

COUNCIL
20 JULY 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.

Revenues and Benefits

2. Benchmarking of our Council Tax and Business Rates collection performance for 2022-23 with other North East Council's has confirmed that Darlington is one of the top performers in the region.
 - (a) The percentage of Council Tax collected in-year of 96.09% was the third best performance and compares favourably with the regional average of 94.54%.
 - (b) The percentage of Business Rates collected in-year of 99.79% was the best in the region, comparing favourably with the average of 97.29%.
3. Our Revenues and Benefits recovery team has achieved a number of recent successes for some long standing debts to the Council, including the following cases:
 - (a) A Council Tax payer in the Heighington and Coniscliffe ward was made bankrupt by the Council, due to the amount of Council Tax debt outstanding. As a result of this action, the full amount of £4,500 owing was recovered.
 - (b) The owner of an empty property in the Pierremont ward, who lived abroad, was traced and contacted by Recovery Officers for an outstanding Council Tax debt of £4,600. The property was subsequently sold and the full debt was recovered.
 - (c) A social housing provider owed the Council over £33,500 in unpaid Council Tax for 11 properties in Darlington. Following the commencement of winding-up proceedings, the provider paid the full amount outstanding, as well as over £3,000 in costs.
 - (d) A private landlord in Darlington, owed over £14,500 in unpaid Council Tax for a number of properties. Following the commencement of winding-up proceedings, the landlord paid the full amount outstanding, as well as £1,800 in costs.
 - (e) A local business in the Park East ward owed over £13,600 in unpaid Business Rates over a period of 3 years. Following negotiations with Recovery Officers and the potential action that could be taken by the Council, the full amount was paid.

Customer Services

4. Our Customer Services team continues to offer advice and assistance to residents for a range of Council services. In 2022-23, the team dealt with a total of 56,520 telephone calls and 12,377 e-mails. 9,862 people visited the Customer Services Centre for pre-booked appointments, including 710 who used the public computers to complete applications and make enquiries and 4,076 who used the scan stations to provide documentation to the Council.
5. The average waiting time for customers contacting the Council by telephone in 2022-23 was 2 minutes and 49 seconds, which is well within our Customer Standards of 5 minutes.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

6. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) On the Darlington Railway Station, the demolitions phase is complete on the eastern side and on the western side the demolition of the former Hogan's Public House is now complete. The delivery of the Scheme has now been transferred to TVCA and work on the foundations of the new station have commenced.
 - (b) The Railway Heritage Quarter project continues on site with the new engineering shed now complete and handed over the A1 Trust. The refurbishment work to the 1861 shed on Whessoe Road is continuing and will complete in early September. The Head of Steam itself is being cleared and made ready for the refurbishment phase.
7. On some of the other projects in the programme:-
 - (a) Works are ongoing at the Central Library.
 - (b) Issues around the impact of the Nutrient Neutrality requirements from Natural England are being worked through on the Sherborne housing scheme.
 - (c) Site work has commenced on a new 3G pitch at the Eastbourne Sports Complex.
 - (d) A Feasibility stage report is being produced for a potential new office development on the former Sports Direct site on East Street.
 - (e) There remains an ongoing risk of further inflation, and resources and material related impacts on the construction sector and projects.

Systems & Process

8. The Education case management system (EYES) implementation is currently in its final phase of testing following its commencement back in June 2022. The new system will provide the authority with a single child record across both Education and Social Care systems.
 - (a) The system incorporates 12 modules that support key functions across the Education and Inclusion service. Examples of functions include School Admissions, Home to

School Transport, Education Psychology, Children Missing from Education, School Attendance Tracking and monitoring.

- (b) Implementation also includes a new case management module, workflow and public facing / professional portals for the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Team to support the management and administration of the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) process.
- (c) Data sharing agreements have been made with all 40 schools in the Borough to allow the Council to import pupil data such as attendance and key pupil demographic information on a daily basis, and ensure pupil data is kept up to date.
- (d) The final testing of the system will be completed mid-July ready for the final data migration in advance of the go-live that is planned for mid-August.
- (e) A plan has been developed and measures will be in place during the go-live window to ensure safe data migration and service continuity while the switch is made between the current and new system, and integrations are embedded with existing Children's social care case management system. These measures have been discussed with the affected service areas, and work will be conducted out of hours where possible.

Annual Canvass (Electoral Registration) 2023

- 9. This year's Annual Canvass commenced on 10 July 2023 and is the fourth 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 are only required to respond to the Annual Canvass Form where there is a change within the household composition.
- 10. 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 2023.

Parliamentary Boundary Review (2023)

- 11. The Boundary Commission for England (BCE) have concluded the 2023 review of Parliamentary constituencies in England. The BCE's final report and maps of the new constituencies are available on the BCE website [2023 Review | Boundary Commission for England \(independent.gov.uk\)](https://www.bce.org.uk/2023-review).
- 12. The constituency of Darlington now includes the Heighington and Coniscliffe Ward (formerly situated in the Sedgfield Constituency) with the wards of Hurworth and Sadberge and Middleton St. George, (formerly situated in the Sedgfield Constituency), transferring to the Stockton West Constituency.

13. The Government will draft an Order containing the recommendations of all four Parliamentary Boundary Commissions and once that Order is approved by the Privy Council, the new constituencies will be used for the Parliamentary (General) Election following that date. For any by elections that may take place beforehand, existing constituencies will be used.

Elections Act 2022

14. Work is on-going to implement the remaining elements of the Elections Act 2022 in preparation for the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and the Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral (TVCAM) Elections scheduled to be held on 2 May 2024 and the next Parliamentary (General) Election. This includes changes to the postal vote handling and absent vote secrecy rules; restrictions on proxy voting; changes to postal voting, including the requirement to submit a fresh application every three years, the introduction of an online absent vote application system and a process for verifying an applicant's identity; changes to overseas electors voting rights to remove the 15 year limit; and the introduction of the 'first past the post' voting system for PCC and CAM elections. Changes to EU citizens' voting and candidacy rights are scheduled to be introduced after the May 2024 elections.
15. The first two elements of the Elections Act 2022, namely the requirement to provide Photo ID to vote at a polling station and accessibility changes, were introduced for the Local Government Elections in May 2023. A national publicity campaign was launched by the Electoral Commission, which ran from January to May, informing electors of the requirement to show photo ID to vote at a polling station and informing them that should they not have an accepted form of photo ID, they could apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate (VAC) from their local council. The national campaign was supplemented by local publicity, which included information being included in the One Darlington magazine, posters on noticeboards, in Parish Council areas, on Poll Cards, etc. There were 275 applications received for VAC's from the launch of the service in January until 25 April 2023. 65 Electors turned up at a polling station without the appropriate photo ID, 43 of which later returned and were able to vote.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio