

COUNCIL
14 JULY 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.

Customer Services Performance 2021-22

2. During 2021-22 our Customer Services teams continued to provide advice and assistance to residents throughout the Covid pandemic. Whilst some face to face services were restricted, telephone and e-mail services continued to operate, whilst more services were available on-line through our website, in line with our Customer Services and Digital Strategy. Performance for 2021-22 was as follows:
 - (a) 171,825 telephone calls received, at an average of 14,319 each month.
 - (b) 89.9% of all calls answered, with an average wait time of 3 minutes and 33 seconds.
 - (c) 16,131 e-mails dealt with by Customer Services.
 - (d) 4,704 customers using the scan station facilities in the Customer Services Centre.
 - (e) 764,408 visitors to the Council website, visiting the site 1.7 million times and registering 5.2 million page views during those visits.

Revenues and Benefits Debt Recovery

3. Our Revenues and Benefits team has achieved a number of recent successes in recovering some long-standing high debts and further demonstrates our commitment to pursue residents who deliberately avoid paying amounts owed to the Council:
 - (a) A debtor living in the Cockerton area had a number of outstanding Council Tax debts dating back to 2016. Charging orders were placed on his property as he had failed to engage with recovery officers. However, as the debt was continuing to accrue, court proceedings were commenced to force the sale of his home. As a result of this, he paid the full amount of £5,290 and has set up a direct debit to pay his ongoing charge.
 - (b) A debtor living in the Park East area had outstanding Council Tax on his property since 2019. Charging orders were placed on his property and he subsequently moved to Scotland. The property was sold and the full amount of £2,700 was recovered from the proceeds of the sale.
 - (c) A property in the Cockerton area had been empty since 2019 with Council Tax accruing since that date. After extensive investigation by recovery officers, we found

out that the debtor had moved to New Zealand and had then subsequently passed away. Contact was made with her solicitors and the full amount of £7,031 was recovered from her estate.

- (d) A debtor living in the Heighington area owed significant Council Tax arrears to the Council. The Revenues and Benefits team instigated bankruptcy action and as a result, the debtor was evicted from her home and the property was sold at auction. The full amount of £9,637 was recovered from the proceeds of the sale.
- (e) A Housing Benefit overpayment of £24,069 was created due to undeclared capital for a debtor living in the Lascelles area. Following recovery action, a payment of £16,500 was received with an arrangement in place to pay the remainder by instalments.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

- 4. 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 Design and Build Contractor's submission for the Darlington Station Improvement scheme has been submitted and is being reviewed. Compulsory Purchase Order proposals are still progressing, and work is still ongoing to try and acquire the remaining land interests by agreement. The Railway Heritage Quarter scheme commenced on site 3 May 2022 with some highway restrictions now in place on Bonomi Way. Site work continues on the Hybrid Innovation Centre on Central Park, Central Library, Crematorium and new Chapel development. The demolition of the ex-Sports Direct and night club building on East Street commenced on 9 May 2022.
 - (b) Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
 - (c) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Annual Canvass (Electoral Registration) 2022

- 5. This year's Annual Canvass commenced on 4 July 2022 and is the third such canvass under the new reformed process. An initial data match with national and local data sets suggested that a significant number of properties had no changes in composition of the household, and as such, the residents within those properties were only required to respond to the Annual Canvass Form where there was a change within the household composition.
- 6. This allows Officers to streamline their approach and target those non-responding properties where the data match suggests that there could be a potential change to the composition of the household. Annual Canvass Reminder Forms will be issued in August and September, and further action, including personal visits, will be undertaken from August through to November, to encourage the completion of outstanding forms. The revised Register of Electors will be published on 1 December 2022.

Neighbourhood Planning Referendum – Middleton St. George

7. A Neighbourhood Planning Referendum (NPR) for Middleton St. George, will be held on Thursday 11 August 2022, at which residents of the Neighbourhood Plan Development Area will vote to decide if they wish the Council to use the Neighbourhood Plan for Middleton St. George to help it decide planning applications in the neighbourhood area.
8. The preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan has been undertaken by Middleton St. George Parish Council and covers the area of Middleton St. George Parish, excluding the land at Teesside Airport. The process began in Spring 2019, when the Parish Council asked local residents and stakeholders to comment on a draft vision, objectives and policy themes for the plan. Consultation was undertaken by the Parish Council in 2020 on the draft Neighbourhood Plan with this Council undertaking further consultation on the submitted plan in the autumn of 2021, in line with regulation 16 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012. The Plan was examined by an independent examiner, who agreed that, subject to a number of minor modifications, it could go to Referendum.

Elections Act 2022

9. The Elections Bill received Royal Assent On 28 April 2022 with secondary legislation expected from July 2022 for the roll out of the new voter identification (ID) system. Voter ID will go live in December 2022 and will apply to UK Parliamentary, Mayoral, Borough Council and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections and local referendums from May 2023 onwards. The Statutory Instrument for the voter ID and the other requirements of the Act that are planned to be introduced from May 2023 including the provision of support in polling stations to people with disabilities and changes to postal vote handling rules, are expected later in the year / early 2023. The remaining requirements of the Act will be introduced from May 2024 onwards.
10. It is expected that Councils will receive support from the Government's Electoral Integrity Programme to deliver the changes, and meet the associated costs, of implementing the new requirements of the Act. The Electoral Commission will communicate with voters, through various campaigns, to inform them of the new requirements and information will also be included on the Council's website, One Darlington Magazine, social media, etc., prior to the 2023 elections.

Interim Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations

11. The Council are required to undertake a review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations every five years. The next full review is not due until Autumn 2023, however, as a result of a number of polling places becoming unavailable or being deemed unsuitable, during the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral (TVCAM) Elections in 2021, which were held during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was felt appropriate to undertake an interim review prior to the 2023 Local Government (Borough and Parish Council) Elections. The interim review will also allow consideration to be given to the impact of the new provisions contained within the Elections Act 2022, to ensure that Polling Places are fit for purpose and can adapt to provisions contained within the Act. A report on the interim review can be found elsewhere on this agenda.

12. The Council are still required to undertake a review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations in 2023, in accordance with the compulsory timeframe, and it is anticipated that this review will commence in the Autumn of 2023.

Councillor Scott Durham
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio