

COUNCIL
21 MARCH 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.

Council Tax Single Person Discount Review

2. Our Revenues and Benefits team has recently completed the annual review of Council Tax Single Person Discounts. Currently, there are over 19,900 people in Darlington receiving a 25% Single Person Discount for their Council Tax at an annual cost of £8.4 million. NEC Software Solutions UK (NEC), who are contracted to undertake our review, undertook a data matching exercise of 12,919 discounts and canvassed 2,537 people.
3. As a result of the exercise, 417 discounts were cancelled at an estimated annual saving of £136,625. The review cost £6,986 (NEC are only paid for the discounts they cancel), and therefore, offers very good value for money for the Council.

Revenues and Benefits Debt Collection

4. 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 £3,800 in unpaid Council Tax and had moved abroad. As the person owned the property, we applied for a charging order to secure the debt against the property. Following contact with the owner, the debt was paid in full.
 - (b) A local resident owed over £7,700 in unpaid Council Tax. Despite numerous calls and visits, contact could not be made with the debtor. However, following some investigative work by the team, his employer was traced and an attachment of earnings order has been put in place. The debt is currently being paid at £300 each month.
 - (c) A local resident owed over £4,100 in unpaid Council Tax. Again, following some investigative work by the team, his employer was traced and an attachment of earnings order has been put in place. The debt is currently being paid at £1,700 each month.
 - (d) A local resident owed over £3,900 in overpaid Housing Benefits. Following a direct earnings attachment served on the employer in 2020, the debt has now been repaid in full.

- (e) A local resident owed over £9,000 in unpaid Council Tax. Following commencement of bankruptcy proceedings, the debt was repaid in full.

Customer Services

- 5. Our Customer Services team are currently in the process of introducing a “call back” feature in our NetCall telephony system, which is being trialled by Housing Services.
- 6. The principle of the call back feature is that when a customer calls and the wait time to speak to an advisor is over 3 minutes, the system will automatically offer the customer the option of a call back. If the customer selects this option, the call is ended, but the system holds their place in the queue. Once it is their turn, the system automatically makes a call back to the customer and they are put through directly to an advisor.
- 7. From the advisor’s perspective, they will see no difference or any additional work, as the system automatically arranges the call back. For customers, it avoids them having to wait on the telephone and reduces the cost of the phone call. Early signs are encouraging with reduced levels of abandoned calls, and reduced waiting times. If the trial proves successful, the feature will be rolled out to other Council services in the next few months.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

- 8. The Council’s capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered:
 - (a) On the Bank Top Railway Station scheme which is being delivered by Tees Valley Combined Authority, the steel frame and floors for the new car park are now complete and roof works are ongoing.
 - (b) The Hopetown Darlington project continues on-site with refurbishment works to the former Head of Steam, Goods Shed and Carriageworks buildings. Construction of the new car park is now underway. The entrance works to the Goods Shed directly off McNay Street are nearing completion and should re-provide a more direct pedestrian route back to the station for first week in March.
 - (c) Site work is ongoing at Eastbourne Sports Complex, Dolphin Centre, Whinfield school and at the Neasham Road housing scheme.
 - (d) A planning application has been submitted for refurbishment works to No. 156 Northgate and a determination is expected shortly.
 - (e) Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
 - (f) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Police and Crime Commissioner and Tees Valley Combined Authority Elections – Thursday 2 May 2022

9. Preparations for the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and the Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral (TVCAM) Elections are underway, with polling taking place on Thursday 2 May 2024. It is intended that the Notices of Election will be published on 22 March for the PCC Election and 19 March for the TVCAM Election, which marks the formal start of the pre-election period when additional care is required to ensure that the political neutrality of local authorities is maintained. These are the second elections whereby voters will be required to show Voter Authority to be able to vote and the first time these elections will be using the new postal vote handling rules and 'first past the post' voting system.

Review of Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2023

10. Following changes to a number of polling districts as part of the review of the Polling Districts, Polling Places and Polling Stations 2023 the Register of Electors was republished on 1 February 2024. The revised polling places will be used for the elections taking place on Thursday 2 May 2024 and all future elections.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio