

COUNCIL
28 SEPTEMBER 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. The Government's Quarterly Revenues Collection (QRC) figures for 2022-23 confirms that Darlington was one of the top performers nationally. As previously reported, our Council Tax in-year collection rate of 96.09% was the third best in the North East region, and these QRC figures confirm that we were just above the national average of 96.02%. Our Business Rates in-year collection rate of 99.88% was the best in the region and well above the national rate of 96.76%.
3. In addition, we collected £2.13m of Council Tax arrears in 2022-23, or 29.08% of the arrears outstanding. This was the second best collection rate in the region and well above the regional average of 15.56% and the national average of 18.26%
4. Our Revenues and Benefits team has achieved a number of recent successes for some long standing debts to the Council, including the following cases:
 - (a) A resident in the Northgate ward owed over £9,700 in Housing Benefit overpayments, as a result of undeclared income. The resident defaulted on a number of voluntary arrangements to repay the debt, and so a Direct Earnings Attachments was made with their employer to collect the debt in July 2023, with £1,111 being received so far.
 - (b) A resident in the North Road ward owed a total of £5,109 in outstanding Council Tax. Despite numerous attempts to collect the debt by our contracted Enforcement Agents, no payments were received. Our Recovery team then visited the property on a number of occasions and, following contact with the debtor, full payment was received in July 2023.
 - (c) The owner of an empty property in the Park East ward had not paid any Council Tax for the property since March 2019. We obtained charging orders for the property, but as no contact was received from the debtor, the case was progressed to court for an order for sale. Initially, the debtor offered to pay £5,000 to halt proceedings to allow him to appeal. This offer was rejected and possession of the property was granted for July 2023. However, on the day before possession was due, the debtor made a full payment of £25,135 to clear the balance of £17,496 Council Tax and £7,639 costs.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

5. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) The Darlington Station Project has been transferred to TVCA to manage delivery of the project with Network Rail, but it is pleasing to see progress and the steel frame for the new car park now partially complete.
 - (b) The Railway Heritage Quarter project continues on site with the 1861 shed handed over. The Head of Steam itself is now clear and the refurbishment works are underway in the Goods Shed and Carriageworks.
 - (c) Works are complete at Central Library and has been re-opened to the public showcasing the new modern facilities within the heritage setting.
 - (d) Issues around the impact of the Nutrient Neutrality (NN) requirements from Natural England are being worked through on the Skinnergate housing scheme. We are also working through requirements of the Party Wall Act and the temporary works design to help inform that process is due shortly. On the Sherborne housing scheme, we have recently heard that we have been successful with our application to the NN Natural England credit system and are awaiting advice on the next steps.
 - (e) Projects are ongoing at Eastbourne Sports Complex, the Dolphin Centre and Whinfield school.
 - (f) Feasibility stage design reports have been submitted for a potential new office development on the former Sports Direct site on East Street and these are currently under review.
 - (g) A procurement exercise for a developer/operator for the refurbishment of former Northern Echo Building is underway.
 - (h) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Elections Act 2022

6. Work is on-going to implement 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. Secondary legislation for three further elements of the Elections Act 2022 were laid before Parliament in July, namely:-
 - (a) 'Representation of the People (Postal and Proxy Voting etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2023' covering the introduction of the online absent vote application services which are scheduled to go live on 31 October 2023, requiring a voter's identity to be checked as part of the process (for both online and paper applications) and the requirement to submit a fresh application every three years;

- (b) 'Representation of the People (Franchise Amendment and Eligibility Review) Regulations 2023' covering changes to the voting and candidacy rights of EU Citizens. These changes will be introduced after the 2024 elections; and
 - (c) 'Mayoral and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections, Recall Petitions and Referendums (Ballot Secrecy, Candidates and Undue Influence) Regulations 2023' covering a range of other measures from the Act, including the new electoral sanction for intimidation.
7. Further secondary legislation is still awaited on changes to the postal vote handling and absent vote secrecy rules; changes to overseas electors voting rights to remove the 15 year limit; digital imprints; and commonly used names and addresses. 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.

Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2023

8. At the previous meeting of Council, the process and timetable for the compulsory review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations was agreed. Although the review cannot start before the 1 October 2023 the Council were able to do some initial work including contacting Members and interested bodies on the current arrangements; looking at electorate figures; suitability of existing polling stations, etc.
9. The notice advising of the commencement of the review will be published on Monday 2 October 2023. This will be the start of the formal six-week consultation period which will end on Sunday 12 November 2023. The comments of Members, the public and other bodies are welcome during this period and will be used to produce the final proposals, which will be produced by the Returning Officer, and consulted upon for a further six-weeks commencing at the end of November 2023.

Annual Canvass (Electoral Registration) 2023

10. This year's Annual Canvass, which commenced on 10 July 2023 is continuing. The final Annual Canvass reminder forms were issued on 25 September 2023, with personal visits being undertaken until the end of November, to encourage the completion of the outstanding forms. The revised Register of Electors will be published on 1 December 2023.

Middleton St. George Parish Council By Election

11. A By Election to fill two vacancies on Middleton St. George Parish Council will take place on Thursday 19 October 2023, if contested.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio