

COUNCIL
28 NOVEMBER 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. Our Revenues and Benefit team recently received positive feedback from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in relation to Darlington's performance over the past 12 months. In his letter, the Head of the DWPs Performance Development Team stated,

"Your Performance Relationship Manager has reviewed the last 12 months performance data and noted that:

- (a) For speed of processing, your Local Authority's processing times are indicative of a positive customer experience and your statistics have been consistently healthy.
- (b) For Verify Earnings and Pensions (VEP) and Housing Benefit Award Accuracy (HBAA), your Local Authority has completed close to or over 100% of funded activities based on our latest available management information. We continue to focus on reducing fraud, error and debt and would like to thank you for your continued commitment to tackling these important issues with us.
- (c) For Housing Benefit Debt Recovery (HBDR), we understand from our Local Authority stakeholders that this has been a difficult area of work due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis. However, we have noted your Local Authority is continuing to maintain focus on HBDR.

We recognise the great work delivered across your Housing Benefit service. We also understand how difficult the last couple of years has been to keep Housing Benefit work prioritised, so we appreciate your commitment to this vital service."

3. Following the successful approval and implementation of the Council Tax and Business Rates Recovery Strategy in January 2024, the Revenues and Benefits team has continued to implement their first committal cases, to address some long-standing Council Tax debts, as follows:
 - (a) Three debtors have approached us directly and agreed to payment plans:
 - (i) One debtor owes £7,438 and has agreed to repay this at £250 each month.
 - (ii) One debtor owes £12,400 and has agreed to repay this at £250 each month.

- (iii) One debtor owes £4,643 and has agreed to pay a £1,000 lump sum followed by £50 each month.
 - (b) Six debtors have been summoned to Court with three appearing before the Magistrates Court. Each one was found guilty of culpable neglect and issued with a warrant of commitment, suspended on the following payment terms:
 - (i) One debtor owes £6,806 and has been ordered to repay this at £195 each month.
 - (ii) One debtor owes £3,956 and has been ordered to repay this at £100 each month.
 - (iii) One debtor owes £1,560 and has been ordered to repay this at £10 each week.
 - (c) The remaining three debtors did not appear at court and have had warrants of arrests issued.
4. 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) Following recovery action against a debtor who owed over £2,254 in unpaid Council Tax, it was identified that his property was up for sale. We instructed solicitors to instigate a Charging Order and payment in full has just been made.
 - (b) Following recovery action against a debtor who owed over £3,395 in unpaid Council Tax, we advised that we would commence committal action. The debtor attended the Town Hall and made payment in full.
 - (c) Following several unsuccessful attempts to contact a debtor who owed over £3,391 in unpaid Council Tax, contact was made with a relative, who advised that she was travelling and would call on her return. A process was undertaken to establish whose sole or main residence the property was and once this was completed, full payment was received.
 - (d) Following contact with a debtor who owed over £4,939 in unpaid Council Tax, it was established they were entitled to Council Tax Support. The debt was reduced to £881, which is now being repaid at £50 each month.

Customer Services

5. Some fantastic positive feedback was recently received for our Customer Services team, as follows:
- (a) "I thought I would drop you a message to say thanks for the service provided by the Customer Service Advisor team. I had a series of interviews last week and this week with candidates coming into the Town Hall for their interview. All the candidates remarked how warmly they were welcomed and made to feel at ease before their interview by the staff in Customer Services. A special mention for Lesley Wall. One of

my other visitors observed her dealing with a query from a member of the public and remarked how she showed the highest standards of customer service, making these members of public feel at ease while going above and beyond to make sure that their query was sorted out and they left happy. All the staff are excellent ambassadors for the Council.”

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

6. The Council’s capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered:
 - (a) Darlington Railway Station scheme, which is being managed by TVCA, good progress is being made with works to the external envelope of the buildings and external areas mostly complete.
 - (b) The first phase of houses at the Neasham Road housing scheme have now been handed over to, whilst work continues on the second phase.
 - (c) Work has commenced at the Sherborne Phase II housing site with foundation work underway.
 - (d) The No.156 Northgate refurbishment Housing scheme is due to go out to tender shortly.
 - (e) Site clearance, strip and asbestos removal work are complete on the former Northern Echo building, with the main refurbishment work to commence.
 - (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 .

Register of Electors

7. This year’s Annual Canvass commenced in mid-August, which was later than usual due to the UK Parliamentary General Election that took place in July. An initial data match with national and local data sets was undertaken prior to the Canvass commencing, and this suggested that a significant number of properties had no changes in terms of the household composition. As such, the residents within those properties were only required to respond to the Annual Canvass Form where there was a change.
8. A number of households were required to respond, and those that did not respond to the initial communication received a personal visit during either September or October, in order to encourage completion of the form. The final reminder was posted in November to those household that were still outstanding following that personal visit. The revised 2025 Register of Electors will be published on 1 December 2024.

Elections Act 2022

9. On 7 May 2024, the changes introduced in the Elections Act 2022 to the franchise of European Union (EU) citizens came into force which meant that the general right of those citizens to register, vote and stand in local government elections and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections was removed. In order to stand, or vote, in local or PCC elections EU citizens are required to be either a qualifying EU citizen or have retained rights.
10. In order to ascertain which EU citizens could remain registered, a review of all registered EU citizens commenced in October 2024. The review established that there are around 2,000 EU citizens registered, of which around 1,700 are either qualifying EU citizens or had retained rights, all of which received a confirmation of maintained registration. The remaining EU citizens were reviewed and were required to answer a question in respect of their immigration status. Any that are no longer entitled to be registered, or do not respond to the review, will be deleted from the Register of Electors prior to the deadline of 31 January 2025.
11. The final element of the Elections Act 2022 to be introduced are further changes to postal voting. Previously signatures needed to be refreshed every five years. The Elections Act introduced the requirement for a fresh application to be made every three years. This will mean that the majority of the current postal voters (around 15,000), will need to submit a fresh application by 31 January 2026. If they do not complete a fresh application their postal vote will be cancelled and they will need to visit a polling station to cast their vote at future elections. It is intended to start contacting postal voters during 2025.
12. The requirement to show Voter ID at polling stations, in order to vote, was one of the first elements of the Elections Act 2022 to be introduced. A draft statutory instrument has been laid before Parliament to include the HM Armed Forces Veteran Card to the list of photographic identifications accepted in polling stations as voter ID, in addition to the already accepted MOD 90 ID card. It is believed that the change will help around two million veterans to engage in the elections process and exercise their democratic right, with the changes set to be made in time for the 2025 local elections.

Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30

13. A draft strategy is being developed and will be open to consultation before Christmas. It will set a clear direction on how we will maximise the benefits of the existing ICT technology associated with our online services and back office systems, and how we will consider and utilise emerging technologies to enable the council to become even more efficient and productive. There will be a key theme within the strategy that considers the impacts of digital exclusion, actions we can take to help address it, and the measures that will be in place to support people who cannot access our online services. The strategy will be aligned with the refreshed Customer Services Strategy which will also be open to consultation during the same period.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio