

**COUNCIL**  
**30 JANUARY 2025**

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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.

**Revenues and Benefits**

2. Members will be pleased to hear that our Revenues and Benefits team continue to promote apprenticeships to provide people with a clear path to a career and the skills they need to succeed in our workplace. A number of recent apprentices have successfully completed their apprenticeships and secured employment within the team, as follows:
  - (a) One Apprentice started in January 2020 and was successful in gaining a post as Revenues and Benefits Assistant. Whilst in that post, she successfully completed her NVQ level 3 qualification in Business Administration. Since then, she has progressed from a Revenues and Benefits Advisor to her current role as a Revenues and Benefits Officer.
  - (b) One Apprentice started in April 2021 and was successful in gaining a post as Revenues and Benefits Assistant. Whilst in that post, he successfully completed his NVQ level 3 qualification in Business Administration. Since then, he has progressed to his current role as a Revenues and Benefits Advisor.
  - (c) One Apprentice started in August 2022 and was successful in gaining a post as Revenues and Benefits Assistant. Whilst in this post, she successfully completed her NVQ level 3 qualification in Business Administration.
  - (d) One Apprentice started in September 2023 and was successful in gaining a post as Revenues and Benefits Assistant. Whilst in this post, he is currently working towards completing his NVQ level 3 qualification in Business Administration.
  - (e) One Apprentice started in October 2023 and was successful in gaining a post as Revenues and Benefits Advisor. Whilst in this post, she is currently working towards completing her NVQ level 3 qualification in Business Administration.

**Customer Services**

3. Following some concerning customer incidents in the Contact Centre interview rooms, secure safety screens have been installed into three of the busiest rooms, to provide more security for staff, and to help them feel safe and secure should an incident arise. The screens which are a thick, safety glass, add more protection having been fitted from the desktop to ceiling, and can withstand items such as chairs being thrown at them. Feedback from staff is that they now feel safer in the interview rooms in the event of an incident. The new screens will provide reassurance and protection for our staff, whose safety is our

top priority.

4. Our Customer Services team has been working in partnership with Civic Enforcement to remove a fraudulent Blue Badge from being mis-used in Darlington. The fraudulent Blue Badge was confiscated, logged for evidence and destroyed. A further four misuses of Blue Badges are currently being investigated by our teams and should hopefully give reassurance to residents that this type of fraudulent activity is taken seriously by the Council.
5. Following a review of processes and procedures for the administration of Blue Badge discretionary applications, which need to be referred to an Occupational Therapist, the Customer Services team has managed to reduce the wait time from 16 weeks to 8 weeks, therefore improving the customer journey and reducing customer complaints.

### **Customer Services Strategy**

6. Consultation has recently ended for our new Customer Services Strategy 2025-2030, which is due to be considered by Cabinet on 4 March 2025.
7. Our strategy sets out our aims for delivering excellent customer services and value for money for our residents and includes:
  - (a) Our commitments to how we will deliver services to our residents.
  - (b) Our performance standards, responding to telephone and face to face enquiries, email and written correspondence.
  - (c) The support we will provide customers who are digitally excluded.
  - (d) How we will listen to our customers, including complaints, and how we will use this to improve services.

### **Climate Change**

8. Work is underway looking at the feasibility of converting the remaining fluorescent lighting in the Town Hall to LED lighting.
9. Funding has been secured through a successful application with Sports England to contribute to the Dolphin Centre Photovoltaics (PV) installation and Replacement Combined Heat and Power unit (CHP). Works are due to start in March and will include a new 399 panel PV array and a replacement 100KW CHP.
10. Works have begun to trial a water treatment product in the Town Hall heating system to assess and demonstrate claimed efficiencies of between 15 and 25% for gas consumption. The product alters the chemistry of the water to make it heat faster and radiate heat more efficiently. Results will be known by the Spring and will determine use in other sites.
11. A feasibility study has begun with a view to submitting a bid for funding from the Green Heat Network fund in January. Inspections have taken place by Scottish and Southern Energy of the Town Hall, Dolphin Centre, Hippodrome and Crown Street Library as

potential sites for inclusion in the proposed District Heating Scheme.

12. As part of the preparations for the annual billing for Council Tax and Business Rates 2025-26, which will take place in March, our Revenues and Benefits team continue to promote our e-billing service, which helps to reduce costs and our carbon footprint.
13. Good progress has been made in 2024-25 with over 4,800 bills being sent paperless. However, this figure represents only 11% of all bills sent and more work needs to be done to encourage local residents and businesses to sign up to this service, which is quick and easy to do. I would also encourage Members who are not yet signed up to e-billing to do so straight away.

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

14. 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 TVCA, the internal area has now been handed over to Network Rail to start the fit out works and the external areas are mostly complete.
  - (b) Neasham Road and Sherborne housing schemes continue to progress well on site.
  - (c) The No.156 Northgate refurbishment scheme has gone out to tender, and the returns are currently being evaluated by the Project Team. A Contractor for the works will be appointed shortly.
  - (d) The main refurbishment work at the former Northern Echo Building is to commence shortly following the completion of the Asbestos removal works.
  - (e) The next phase of demolition at the Skinnergate Housing site for the former St Mary's Club property at the rear of the site is due to commence in the new year.
15. Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
16. There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

### **Staff Wellbeing**

17. This month saw the return of the January Wellness calendar following the success of the initiative in 2024. This provided all staff with activities and suggestions to help think about their health, body and mind. There were also a number of one off sessions provided by the Dolphin Centre with discounts to inspire staff to try a new activity. We also had our Employee Wellness fair on 23<sup>rd</sup> January with internal and external wellness specialists providing staff with guidance and advice.

## **Digital Darlington Strategy**

18. The draft Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 was published for public consultation on 2 December 2024 and ran until 12 January 2025. Public awareness of the planned consultation was initially raised in the autumn edition of the One Darlington magazine and subsequently promoted via the council's website, social media profiles, via our VCS partners, to staff, and all councillors were asked to help raise awareness of the consultation too. The consultation was online, and paper copies were made available in the Customer Services Centre, with the offer of copies in alternative formats upon request. The Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee will have the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy on 30 January 2025. The aim is to seek cabinet approval for the strategy on 4 March 2025 once all the consultation feedback, and feedback from the scrutiny committee has been gathered and analysed.

## **Elections Act 2022**

19. 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 reviewed. There are around 121 EU citizens that did not respond to the review, and they will be deleted from the Register of Electors prior to the deadline of 31 January 2025.
20. The final element of the Elections Act 2022 to be introduced are further changes to postal voting, with the introduction of the requirement for a fresh application to be made every three years. From January 2025, the majority of the current postal voters (around 15,000), will be requested to submit a fresh application by the deadline of 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, unless they re-apply for a postal vote, at a later date.

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