

COUNCIL
17 JULY 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. Our Revenues and Benefits team continues to perform well in recovering long-standing and large debts to the Council, as follows.
 - (a) One commercial debtor owed over £15,000 in unpaid Business Rates and following the commencement of bankruptcy action by the Council, the full amount was recovered.
 - (b) One debtor, who was a local landlord, owed over £4,500 in unpaid Council Tax on two properties in Darlington. Charging orders were secured on the properties in 2020 but when the landlord passed away in 2022, the full amount of the Council Tax debt was then recovered, following the sale of the properties.
3. During 2024-25, a total of 13,372 Council Tax and Business Rates bills were sent electronically, representing an approximate saving of £8,500 on postage and stationery. Whilst this is an increase on the numbers in 2023-24, this total still only represents 11% of all the bills sent. Signs of improvement are encouraging in 2025-26, with over 13% of bills produced electronically so far but more work needs to be done.
4. Our Revenues and Benefits team are currently exploring an alternative to the way e-bills can be produced, by giving customers the option of receiving an e-bill when a change of circumstances or application for a discount is received. This should increase the number of e-bills significantly and I will update Members later in the year.

Climate Change

5. As noted above every move to a paperless electronic bill reduces paper consumption and energy required for the processing and delivery and the team are working to increase take up rates in this area.
6. Work on providing electric vehicle chargers at the Allington Way depot is progressing well and will allow progression to more electric vehicles in the council fleet. We have been working closely with Northern Power Grid, and they have provided an indicative date of September to install the cabling required for the work. A tender is currently underway through NEPO to appoint a contractor to deliver the charging units and substation.

7. As an update from my last report, 112 photovoltaics (PV) have now been installed on the lower level Dolphin Centre roof, work will now begin on the remaining 287 PV's on the higher roof.
8. Our ICT infrastructure is continually being refreshed and as the new equipment comes online the carbon footprint is reduced along with the electricity required to power it.

Customer Services

9. Our Customer Service and Civic Enforcement teams joined forces to take part in a National Blue Badge Action Day, which took place on 30 May 2025. Data from this day is being collated and will be shared nationally with all Councils taking part.
10. Taking part in this important event shows that we take Blue Badge fraud and misuse very seriously. Although officers already make regular checks on Blue Badges, the day of action allowed more resource to be added and recording statistics to be shared nationally.
11. Councils taking part will also be recognised by the transport minister, who takes a great interest in what Councils do take part in this day. We have been working hard to prepare for this day of action for a couple of months, which is the first time for Darlington.
12. We have used this opportunity to raise public awareness through local media and social media channels, informing the public about what we are doing to deter misuse and educating badge holders and the general public about the rules and importance of compliance.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

13. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) On the Darlington Station scheme, which is being managed by the Tees Valley Combined Authority, Network Rail's contractors are continuing the fit out works and the external areas are nearing completion.
 - (b) Neasham Road and Sherborne housing schemes continue to progress well. However, on the Neasham Road site there has been an incident of vandalism which has severely damaged several properties. Efforts are being made to minimise delays to the completion of the scheme.
 - (c) The refurbishment works to provide office space at No.156 Northgate are progressing well and the tender for refurbishment works to No.142 Northgate has been issued.
 - (d) The refurbishment works at the former Northern Echo building are also progressing well both internally and externally.
 - (e) The remaining phase of demolition at the Skinnergate Housing site is due to commence shortly and aims to be complete by the end of August.

14. Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
15. There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

16. During May and following the establishment of a robust data processing agreement, 25 staff from a range of services commenced a pilot of an AI tool called MINUTE. The tool has been developed by a team in central government, and Darlington is one of 25 local authorities testing it. It transcribes in-person and online meetings through both live capture and audio uploads. The transcriptions are then summarised using one of the several template options available. All of this is achieved within a matter of minutes after the meetings.
17. Early tests have generated positive results, and the pilot runs until mid-July. If proven to be successful, the tool has the potential to save a significant amount of officer time when documenting meetings, and it enables minute takers to be more actively engaged in meetings.
18. We are also testing the capabilities of other similar commercial products, with a view to establishing an approach to the wider use of this technology across the Council later in the year.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio