL
26 March 2026

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.

TVCA Transport Portfolio Update

2. As the TVCA Cabinet member with responsibility for transport the following sections provide a general update on elements of the portfolio relevant to Darlington.

Darlington Northern Link Road

3. As part of the Transport in City Regions (TCR) 2027-2032 funding allocated for this scheme, TVCA are continuing to develop an updated Options Assessment Report – this will also pick up the new guidance in the recently updated HM Treasury Green Book about the type of options to take forward. Once completed it will enable consideration of the next steps.

Darlington Station

4. The delivery of the Darlington Station project continues to progress and is planned to open in Spring 2026. The associated highways work on both sides is awaiting final approval and will be programmed to minimise the impact to the operational running of the station and car park.

Tees Valley Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP)

Supported Bus Services

5. Currently, the BSIP funding for 2025/26 is being used to deliver elements of the Tees Valley BSIP plan including fares offers, improving customer experience and supporting a number of services which are contracted until 31 March 2026.
6. BSIP funding has been replaced by a new Local Authority Bus Grant (LABG) and it has been confirmed that TVCA will receive a multi-year funding allocation of £25,988,194 for the period 2026/27 to 2028/29. This is the equivalent of £8,662,728 per annum - an increase from the £7,278,668 allocated in 2025/26. This multi-year settlement provides longer-term funding certainty and enables TVCA, Local Authorities and bus operators, via the Enhanced Partnership to plan further ahead.
7. In anticipation of this funding, and in light of the withdrawal of Tees Flex from the network from March 2026, TVCA are currently carrying out a review of all our current service enhancements. Following a data collection and analysis exercise on proposals put forward

for Supported Bus Services from the 25-26 BSIP funding and the requests for interventions TVCA have received over the last year, a long list of potential services and service enhancements has been developed, this will form proposals of which will move forward for approval.

8. Until this review has concluded, and to keep disruption to passengers at a minimum, TVCA have confirmed the following services have been extended in Darlington until July 2026:
 - (a) Service 16 (Darlington) – to be operated by Arriva
 - (b) Services 17/18 (Darlington) – to be operated by Arriva
 - (c) Services 3&4, evening and Sunday extension (Darlington) – to be operated by Arriva
 - (d) Services 6/6A (Darlington & Stockton) – to be operated by Stagecoach
9. In addition, from April 2026, an extension of the current Arriva commercial service 10 from Whinfield in Darlington, will now travel once an hour via Great Burdon, Sadberge, Little Stainton, Bishopton, Redmarshall, Carlton, Thorpe Thewles, Stillington and Great Stainton in an anticlockwise loop, returning to Sadberge and rejoining Service 10 at Whinfield.
10. Residents of Bishopton will also be able to travel to Stockton via new supported service Service X85 which will connect Redmarshall, Whitton, Stillington and Bishopton to Roseworth Tesco, University Hospital of North Tees and Stockton High Street. The service will also connect Great Stainton at a reduced frequency whilst covering key commuter travel demands. This service will also start in April 2026.

Supporting the decarbonisation of the bus fleet - Arriva Darlington Depot

11. Infrastructure works commenced in December 2025, and 21 Wrightbus Electric Buses have been ordered which are anticipated to enter in service from September 2026. This timeline has slipped from the original June 2026 date due to unforeseen complications with the power connection.

Great British Railway Bill

12. The Railways Bill will make provision to enable the creation of Great British Railways (GBR) and will create a statutory duty for Mayoral Strategic Authorities to have greater local influence over decision-making on the railway and shape rail outcomes in their regions. The intention is for the Bill to receive Royal Assent in Summer 2026. GBR is expected to be operational around twelve months after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

Active Travel

13. The Northgate Levelling Up Fund scheme which improves cycle connectivity from East Street to St. Cuthberts Way is now fully designed with a business case due to be appraised shortly. Works are expected to start on site in June 2026.

14. Woodland Road Phase 2 is also fully designed, and the business case has been approved following appraisal. Works expected to start on site around Easter 2026.

Climate Change

15. The Climate Change Working Group has now been renamed to Climate Change and Nature Restoration Cross Party Working Group, to incorporate the addition of the Nature Restoration work. The group met on 6 February and had updates from officers covering both areas. Members also heard about the recent publication of the Warm Homes Plan and government response to heat network zoning. We are now waiting on legislation to see exactly how that will impact on us.

Corporate Peer Challenge

16. In line with best practice, the council asked the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC), and this took place at the start of March 2026. The CPC team included senior politicians and senior officers from a range of local authorities, and focused on six themes; local priorities and outcomes, organisational and place leadership, governance and culture, financial planning and management, capacity for improvement, and ambition for place and ways of working. The CPC team interviewed a broad range of staff, councillors and external partners with the aim of achieving a broad understanding of the council in line with the six themes. The council will receive a CPC report in the near future and will develop an action plan based on the recommendations it contains.

External Meetings and Engagement

17. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are some of the meetings and events I have attended:
 - (a) Pride in Place Board
 - (b) Citizenship Ceremonies
 - (c) Formal opening of Martin Brower distribution centre
 - (d) Deputy Chief Constable Ciaron Irvine
 - (e) Briefing with the Police and Crime Commissioner
 - (f) Various Cabinet and Transport meetings at the TVCA
 - (g) LGA Engagement Workshop
 - (h) Introductory meeting with new Lord Lieutenant Michael Butterwick
 - (i) All Member Briefings – Events Programme 2026 and Inclusive Recovery Cities
 - (j) Transport for the North Board
 - (k) Darlington Health and Wellbeing Board
 - (l) Beaumont Hill Academy Launch

Councillor Steve Harker
Leader of the Council