

**COUNCIL**  
**30 NOVEMBER 2023**

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**OVERVIEW OF RESOURCES PORTFOLIO**

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

**Digital billboard**

2. The digital billboard adjacent to Feethams roundabout is owned by Darlington Borough Council. To date it has been used to display adverts for services associated with Darlington Borough Council.
3. The process for managing the billboard content is now established and embedded. The Council will continue to use the billboard to advertise its services, but there is an opportunity to sell some advertising slots to external organisations in order to recover the costs of operating the billboard. A 6 month trial of this arrangement will commence in the coming months, with the ambition to implement a permanent offer thereafter. Further details of the offer will be published on the Darlington Borough Council website.

**Capital Projects and Design Services Management**

4. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered:
  - (a) On the Bank Top Railway Station scheme the steel frame for the new car park is now substantially complete. The delivery of the Bank Top Scheme has now been transferred to TVCA.
  - (b) The Railway Heritage Quarter project continues on-site and the 1861 shed is now complete and occupied by NELPG. Refurbishment works continue in the Head of Steam, Goods Shed and Carriageworks buildings.
  - (c) Works are now complete on the Central Library scheme which has now re-opened.
  - (d) An application to Natural England for Nutrient Neutrality 'credits' for the Sherborne housing scheme has been successful and a similar application for the Skinnergate housing scheme is to be submitted shortly.
  - (e) Site work is ongoing at Eastbourne Sports Complex, Dolphin Centre and at Whinfield school. Feasibility is ongoing for a potential new office development on the former Sports Direct site on East Street. A procurement exercise for a developer/operator for the refurbishment of former Northern Echo Building is ongoing.

- (f) Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
- (g) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

### **Revenues and Benefits**

5. 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 owed over £7,000 in unpaid Council Tax. He had never made any payments or contact with the Council. Following investigative work by our Recovery Officers, we located his employers and served them with an attachment of earnings order. The arrears and current year's Council Tax will be repaid within this financial year.
  - (b) A resident owed over £8,100 in unpaid Council Tax. We informed the debtor that we would obtain a charging order for the debt and force the sale of his property. He has now agreed to pay £1,500 each month to halt the charging order process.
  - (c) A resident owed over £8,200 in overpaid Housing Benefit. We applied for an injunction order against the property, which stated that she was not allowed to sell, re-mortgage, let or dispose of the property, unless she repaid the amount owing. Following this action, we received full payment from the debtor.
  - (d) A property developer owed over £18,000 in unpaid Council Tax on a property they owned. We instructed solicitors to commence winding up proceedings on the company. So far, they have repaid £10,000 of the debt to halt the proceedings.
  - (e) The owner of an empty property owed just under £10,000 in unpaid Council Tax. After securing a charging order on the property, we instructed solicitors to force the sale. Following this action, the debt has now been cleared in full, together with £695 costs.

### **Estates and Property**

6. Planning permission for the remaining undeveloped part of the residential development at Neasham Road ( Cell C ) has now been granted and the sale to the Hurworth Gardens Ltd ( the Council's JV with Esh homes ) duly completed. Works to Cell C have now started and good progress with site infrastructure is being made.
7. The sale of one of the remaining plots of land at Faverdale East Business Park to Jaymac Pallets recently completed and works to the site are well underway and expect to be finished at the end of March 2024 weather permitting.
8. The sale of North Cemetery Lodge has now completed, and the new owner is keen to progress a planning application.

9. The proposed residential development and parkland restoration at Blackwell Grange is continuing through the planning application process with full stakeholder engagement.

### **Register of Electors**

10. This year's Annual Canvass commenced on July 2023, the fourth Annual Canvass under the new reformed process. As reported at a previous meeting, an initial data match with national and local data sets was undertaken prior to the Canvass commencing, and this suggested that a significant number of properties had no changes in terms of the household composition. As such, the residents within those properties were only required to respond to the Annual Canvass Form where there was a change. Those households that did not respond to the initial communication received a personal visit between August and November, in order to encourage completion of the form. The revised 2024 Register of Electors will be published on 1 December 2023.

### **Elections Act 2022**

11. Work is on-going to implement further 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.
12. A number of changes to postal and proxy voting arrangements, were introduced on 31 October 2023 through the Representation of the People (Postal and Proxy Voting etc.) (Amendment) Regulations 2023. The main changes include the removal of indefinite postal votes and the requirement for all electors to re-apply for a postal vote every three years; the requirement to check and verify a person's identity when an application for an absent vote is made; the introduction of a new on-line application system for both postal and some proxy voting; and restricting the number of electors that one person can act as a proxy for to four.
13. Other secondary legislation has been laid / expected to be laid over the next few months in relation to undue influence and intimidation; digital imprints; overseas electors to remove the 15 year limit; candidate addresses and commonly used names for UK Parliamentary (General) Elections; EU Voting and candidacy rights; and postal vote handing and secrecy rules.

### **Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2023**

14. The compulsory review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations commenced on 2 October 2023. This was the start of the formal six-week consultation period which ended on Sunday 12 November 2023. The comments of Members, the public and other bodies were welcome during this period and were used to produce the final proposals, which have been produced by the Returning Officer followed by a further six-week consultation period which will end on 7 January 2023.

**Councillor Mandy Porter**  
**Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio**