

**COUNCIL**  
**24 November 2022**

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**OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

**Customer Services and Digital Strategy Review**

2. Scrutiny received a presentation from the Head of Housing on the progress of the Council's Customer Services and Digital Strategy.
3. The Strategy sets out the Council's aim to deliver excellent customer services which are easy to use, provide value for money to all the Borough's residents, and, wherever possible, provide digital access to all Council's services.
4. In relation to the progress made to date, we were advised that work has continued on improving the Council's website to make it easier to use and understand, Corporate Customer Services standards have been introduced and implemented to ensure customers received the same level of service across all departments, a corporate visitor and customer appointment system has been introduced to enable appropriate staffing levels to be available with the Customer Services Centre to support customers accessing on-line services where needed and increased publicity advising residents how to contact the Council.
5. There is further work to be undertaken within the next 12 months to achieve the aims of the Strategy and we have requested that we receive regular updates on the progress being made.

**Outcome of Complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman**

6. We have also considered a report which was considered by Cabinet outlining the outcome of cases which have been determined by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman Service (HOS). During the period 1 April to 30 September 2022, 15 complaints had been determined by the LGSCO with none in relation to the HOS.
7. Two of the complaints had been upheld, one in relation to how the Council had dealt with an appeal for home to school transport which resulted in the Council agreeing to review the appeal Panel's decision and policies and the second was in relation to the failure on behalf of the Council to properly consider the findings and recommendations of an independent investigation carried out under the children's statutory complaints process.

### **Council Tax Exemption for Care Leavers**

8. Scrutiny agreed to add its support to a proposal to implement a Council Tax exemption for care leavers under the age of 25 from 1 April 2023. It is important that the Council supports its young care leavers whilst they are developing their skill and confidence to live independently.
9. Since 2018, there has been provision in the Council Tax Support Scheme to provide care leavers under the age of 25 up to 100 per cent support with their Council Tax costs, however, as this was means tested, some young care leavers receive less than 100 per cent support, depending on their income and other circumstances.
10. Cabinet subsequently agreed to this proposal at its meeting held on 8 November 2022 and this will give young care leavers the stability and assurance with their Council Tax costs.

### **Council Tax Support Scheme**

11. Members will see from elsewhere on this agenda, that Council is being asked to approve the Council Tax Support Scheme 2023/24.
12. Other than the removal of the provisions for care leavers under the age of 25 referred to above, which Scrutiny supported, we were advised that there were no other significant changes.

### **Council Tax Energy Rebate**

13. At the request of Members, Scrutiny received information on the delivery of the Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme which took place between April and August 2022.
14. As Members will be aware, in February 2022, the Government announced a package of financial support to help households with rising energy bills which included a £150 non-repayable payment for households in Council Tax Bands A to D, known as the Council Tax Energy Rebate, and £144 million of discretionary funding for Council's to support households who were in need but not eligible for the Council Tax Energy Rebate, known as the Discretionary Fund.
15. In total, 45,026 Council Tax Rebate payments have been made to eligible residents amounting to £6,753,900 and a total of 5,153 Discretionary Fund payments had been made amounting to £231,870.

### **Darlington Business Summit 2022**

16. The first ever Darlington Business Summit took place at the Dolphin Centre from Wednesday 5 to Friday 7 October 2022.
17. As part of the Business Summit, a Jobs Fair was held and more than 800 people browsed a wide range of stalls from around 60 local employers and training providers and the event gave people the chance to chat face to face with employers to find out more about the local opportunities on offer.

18. Post evaluation feedback from the event has identified that some applicants had progressed to job interview stage and many positive comments had been received by businesses who had participated.

### **Economic Growth Strategy for Darlington – A Framework for Discussion**

19. Scrutiny has been advised of the approach being taken to refresh and review the purpose and priorities of the Darlington Economic Strategy.
20. The existing Strategy is more than ten years old and whilst much has been achieved, the context in which it sits has changed with major policy changes and operational opportunities setting a new context.
21. The strategy refresh will produce a plan that promotes and places Darlington as an economic driver. It will highlight current opportunities and challenges and provide a broad framework for actions built from strategic priorities. The document will also be used to support Darlington's place marketing activities, setting out the local strategy, the direction of travel and how Darlington is aiming for success.
22. Consultation on the Strategy will take place and Scrutiny will be kept updated on its development.

### **Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring – Quarter 2**

23. We received the quarter 2 information in relation to the capital resource and commitment position of the Council's capital programme. The Council currently has 46 live projects being managed with an overall projected outturn value of £186,155 million.
24. The majority of the Council's projects are running to time, cost and quality expectations but are being monitored given the current pressures on resources in the construction sector nationally.

### **Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2022-23 – Quarter 2**

25. We received the quarter 2 revenue budget outturn report prior to its consideration by Cabinet.
26. The Council's projected reserves at the end of 2022-23 are £22.662 million, a £1.351 million decline on the initial 2022-26 MTFP position. Scrutiny was advised that this reduction in reserves, included a brought forward amount of £0.384 million from 2021/22, £0.539 million of projected departmental overspend and a decrease in corporate resources of £1.196 million.
27. The agreed pay award will place additional pressure on the 2022/23 MTFP, however, this has partly been offset following the recent decision to remove the increase in National Insurance which was budgeted from April 2022.

**Councillor Heather Scott**  
**Chair Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee**

