
OVERVIEW OF EFFICIENCY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Efficiency and Resources Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

Darlington Director of Public Health Annual Report 2014

2. We received the Director of Public Health's Annual Report 2014, which was based on the theme 'Public Health: A Shared Agenda', which reflected the partnership working that is necessary to tackle the causes of health inequalities by all sectors not just the Council or the NHS to help residents who experience disadvantage over the course of their lifetime.
3. This is the second annual report following the transfer of public health responsibilities from the NHS to the local authority, as part of the Health and Social Care Act 2012. The first report in 2013, described some of the key health issues people face in Darlington and proposed key actions to improve the health of our populations and to reduce health inequalities and the 2014 report provided us with an update on 2013-14 and outlined the work which will be on-going in 2015-16.
4. We were informed of the life expectancy for men and women and noted that the life expectancy gap amongst men is greater than that amongst women and that there is a link between health inequalities and social inequalities. Councillors have a key role in the promotion of healthy lifestyles and are able to influence some of the inequalities by providing advocacy and support for residents within their communities. Through decision-making, the Council can also ensure residents are able to have healthy lifestyle choices. We particularly discussed the role of the Planning Committee and the need to ensure that any decisions it made supported the health and well being agenda.
5. The common causes of death and health inequalities are cancer, heart disease and stroke and lung and liver disease and we discussed the importance of early detection of cancers and the need to ensure GP's were well equipped to detect cancers and that promotion for patients around urgency of seeking treatment was important.
6. We talked about suicide rates within Darlington and the challenges for the mental health network; issues around alcohol-related harm and those reporting to A and E; and the work being undertaken in relation to sugar and sugar content and its effect on oral health and obesity.

7. The roles identified for our Scrutiny Committee following the publication of the report are :-
 - (a) to understand the economic base and resources needed to ensure that children have the best start in life;
 - (b) look at the numbers of youngsters not in employment, education or training; and what support can be given; and
 - (c) support health programmes that keep people in employment.
8. The Public Health grant is a Council ring-fenced grant and the Director of Public Health is required to report back to Public Health England on what the grant is spent on. We were concerned, however, that the grant is to be cut next year and we are aware that the Adults and Housing and the Health and Partnerships Scrutiny Committees are to write to the Government expressing their concern about this.

Darlington Partnerships Accounts

9. We have also looked again at the budget for the Darlington Partnership for 2015-16. The Partnership receives funding from the Council and other public bodies and also receives sponsorship for the Best of Darlington Awards.

Use of Collection Agencies

10. Scrutiny has also received an overview of the use of external collection agencies in the Revenues and Benefits service and Housing services to recover debts as part of their recovery and enforcement processes.
11. The process and timescales for Council Tax and Business rates collection are set out in the Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulation 1992 and the Local Government Finance Act 1992.
12. We were advised of the various steps and processes taken to recover debts prior to enforcement agents being appointed and the legislation under which the Council could instruct agents to collect Council Tax and Business Rates debt.
13. In relation to Council Tax and Business Rates, the collection agency used is Equita and, as at 30 September 2015, there were 791 debts with it for Council Tax totalling £469,000 and 82 debts for Business rates totalling £332,000. In relation to housing tenant rent arrears and former tenant sundry debts, Collectica are the agency used and, between April 2014 and September 2015, 334 referrals were made. To date, in 2015/16, Collectica have collected £8,240 in former tenants and sundry debts and the Council has paid £1,442 in commission.
14. We discussed the support and advice available and given to those that were suffering genuine hardship but we noted that the majority of the debts that were passed to collection agents were the most challenging debts and all other options had been exhausted.

Treasury Management – Schedule of Borrowings

15. Information on the current schedule of borrowings held by the Council has been provided to us.
16. The approved Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators are agreed by Council and set out how much borrowing may need to be undertaken in the forthcoming three years to support the capital programme. There are limits to the total amount of borrowing that can be undertaken by the Council and these are set by two indicators, the Operational Boundary and the Authorised limit.
17. The debt currently held is £129.161 million, with an average interest rate of 4.05 per cent. In addition to this, there is also £17.467 million of debt relating to the PFI scheme for the Education Village and Harrowgate Hill primary school. Repayment of this debt is included in the unitary charge paid to Kajima, the operator, with an inherent interest rate of 4.77 per cent. Grant is received from the Department for Education to repay this debt.
18. The actual debt is made up of 36 individual loans from a variety of sources, the majority of which come from the Public Works Loan Board but also market loans from a number of financial institutions and other local authorities. Internal borrowing is also used to finance the Council's own debt rather than invest with other counterparties as the interest on our reserves is less than the interest on loans.

Revenue Budget Monitoring 2015/16 – Quarter 2

19. We have considered the Quarter 2 revenue budget monitoring report for 2015/16. The projected revenue reserves at the end of 2015/16 are £17.229 million, which is £3.743 million better than the initial 2015/20 MTFP position and includes a brought forward amount of £2.533 million from 2014/15 along with the quarter 1 budget claw back. Whilst this is helpful, it does not change the overall context for the MTFP.
20. We discussed the current position in relation to the MTFP; the reasons for the use of agency staff within the Legal Section; the effect the introduction of the living wage will have on the MTFP in future years, the Housing Revenue Account; and the timetable around consultation on the 2016/17 MTFP.

Councillor Ian Haszeldine
Chair Efficiency and Resources Scrutiny Committee