

COUNCIL
18 JULY 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.

Customer Services

2. Our Customer Services team continue to deliver excellent services to our residents, in line with our published customer standards. The key highlights of our performance in 2023-24 is as follows:
 - (a) The total number of telephone calls received through our corporate Netcall telephony system was 207,917, which is a 6.5% reduction in the number of calls received in 2022-23 (an indication that more people using our on-line services, as part of our Customer Services and Digital Strategy).
 - (b) The average percentage of calls answered was 92%, an increase from 87% in 2022-23.
 - (c) The average telephone call waiting time was 1:59 minutes, a reduction from 2:49 minutes in 2022-23, and well within the customer standards of 5 minutes.
 - (d) The monthly average of walk-in visitors to our Customer Services Centre was 1,200, an increase from 822 in 2022-23.
 - (e) The monthly average of e-mails received by Customer Services was 1,576, an increase from 1,378 in 2022-23.
 - (f) Over 375 customers on average each month are using the Scan Stations based in our Customer Services Centre to upload documents to support various applications.
 - (g) A new callback facility has been trialled by Housing Services and Revenues and Benefits and the plan is to roll this out to all services during 2024-25. Initial statistics show this is having a positive impact on the customer journey and waiting times.

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 £2,600 in overpaid Housing Benefit. Following correspondence with the Revenues and Benefits team, a payment arrangement was made, and the debt was cleared in full, in May 2024.

- (b) The owner of an unoccupied property owed a substantial amount of Council Tax debt. Following attempts to recover the outstanding sum, the Revenues and Benefits team pursued a bankruptcy petition with the owner. It then came to light that the owner was in the process of selling another property in Stockton-on-Tees but couldn't proceed with the sale due to the bankruptcy petition. As a result, the owner's solicitors cleared the outstanding debt and costs totalling £11,445.
- (c) A local resident owed over £5,700 in unpaid Council Tax going back to 2013. Numerous attempts were made to recover the outstanding sums, and eventually, the debtor agreed to a payment arrangement. Payments were intermittent and the Revenues and Benefits team kept in constant contact with the debtor to ensure he kept to the arrangement; the final payment being received in March 2024.
- (d) A property development company owed over £19,900 in unpaid Council Tax on several properties in Darlington. Following contact from our solicitors, the company made a repayment proposal, which was rejected. They eventually agreed to our terms to pay 50% of the debt in full, followed by monthly instalments; the final payment being received in January 2024.
- (e) A local resident owed over £3,900 in unpaid Council Tax and following numerous visits and correspondence, a monthly arrangement was made, and the debt was paid in full in March 2024.
- (f) A local resident owed over £5,400 in unpaid Council Tax and following numerous visits and correspondence, it was identified that he had entitlement to Council Tax Support and Single Person Discount. The debt was reduced to just over £1,500 and a monthly instalment arrangement was set up.

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 which is being managed by the Tees Valley Combined Authority, the external cladding to the car park and new station building is nearing completion.
 - (b) The Hopetown Darlington project continues onsite with refurbishment works to the former Head of Steam, Goods Shed and Carriageworks buildings. The construction of the new car park is now complete and open to visitors. The entrance works to the Goods Shed directly off McNay Street are also complete and now provide an accessible new access route to North Road Railway station.
 - (c) Site work is progressing on the first phase at the Neasham Road housing scheme.
 - (d) A planning application submitted for refurbishment works to No.156 Northgate has been successful and the detailed design for the scheme is now being worked up.
 - (e) A development partner has been appointed for the refurbishment and subsequent operation of the former Northern Echo building.

- (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 .

Climate Change – Conversion to Light Emitting Diode (LED) lighting in the Town Hall

- 5. Corporate Landlord are programming the conversion of the Town Hall to LED lighting. The provisional numbers for the programme require an investment of around £70k (from existing budgets) that will create a utility saving of circa £32k pa based on current rates and a saving of 56 tonnes of carbon.
- 6. Work is progressing on feasibility of conversion on the remainder of Council assets. The following table demonstrates several of our larger buildings that have already been converted:-

| Operational Buildings | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Hippodrome | Already LED |
| Feethams Multi-storey Car Park | Already LED |
| Crematorium | Already LED |
| Crown Street Library | Already LED |
| Lingfield Way Salt Barn | Already LED |
| Allington Depot | Already LED |
| Eastbourne Sports Complex | Already LED |
| Head of Steam | Conversion as part of Hopetown works |
| Eastbourne Sports Running Track | Already LED |
| Surestart (McNay Street) | Already LED |
| Cockerton Library | Already LED |

Online content and functionality

- 7. The Hopetown website was launched in May and is based on designs provided by Hemingway Design. Its main feature is a hybrid integration between our content management system and a third-party electronic point of sale (EPOS) system. This enables ticket sales and associated event information to be merged and managed via a third-party platform. Hopetown events have been added to the Darlington Application Programming Interface (API) meaning that in the future we will be able to automatically add Hopetown events to our main event feeds on Darlington.gov.uk and Enjoydarlington.co.uk websites. The foundations laid here mean we'll be able to do the same thing with the Hippodrome events when that site gets its upgrade next year.

Corporate Systems and Processes

8. The education modules within the Early Years and Education System (EYES) application were implemented in September 2023. Subsequent work with the SEN Team and system supplier has led to the modules being bedded in, and we are starting to see the benefits. Other services which were offline such as Attendance and Exclusions are now able to process data much quicker and can identify trends much more easily. We successfully processed both Primary and Secondary School admission applications, with outcomes being promptly emailed to applicants, and many acceptances being swiftly received. The next phase of the EYES programme has started and will involve implementation of the Education Delegation portal and a finance module, and further work to enhance some Early Years processes.
9. The customer services CRM system (Verint) is undergoing a major upgrade. User acceptance testing is nearing completion and in the coming weeks the upgraded system will be implemented into the live environment. This upgrade will bring several new features and benefits which will help to streamline some processes within customer services.

Corporate communications and marketing

10. Key activities carried out by the communications and marketing team during recent months include pre-launch support for Hopetown Darlington, developing a town centre communications and marketing plan for 2024-26, promoting the Council Plan consultation, pre-election activities for the May and July elections, and producing the Summer 2024 edition of One Darlington.

United Kingdom Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) – 4 July 2024

11. The UK Parliamentary General Election took place on Thursday 4 July 2024. The election was held on the new Parliamentary Boundaries which came into force on the dissolution of Parliament on 30 May 2024. The new Darlington County Constituency now includes the Heighington and Coniscliffe Ward with the wards of Hurworth, Sadberge and Middleton St. George now voting in the Stockton West County Constituency. Previously all three wards voted in the Sedgefield Constituency. The arrangements for the Stockton West Constituency were co-ordinated by Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council.
12. Given the short notice period in terms of calling the election, the Democratic Services team worked within incredibly tight timescales to ensure that appropriate arrangements were in place in terms of the nomination process, staffing, securing venues as Polling Stations and liaising with our printers to produce the required paperwork. A total of 158 staff were employed and trained to work at 47 Polling Stations throughout the day, and around 82 staff were employed to work on the Count later that evening, with a significant number of staff allocated to other key roles in the lead up to the election.
13. Following the ending of the 15-year limit on voting for British citizens living abroad on 16 January 2024, the number of overseas electors applying to register and vote at the Parliamentary election increased. There were also a large number of electors registering to vote and applying for absent votes, once the election had been announced on 21 May.

Elections Act 2022

14. Work is ongoing on the changes to 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 the 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. Work had commenced to contact all the EU citizens, however, it was put on hold until after the election was held.

Annual Canvass 2024

15. As a result of the UKPGE taking place on 4 July 2024, the start of the Annual Canvass has been delayed. It is anticipated that the initial data match will take place at the end of July / early August 2024, with the annual canvass forms going out to all properties shortly afterwards.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio