
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.

Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring Quarter 3 2015/16

2. Cabinet has received information on the current position of the Council's capital commitments and resource together with all the live construction projects currently being managed by the Council.
3. The Council has a substantial annual construction programme of work, with the current project position statement showing that there were 66 live projects currently being managed with an overall project outturn value of £108.476 million. The majority of projects are running to time, cost and quality expectations with no foreseeable issues.

Revenue Budget Monitoring 2015/16 – Quarter 3

4. Cabinet has considered the Quarter 3 forecast of the 2015/16 revenue budget out-turn. The Council's projected revenue reserves at the end of 2015/16 were £16,267 million, which was £2.781 million better than the initial 2015-20 MTFP. Departmental reserves are projected to be underspent by £0.083 million and corporate reserves are projected to be in surplus by £2.698 million compared with the 2015-20 MTFP and include the increase in 2014/15 opening results of £2.533 million.

Sale of Land

5. Cabinet has agreed to dispose of land at Kellaw Road to the existing leaseholder.

ICT Update

6. Following a comprehensive external audit, ICT has been successfully recertified to the Government's Public Service Network standard. This means the Council is part of the national government secure IT network infrastructure which is used for transferring data and secure emails between public bodies.

Xentrall Shared Services – Northumberland County Council ICT Hosting

7. Cabinet has agreed to extend the services delivered by Xentrall Shared Services to include the provision to Northumberland County Council of an ICT hosting service.

8. Discussions have taken place between Xentrall ICT services and Northumberland ICT Services on the technical details of an ICT hosting service which has arisen as a result of Northumberland Council Council's plans to rationalise its property portfolio and move out of County Hall. Its hosting requirements can be accommodated within the existing Xentrall Darlington and Stockton and data centres without causing restriction or undue technical or security risk to Darlington and Stockton's existing and future ICT assets and requirements.

Council Tax single occupancy discount review

9. Each year the Council undertakes a review of single occupancy discounts for Council Tax.
10. People who are liable for Council Tax, where there is only one resident aged 18 or over in the household, are entitled to a 25 per cent discount on their Council Tax. Currently there are 17,500 households in Darlington receiving this discount and the total cost is £5.1 million. The Council is under a statutory duty to ensure that all discounts are applied correctly.
11. An annual review of single occupancy discounts is undertaken by Northgate Public Services Ltd under a contract with the Council. Northgate are used for this exercise as they are able to match all the records of these households with credit reference agents at no cost to the Council. A survey of potential 'matches' where there may be more than one occupier in the household is then undertaken. The Council will only pay a fee to Northgate if the discount is subsequently cancelled. This is the most cost effective way the Council can conduct this type of review.
12. The 2015 single occupancy discount review has recently been concluded. A total of 350 discounts were removed as a result of this exercise, amounting to £97,000 per year extra revenue for the Council. The one-off fee for Northgate to conduct this exercise was £10,000.

Council Tax collection

13. The Council's Revenues and Benefits service has continued to improve the collection of Council Tax and arrears.
14. In the first three quarters of 2015-16, the Council collected £39.436 million of Council Tax (net of refunds). This compares to £37.921 million for the same period in 2014-15, a four per cent improvement. Included in these amounts is £1.236 million of Council Tax arrears, compared to £1.015 million for the same period in 2014-15, a 22 per cent improvement.
15. Most debts are being collected through payment arrangements with the Council or deductions from debtor's wages or benefit payments. Where arrangements cannot be secured, debts are referred to the Council's contracted enforcement agents for recovery. In the case of individuals who deliberately evade payment of Council Tax, a dedicated team of Recovery Officers are pursuing these through various

legal actions including charging orders and bankruptcy proceedings.

Police and Crime Commissioner Election 2016 and the Referendum on the UK's Membership of the European Union

16. Preparations for the Police and Crime Commissioner Election (Thursday, 5th May 2016) are now at an advanced stage, and planning is underway for the Referendum on the UK's Membership of the European Union (Thursday, 23rd June 2016) has commenced following the announcement made by the Prime Minister on Saturday, 20th February 2016.
17. As part of a Communication Plan to increase democratic awareness and participation, a number of planned activities have taken place ahead of the Police and Crime Commissioner Election, with a Press Release being issued, and published in the local press shortly after New Year, advising electors of the forthcoming election. Key messages surrounding electoral registration have also appeared on the Council's website, where there is also a dedicated webpage for the election; via the Council's social media profiles; and Members have been encouraged to highlight the election in their Ward Newsletters. Information about the election has also been published in March's issue of the 'One Darlington' magazine, and includes details on how to register, information on Absent Voting, and signposts residents as to where they can find more information.

National Voter Registration Drive

18. 2016's National Voter Registration Drive (NVRD) took place between 1st February 2016 and 5th February 2016, and is an initiative promoted by campaign group, 'Bite the Ballot', which aims to increase the involvement of young people in the electoral process. The initiative is primarily social media driven, to better engage with the target audience, and the Council posted a number of key messages on its social media profiles throughout the week to promote the initiative.

Councillor Stephen Harker
Cabinet Member with Efficiency and Resources Portfolio