
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.

Release of Capital Allocation in the MTFP – Railway Museum

2. Cabinet has released funding allocated in the Capital Medium-Term Financial Plan 2016/17 to 2019/20 to undertake essential structural works at the Railway Museum. Significant works are required in order to maintain the Museum building, which is Grade II listed, to an acceptable condition and to meet the Council's repairing obligations under the terms of the lease.

Procurement Plan Update

3. In accordance with Contract Procedure Rules, Cabinet has received an update to the Annual Procurement Plan and determined, in accordance with criteria, which of those contracts on that Plan that should be delegated to Officers and which were deemed to be strategic.
4. We were also advised about the decisions taken by the Procurement Board to waive Contract Procedure Rules during the period 8 March to 12 September 2016, and the reasons justifying the exception.

Non-Domestic Rates (Business Rates) Revaluation 2017

5. The next revaluation of Business Rates will take place in April 2017 and, together with Officers, I have been reviewing the implications.
6. Business Rates are charged on most non-domestic properties such as shops, offices, factories and other commercial properties. The amount of Business Rates payable are worked out on the property's rateable value, which is set by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) and is based on an estimate of the open market rental value of the property.
7. In order to ensure that this estimate reflects changes in the property market, the VOA undertakes a revaluation of every rateable value, usually every five years, although the last revaluation was completed in 2010.

8. In preparation for the revaluation in 2017, Darlington Borough Council has recently been sent a draft schedule of the proposed new rateable values that will be used to calculate Business Rates bills from April 2017. Based on this schedule, the total rateable value for properties in Darlington is proposed to reduce from £86.6 million to £80.9 million, a reduction of £5.7 million (or 6.6 per cent).
9. At this stage, we don't know what each individual Business will pay the Council in Business Rates for 2017/18, as this is calculated using a rate in the pound figure, which is set by the Government and won't be known until early January 2017.
10. What is known from the proposed schedule of rateable values is that a number of smaller retail units, including a number of Town Centre shops, will fall into the Small Business Rate Relief scheme and are likely to pay reduced or no Business Rates from April 2017.
11. This proposed reduction in Business Rates may result in less income for the Council, although the proposal is that no Council should be worse off and there will be a system of reliefs to compensate Councils, such as Darlington, whose rateable values will reduce. However, until the details of the actual amounts are known, this poses a potential further financial risk to the Council.

Site at Lime Avenue

12. The Council has recently completed the sale of the site at Lime Avenue which will see the development of 14 rent to buy affordable units and construction is now underway.

Annual Canvass (Electoral Registration)

13. This year's Annual Canvass commenced on 15 July and Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) were delivered to every property in the Borough. Residents were provided with a number of different options as to how they could respond, including on-line, by telephone, by text, or by completion and return of the form itself.
14. Where appropriate, reminders were issued to those electors who had not responded. The initial set of reminders were issued with effect from 17 August with subsequent reminders being issued from 19 September, where required. Visiting Officers have also been visiting properties throughout August, September and October to encourage the completion of outstanding forms.
15. Invitations to Register (ITRs) were delivered to any identified new electors, and, again, a series of reminders have been delivered where necessary, together with a personal visit to the property, when required.

16. Personal visits to chase outstanding HEFs and ITRs have continued throughout November, however, at the time of writing, the response rate in relation to HEFs has already surpassed that of last year, with 80.86% of HEFs returned. It is hoped that this figure will be even higher once the new Electoral Register is published on 1 December 2016.

Register Office Relocation

17. The Register Office's relocation to the Town Hall went to schedule and the Registration Team transferred on 26th September, 2016.
18. The Customer Centre (with dedicated booths for the Registration staff and a separate counter provision) deals with Birth and Death Registrations; Certificate Sales; and Notices of Marriages whilst the Civic Suite provides different options for wedding ceremonies as well as accommodation for the Bride.
19. Early feedback from those using the new facilities has been positive and guests have been impressed with the refurbished accommodation for Ceremonies. There has also been significant interest in the history of the Council from the information and photographs we have on display in the Civic Suite area.

Efficiency Statement

20. As part of the Local Government Finance Settlement in February 2016, the Government confirmed its offer of a four-year Funding Settlement for Councils who are prepared to demonstrate their commitment to financial stewardship in an Efficiency Strategy. A four-year Funding Settlement will provide relative certainty with regard to the Council's levels of Revenue Support Grant over this period and will assist in financial planning. The Councils Efficiency Statement was submitted on 14 October and we are waiting to hear if it has been approved.

Accounts Closure

21. The 2015/16 accounts were closed in good time, audited by Ernst Young and reported to Audit Committee on 30 September and an unqualified audit opinion was issued. In 2017/18 the accounts will need to have been closed, audited and approved by 31 July 2018. Council officers will be working with our auditors to ensure processes are in place for this to happen.

ICT Update

22. In terms of governance, ICT have successfully retained both Information Security and Quality Management System ISO certifications following an external audit in the Summer. The service has also been subject to internal audits and has achieved two full assurance and two substantial assurance ratings for specific aspects of the ICT service.

23. Progress has also been made on a number of architecture projects, which include :-
- (a) complete replacement of the Council's server and storage platform which supports 400+ servers and systems across both Darlington and Stockton, without impacting services. The new platform provides greater speed and capacity;
 - (b) the deployment of an email classification system to all users to assist with the Council's overall information governance programme. Emails are now classified by the user at the point of creation;
 - (c) the assessment of the longer-term desktop office software provision (including email, documents, spreadsheets etc.), which involves confirming the viability of products from Google and Microsoft, both of which are hosted remotely in Google or Microsoft's cloud computing architecture. Integration with existing Council systems and overall cost are key factors of this work; and
 - (d) the roll-out of the new wide area network has continued, albeit hampered somewhat by a shortage of fibre in the local area. The impact of this has been contained and has not affected Council services.
24. The ICT team has also continued to work with Northumberland County Council in the migration of their ICT systems to Darlington and Stockton as part of an ICT hosting agreement made earlier this year.
25. The ICT team now also supports NEPO (North East Purchasing Organisation) and have deployed and supported a new ICT set-up at the Guildhall in Newcastle.

Councillor Stephen Harker
Cabinet Member with Efficiency and Resources Portfolio