

COUNCIL
31 MARCH 2022

OVERVIEW OF RESOURCES PORTFOLIO

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

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

2. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered:
 - (a) Design work is progressing on a number of schemes. The Darlington Station Gateway East and West scheme Compulsory Purchase Order has been confirmed following a Public Inquiry but work is still ongoing to try and acquire land by agreement. The planning application for the Railway Heritage Quarter scheme was approved and the project is mobilising following approval by Council. Site work continues on the Hybrid Innovation Centre on Central Park, Crematorium and new Chapel development. A tender exercise for the demolition of the ex-Sports Direct building on East Street has been undertaken and demolition is expected to start in the coming months.
 - (b) The site options for the Treasury North Campus are being reviewed with the Government Property Agency with an announcement expected on a final location very soon.
 - (c) The implementation of an integrated control point system 'Project in a Box' continues with the new projects to be added to the system. Scrutiny committee have received demonstrations and are providing feedback into the reports produced.
 - (d) There remains a risk of delay costs from Covid-19 and from inflation related effects on construction material prices.

Elections Bill

3. The second reading of the Elections Bill, in the House of Lords, took place on 23 February 2022, and it is expected that it will receive Royal Assent, based on the current progress of the Bill, in May 2022. Should the Bill receive Royal Assent at this time, Secondary Legislation is expected to be laid before Parliament in July 2022 with the Statutory Instruments being made for Accessibility, Notional Expenditure, Political Finance and Voter Identification (ID) in November 2022 and Postal Voting Handling Rules and Absent Vote Secrecy Rules in January 2023, with those elements of the Bill, including the First Past the Post Voting System, coming into force for the Local Elections scheduled to be held in May 2023. It is anticipated Voter ID will go live in November 2022.
4. The remaining elements of the Bill, including changes to the postal and proxy voting rules, introduction of an online absent vote system, EU citizen voting and candidacy rights and

changes to the registering of overseas electors, will be introduced from June 2023 onwards, and will be in force for the elections in May 2024. The ineligible EU Nationals who are no longer entitled to be registered as a result of the changes in the Bill will be removed on publication of the revised register in 2023, which may see a reduction in the number of register electors.

Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Business Grants

5. This latest Government business grant scheme provides support to hospitality, leisure and accommodation businesses, in recognition that the impact from the Omicron variant of Covid-19. One-off grants of up to £6,000 have been available to businesses in those sectors.
6. As at the end of February, 224 local businesses have benefitted from this grant scheme with a total of £730,716 awarded by the Council.

Covid-19 Additional Relief Fund

7. The Covid-19 Additional Relief Fund provides support for Business Rate payers who have been adversely affected by the pandemic and have been unable to adequately adapt to the impact. Qualifying businesses are those that have been ineligible for existing or previous Business Rate relief aimed at businesses in the retail, hospitality or leisure sectors. Typically, these will be offices and industrial units.
8. As at the end of February, 255 local businesses have benefitted from this Business Rate relief scheme with a total of £1,925,809 awarded by Darlington Borough Council.

Test and Trace Support Payments

9. The Test and Trace Support payment scheme was introduced in September 2020 to support people on low incomes who were required by law to self-isolate because of Covid-19, and who would lose income as a result. One-off payments of £500 were available to support people who qualified under this scheme.
10. As at the end of February, the Council has processed over 5,300 applications for support and made 2,524 awards to local residents, with total payments of £1,262,000.

Council Tax Energy Rebate

11. The government has announced a package of support known as the Energy Bills Rebate to help households with rising energy bills, worth £6.8 million for Darlington residents.
12. Every household registered for Council Tax in bands A to D and occupying their home on 1 April 2022 will receive a £150 payment. A discretionary scheme worth £233,700 will also be available for households in Council Tax bands E to H. Households in these Council Tax bands receiving Council Tax Support or disability discounts will also receive £150. Other households will receive the rest of the funding, which will be £42 each.
13. Some key messages for Members and residents about the scheme are as follows:

- (a) This is an enormous undertaking to distribute £7 million of payments to over 50,000 households in Darlington. This process will begin in April and is likely to be staggered to make the process manageable for our Revenues and Benefits team.
- (b) Detailed guidance and the latest information will be posted on our website at: <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/council-tax-and-benefits/council-tax-energy-rebate-2022/> This should be the first place to direct any enquiries about the scheme.
- (c) People who pay their Council Tax by direct debit will receive an automatic payment into their bank account from April, using the same bank account they pay their Council Tax from. These households do not have to do anything.
- (d) People who pay their Council Tax by another method will need to complete an application form to register their bank account details with us. This form will be available on our website from April. Support will be available in the Customer Services Centre and over the telephone for people who are unable to access the internet.
- (e) Please avoid sending individual enquiries about the Council Tax Energy Rebate to the Revenues and Benefits team. This is likely to delay getting payments out to residents. A process will be in place to ensure that everyone receives their payment.

Successful legal action to recover Council Tax debt

- 14. The Revenues and Benefits service has recently undertaken successful bankruptcy action to recover £10,257 from a local private landlord who owed Council Tax on a number of his properties. Some of these debts dated back to 2015 and despite numerous attempts by officers to collect the outstanding Council Tax, the individual failed to make payment.
- 15. Following legal advice, the Council decided to take bankruptcy action against the individual to recover the debt. This sort of action is seen as a last resort, where all reasonable attempts to recover outstanding Council Tax has failed. The bankruptcy action in this case resulted in the forced sale of 2 empty properties that the debtor owned to recover the outstanding sums, including the full costs incurred by the Council to undertake this action.
- 16. Recovery of this substantial sum underlines the Council's commitment to collect and recover Council Tax from those individuals who have the means to pay their Council Tax but deliberately or wilfully refuse to do so.

Climate Change

- 17. As part of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme, the Council has been awarded £443,313 through an application with Salix to introduce efficiency measures at the Town Hall and the Hippodrome.
- 18. The measures approved were the replacement of the gas boilers for the hot water supplies to air source heat pumps at both venues, additional solar PV panels and LED lighting upgrade at the Town Hall, improvements to the energy controls for the loading bays and catering equipment at the Hippodrome.

19. All measures have been installed apart from the LED programme which will be completed this month.
20. The principle focus of the scheme was to reduce the gas consumption across all public buildings with some additional electrical improvements permitted which met certain criteria. Our projected savings from these works is a reduction in gas consumption of 963,603 kWhs, a small uplift in electric consumption of 148,864 kWhs, and an approximate annual saving of £20,000.

Customer Services Centre – Digital Briefings

21. A series of digital briefings have been created and will be available to customers via the digital screens in the Customer Services Centre. The briefings provide customers with a range of information about contacting the Council, our opening times, how to report various issues from fly tipping to potholes, and how to download the Darlington Borough Council app.

Recent Acquisitions

22. The Council has recently acquired the Garbutt Square car park and Bank Top House, both of which are key to the redevelopment of Bank Top Station. It has also acquired the former Northern Echo building in Priestgate as part of the Towns Fund initiative.

Ukraine

23. Following the introduction of Government sanctions, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities requested all Councils to review and reconsider contracts with Russian and Belarusian owned companies. We do not have any direct contracting relationships with Russian or Belarusian suppliers.
24. The war in Ukraine, the sanctions and the global impacts will lead to increases in the price and the availability of some goods and services. Price increases on goods and services were prior to the war an issue, more recently fuel and energy costs have also risen significantly and will have an impact on the costs. We have been working with NEPO to better understand potential supply chain risks and how we can be as resilient as possible.

Councillor Scott Durham
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio