

COUNCIL
25 JANUARY 2024

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 draft MTFP proposed at Cabinet in December is out for consultation and has been discussed at all Scrutiny Committees along with an all Member briefing held on 13 December 2023. The draft Local Government Finance settlement was received on 18 December and the MTFP will be updated accordingly in the final draft going to Cabinet and to Council in February.

Revenues and Benefits

3. Our Revenues and Benefits team continue to perform exceptionally well in recovering long-standing debts to the Council, including the following cases, which also demonstrate the supportive role that the team undertake in establishing entitlement to benefits:
 - (a) A local resident owed over £4,200 in unpaid Council Tax for two properties, as well as a Housing Benefit overpayment of £950. Following intervention and negotiation by Recovery Officers, all the debts were paid in full.
 - (b) A local resident owed over £5,000 in unpaid Council Tax. Following contact by a Recovery Officer it was established that the resident was not working and receiving Universal Credit. The resident was supported to apply for Council Tax Support, which reduced the debt to £2,200 which is being collected by deductions from Universal Credit.
 - (c) A local resident owed over £2,800 in unpaid Council Tax. Following contact by a Recovery Officer it was established that the resident was receiving Universal Credit and entitled to Council Tax Support, which reduced the debt to £750 which is being collected by deductions from Universal Credit.
 - (d) A local resident owed over £2,500 in unpaid Council Tax. Following contact by a Recovery Officer it was established that the resident was receiving Universal Credit and entitled to Council Tax Support, which reduced the debt to £675 which is being collected by deductions from Universal Credit.

Customer Services

4. Our Customer Services team and other customer telephone teams across the Council continue to perform extremely well against our Customer Standards to answer telephones

within 5 minutes. The average waiting time for customers in September 2023 was 2 minutes 12 seconds, reducing to 2 minutes 1 second in October 2023 and 1 minute 38 seconds in November 2023 and 93.45% of calls answered.

Universal Credit

5. The migration of Darlington residents from legacy benefits to Universal Credit continues at a pace with over 70% of working aged people who receive Council Tax Support now receiving Universal Credit.
6. The next phase of Universal Credit implementation will commence in 2024 with the managed migration of residents receiving long-term legacy benefits. These are mostly people on benefits such as Employment Support Allowance, who have not had a change in their circumstances that would normally trigger a Universal Credit claim.
7. The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) will be providing more detail from April 2024 about the managed migration of these customers and how they will be supported with the move to Universal Credit. Our Customer Services and Tenancy Sustainment teams are well prepared to assist our vulnerable customers with the move, together with our long-standing good working relationship with the Jobcentre Plus Office in Darlington.

Climate Change

8. Our Revenues and Benefits team continue to promote e-billing as an alternative to sending paper Council Tax and Business Rates bills. Over 5,000 bills were sent electronically in 2022-23 but more work needs to be done to promote the e-billing option, which also allows local residents and businesses to access their accounts on-line, checking for payments and instalments due.
9. A promotional leaflet will be sent out with all the paper annual bills in March 2024, and I would urge Members to sign-up for e-billing, if they have not already done so, and promote this option to local residents.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

10. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) On the Darlington Railway Station scheme which is being managed by TVCA the steel frame and floors for the new car park are now complete.
 - (b) The Hopetown Darlington project continues onsite with refurbishment works to the former Head of Steam, Goods Shed and Carriage works buildings. The entrance works to the Goods Shed directly off McNay Street are progressing well and should re-provide a more direct pedestrian route back to the North Road Railway Station from the end of February 2024.
 - (c) Site work is ongoing at the Dolphin Centre, Whinfield school and at the Neasham Road housing scheme.

- (d) A procurement exercise for a developer/operator for the refurbishment of former Northern Echo Building has concluded and a decision on who to appoint is expected shortly.
- (e) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Police and Crime Commissioner and Tees Valley Combined Authority Elections

- 11. Preparations are underway for the elections that are due to take place on Thursday 2 May 2024 to elect the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for the Durham Police Area and the Mayor for the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA). Durham County Council is the lead authority for the PCC election and Stockton Borough Council is the lead authority for the TVCA Mayoral Election.

Elections Act 2022

- 12. Work is continuing 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. The introduction of Voter Authority Certificates and changes to the postal and proxy voting arrangements have already been introduced and implemented.
- 13. Other changes that will be implemented for future elections are undue influence and intimidation; digital imprints; removal of the 15 year limit for overseas electors; candidate addresses and commonly used names for UK Parliamentary (General) Elections; EU Voting and candidacy rights; and postal vote handling 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. Two six-week consultation periods were held during which time the comments of Members, the public and other bodies were welcomed. The final proposals for the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations can be seen in a separate report elsewhere on this agenda, and once approved, they will be used for all future elections. As the proposals have resulted in changes to a number of polling districts, it may be necessary to republish the Register of Electors.

Review of Parliamentary Constituencies 2023

- 15. The Parliamentary Constituencies Order 2023 came into force on 29 November 2023. The new constituencies will be used for the next Parliamentary (General) Election, which will take place before the end of January 2025. The main changes for this Council involved the Heighington and Coniscliffe Ward moving from the Sedgefield Constituency into the Darlington Constituency and the Sadberge and Middleton St George and Hurworth Wards moving from the Sedgefield Constituency to the Stockton West Constituency.

Communications and Marketing

16. The digital billboard adjacent to Feethams roundabout operates 365 days per year. It is switched on from 6am to 2am the following day and has up to nine advertisements in rotation at any one time. To help offset the running costs of the billboard, the Council has opened up the opportunity for a limited number of businesses and non-profit organisations to place their advertisements on the billboard. Priority will be given to local organisations, and their advertisements will sit in the same rotation cycle as the Council's advertisements. More information can be found at www.darlington.gov.uk/billboard.

17. The One Darlington magazine model has been in place since September 2015. It is an effective way of sharing information with many people across the borough. The magazine has and will continue to operate in partnership with a number of public and voluntary sector organisations. Not only does this lead to a magazine that is rich in content, it also helps to offset some of the costs for the Council. Over recent years, production and distribution costs have significantly increased and it has been necessary to review the model. From April 2024 the current distribution model will continue, but the number of editions per year will reduce from six to four. To help offset costs further, we will introduce the opportunity for commercial organisations to advertise in the magazine, details of which are currently being developed.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio