

COUNCIL
27 MARCH 2025

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

Council Tax and Business Rates Annual Billing

2. Earlier this month, our Revenues and Benefits team undertook the annual billing exercise for Council Tax and Business Rates, for 2025-26. The project started in November 2024, involving significant planning, preparation and testing of ICT software, to ensure the correct bills are produced, with the recalculation of benefits and other discounts.
3. Over 54,000 Council Tax bills and 4,000 Business Rates bills have been produced and dispatched to residents and local businesses, raising debits of £85 million Council Tax and £37 million Business Rates. Our Revenues and Benefits team will be busy over the next couple of months, dealing with enquiries and processing changes as a result of the annual billing exercise. Around 6,000 of those bills were sent as e-bills and I would urge Members who have received a paper Council Tax bill to sign up for our e-billing service, in our drive to reduce costs and paper usage.

Council Tax Recovery

4. Our Revenues and Benefits team continues to perform well in recovering long-standing and large debts to the Council, as follows:
 - (a) One debtor owed over £8,000 in Council Tax and, following the sale of the property, the full amount was recovered.
 - (b) One debtor owed over £6,000 in Council Tax and, following a number of attachment of earnings orders and payment arrangements, the full amount was recovered in December 2024.
 - (c) One debtor owed over £7,000 in Council Tax for an empty property. Following charging orders and an order for sale being obtained, the property was finally sold to a Housing Association for occupation, and the full amount was recovered in January 2025.

Customer Services

5. Our Customer Services team has recently completed the annual National Fraud Initiative exercise for Blue Badge data matching. A total of 233 Blue Badges were identified for review and only two badges required follow-up action, where the customer had a Blue

Badge issued by another Council. In both cases, the second Blue Badge was cancelled.

6. This exercise demonstrates the continued commitment to ensuring the correct issuing and accuracy of our Blue Badge decision making.

Climate Change

7. The works on The Dolphin Centre to include a new 399 panel PV array and a replacement 100KW CHP started on 13 March.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

8. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) Neasham Road and Sherborne housing schemes continue to progress well on site with the first initial phases of houses handed over at the Neasham Road site.
 - (b) The No.156 Northgate refurbishment scheme to provide new office space provision now has a contractor appointed and works will commence shortly on-site.
 - (c) A similar refurbishment scheme for No.142 Northgate will be going out to tender shortly.
 - (d) The main refurbishment work at the former Northern Echo Building continues with work to the existing windows underway.
 - (e) The next phase of Skinnergate Housing site has commenced and the former St Mary's Club property at the rear of the site is being demolished.
9. Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
10. There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30

11. The Digital Darlington Strategy 2025-30 was approved by Cabinet on 4 March, setting a clear direction of travel for the consideration and adoption of technology to help the council increase its efficiency and productivity. As previously reported, a theme within the strategy focuses on digital exclusion to ensure no resident is restricted from accessing our services. Another theme within the strategy focuses on emerging technology, and it is through this theme that we will be exploring opportunities for the application of artificial intelligence (AI) within some services. Our adoption of AI will be done with caution and consideration. To ensure we can be confident in the AI technology we use, we will be establishing a robust decision-making process to ensure we have clear governance, high levels of data security, and a clear understanding of how the AI tool is processing the data.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio