

COUNCIL
2 OCTOBER 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. The national benchmarking data for the collection of Council Tax and Business Rates in 2024-25 has recently been published and I am pleased to report that again, Darlington Borough Council is one of the top performers in the region:
 - (a) For the in-year collection of Council Tax, our performance of 96.32% was third best in the North-East and above the regional average of 94.94% and the national average of 95.88%.
 - (b) For the in-year collection of Business Rates, our performance of 99.18% was the best in the North-East and above the regional average of 97.80% and the national average of 97.32%.
 - (c) For the collection of Council Tax arrears, our performance of 28.37% was the second best in the North-East and well above the regional average of 15.09% and the national average of 17.35%. In addition, we have the lowest amount of Council Tax arrears outstanding in the region at £7.25m, compared to a regional average of £28.95m.
3. Our Revenues and Benefits team continues to perform well in recovering long-standing and large debts to the Council, as follows:
 - (a) One debtor, who was a local landlord, owed over £4,800 in unpaid Council Tax for various properties in Darlington. Charging orders were secured on the properties and as a result, the property owner paid the amount in full.
 - (b) Committal action was taken against a debtor who owed over £7,600 in arrears and had wilfully refused to pay Council Tax. A warrant for his arrest was issued by the Court and following contact with the debtor, he was persuaded to apply for Council Tax Support, reducing the debt to £3,900 with the remainder being collected from his Universal Credit payments.
 - (c) A Housing Benefit overpayment of over £4,000 was created in 2016 following a DWP fraud investigation. Various attempts were made to recover the debt and in 2022 we finally obtained the debtors employment details. Deductions were made from his earnings, and the debt is now fully repaid. This case illustrates how our Revenues and Benefits team make every effort to ensure those people who commit benefit fraud repay the amounts fraudulently obtained.

Climate Change

4. ICT are in the process of replacing all of the network hardware (switches and Wireless Access Points) across Darlington Borough Council and Stockton Borough Council over the next 12 months. This new technology will reduce costs for both Councils but also offers carbon reduction benefits through better power management and more efficient power consumption.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

5. The pilot of the MINUTE AI tool has now finished, and the Government team leading its development is considering the future scope of the product. Within the council we are continuing to assess other AI tools. The AI Strategy and Ethics group has been established with its main purpose being to assess AI technologies from different perspectives before such tools are adopted by the council. Recognising that AI products can be created to try and replicate human thinking, we need to give more consideration to how the AI software works, than we would with other non-AI software products. To achieve this understanding, not only does the group include people with specialist AI and data knowledge, but it also includes people with specialist knowledge of equality and diversity, human resources, communications, climate change, and finance.

DBS Applications for Members

6. Further to the decision of Council on 24 November 2024, and subject to subsequent guidance received from the Disclosure and Barring (DBS) Service in relation to Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Checks, the process of undertaking DBS Checks for Members started in July 2025.
7. At the time of writing this report, thirty-one DBS applications have successfully been completed with no disclosures being made, with a further five DBS applications currently with the Disclosure and Barring Service for authorisation and processing.
8. A further nine DBS applications have been submitted, and applications will be progressed when the provision of appropriate identification documentation is received.
9. Five Members are yet to make a DBS application. Officers from the Democratic Services Team continue to monitor the applications and will pursue those Members yet to apply.

Capital Projects and Design Services Management

10. The Council's capital programme has a wide range of exciting projects being developed and delivered.
 - (a) In terms of some of the larger projects being delivered in the programme:
 - i. Neasham Road Housing scheme is progressing despite being impacted by a significant act of vandalism.
 - ii. Sherbourne Close housing scheme is also progressing.
 - iii. The demolition and clearance phase of the Skinnergate Housing scheme is on site and progressing.

- iv. The former Northern Echo building regeneration project is also progressing moving into the internal works phases.
 - v. The refurbishment works to provide office space at No.156 Northgate are progressing.
 - vi. The tender for refurbishment works to No.142 Northgate has been received and is being assessed.
 - vii. TVCA continue to manage the Darlington Station project; with works continuing on the internal fit out works, and completion of the rail infrastructure and new pedestrian link bridge. The works to both entrances are scheduled to start over the coming months.
- (b) Following a procurement exercise a development partner (CityHeart) has been identified to bring forward proposals for a number of key sites within the town centre.
- (c) Business cases continue to be developed to secure additional projects from funding opportunities.
- (d) There remains a risk of further inflation related effects on construction related costs.

Councillor Mandy Porter
Cabinet Member with Resources Portfolio