
OVERVIEW OF EFFICIENCY AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work under my Efficiency and Resources Portfolio.

Corporate Planning and Performance Framework

2. Cabinet has received an update on the implementation of the actions contained within the Corporate Plan 2012-15 and approved a new suite of actions and priorities for the period 2013/14. Corporate and service planning form critical components in the planning and delivery of Council services and given the pace and scale of change driven by both national and internally generated constraints, it is important that they play a prominent role in directing and shaping services and maintaining a focus of outcomes and customer needs.

Discretionary Housing Payment Policy

3. Following consultation with registered housing providers and support and advice agencies, Cabinet has approved the Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Policy which seeks to provide financial assistance to low income households, targeting the most vulnerable residents through the transitional period of key welfare reforms.
4. Members will be aware that the DHP is a scheme which aims to provide people receiving Housing Benefit with further financial assistance towards their housing costs and is funded by a cash limited grant from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
5. From April 2013, the amount of grants to Council's increased significantly to take into account the impact of the Welfare Reforms and the amount which Darlington receives increased from £101,761 in 2012/13 to £224,185 in 2013/14. The policy reflects National DWP guidance on the operation of the scheme and will underpin discretionary decision and appeals being made by Officers.

Humanities

6. Members are aware that the Council has been working with Humanities for a number of years to support the development of arts and culture in Darlington and have previously agreed a package of support to enable it to achieve a more stable financial position.
7. In order to secure the future of the Forum, which is one a number of facilities which supports creative and cultural individuals and organisations in Darlington,

Humanitics needs to reduce its finance costs and, following discussions on a number of options, Cabinet has agreed to write-off £18,000 of its secured loan, reduce the interest costs and extend the rent free period on the lease for the Forum from five to ten years to assist it with more long-term financial stability.

8. This decision is a one-off change in the Council's loan and lease arrangements and has been made in recognition of the important role that Humanitics plays in the cultural life of the Borough and its contribution to the future vision for the Town Centre Fringe and the development of creative businesses in the Parkgate/Civic Theatre vicinity.

Extended Customer Centre and Town Hall Ground Floor Refurbishment Works

9. Cabinet has considered proposals to refurbish the existing Customer Centre and extend the existing office accommodation by undertaking works on the ground floor corridor of the Town Hall building to provide additional interview booths.
10. The increase in customer volumes in the Customer Centre since its opening in 2005 has necessitated the need for this work to be undertaken and, in doing so, the proposals will also drive down the cost of contact with improved contact channel management, particularly around self-serve and automation; will rationalise disparate customer contact points and reduce revenue costs and increase capacity for partnership working.
11. £750,000 has been released from the 2013/14 medium Term Financial Plan to undertake the work, with a further £46,000 funding being transferred from the Adults budget which was originally allocated for the refurbishment of Central House Reception which it is anticipated will close as the current casual callers to that reception area will be directed to the new Customer Centre.

Register Office - Tell us Once

12. Members will recall that since 2011, Darlington residents who are registering a birth or a death at the Register Office have been asked if they want details of the registration passed to relevant central and local government departments as part of the 'Tell us Once' service.
13. 'Tell us Once' makes it easier for those who are registering a birth or death to ensure all 'relevant local and national government agencies have the information they need. It also reduces administration costs and improves customer service by reducing the number of people a person needs to contact with the same information.
14. The National 'Tell us Once' service has proved so popular in the Borough that the Darlington Register Office has been highlighted by the Department of Work and Pensions as one of the top performing centres offering the service in the Country.

15. Darlington Register Office was in the first in the region to offer the service for death registration and will now be used as a model of good practice for other local councils.

Xentrall Shared Services Annual Report

16. It has been five years since the establishment of Xentrall Shared Services, the partnership between Darlington and Stockton Councils to provide ICT, transactional finance and HR and design and print, and Cabinet has received the fifth annual report which shows that the service has now delivered all the efficiencies and main benefits as outlined in the original business case and is on target to make £13.6 million savings over the 10 years of the partnership which is nearly double the original target.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers

17. Cabinet has received an update on developments in relation to the use of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, which enables Council's to carry out certain types of surveillance activity, as long as specified procedures are followed, and that any information obtained as a result of surveillance activity can be relied upon in Court proceedings provided that the provisions of the Act are complied with.

Annual Review of Significant Partnerships 2012/13

18. Officers have undertaken the annual review of significant partnerships using the partnerships toolkit previously agreed. Through the use of this toolkit the Council has an established approach to monitoring the significant partnerships it is involved with and, as a result, there are good governance arrangements in place and the partnerships are delivering well against their objectives.

Proposed Write-off of Irrecoverable Debts

19. Cabinet has written-off sundry debtor invoices with individual values greater than £500 which are considered irrecoverable; this equates to 0.9% of collectable debt. The Council works continually on debt collection to minimise loss of income by speeding up collection times and reducing the need for invoicing debt by maximising up-front payment for services wherever possible, however, there are some services which we are obliged to provide which cannot be withheld prior to payment.

Land off Bates Avenue – Playing fields to Former Alderman Leach Primary School

20. Cabinet has declared an area of Council-owned land off Bates Avenue, which was previously the playing field to the former Alderman Leach Primary School, surplus to Council requirements and have authorised Officers to agree the detailed terms of disposal.

21. Discussions on the disposal of this land have taken place with Sport England who, have agreed, on this occasion, that the usual requirement for the re-provision of an equivalent area of playing field land is not required but that part of the proceeds of the sale should be invested in improving sports facilities within the Borough. The location and nature of these improvements will be formally agreed with Sport England in due course.

Land at Faverdale

22. Cabinet has agreed to sell an area of land at Faverdale North, subject to the granting of planning permission for the development of a transport depot, site investigations and the interrelated sale of the purchases existing land at Southampton Street. The sale of this land will bring a significant capital receipt for the Council and will bring forward the development and improve an underused site at Albert Road.

Land at Former Eastbourne School Site

23. Cabinet has agreed to declare a small parcel of the Eastbourne Sports Centre surplus to requirements and to dispose of that parcel and the site of the former Eastbourne Youth Centre and part of the site of the former Eastbourne School site for residential development.
24. In order to deliver affordable housing in line with the Homes and Communities Agency's tight funding timetable it is proposed to develop the Eastbourne site on a phased basis and the land required for Phase 1 comprises an area of 2.30 hectares (5.68 acres).
25. Access for Phase 1 is proposed via the Fairway but initial advice from Highways Development Control is that only 64No of the proposed 76No dwellings may be occupied until a second adoptable access is provided via Bourne Avenue.
26. A planning application has recently been submitted and if this is successful, a start on site is anticipated in September 2013, in order to meet the HCA grant funding timetable.

Councillor Stephen Harker
Cabinet Member with Efficiency and Resources Portfolio