

**COUNCIL**  
**30 JANUARY 2020**

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**OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY PORTFOLIO**

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

**Darlington Town Centre/Estates and Property**

2. Officers continue to work with external support from AECOM Limited (Architecture Engineering Consulting Operations and Maintenance) to complete the business case for the Future High Street Fund. The bid will focus on the development of residential homes in the East Street and Crown Street area. An early business case has been submitted to Government and we await feedback. The final business case will be submitted before 30 April 2020.
3. The Council's Shop Front and Business Support Scheme continues to attract attention from local retailers. Initially focussed on Post House Wynd the scheme will be further expanded to include the conservation area of the town centre in Spring 2020.
4. The acquisition of the former Argos and Cash Convertors buildings in Skinnergate is now complete. Over the last six months, Officers have been developing a residential scheme to replace the current buildings and to complement the existing No. 12 Skinnergate which is a listed building. A planning application for 15 residential properties will be submitted in February 2020.
5. Other Town Centre Strategic Acquisitions are ongoing:
  - (a) purchase of the Union Street Congregational Church and Hall;
  - (b) 10-12 Union Street expected to complete by the end of January 2020;
  - (c) negotiations with the owners of the adjacent former nightclub building are continuing.
6. All of the above properties have been vacant for some time and when acquired will be demolished at the earliest opportunity to improve the general appearance of the area and make way for future developments.
7. Refurbishment works to the Council's shop premises at the corner of Skinnergate and Duke Street are progressing well and are expected to be complete by mid-January 2020. The refurbished unit previously occupied by the Co-op Bank has been let to Queensway Dental Practice who are already in Darlington on Yarm Road and have practices in Billingham and Jesmond.
8. The Town Centre has seen an increase in the number of units taken up with independent traders, particularly in the Grange Road area which is nearly at full occupancy.

9. Members will recall that at the last Council meeting, I informed Council of the launch of the Government's Towns Fund. The Council are currently working on the development of a Town Deal which will be submitted to Government in summer 2020. Town Deals will improve connectivity, provide vital social and cultural infrastructure and boost growth, with communities having a say on how the money is spent. A new Town Board has recently been established to ensure communities views are considered in the development of the Town Deal through a comprehensive consultation process.

### **Business Investment**

10. In early December 2019, Amazon announced plans to open its new Fulfilment Centre in Darlington and begin recruitment for more than 1,000 new permanent jobs. Recruitment has now started for a range of new roles including engineers, HR and IT professionals, health and safety and finance specialists and operations managers. The Council will be working with Amazon and other partners to ensure Darlington residents have every opportunity to gain employment at the new centre.
11. Confirmation has been received from Aldi HQ that their new facility at Faverdale is fully operational. The facility includes a new multi storey car park and a chiller expansion to handle an increased range of fresh foods for their store network. This expansion will result in an additional 100 plus jobs for the local area.
12. Work is underway to develop a new Professionals Network in Darlington to support the Business Professionals and Financial Services sector in the town and look at how they can be better supported, and growth encouraged. Early conversations with local businesses are positive and a delivery framework will be developed in the New Year.
13. Negotiations are ongoing with prospective tenants for Feethams House and we hope to update Members in early 2020.

### **Planning Development Management and Environmental Health**

14. Over the last few months permissions have been granted for the development of Stag House and Section 106 Agreements have been completed for Oak Meadows Farm, Middleton St. George which means that the commencement of development is imminent.
15. Further work is being undertaken relating to the Development Management Charter, which sets out the reasonable expectations of both developers and objectors within the Development Management System. A report will be brought back to Members for consideration when complete.
16. An engagement process with Parish Councils has been completed to explain the planning process focussing on Section 106 legal agreements. A presentation was given by the Head of Development Management and Environmental Health to the Association of Parish Councils. There has been very positive feedback regarding this renewed engagement process resulting in a formal request to engage in the 106 process to ensure wherever possible that funds are secured to facilitate local improvements.

17. An outline planning application for 46 dwellings on brownfield land at Sadberge Reservoir on behalf of Northumbrian Water Ltd has been approved by the Planning Committee. The scheme will secure finance to extend the current bus service to and from the village and to improve the existing play area by way of a Section 106 agreement. As an alternative the money could be spent on the creation of a new play area in a more accessible place.
18. Planning Permission for the construction of a new Fire Station on the existing site in Darlington has also been granted after some delays relating to flooding matters.
19. An application for a supermarket in the Faverdale area is reaching the final stages of negotiation. A recommendation to Members of the Planning Committee will be forthcoming in February.

## **Environmental Health**

20. Darlington Environmental Health have been the lead Authority in a partnership with Public Health England in setting up a pilot hospital notification system that will allow Accident and Emergency departments to notify Local Authorities about patients attending hospital as a result of an allergy attack linked to a food premises (shortly to be trialled at Darlington Memorial Hospital, Northern Children's Hospital and RVI). If successful, this trial could be rolled out nationally.
21. The background to the development of this initiative is as follows. In the UK food allergies affect eight per cent of adults and two per cent of children and the effects can be life changing. This equates to 2 million people living with a diagnosed food allergy. Every year approximately ten people die from food related anaphylaxis (FSA, 2008). More people per year are admitted to hospital with a food related hypersensitivity than food-borne diseases. In the UK, £900 million per year is spent on allergies in primary care and £68 million on allergy-related hospital admissions. A considerable amount of this large figure is avoidable. There is no cure for food allergies or intolerances therefore the only way to manage the condition is through a strict avoidance diet. It is therefore of the utmost importance that sufferers have access to accurate allergen information. The Environmental Health section at Darlington Borough Council were receiving a significant number of complaints from consumers who had an allergic reaction following the ordering of food at premises or where the knowledge of the food business was lacking with regards to allergens.
22. Therefore since 2015 we have carried out several visits as part of our regulatory duties with local businesses in relation to allergies.
23. Our initial results found:
  - (a) 40 per cent of food premises tested were discovered to not be fully compliant with the Food Information Regulations 2014.
  - (b) Over 65 per cent of businesses did not have any written policies, procedures or documentation such as the allergen matrix.
  - (c) Those without documentation were questioned verbally about the presence of allergens within their menu items. 40 per cent of those questioned failed to give satisfactory answers.

- (d) 20 per cent of the test purchase samples were found to be containing the allergen despite the server confirming that the item did not contain said allergen.
  - (e) Take away businesses were found to be the businesses with the lowest level of allergen compliance. The main issues found were that often takeaways were cooking their food in nut oil, using mixed ground nut as a substitute for almond or using mixed pastes which contained allergic ingredients but not declaring this to the consumer. This was putting consumers with an allergy at a significant risk of harm.
24. To deal with this we have carried out the following (using funding provided by the Director of Public Health team) and using an invited trainer:
- (a) A series of four training sessions were implemented targeting these business (Caterers/Takeaways/Lunch Clubs & Indian/Bangladeshi restaurants). These were done free of charge for the business and held at The Kings Centre Church and local restaurants where participants were likely to feel most at ease and so that practical activities could take place to aid understanding. Businesses were also provided with an information pack and signposted to information in other languages. We experienced a very good turnout and the feedback following the events was very positive.
  - (b) Training has been provided at Darlington College for 1<sup>st</sup> Year Catering students in order to engage with the chefs of the future.
  - (c) Formal food samples have been obtained from food premises where intelligence suggests more action is needed (currently being tested at a public analysts' laboratory).
25. Our work was recently presented to Environmental Health colleagues in the North East in order to promote best practice and Darlington is now the lead authority for allergens within the region. We were also finalists in this year's APSE awards based on this work.
26. Environmental Health have seen an increased number of complaints relating to people allegedly living in caravans in the street and on housing estates. These issues have been dealt with using powers normally used for dealing with Unauthorised Gypsy and Traveller Encampments and, with the exception of one case, have ensured the caravans have been moved with minimal enforcement need.
27. One individual who set up camp in White Hart Crescent led to complaints about anti-social behaviour, substance misuse, fires and accumulations of scrap material. Environmental Health and Legal Services obtained a Court Order on 25 November to ensure that the caravan was removed from the area.

## **Local Plan**

28. The Local Plan will be considered at Special Cabinet on 11 February and Special Council on 20 February. If approved the Plan will be placed on deposit in the Spring for a period of six weeks to allow representations. All representations submitted will be forwarded to the independent Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State who will be responsible for Examining the Plan to ensure its soundness and legal compliance.
29. Anyone who makes representations on the Plan may request to appear in front of the Inspector when the Plan is discussed.

## **Climate Change**

30. A Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer has been appointed and commenced duties on Monday 27 January. The initial primary task will be working with the Cross-Party Members Working Group to develop an Action Plan to meet the Council's resolution on climate change.

**Councillor Alan Marshall**  
**Economy Portfolio**