

COUNCIL
23 MARCH 2023

OVERVIEW OF RESOURCES PORTFOLIO

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

Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)

2. The Medium Term Financial Plan was considered and approved at the Special Council meeting held in February 2023 and as a result of a better than expected Local Government Settlement, the Council were able to set a legal budget in 2023/24. This allows a net revenue investment in Darlington and its residents of £120m in 2023/24 and new capital investment of over the life of the plan of £111m.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

3. The Council's Capital Programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) On the Bank Top Railway Station the demolitions phase is ongoing on the eastern side of the scheme with a number of buildings already cleared. On the western side the demolition of the former Hogan's Public House has commenced. The Railway Heritage Quarter project continues on site with the new engineering shed and refurbishment work to the 1861 shed on Whessoe Road. The Head of Steam site itself has been vacated and work is due to start on that part of the site shortly. Works are ongoing at the Central Library and Cattlemarket car park. Issues around the impact of the Nutrient Neutrality requirements from Natural England are being worked through on the Sherborne and Skinnergate housing schemes.
 - (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.

Council Tax and Business Rates collection

4. As at January 2023, our Revenues and Benefits team has collected a total of £91.56 million in Council Tax and Business Rates, including £1.7 million of arrears. Recovery Officers on the team continue to take decisive action to deal with serious debt cases, including the following recent examples:
 - (a) A Council Tax debt of £2,741 was outstanding, despite numerous attempts to contact the property owner. The debt had been referred to our Enforcement Agents (bailiffs) but had been returned to the Council as uncollectable. However, following several

visits and telephone calls by Recovery Officers to the debtor, the full amount outstanding has now been paid.

- (b) A local business owed £15,157 in outstanding Business Rates. Following insolvency action being commenced by our Recovery Officers, the owner repaid the debt in full.
- (c) An outstanding Housing Benefit overpayment of £22,282 as a result of benefit fraud was being repaid on a voluntary repayment plan. However, the debtor moved and payments stopped. Following investigative work by Recovery Officers, the debtor's employer was located and a direct earnings attachment was set-up to recover the remainder of the debt, which has now been repaid in full.

Local Government (Borough and Parish Council) Elections

- 5. Preparations for the Local Government (Borough and Parish Council) Elections 2023 are now underway, with polling taking place on 4 May 2023. It is intended that the Notice of Election will be published on Friday 24 March 2023 which is the formal start of the election period. The nomination process will run from this date until 4.00 p.m. on Tuesday 4 April 2023. These are the first elections taking place where voters will be required to show photo ID to vote and work is on-going to inform the electors of this new requirement and the changes to the accessibility arrangements in polling stations.
- 6. The Verification and Count for the Elections will take place on Friday 5 May 2023 commencing at 10.00 a.m. in the Dolphin Centre. Attendance at the Count is restricted and only those with a ticket will be admitted to the count venue.

Absent Vote Signature Refresh and Postal Voting

- 7. The final Absent Vote Signature Refresh commenced in January when 4,196 electors were written to, informing them that their Postal Vote was over five years old, and requesting that a fresh specimen signature be provided as part of the security measures in place to ensure that their Postal Vote cannot be used by anyone else. At the end of the six week refresh period, 296 electors had their Absent Vote deleted either at their request or as a result of not responding to the letters they received.
- 8. The Elections Act 2022 will bring in a number of changes to the postal and proxy voting process, including the requirement that electors will only be able to hold a postal vote for a maximum of three years, and rather than complete an absent vote signature refresh form they will be required to make a fresh application, at least every three years, should they wish to continue to vote by post. Secondary legislation is awaited on this and the other elements of the Elections Act that are to be implemented prior to the 2024 elections.

Councillor Scott Durham
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio