

**COUNCIL
16 JULY 2020**

OVERVIEW OF RESOURCES PORTFOLIO

Council Tax and Business Rates collection

1. Despite the financial challenges that the lockdown has brought to residents and businesses in Darlington, £10.9 million of Council Tax and £3.6 million of Business Rates has been collected. Collection levels are only slightly less than the same period in 2019/20 and appear to be much better than other Councils in the region.

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support

2. The number of residents applying for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support has increased significantly during the lockdown period, with the overall total now 11,823, the highest level since May 2016. We have ensured that residents adversely affected by the lockdown have received the support they require promptly, with no backlog of benefit applications. Over half the working age people receiving Council Tax Support (53 per cent) are now also receiving Universal Credit, a substantial increase from 47 per cent in April 2020.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

3. The Investment and Funding, Capital Projects, and Building Design teams all continue to operate on a work from home basis. There have been some limitations in terms of on-site surveys within specific projects, but desktop work has been able to continue with minimal impact. We have seen some delayed costs from COVID-19 related effects on one scheme, but this was managed within the available budget.

Revenue Budget Monitoring 2020-21 – Quarter 1

4. The Quarter 1 Revenue Budget Management report provided an early forecast of the 2020-21 revenue budget outturn position. The impact of COVID-19 on both expenditure and income levels is projected to be significant particularly in regard to lost income from our leisure and culture facilities, increased expenditure supporting our social care providers and impacts on council tax and business rates. At the time of writing the Government have provided a grant of £6.231m to assist with the pressures however there remains an estimated overall in year pressure of £6.484m.
5. There is a significant amount of uncertainty in regard to future pressures and this early projection uses best estimates and assumptions based on the Governments recovery plan on reopening. The projected pressure is significant in the context of the Councils overall MTFP however at this stage the deficit in 2020/21 could be met from general fund reserves. The position will be constantly reviewed and I will be continuing to lobby the Department and the Treasury on the need for additional COVID-19 resources.

Human Resources

6. There has been a significant amount of work in the HR section during lockdown which started with a staff skills audit to understand what skills employees had over and above those they need for their current roles for example skills gained in previous roles and personal lives which could be of use in the emergency situation. This was followed up by the establishment of our reallocation services which was a clearing house for moving staff into different roles where necessary to support service impacted by absence and self-isolating or to provide emergency services. The service worked extremely well with 100+ staff reallocated to different duties over the COVID-19 period. The most significant movement was staff reallocated from Leisure and Community Safety to the Hub, along with support to and street scene areas, along with cleaning staff. All staff were fully briefed and trained before commencing new duties.

Absence and self-isolation

7. Whilst a number of staff needed to self-isolate either because of their own symptoms or those of family members, the overall absence levels for the Council in relation to COVID-19 has been low with no significant impact on service delivery. However, it should be noted that at the beginning of lock down there were no testing facilities available so some employees may have had the virus but were not officially diagnosed.
8. From 20 April, all employees (and agency workers) were able to access testing for COVID-19 where they had symptoms and the symptoms were within days one to five. There has been a steady stream of enquiries and requests for testing since the service opened. The service is open seven days per week and employees are triaged through HR and Occupational Health and results are fed back through HR / OH with appropriate advice re isolation and returning to work as appropriate to individual and manager. At the time of writing there have been 53 employees been tested through Darlington Memorial Hospital.
9. Seven employees have tested positive and have been subject to an investigation following the RIDDOR (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences) investigation guidance. None of the employees above have been deemed to have contracted Coronavirus from the work environment. Thankfully there have been no reportable deaths in service for COVID 19 for any employees.
10. This has and continues to be a difficult time for all so effort has been focused on staff wellbeing, ensuring that the programme remains on the agenda for employees during the lockdown period. A number of events have been held virtually including two Resilience Sessions focusing on positivity. We have been promoting the Mental health first aiders and mentors have been who are available on a confidential basis to all staff if they are struggling and would like to talk and have hosted informal 'chat' sessions to give employees the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling, what is working well and what isn't in the new way of working.
11. Managers were provided with a guide to staying connected to assist with communication and team connectivity whilst working from home and the importance of keeping in touch has been widely promoted. The intranet has a specific page for coronavirus FAQ's which has been constantly updated and added

to as new guidance has been released to help employees along with all the risk assessments for working during COVID-19. There has also been continual communications on the weekly briefing and Occupational Health briefings on caring for yourself, staying safe out and about, and home working.

Furlough

12. The Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has tight guidelines for eligibility and is not applicable for all staff. However, the Council has made use of the furloughed scheme for a number of our leisure and culture staff in income generating areas who could not work due to the closure of the facilities and who were reallocated to other service areas. 113 staff in this area have been furloughed and to date £124k has been received. A further claim has been submitted for employees in the Construction, Highways and cycle and pedestrian trainer services covering the period they were not working, we are awaiting confirmation of this claim being successful.
13. Employees can remain on Furlough leave up to 30 October when the scheme ends but constant reviews will take place to 'unfurlough' employees as services resume or employees are reallocated to other areas of the Council. At the time of writing 132 staff are furloughed.

Agile Working

14. The mobilisation of the Councils workforce to home working has been very successful, we have over 40 per cent of staff working from home or using home as a base. This has been enabled through the rapid roll out of Microsoft teams, the video conferencing application, and the Councils Systems and process team and Xentrall ICT teams have worked tirelessly to enable as many staff to homework as possible. Whilst there were some initial technical issues around PC capability, they have been resolved with most staff reporting that working from home is working well with some saying their productivity has increased as travelling time to and from work and between meetings has been reduced.

Health and Safety

15. The Health and Safety Team have provided significant support throughout the period, reviewing work practices and risk assessments and implementing the wealth of government guidance, to ensure the safety of staff and members of the public.
16. A Corporate risk assessment has been produced to manage the risks of working during COVID-19 and specific safe systems of work have been developed in consultation with the trade unions and working closely with Public Health, for various activities including Hub operations, emergency call out, home visits, refuse collection, passenger transport. Working with Darlington Support risk assessments and guidance have been developed for some key volunteering tasks.
17. With the government's clear message work from home where possible, the team has assisted managers and staff to do so safely, providing guidance in various forms on; the home work environment and steps needed to reduce the risks from

display screen equipment, lone working and mental health and the importance of keeping in touch. A number of briefings have been produced with key information including Display Screen Equipment, The Unexpected Homeworker and Staying COVID-19 Secure, building arrangements and PPE.

18. Health and Safety have been heavily involved in the recovery plan and ensuring workplaces are ready for the safe return of staff, advising on social distancing measures, hygiene and cleaning arrangements and have also developed an AC10 module 'Your Safe Return to Work – Staying COVID-19 Secure' which will provide information and guidance on measures that have been taken to provide a safe work environment for staff. As required by the government we have displayed the 'Staying COVID-19 Secure in 2020' poster in all our workplaces.
19. There has been a significant amount of work with our schools, providing support and assistance to teaching staff completing risk assessments for remaining open to the children of key workers and the return of specific year groups, regularly consulting with trade unions and visiting maintained schools to see how the arrangements are being implemented in practice.

Xentrall Update

20. This year is turning out to be like no other and Xentrall have had a very busy time since March getting to grips with hurriedly mobilising both Councils whilst also putting in place various special arrangements for all the side-effects of the UK COVID-19 lockdown which relate to paying suppliers and paying our staff. All this, at the same time as protecting and mobilising its own services and staff and running all the vital day-to-day services that the Councils rely on, but often go unseen. This was done while self-isolating and social distancing like everyone else.
21. A snapshot of these recent Xentrall activities and achievements is shown below.

Xentrall HR

- Went live with phase 3 of payroll on ResourceLink for over 3,500 staff in Academies
- Kept paying almost 16,000 people, whilst implementing an upgrade to ResourceLink
- Quickly set up all of our staff working from home, including testing of all required links to systems such as BACs and HMRC
- Completed Year End on ResourceLink and the old PSE system
- Set up emergency process for payment of staff in case of system failure

Xentrall Design & Print

- Produced hundreds of critical information letters for different services via the re-directional postal service set up between D&P and the Post Room
- Continued to support "business as usual" services with provisions for daily/scheduled print items such as letters and printed payslips
- Supported key projects by producing items such as urgent labels or menu sheets for the food boxes and information leaflets on Covid-19 and producing vital signage and packs for the town centre and Council offices.

Xentrall Finance

- Achieved all of our year-end processing to deadlines set before lockdown and despite staff being displaced
- Completed year-end system changes and reconciliations working jointly from remote locations. This was slow going but down-time was minimal for Council services taking into account the unusual circumstances we were in
- Maintained service delivery on day to day processing to ensure Academies are supported, suppliers are paid promptly, and customers are billed accurately where direct debit collection is in place
- Supported both Councils in processing grant funding payments to small businesses and retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. In a two-week window, Creditors processed over 2,900 payments totalling over £33m in state funded aid and all in addition to our usual supplier and interfaced payments
- Put additional payment runs in place for Stockton, Darlington and Academies in to ensure we get money to suppliers as soon as possible
- Assisted both Councils in the set-up of payment systems to Support Hubs for vulnerable /shielded individuals who require assistance with shopping and medicines pick up
- All teams have also continued to support business as usual and mostly working from home

Xentrall ICT

- Rapidly rolling out 140 laptops across Stockton and Darlington and 400 Jabber iPhone installs, taking us to over 2,500 people using softphones instead of physical handsets
- Implementing Microsoft Teams to the whole workforce across both Councils to enable better collaborative and remote working
- Intensive behind the scenes work on the network, firewall, antivirus, remote connectivity infrastructure that supports a massive increase in remote workers, from originally around just over 100/day to now thousands
- Mobilising our Service Desk and associated systems to being home-based and assigning additional staff to help manage the upsurge in calls, with ICT staff pulling together and taking on roles they haven't previously experienced
- Scouring suppliers for ICT kit, including elusive laptops and headsets
- Delivering innovative IT solutions to enable both Stockton and Darlington Support Hubs to become a reality
- Remaining calm and level-headed throughout and ensuring the wrong decisions weren't taken due to pressures and urgency and a measured approach and the longer-term view prevailed, thus keeping the Council's systems and data safe
- Delivering innovative solutions to keep some large older service applications running and available in a remote working environment
- Providing a stream of user information and self-help guides to support home working
- Keeping all the normal systems and services running that you'd expect on a daily basis from ICT, including upgrades, COVID-19 hot-fixes to systems and year-end processing
- Continuing to deliver Council-wide changes behind the scenes to improve the remote working experience whilst mitigating the risk associated with applying this to a fully remote workforce

22. Since the UK restrictions came into place during March, Xentrall have continued to provide a full range of services and underpin the vital functions of both Councils, whilst in addition, stepping up and providing additional services specifically in response to the pandemic situation. None of what has been achieved collectively could have been done without the dedication of all the teams across Xentrall and the years of investment in our systems, processes and most importantly the professionalism and skill of our staff. So much effort and additional hours have been put in and staff will continue to do so to ensure everything runs as seamlessly as possible. Acknowledgement must also go out to service users who have co-operated and been understanding throughout. There has been some brilliant feedback.
23. In terms of the remainder of 2020/21, Xentrall will continue to follow the Council's instructions regarding COVID-19 safety whilst supporting all services in their own remote service delivery activities. As well as supporting the original emergency planning aspects of the pandemic, Xentrall are also integral in the recovery planning and activities taking place.
24. Xentrall will continue to also help both Councils retain the benefits that have been gained through mass home working and to help exploit the technology enabled opportunities and innovation that have also arisen across services.

Democratic

25. Following lockdown all member meetings were cancelled which meant that some decisions had to be postponed. On 28 April 2020, a single Member Executive decision making session took place with the Leader making a number of decisions that would previously have been considered by Cabinet. Decision making has also continued by officers making delegated decisions in consultation with Cabinet members as appropriate..
26. During the initial suspension of Member meetings, some Democratic staff were redeployed to other areas. While electoral work on the Police and Crime Commissioner election and the Tees Valley Mayoral election stopped, work has been continuing on electoral registration throughout.
27. The reinstatement of Member meetings in June required very significant levels of planning and preparation with officers working very hard to support members to be able to participate in remote meetings. Although there have been technical issues, it was an achievement to be able to hold a fully remote meeting of Annual Council involving the numbers of Members and officers in attendance. Remote meetings are ongoing.

Legal

28. The Legal Team moved to remote working following lockdown with some staff still attending work to deal with post and accessing hard copy materials when needed. Normal workloads have continued but also with additional work being required on specific issues concerning service and contractual changes occasioned by coronavirus. Court work has continued, but with quite a lot of time has been spent working through the changes introduced by Court Service to move to electronic documentation and remote hearings.

29. The land charges services was suspended from 24 March because it was not possible to deliver the service remotely because following lockdown staff were unable to access material held in hard copy format. As part of the recovery process the service was reinstated on 18 May.

Procurement

30. Normal work has continued, with the team mostly working remotely. A particular focus has been to support decision making regarding requests for supplier relief for contracts that have been affected by Coronavirus. Significant work has been done to assist with the procurement of PPE stocks

Complaints and Information Governance

31. The Complaints and Information Governance Team made a transition to full remote working just prior to lockdown and have continued operating fully remotely since then. This has not had a significant impact on members of the public, as very few complaints are made in person and most information requests must be made in writing. Complaints investigations are also currently being conducted remotely wherever possible, which again has not had a significant impact on the service provided as officers are making extensive use of the video call functionality within Microsoft Teams. In line with Government guidance and the stated positions of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the Information Commissioner's Office communications have been made that some timescales may not to be adhered to while services target resources at meeting the needs of those most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Registrars

32. At the start of the pandemic following government instructions, birth registrations were suspended and marriages and other ceremonies unable to take place. These changes while difficult for the public, protected staff and enabled them to focus on the surge in death registrations. The Team coped well with the increase in death registrations and the move to a telephone only service. An additional member of staff was seconded to support the Team.
33. Throughout the pandemic staff have continued to attend the customer contact centre rather than work remotely because of the need to access certification materials, which are kept in secure storage. The contact centre facility has worked very well, with customers only allowed into the building at their designated time. Advance information is provided to help provide the public with reassurance if they have concerns about entering a public building.
34. Things are now returning to a more normal levels of death registrations for this time of year. From the 1 June the Office was allowed to recommence birth registrations. A backlog had built up during the period when this service was suspended, but staff are working hard (including Saturdays working) to catch up and are completing around 100 registrations a week. It is hoped that we will be back at normal levels of births appointments by the end of July.
35. Notices of Marriage are now allowed to be given again in person at the office. Weddings have been permitted to take place (with restrictions) from 4 July and we will be holding our first weddings since lockdown on 10 July. We have been

working with our wedding venues (hotels) as much as possible to keep them informed and help them with queries and bookings. Risk assessments and processes ready for the resumption.

36. At present there remains a blanket ban on citizenship ceremonies.

Councillor Charles Johnson
Cabinet Members with Resources Portfolio