

COUNCIL
25 APRIL 2019

OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND REGENERATION PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work undertaken under the Economy and Regeneration Portfolio.

Strategic Sites Development Programme Darlington Town Centre

2. Cabinet welcomed updates on the emerging high-level thoughts and the future development of proposals to encourage further investment on key strategic sites in Darlington Town Centre; and on the successful outcomes of several objectives articulated in the Town Centre Regeneration Strategy for Darlington, adopted by the Council in 2012.
3. Since the adoption of the Town Centre Regeneration Strategy the landscape of retail and commerce within town centres across the UK has changed markedly. It is important to note that while Darlington Town Centre has experienced a number of shocks to its retail profile over the last few years, the town centre continues to retain a high proportion of top national retailers and has a strong representation from independent retailers in certain parts of the town. A recent report, commissioned by the North East Chamber of Commerce – Town Centres: Planning for the Future (November 2018), identified Darlington as the highest ranked retail town in the Tees Valley and the third highest retail centre in the North East behind Newcastle and the Metro Centre.
4. The threat to the Country's high streets has been acknowledged by Central Government which announced a £675m Future High Street Fund as part of the 2018 budget. A Bid has been made to the Fund with feedback expected early Summer.
5. Cabinet has agreed the key Town Centre development areas appropriate for consideration are:
 - (a) Victorian Indoor Market
 - (b) Skinnergate and the Yards and Wynds
 - (c) Northgate
 - (d) Crown Street

Darlington Indoor Market

6. Darlington's Victorian Indoor Market is an important anchor for the Town Centre going forward. In terms of being a unique proposition the market should and could act as an attractor for many people to come to the Town. However, it is an accepted fact that this building is underperforming and is not fulfilling its potential. The Council has recognised the need for further investment and in 2017 entered a partnership agreement with Market Asset Management.

7. As part of the partnership agreement Market Asset Management (MAM) is obliged to produce a redevelopment scheme for the Indoor Market. In March 2019 MAM launched a public conversation exercise on two refurbishment options for the Indoor Market.
 - (a) Option 1 detailed the general improvements to the overall fabric of the building, which includes the provision of a modern retailing space, which will showcase the existing and potentially new independent businesses and create an environment to appeal to younger more affluent shoppers, while retaining the varied retail choices currently used by customers.
 - (b) Option 2 includes the proposals detailed in option one but also includes the development of a 'temperate garden' on the eastern elevation of the market building.
8. This engagement exercise is due to be completed within the next few weeks and following its conclusion the necessary planning permissions will be submitted. The Council with its partners are confident that this investment and transformation of this much-loved heritage building into a modern retail and leisure venue would not only provide a quality retail offer to residents but act as a regional attraction for visitors.

Heighington Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Boundary Review

9. Cabinet approved the Heighington Conservation Area Character Appraisal including the proposed extension to the boundary, in order to assist in the preservation and enhancement of the Heighington Conservation Area and its setting, in accordance with Section 71 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.
10. Darlington Borough has 17 Conservation Areas. The earliest were designated in 1968 and the last in 2016. 12 of these Conservation Areas have the benefit of an adopted Character Appraisals. Heighington Conservation Area was designated in February 1972 and extended in 1999. Up to this point, it has not had the benefit of a Character Appraisal.
11. Defining the 'special interest' of an area is the main purpose of a Character Appraisal and is gained from the area's character and appearance; but other senses and experiences, local environmental conditions and historical associations can be drawn on.
12. The Character Appraisal for Heighington Conservation Area has been prioritised due to increasing development pressure which, if not managed effectively through the planning process, could lead to impact on its special character and appearance.

Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan

13. Low Coniscliffe Parish Council has prepared a Neighbourhood Plan which covers the whole of the geographic area of the parish. The Plan has been prepared in accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012. The Plan was submitted for independent examination. The examiner suggested some modifications and officers of the Council are satisfied that with these modifications the Plan meets the basic conditions and the Legislation.

14. As the Plan meets the basic conditions, it can now proceed to a referendum. A referendum will be held on 23 May when all the electorate of Low Coniscliffe Parish are eligible to vote. The question on the voting paper will be **“Do you want Darlington Borough Council to use the neighbourhood plan for Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent to help it decide planning applications in the neighbourhood area?”** The vote requires a simple yes or no answer and the result would be based on a majority of those who voted.
15. If the majority vote yes, the Council are legally obliged to **Make** (adopt) the Plan as part of the Development Plan Framework.

Feethams Project

16. Activity has begun on site for Feethams House – with archaeology/excavation works being carried out in preparation for commencement of construction. European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Tees Valley Combined Authority funding has been secured and the five-storey office building is anticipated to be completed in early 2020. Cushman and Wakefield and Connect Property North East Ltd are seeking to secure tenants.

Business Investment

17. From the beginning of the year, the Invest in Darlington website has generated 79 property search enquiries. Work is ongoing to develop testimonials and case studies for the website to fully show the sectoral strengths Darlington has, as a means to attract further inward investment from priority sectors. Relationships with key partners and intermediaries are developing and a number of leads have come through for companies looking for sites to develop new manufacturing facilities. These are early stage enquiries, but the team are working hard to progress them.
18. 49 new projects have been created since the start of the year and it is hoped that they will lead to a number of new businesses setting up in Darlington thus adding to employment opportunities for local residents. There has been a noticeable increase in enquiries for town centre premises and a number of new businesses have started trading or are looking to open in the next one to two months.
19. There are currently 2,745 Darlington residents claiming out-of-work benefits. This equates to 4.2 per cent of all residents which is the same level as the North East figure. Great Britain's figure is 2.6 per cent.
20. Of those claiming out-of-work benefits, 570 are aged 18-24 (7.6 per cent) and 340 (8.2 per cent) are aged 18-21. These two age groups are those which are most notable in variance compared to Great Britain as a whole at 3.4 per cent and the North East at 5.9 per cent for the 18-24 age range and 6.2 per cent respectively for the 18-21 age range.

Environmental Health

21. The Environmental Health Section responded to 962 requests for service in Quarter 3.

22. The main categories of these requests are:

- (a) Food (102)
- (b) Licensing (83)
- (c) Noise (119)
- (d) Planning Consultations (77)
- (e) Refuse (46)
- (f) Pest (134)

23. Additionally, the Commercial Team carried out the following proactive Food Inspections:

- (a) Food Safety (125)
- (b) Food Standards (82)

24. A high percentage of requests for service received by Environmental Health relate to matters which could result in a statutory nuisance. The Council has a statutory duty to investigate cases of potential statutory nuisance and whilst many cases can be resolved informally there is a legal requirement to serve an Abatement Notice if a statutory nuisance is proven. To be a statutory nuisance there needs to be evidence of something being a nuisance or prejudicial to health (or likely to be). There is no set definition of the term 'nuisance' but a nuisance is something which causes substantial interference with the use and enjoyment of a person's property and is more than just an annoyance or something that is present.

25. Types of situations which may give rise to a statutory nuisance are as follows:

- (a) State of premises
- (b) Smoke/fumes and gases emitted from premises
- (c) Smell/Dust/Steam from industrial, trade or business premises
- (d) Accumulations or deposits for example accumulations of refuse containing food waste
- (e) Animals kept in such a place or manner
- (f) Insects from any industrial, trade or business premises
- (g) Artificial light from premises
- (h) Noise emitted from premises or caused by a vehicle, machinery or equipment in a street

26. The most common complaints of potential statutory nuisance investigated by Environmental Health relate to noise, specifically barking dogs and music from domestic premises, as well as complaints about industrial/commercial premises.

Councillor Chris McEwan
Economy and Regeneration Portfolio