



Darlington Local Government Branch

APPENDIX 2
Darlington Local Government Branch

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Dear Ada

Medium Term Financial Plan 2016/17

Darlington Local Government Branch of Unison would like to put forward its comments on the proposals set out in the revised Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

This letter is a revised version of the letter given to Councillors Dixon and Harker on 11 February 2016.

There is no doubt that the council's budget is under severe pressure and difficult choices have to be made about which services to prioritise but we believe that the council has not given itself enough time to rewire services before making these drastic cuts. The lack of genuine and meaningful long-term service planning gives rise to a view that the council's response to the Government's significant grant reductions are ill thought out.

Is there still scope within certain core offer services for carefully planned efficiency savings that, if managed properly, do not significantly impact on service delivery or jobs? We believe there is. This has the potential to bolster the Future Fund pot to preserve services that the public clearly hold dear and that make Darlington what it is. We also believe that the council is failing to capitalise on opportunities to generate income which could be used to support existing services. It appears that direction of travel, to have a slimmed-down council, is seriously lacking in vision and ingenuity.

This can be illustrated as follows:

Agency spending

We have analysed the data for spending over £500 for 2015. For the 11 reported months (September is missing) the council spent over £2.7 million on agency staff, a significant proportion of this spending in Environmental Services. The breakdown of agency spending is shown below:

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Sum of Invoice Line Value (net of VAT)	Column Labels												Agency Staff Costs - Non Teaching Total	Grand Total
Row Labels	Jan-15	Feb-15	Mar-15	Apr-15	May-15	Jun-15	Jul-15	Aug-15	Oct-15	Nov-15	Dec-15			
People	58273.63	52066.6	95145.33	74783.19	140831.66	85843.29	91334.06	85053.11	62646.17	61535.96	260596.39		1068109.39	1068109.39
Adults Social Care	30104.13	39408.3	47719.93	50195.86	73286.17	50936.53	47485.42	38451.19	18973.62	14680.9	70249.6		481491.65	481491.65
Childrens Social Care	28169.5	12658.3	47425.4	24587.33	67545.49	34906.76	43848.64	46601.92	43672.55	46855.06	190346.79		586617.74	586617.74
Place	85198.96	145858.37	229945.48	105188.29	140287.73	112961.31	91269.22	124940.01	201905.06	97618.08	214620.65		1549793.16	1549793.16
Building Design Services	3381.74	15658.58	13323.64	7080.25	21027.82	7443.33	14374.18	15466.11	4142.48	12956.69	10578.89		125433.71	125433.71
Culture	4149.33			714.75									4864.08	4864.08
DLO Services	45698.74	89983.51	145870.48	82465.12	87894.81	71384.95	65887.15	102638.49	181717.99	76673.93	189038.28		1139253.45	1139253.45
Environmental Services	16874.89	26650.22	42298.51	1563.99	8988.41	19126.69	514.87		1035.08		3174.6		120227.26	120227.26
Highway Asset Management					1098.16	2196.32	2196.32	1121.84	7529.61	1603.21	6415.8		22161.26	22161.26
Housing	8460.75	5531.75	19790.02	8181.15	8523.62		544.88	1770.51	577.94	1718.2			55098.82	55098.82
Housing Revenue Account	5311.59	6405	8662.83	5183.03	12754.91	12810.02	7751.82	3943.06	6246.46	4666.05	5413.08		79147.85	79147.85
Programme & Projects		1629.31											1629.31	1629.31
Regulatory Services									655.5				655.5	655.5
Transport & Building Cleaning	1321.92												1321.92	1321.92
Resources Group	8509.99	8037.59	14620.36	12905.78	9017.19	15150.01	9958.28	16537.05	14212.42	7393.75	5848.25		122190.67	122190.67
Resources	8509.99	8037.59	12230.47	11312.52	8220.56	10808.42	9958.28	13615.85	10587.5	7393.75	4198.61		104873.54	104873.54
Transformation			2389.89	1593.26	796.63	4341.59		2921.2	3624.92		1649.64		17317.13	17317.13
Grand Total	151982.58	205962.56	339711.17	192877.26	290136.58	213954.61	192561.56	226530.17	278763.65	166547.79	481065.29		2740093.22	2740093.22

The staff at the depot have reported that it is bursting at the seams with agency staff, some of whom are on a higher hourly rate than they are. In fact, appendix 1 to the HR1, Agency Workers Hired by Darlington Borough Council as at week ending 31 January 2015 shows the number of agency Waste Operatives at 11, suggesting that the over-use of agency staff in that area has been going on for some time. This we believe is due to the failure to correctly implement the refuse and recycling collection rounds efficiently. When the alternate weekly collection service was introduced, the routes were based on the refuse collection operation and the mechanical operation of wheeled bin emptying. This was then mirrored to service the recycling rounds. The recycling service was severely under resourced as it is, by its nature, a slower and more labour-intensive process with new and restrictive vehicles. Under the current collection policy, which takes place on the same day as refuse collection, this meant the council was never going to be able to achieve the required standard and maintain collection levels whilst saving £400,000, the very reason alternate weekly collection was introduced.

This could have and should have been properly thought through at the time, however it was not and what we have now is a collection service that cannot function in any given week without some level of support/backup, including overtime payments being made on a Monday to several staff to deal with the overspill from the four day working week. This includes delivering bins and collecting missed bins. It is hard to see where the original £400,000 saving for alternate weekly collection is ever going to occur.

This was forecast by the Branch in a letter sent to the Assistant Director on 3 June 2014:

It is quite simply a short-term unsustainable cost-cutting measure which will inevitably see the build-up of service delivery pressures in the medium term which could lead to cost pressures, for example through increased reliance on expensive agency staff.

Agency spending in all areas is ripe for review. We would suggest that this review could be led by Efficiency and Resources Committee.

How could any efficiency savings be better used? Businesses do not want to invest in a dump. That is what Darlington could become if the council no longer provides a litter and waste reduction service, if it reduces the number of Street Scene staff to

collect the litter and if it no longer provides an Environmental Crime Team that enforces laws on fly tipping and littering. How will education, awareness and empowerment work when the staff that drive these key aspirations are being made redundant? Will Darlington become the fly tip area of choice and the dirtiest town in the North East? This is not how we will attract investment or build on our economic growth successes.

We are concerned that the Council does not appear to have identified how the statutory services provided by this team will be carried out after it is disbanded. For example, how will Abandoned Vehicles be dealt with after the proposals are implemented? Has a full assessment of the current volume of work been carried out? It is essential that if there is an intention to redistribute the work to other members of staff this is specified during the consultation period.

Library

It appears that the proposal to close Cockerton library, stop the mobile library and switch Crown Street library to the Dolphin Centre has got more holes than substance. It would necessitate moving the Registrars out of the Dolphin Centre, significantly downsizing the library offer, relocating the archive (there is no current plan for where this would be) and losing expert and experienced staff. We have serious reservations as to whether this merry go round of services would save any money; in fact we believe it would cost the council dear.

It is very disappointing that when we expect the council to come up with visionary, ground breaking ideas, it comes up with such a weak one.

The Branch has alternative proposals that could generate an income stream to help support the library service. The vision is to market the town hall as a public sector hub. The collaboration of DfE and the council has been a success. This vision could be developed. We propose that the council chamber and committee rooms could be decommissioned and rented out to another public sector body as office space. The prime location, ready to roll facilities and excellent transport connections could attract premium rent. Council meetings could then be switched to the Dolphin Centre. This would help support the Dolphin Centre and make meetings more accessible to members of the public.

Has the council thought of making the libraries multi-functional? For example hosting pop-up shops or cultural events? We are confident that the libraries staff are brimming with ideas on how this could be developed.

We believe the Pease family would welcome this or any other ideas that save their legacy and our heritage.

Market

The market has suffered from lack of investment for many years. It has been neglected and the maintenance carried out to date, which clearly has not been enough, only serves to increase the costs of refurbishment. Whilst it makes a £100,000 profit on paper, it is clear that the council sees privatisation as the best solution – did it exhaust all options before it came to this decision? It is an interesting contrast that the council spent £7.2 million on a car park but decided it could not

afford £4 million for the market, one of the features that attracts people to the town to shop. We are firmly of the opinion that market traders and the council need to work together to change the market and how it operates to secure its future for the next generation.

When the outdoor market was moved from the market square to the High Row, it narrowed the footfall. Returning it to the market square could spread that footfall, make the town centre as a whole more vibrant and ensure it remains viable.

Returning the outdoor market to the market square might also “bridge the gap” between the town centre and the new Feethams leisure development. We need users of the new Leisure development to venture into the town centre and making best use of the market square might help encourage this.

Looked after children

The core offer budget for looked after children (including leaving care services) is £11,043.139 (net of income and grants) for 191 children that the council currently has responsibility.

This is a significant chunk of the overall council budget to cover a small number of service users. We believe this is another area where spending could be reviewed. How does the cost per child figure compare to other councils?

A realignment of spending could potentially save the Children’s Centres and spreads the benefit of that budget across many more children and families.

Collaboration

The Branch notes with dismay that, in the Review of Senior Management report to Special Council on 25 February 2016, the Clinical Commissioning Group has pulled out of collaboration with the council on a joint commissioning management structure. This means the council will revert to its own commissioning arrangements. Yet again, as with the Tri-borough arrangement, a promising collaboration fails to bear fruit. At what cost we wonder?

Staff

The Branch is encouraged that the council continues to look favourably on requests from individuals to take early retirement and/or voluntary redundancy. We accept that this has to be managed to ensure that service delivery isn’t compromised.

At the moment, our main focus is to ensure that there are as few compulsory redundancies as possible and we recognise that the council has a difficult balancing act between cutting costs and delivering services. We would like the council to encourage people to volunteer to reduce hours, especially in areas where redundancies are planned. We hope that an element of ‘horse-trading’ on reduced hours/redundancies could minimise the impact on individuals and services. Obviously no-one should be forced down this route.

The council implemented an additional leave buy-back arrangement some time ago. To balance this out and to potentially alleviate the need to bring in agency or casual staff, the council could consider an annual leave sell-back arrangement.

We hope that the council continues to make best efforts to seek out grants that would support services such as Sustainable Transport.

Councillors' allowances

The core offer budget document (EffR5) shows Councillors' allowances as being set at £760,372 in year 2019/20. However, appendix 2 of the MTFP report shows the current spend for allowances as being £717,000. The Branch welcomes the Councillors' decision, after we raised the matter, not to take the recommended increase in allowances.

Conclusion

As a Trade Union we seek to safeguard the best interests of our members and their families. However, our members are also residents and/or service users in Darlington. The loss of employment that will result from these budget proposals will have a knock on effect on the Darlington economy, as fewer people will have income available to spend. This will affect businesses whose business rates help fund the Council.

We would urge the council to reconsider its proposals and hopefully save our services, however, where the proposals are implemented and our members' jobs are lost we would ask the Council to play an active role in seeking alternative employment for its workforce.

Finally, we expect the Council to consider whether its proposals, are fully consistent with its statutory duties and that they are confident that any cuts will not be vulnerable to legal challenge.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dawn Taylor". The signature is written in a cursive style with a capital 'D' and 'T'.

Dawn Taylor
Assistant Branch Secretary