

Economy and Resources Scrutiny
27 AUG 2026

TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To present a consultation draft of the Town Centre Strategy to members and seek views to inform the final draft that will be recommended to Cabinet for approval.

Summary

2. Town Centres are changing in nature across the Country, and it is important to have a strategy that will support and promote adaptation to the new role that town centres play in our communities.
3. The Council recognises that our businesses and partners play an instrumental role and do a tremendous job in the success of our town centre. The Council has a role to play in the changing environment of town centres and the purpose of the refresh of the strategy is to engage and develop an approach for ongoing support and collaboration.
4. A consultation draft has been produced that shares some of the recent successes of our town centre and provides a look into the future investments. **(See Appendix 1)** The strategy seeks views on a proposed vision, objectives and themes for the town centre strategy. It also outlines an approach on how the council will work with business, partners, visitors and the public to support the town centre moving forward.
5. The Council are seeking as wide-ranging views as possible to influence the strategy and the action plans that will be developed. An engagement programme commenced on 8 July, and this will close on 11 September. The views and comments will be analysed throughout this period with a view to seeking Cabinet endorsement of a revised Town Centre Strategy.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) Members note the contents of this report, consider the consultation draft and provide feedback to inform the final version of the strategy.

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Council Plan	The proposed Town Centre Strategy supports the delivery of the vision and outcomes in the Council Plan 2024 - 2027.
Addressing inequalities	The strategy will seek to address inequalities and provide opportunities for all.
Tackling Climate Change	This report has no significant impact on Carbon Impact and Climate Change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	There is no impact on the Council's efficiency agenda.
Health and Wellbeing	The proposed themes in the strategy will seek to have a positive impact on health and well-being.
S17 Crime and Disorder	An attractive and safe town centre is an outcome the strategy is seeking to achieve.
Wards Affected	Residents of the whole borough use the town centre so all wards are considered to be affected.
Groups Affected	The strategy is focused on the population of Darlington Borough, and considers those living, working in, visiting or considering establishing or relocating business within the town centre.
Budget and Policy Framework	There is no impact on the budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	This report is not a Key Decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an Urgent Decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

7. The proposed strategy reflects on the changing nature of town centres across the country and recognises that our businesses and partners play an instrumental role and do a tremendous job in the success of our town centre.
8. The purpose of the Town Centre Strategy is to set a vision, supported by clear objectives that outlines how the Council intends to contribute and outline to both existing business and investors the future direction of travel and opportunities for the town centre.

9. There has been significant investment in the town centre over recent years, and the strategy reflects on the investment of circa £230m providing both opportunities and supporting the town centre. The strategy also outlines future plans for investment and outlines the types of investment planned by the Council and others, which equates to a further £250m of investment in the coming years. The strategy proposes an ambitious vision and set of objectives

10. The draft consultation document proposes a Vision for the Town Centre:

“By 2030, DBC working together with partners, businesses and local communities, will deliver real positive change to our town centre, placing it at the heart of our community for years to come.”

11. This vision will be underpinned by developing a more diverse and modern role for our town centre supported by the following proposed objectives:

- *Enhancing the attractiveness, useability and vitality of our town centre.*
- *Celebrating our heritage.*
- *Supporting local economic growth.*
- *Improving the health and wellbeing of people.*
- *Making Darlington a great place to live, work, learn and visit.*

12. A series of actions plans will be developed that will focus on five themes that will have the vision and objectives as the key principles. These will be informed through views received in the engagement process. The themes are aimed at the town centre being all encompassing and inclusive and they will be in addition to the traditional role of town centres being a place to shop. It will encourage people to:

- 1) *Live here:* To ensure town centre living options are available in a clean, attractive and safe town centre environment.
- 2) *Work here:* To create new office spaces, create the environment to provide job opportunities and to ensure of strong transport links.
- 3) *Play here:* To encourage people to use the town centre for leisure by ensuring of a good choice of leisure offer and a clean, safe and attractive town centre environment which is easy to get to.
- 4) *Learn here:* To ensure there is a high-quality town centre learning options and to support education providers.
- 5) *Invest here:* To support continued business investment in our town centre by offering support and ensuring appropriate workspace is available.

13. The proposed strategy will support the town centre in continuing to be a place people will want to continue visiting, shopping, working and living in for many years to come.

14. The future of Darlington Town centre is positive; the strategy outlines the proposed investment of over £250m. The Council wants all business to take advantage of the recent successes and those that are planned. The Council will develop a delivery framework to monitor delivery of the strategy and action plans based on four strands:

- (a) Partnership: developing relationships between all with interests in the town centre and setting up refreshed governance process and communications
 - (b) Funding: Proactively seek funding opportunities and explore opportunities through engagement.
 - (c) Promote: we will develop proactive collective communication channels and promote the town centre
 - (d) Deliver against the strategy: Detailed action plans will be developed that deliver the vision and objectives that are finally agreed in the strategy.
15. The Council recognises the challenges that business face, the Council also faces these challenges. The Council will listen to all ideas and suggestions, but there are very limited resources available, which is why we need to develop this strategy and work on partnerships that ensure every pound spent is invested wisely and we seek funding opportunities in partnership that benefit all town centre businesses and users.

Outcome of Consultation

16. The consultation and engagement programme started on Wednesday 8 July and will close on Friday 11 September. Members views are sought as part of this process and officers would welcome views on any audiences where further engagement should be considered.
17. As part of the Town Centre Strategy consultation and engagement programme, significant activity is underway to maximise participation from residents, businesses and stakeholders across Darlington to ensure the strategic objectives and action plans reflect the views of those who have engaged.
18. The Council are seeking as wide-ranging views as possible to influence the strategy and the action plans that will be developed. Some aspects of the engagement programme include:-
- (a) All Member Briefing 14th July
 - (b) On-line Questionnaires/Survey
 - (c) One Darlington article & promotion of the consultation at various events through the summer
 - (d) Consultation postcards will be distributed to support survey participation,
 - (e) a dedicated newsletter circulated to town centre businesses.
 - (f) The survey has been promoted through direct email communication to all town centre businesses, via the town centre WhatsApp group, through Darlington Borough Council's social media channels, and within the Council's internal communications briefing.
 - (g) all councillors have been provided with survey links and supporting social media assets to encourage wider dissemination and participation within their communities.
 - (h) To ensure the consultation remains accessible and inclusive, a paper-based version of the survey has been developed for those who prefer not to complete the online questionnaire.
 - (i) Collaboration with the youth engagement group based at the Cornmill.
 - (j) Two online engagement sessions have also been scheduled, providing residents, businesses and stakeholders with an additional forum to discuss the Town Centre Strategy and contribute their views.
 - (k) Specific groups will also be targeted following suggestions, such as landlords.