

**CABINET
5 NOVEMBER 2019**

**DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY 2019-2030
CONSULTATION OUTCOME**

**Responsible Cabinet Member –
Councillor Alan Marshall, Economy and Regeneration Portfolio**

**Responsible Director –
Ian Williams, Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. To feedback to Cabinet the responses from the public consultation on the draft Darlington Town Centre Strategy (2019-2030).

Summary

2. In July 2019 Cabinet approved the commencement of a consultation process on the Darlington Town Centre Strategy. This strategy proposes a new joint vision for the Town Centre which:
 - (a) develops and enhances Darlington's unique selling points
 - (b) establishes a richer understanding of the current and future demographic demands upon the town centre
 - (c) creates an accessible town centre a for motorists, pedestrians and cyclists
 - (d) establishes new anchors within the town such as a revitalised, refurbished and refreshed Victorian Indoor Market
 - (e) invests in our heritage assets like the historic yards and wynds and utilising their charm and attractiveness by holding regular events and activities
 - (f) reduces the retail footprint of the town replacing empty shops and derelict pieces of land with appropriate, sustainable and high-quality residential accommodation
 - (g) ensures any future developments of the town centre strategically fits and complements forthcoming investments into the Bank Top Train Station and the development of initiatives surrounding the Darlington 2025 programme of projects.

3. A full copy of the Strategy can be found on the Council's website at <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/9359/town-centre-strategy-2019-30.pdf>
4. The strategy also specifically proposed the development of several proposals that aimed to encourage the delivery of key strategic sites in Darlington Town Centre.
 - (a) Victorian Indoor Market
 - (b) Skinnergate and the Yards and Wynds
 - (c) Northgate area
 - (d) Crown Street area
5. Several consultation and communication channels were used to gain people's views. These included the use of survey monkey, various social media platforms including those managed by the Council and partners, consultation stands in the Dolphin Centre, focus groups with young people and older people, we gathered the views of disabled users, and faith groups and discussed the intended approach with retailers and landowners. A full analysis of the consultation is detailed in **(Appendix 1)**.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that Cabinet agree to adopt the Darlington Town Centre Strategy 2019-2030.

Reasons

7. The recommendation is supported by the following reasons:-
 - (a) To ensure that the Council has an established and agreed vision for the future of Darlington Town Centre.
 - (b) To contribute to the further economic wellbeing and vitality of the Town Centre

Ian Williams
Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services

Background Papers

No background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

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S17 Crime and Disorder	This paper supports and complements the actions detailed in the Darlington Purple Flag submission to reduce ASB in the Town Centre and improve the safety of residents and visitors
Health and Well Being	No direct impacts
Carbon Impact and Climate Change	No direct impacts
Diversity	No direct impacts
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All

Budget and Policy Framework	This decision does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework. Any works highlighted in the report will be met through existing agreed budgets.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The actions detailed in the report aim to improve the attractiveness of the Town Centre therefore directly impacting on Perfectly Placed.
Efficiency	The report aims to utilise the Councils and partner resources in a collective more efficient manner.
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

The Development of Darlington Town Centre

8. Darlington Town Centre is a key element of the economic, social and environmental fabric of the town. It needs to be at the core of community and economic life, offering spaces in which to live, meet and interact, do business, and access facilities and services. The Council together with partners needs to take collective responsibility to help the town centre thrive sustainably, reinvent its function, and meet the needs of residents, businesses, and visitors.
9. Given the changes in both the environment of the high street and changes in peoples shopping habits there is a need for all towns to develop plans that have business investment at their heart and are focused on transforming the place into a complete community hub incorporating health, housing, arts, education, entertainment, leisure, business/office space, as well as retail. Councils together with business and the communities needs to develop a compelling proposition both for residents, stakeholders and visitors, a proposition that embraces the heritage, culture and social context of the town.
10. Retail activities alone can no longer anchor a town centre and with the long lead-in times needed for major regeneration plans to come into fruition it is important to consider other uses town centre. A carefully future proofed strategy robust enough to appeal to multiple customer groups while still offering a unifying town-centre vision is essential. This approach also brings with it the differentiation and variety needed to make Darlington Town Centre a place people will want to visit, shop, work and live. The attached strategy aims to ensure that:

“By 2030 Darlington Borough Council together with its partners and communities will have delivered real positive change to our town centre. Enhancing the competitiveness and vitality of our town centre as place at the heart of the community, which celebrates our heritage, supports local economic growth and enhance the health and well-being of people who live in, work and visit our borough”.

11. In January 2019 Cabinet approved the development of several proposals that aimed to encourage the delivery of key strategic sites in Darlington Town Centre. The report also complemented and supported the work and actions outlined in the Town Centre Footfall Strategy report agreed by Cabinet in July 2018. The sites identified in the report included: -
 - (a) Victorian Indoor Market
 - (b) Skinnergate and the Yards and Wynds
 - (c) Northgate area
 - (d) Crown Street area
12. This report will update members on the feedback from the consultation exercise on the draft Town Centre Strategy which was presented to Cabinet in July 2019.

Consultation Feedback on the Town Centre Strategy

13. Following Cabinet agreement in July 2019 the Council commenced a consultation exercise to engage with both residents and visitors to the town centre and explore what people wanted to see improve in the town centre. The consultation commenced with the launch of a survey which over 500 people completed. The survey was promoted via the Council's website and social media platforms in addition local partners also used social media to promote the Strategy and public exhibitions and extensive coverage in local media and the One Darlington magazine were also used as a means of gauging people's views.
14. To gain further qualitative data several focus groups were set up with young people, faith groups, disability group and older people representatives.
15. Unsurprisingly given the current general function of the town centre most respondents wanted to see more shops being on offer in the town centre. This is a reflection on the current downward trend in retail across the country. While the Council's ability to attract large national chains is extremely limited it does have the ability to support smaller independent retailers to the town. The recently launched Council funded shop front and business support grant will be of assistance and the Tees Valley Business Support Grant scheme should also help small businesses and retailers in the town centre. Furthermore, effective signposting of retailers and new businesses to support organisations like North East Enterprise Agency Limited (NEEAL) will assist in ensuring our retailers gain the best advice and guidance that is available.
16. While the retail offer was deemed important to people the delivery of quality events and the enhancing of visitor attractions was also highly valued. The Council has made a commitment to continue to improve its events and festivals schedule by working with partners across the region to establish Darlington Town Centre as an excellent events venue. The proposed investment into the Indoor Market will also enhance the visitor offer and develop Darlington as a regional destination of choice.

17. One area that needs to be addressed is the perceived lack of facilities for young people in the town. This was highlighted through the survey but also emphasised during the young people focus group sessions. The provision of a ten-pin bowling facility was mentioned on several occasions and an increase in affordable, quality eating places was also highlighted as missing in the town centre.
18. The cleanliness of the town and the quality of the public realm were highlighted as important to many of the people responding to the questionnaire. The Council has embarked on a plan to improve the greening of the town which will help to 'soften' and improve the various public spaces and contribute to our carbon reduction agenda. In addition, the Council aims to invest in its heritage and cultural areas by improving the yards and wynds to make them more visually attractive and welcoming for residents and visitors. Clearly there exists a great deal of public pride in the town centre and this work will commence in early 2020.
19. One of the town centre strategy's main objectives was to develop Darlington into a 'Living Town Centre' and a development of residential homes, particularly in the Crown Street area was well supported. This proposed approach was also very welcomed by the older people's focus group who felt that homes conveniently located to amenities would enhance the accessibility for older people to the town centre. These responses are in line with the Council's ambition to increase town centre living and its Future High Street Fund bid which aims to deliver approximately 150 properties in the Crown Street/East Street area of the town.
20. The older people's focus group also stated that the 'flow' of the town from Northgate to the Market Square was disrupted by the lack of a retail offer in and around the Queen's Street area. This has been highlighted in the strategy and the Council may wish to reflect on plans that assist in linking the northern and southern part of the town centre.
21. The details of all the responses to the Strategy can be found in Appendix 1.
22. Overall it would appear from the general comments and feedback from the survey and focus groups that there exists a large degree of support for the ambitions articulated in the strategy. There are number of changes requiring action and emphasis which include: -
 - (a) Expand the support and funding available to independent retailers and small businesses
 - (b) The Council examine the possible development of a ten-pin bowling alley within the town centre
 - (c) Introduce a disability friendly scheme for retailers
 - (d) Review current car parking arrangements including pricing and parking times. This could form part of the site assembly requirements for a convenience store in the Commercial Street area which could provide a restricted amount of free parking and meet residents' aspirations of additional retail in the area.
 - (e) Work with land owners to refresh and develop the Queen Street shopping centre

Financial Considerations

23. Whilst this paper sets out responses to possible future work programme, it is contributing to the completion of a strategy paper and financial interventions are not yet known and will depend on the type of scheme which is brought forward.

Legal Implications

24. This paper sets out thoughts on a future work programme, and legal implications will depend on the development of specific schemes.
25. Property acquisition and disposals will be subject to legal due diligence and further Cabinet approvals on and subject to the terms and method of acquisition. Further reports and information will be produced to Cabinet where the use of compulsory purchase powers is envisaged.
26. Grant funding schemes will need to be provided on an open and accessible basis ensuring equal treatment that the funding delivers required outcomes and ensures prudent use of funds and does not give rise to state aid.
27. Procurement of works goods and or services will be procured in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 and good industry practice.
28. It is anticipated that further Cabinet reports detailing the funding sources will cover these issues and further detail on legal implications.

Equalities Considerations

29. During the consultation a number of protected characteristic groups, including younger and older residents, residents with disabilities and faith groups, were engaged with, as detailed in Appendix 1.
30. Equality information was also collected from survey respondents in order to ensure that the feedback received was reflective of the borough population.
31. In addition, analysis of consultation responses by protected characteristic was undertaken in order to identify any specific issues/views raised by or potential impacts of the strategy upon different groups. These findings are raised in the body of this report.
32. Changes to the strategy as a result of consultation feedback relating to protected characteristics include: an increased focussed on the attraction of additional and improved leisure attractions for young people, work with existing and new retailers and businesses in the town centre to address access and service issues for people with disabilities.