

COUNCIL
15 MAY 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

2. I am pleased to be able to report the Council Tax and Business Rates collection data for 2024-25, which has been another successful year for our Revenues and Benefits team:
 - (a) For the Council Tax due in 2024-25, we collected 96.32%, which is only a slight decrease in the performance for the previous year of 96.39%. Benchmarking data for 2024-25 will be available later this year, but the latest data from 2023-24 shows that our previous two years' performance was higher than the national average of 95.94% and the regional average of 94.93%. In terms of amounts of Council Tax collected, this was £79.29m in 2024-25, including £1.85m arrears collected for previous years. This compares to £74.46m in 2023-24, an increase of 6.1%.
 - (b) For the Business Rates due in 2024-25, we collected 99.82%, a very slight decrease in the performance for the previous year of 99.97%. Benchmarking data for 2024-25 will be available later this year, but the latest data from 2023-24 shows that the previous two years' performance was better than the national average of 97.23% and the regional average of 97.78%. In terms of amounts of Business Rates collected, this was £32.54m in 2024-25. This compares to £29.44m in 2023-24, an increase of 10.5%.

Climate Change

3. The opportunity was taken during annual Council Tax and Business Rate billing to remind residents and businesses that paperless e-billing is the most efficient way to pay with the added benefit of reducing paper consumption, the campaign has increased e-billing take up by 19%.
4. The Network refresh which started at the beginning of the year sees the replacement of network switches with new more efficient equipment which will help reduce power consumption. In addition, the Netcall Contact Centre system has recently been refreshed with two physical servers virtualised effectively reducing the physical server count by two, this subsequently reduces power consumption.
5. The works on The Dolphin Centre to include a new 399 panel Photovoltaic array and a replacement 100KW Combined Heat Power (CHP) are continuing and will be completed late summer.

Artificial Intelligence

6. Supported by the LGA, we are working in collaboration with councils across the country to understand artificial intelligence (AI) technology and how it could be beneficial in local government. We continue to see opportunities for it to help the council be more productive and efficient. We are focusing on ensuring we have the right governance in place so any sensitive information we have is kept secure, we know how our information is being processed and managed, and how issues such as bias could affect the products generated by the AI tools.
7. Some highlights to note since the last update to Council (September 2024) include:
 - (a) Three existing members of staff voluntarily started a level 4 apprenticeship in business process analysis, but with a focus on the use of AI within local government. It is intended the learning from the apprenticeship will contribute to the development of an AI strategy for the Council.
 - (b) We have been successful in our bid to be part of a pilot for a product called MINUTE that has been created by central government. The pilot is expected to commence before the summer.
 - (c) We are continuing to explore the benefits of Microsoft CoPilot. As the product develops, we will continue to assess the cost benefit of deploying it more widely across the organisation.
 - (d) Subject to the release of external funding, we will be part of a regional trial of an AI product called Magic Notes which is designed to support the activities of staff within children and adults social services.
8. As reported to Council in September 2024, we remain on track to have a clear plan in place for the application of artificial intelligence before the end of 2025.

Enjoy Darlington

9. Following feedback from businesses, residents and tourists it's been agreed to rename the Love Darlo social media platform to 'Enjoy Darlington'.
10. Enjoy Darlington is already a well-established brand with a successful TikTok account and a [popular website](#). By bringing all the platforms together under the one name, we will unify our visitor communications channels and make it easier for people to find the information they need - particularly people from outside the borough.
11. Our highly skilled marketing team, which already looks after the existing Enjoy Darlington platforms, has brought back in-house the management of the renamed social media accounts. The channels will continue to focus on increasing footfall to the town centre and will still share the same high-quality information about things to do, see, buy and enjoy across Darlington. We will also explore new opportunities to attract a wider audience and further strengthen the existing offer.

12. We have shared content on the council's social media channels alerting people to the channel's name change and would welcome support from members in raising awareness of the changes.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

13. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) On the Darlington Railway Station scheme Network Rail's contractor are working on the fit out works and the external areas by Willmott Dixon are nearing completion. The delivery of the scheme is being managed by TVCA.
 - (b) Neasham Road and Sherborne housing schemes continue to progress on site with the initial phases of houses handed over at the Neasham Road site.
 - (c) The contractor appointed for the No. 156 Northgate refurbishment scheme has commenced the site works. This project aims to transform a vacant, listed building into office space. Much of the site strip has been completed ahead of refurbishment works that will be completed in the New Year.
 - (d) A similar refurbishment scheme for No. 142 Northgate will be going out to tender shortly. Forming part of the original Pease House, following procurement, the ground floor will be returned to its original residential form, and the intention is to operate a rail heritage interpretation space in partnership with the Friends of Stockton & Darlington Railway.
 - (e) The main refurbishment work at the former Northern Echo Building is progressing with works underway on the internal refurbishment.
 - (f) The next phase of demolition at the Skinnergate Housing site is now complete with the demolition and clearance of No.2 Raby Terrace.
 - (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.

Staff Wellbeing

14. April was Stress awareness month which is an annual event observed every April since 1992, dedicated to increasing public awareness about the causes and cures for stress. Our HR team has developed a stress awareness calendar which ran throughout April to provide lots of tips and ideas on how to manage stress with different initiatives for each day. During this month as part of the Mental Health Awareness week which takes place from 12th to 18th May, our HR team have encouraged employees to take up the walking challenge to promote mental wellbeing and fitness amongst our staff. The last challenge walked approximately 6,000 miles across 13 teams, and it is hoped to go further with this challenge.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio