

COUNCIL
26 SEPTEMBER 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.

Revenues and Benefits

2. Following the successful approval and implementation of the Council Tax and Business Rates Recovery Strategy in January 2024, the Revenues and Benefits team has initiated their first committal cases, to address some long-standing Council Tax debts, as follows:
 - (a) A resident in privately rented accommodation who had never paid any Council Tax on his home and owed over £8,100 in Council Tax, was sent a letter of intent to take committal action. Following contact with, and support from CAB, a direct debit was set up for his current year's Council Tax. At court, the Magistrate's issued a warrant of commitment, suspended on payment terms of no less than £195 each month, until the debt has been cleared.
 - (b) Another resident in privately rented accommodation who had never paid any Council Tax on his home and owed over £7,600 in Council Tax, was also sent a letter of intent to take committal action. The resident subsequently agreed to set up a direct debit for his current year's Council Tax and at court, the Magistrate's issued a warrant of commitment, suspended on payment terms of no less than £100 each month, until the debt has been cleared.
 - (c) A resident who owed over £7,400 in Council Tax dating back to 2016 was sent a letter of intent to take committal action. Numerous attempts to contact the resident, including visits had previously been undertaken, with no response. Following a letter of intent to take committal action, an agreement was made to start paying £230 each month to reduce the debt, and the first payments have already been received.
3. In addition to these committal actions, the Revenues and Benefits team continue to perform well in recovering other long-standing and large debts to the Council, as follows:
 - (a) Two Housing Benefit overpayments relating to undeclared capital were discovered in July 2024: one amounting to over £19,100 and the other amounting to over £20,200. In both cases, the team pressed for full payment, given that it had already been established that the debtors had sufficient capital to repay the debts. In both cases, the amounts were paid in full.

- (b) A resident owed over £7,000 in Council Tax arrears after he had inherited a property. A charging order was secured on the property and after the sale, £4,100 was paid from the proceeds of sale, with the resident paying the remaining £2,900 to clear the debt.
 - (c) A resident owed over £3,900 in unpaid Council Tax and had been returned by our Enforcement Agents, as they had been unable to collect the debt. Following investigations, it was established that the resident owned the property and was advised that we would pass it to our legal representatives to obtain a charging order and potentially force the sale of the property. The debt was then paid in full in June 2024.
4. The national collection of Council Tax and Business Rates performance statistics for 2023-24 has recently been published. The performance of our Revenues and Benefits team has previously been reported, but these national statistics show how well we compare to other Councils, as follows:
- (a) Our in-year collection of Council Tax of 96.39% was the third best in the North-East and above both the regional average of 94.93% and the English average of 95.94%.
 - (b) Our in-year collection of Business Rates of 99.97% was the best in the North-East and fourth best in England. Our performance was well above the regional average of 97.78% and the English average of 97.23%.
 - (c) Our collection of Council Tax arrears of 29.66% was the second best in the North-East and well above both the regional average of 14.55% and the English average of 16.73%.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

5. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
- (a) Darlington Station Project is progressing with works to the external areas and works external aspects of the buildings are nearing completion. The is being managed by TVCA.
 - (b) Hopetown Darlington is now open to the public and initial feedback received from visitors is very positive.
 - (c) Site work is now complete on the first phase at the Neasham Road housing scheme, and those properties are in the process of being handed over to Housing for allocation, whilst work continues on the second phase.
 - (d) Work has commenced at the Sherborne Phase II housing site with initial site clearance and excavation work complete.
 - (e) Detailed design work continues for the No.156 Northgate refurbishment scheme.

- (f) Site clearance and strip out works are nearing completion on the former Northern Echo building.
- (g) Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
- (h) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Corporate Systems and Processes

- 6. Artificial intelligence has the potential to make the delivery of some council services more efficient and at a reduced cost. The mainstream application of this technology within local government and many other sectors is still within its infancy, but we are actively involved with several local, regional, and national networks that are assessing and experimenting with this technology.
- 7. In addition to testing the functionality of Microsoft CoPilot, for which we already hold several licenses, we are developing a structured approach to inform if and when it would be appropriate to apply artificial intelligence more broadly to aid with the delivery of our services in line with the required data security measures.
- 8. The ambition is to have a clear plan in place by the end of 2025.

Death Registrations

- 9. The death registration process has remained largely unchanged for over 50 years. From Monday 9 September 2024 the way in which deaths are registered changed. Reform was identified largely arising from the Shipman Inquiry and the COVID Pandemic but also a number of other government inquiries and investigations.
- 10. The lead government department for these changes is the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).
- 11. From 9 September 2024 the Medical Examiner Service became a statutory function, meaning all deaths except those referred to the Coroner must be scrutinised by a Medical Examiner. This applies to deaths that occur both in a hospital and in the community. The Medical Examiner Service for County Durham and Darlington is based at Darlington Memorial Hospital.
- 12. There are also other changes to the death registration process that apply from this date, including for medical professionals who can certify the death, a mandatory requirement for the Medical Examiner to discuss and agree a cause of death with the family of someone has died and also changes of who can attend the register office to register a death. The requirement to register a death within five days and also of having to attend the appointment to register the death are unchanged.
- 13. These changes will put the bereaved at the centre by providing an opportunity for them to raise questions or concerns with a senior doctor not involved in the care of the deceased. This will improve practice and communication, support the right deaths being referred to

coroners for further investigation and help deter poor practice and criminal activity.

14. A working party including the Medical Examiner Service, Coroner's Office, Register Office, Burial and Cremations team and funeral directors have been meeting for some time in preparation for these changes, to ensure that those bereaved have the correct information the impact of change is minimised upon those who have been bereaved.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio