

**COUNCIL**  
**16 MAY 2024**

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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.

**Customer Services**

2. During 2023-24, our Customer Services team received 56,854 telephone calls from customers for a range of services, including Street Scene, Parking, Environmental Health and Planning. Our Revenues and Benefits team received 38,415 calls and Housing Services received 63,163 calls.
3. In total, 207,917 calls were received by all Council services in 2023-24. In March 91.41% of calls were answered, with an average waiting time of 1 minute and 43 seconds, which is within our Customer Standards of 5 minutes.
4. In addition, there were 16,466 visitors to our Customer Services Centre, including 1,332 booked appointments, 734 customers who accessed our free to use PCs and 4,511 customers used our scan stations, enabling those people to easily provide supporting documentation for benefit claims, Housing applications, bus passes and Blue Badge parking permits.

**Revenues and Benefits**

5. During 2023-24, our Revenues and Benefits team collected over £106m in Council Tax and Business Rates. In-year collection of Council Tax was 96.39%, our best performance since 2010-11 and in-year collection of Business Rates was 99.97%, which is our best ever performance.
6. The team also continue to perform exceptionally well in the recovery of long-standing debts to the Council, including the following recent cases, which also demonstrate the supportive role that the team undertake in establishing entitlement to benefits:
  - (a) A local resident owed over £5,400 in unpaid Council Tax. Numerous attempts had been made to contact the resident without success. However, following an evening visit to the resident, officers were able to award backdated amounts for single person discount and Council Tax Support, reducing the arrears to £1,500 and an arrangement has been agreed to clear this amount.
  - (b) A local resident owed over £3,700 in unpaid Council Tax. Despite numerous visits to the property, contact could not be made with the resident. Further investigative work took place and a business address was obtained. A successful visit to the business

resulted in a payment arrangement being agreed and the full amount of the arrears were repaid by March 2024.

- (c) A local resident owed over £3,000 in unpaid Council Tax. Following a charging order being obtained, the property was subsequently sold and full payment was received.
  - (d) A local resident owed over £3,900 in overpaid Housing Benefit. A payment arrangement was set up but payments were irregular and the team had to make constant prompts and reminders. However, the last instalment was made in March 2024, repaying the debt in full.
  - (e) A local business owner owed over £2,100 in unpaid Council Tax for an empty property above their business. Proceedings were commenced to obtain a charging order on the property, but the full amount was repaid in February 2024.
7. Our Revenues and Benefits recovery team have also been proactive in identifying unclaimed discounts and Council Tax Support for residents in arrears with their Council Tax and on low incomes. During 2023-24, a total of £229,296 in unclaimed Council Tax Support was identified and awarded, reducing the amount of Council Tax owed and establishing repayment agreements to clear any remaining debt.

### **Capital Projects and Design Services Management**

8. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
- (a) The Darlington Railway Station scheme, which is now being managed by TVCA, the external cladding to the car park and new station building is now being installed. Additional Funding has been secured by TVCA for the transport interchange & public realm works at the top of Victoria Road.
  - (b) The Hopetown Darlington project continues on-site with refurbishment works to the former Head of Steam, Goods Shed and Carriageworks buildings and the construction of the new car park is well underway. The entrance works to the Goods Shed directly off McNay Street are nearing completion and now provide a new access to North Road Railway station.
  - (c) Further investment is underway at the Dolphin Centre to undertake mechanical and electrical works including energy efficiency elements that will reduce the operating costs and the carbon footprint.
  - (d) Site work is nearing completion at Whinfield School and on the first phase at the Neasham Road housing scheme.
  - (e) A planning application has been submitted for refurbishment works to No.156 Northgate and a determination is expected shortly.
  - (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.

### **Police and Crime Commissioner and Tees Valley Combined Authority Elections – Thursday 2 May 2024**

9. The Police and Crime Commissioner and Tees Valley Combined Authority Mayoral Elections took place on Thursday 2 May 2024. The Elections Act 2022 introduced a number of changes for the elections including the ‘first past the post’ voting system and changes to the postal voting handling rules. The changes to the postal voting handling rules required electors to complete a form when handing postal votes at the Town Hall or at a polling station and limiting the number of postal votes that can be handed in to five plus their own. Restrictions on the handling of postal votes by political campaigners were also introduced.
10. These were the second elections whereby electors were required to show photo ID at a polling station before they could be issued with a ballot paper. The Electoral Commission again launched a national publicity campaign to remind 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, billboard and on Poll Cards.

### **Elections Act 2022**

11. The Elections Act 2022 removes the rights of some EU citizens to vote and stand as a candidate at elections from 7 May 2024. The changes apply to local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections. EU citizens where the UK Government has negotiated agreements with EU Member States to allow its citizens living in the UK to vote in return for the same right for UK citizens living in that country, will still be able to vote and stand in elections. Other EU Citizens who were living in the UK before end of the EU Withdrawal Agreement implementation period (up until 1 January 2021) will also still be able to vote and stand in elections. All EU citizens currently on the register will be reviewed by 31 January 2025 and any that do not meet the eligibility criteria will be deleted from the Register of Electors following the review process.

### **Climate Change**

12. The works on the Dolphin Centre include LED lighting, photovoltaics and combined heating and power that will reduce the operating costs and carbon footprint of the building.

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