

COUNCIL
18 JULY 2019

OVERVIEW OF EFFICIENCY AND RESOURCES PORTFOLIO

1. Since the last meeting of Council, the following are the main areas of work under the Efficiency and Resources Portfolio.

Release of Capital Allocation

2. Cabinet has released £200,000 of funding allocated within the Capital MTFP – 2019/20 – 2222/23 to undertake capitalised repairs in corporate buildings, which the Council has a responsibility to maintain in accordance with its statutory obligations.
3. The allocation will be used to meet urgent identified repairs which include replacement boilers at Harewood House, Heighington Village Hall, West Cemetery Chapel, and the replacement of louvre panels to the spire dormers on the Town Clock.

Project Position Statement and Capital Programme Monitoring Outturn 2018/19

4. Cabinet has received information on the delivery of the Council's Capital Programme, together with the financial outturn position as at 31st March 2019, and the proposed financing of the 2018/19 capital expenditure.
5. The Council has a substantial annual construction programme of work, with the current project position statement showing that there are currently 29 live projects currently being managed with an overall project outturn of £67.937 million. The majority of projects are running to time, cost and quality expectations with no foreseeable issues.

Revenue Outturn 2018/19

6. The Council's draft revenue position at the end of 2018/19 is £18,310 million, which is £0.131 million better than the initial 2019-20 MTFP position.
7. An additional £0.249 million has been requested to be carried forward into 2019/20 to meet future commitments on top of the £2.592 million already approved. Whilst this improved position is helpful it does not change the financial context in which the Council is currently planning.

Council Tax Empty Property Premium

8. I am currently consulting residents over proposals to increase the Council Tax premium on long-term empty properties.
9. Currently, a property which has been left empty for more than two years is charged an extra 50 per cent Council Tax (making a band D charge on such a property £2,722 for 2019/20). Under new legislation introduced by the Government, the Council can increase such a charge to:
 - (a) 100 per cent of the Council Tax (making a band D charge on such a property £3,629).
 - (b) 200 per cent additional Council Tax can be charged for properties left empty for five years (£5,443 for a band D), and
 - (c) From 2021, an additional 300 per cent for properties left empty for ten years (£7,258 for a band D).
10. There will be protection for those owners making genuine attempts to refurbish empty homes and bringing them back into use.
11. Whilst Darlington does not have a significant problem with long-term empty properties, I recognise the blight that these sorts of properties can have on our residents. In addition, I am determined to use all the powers at our disposal to bring these much-needed properties back into use, ensuring we have the housing we need for Darlington residents.

Customer Services Digital Strategy

12. We are currently developing a new Customer Services Digital Strategy for Darlington, which sets out our plans to modernise the way in which we deliver services to our residents.
13. I recognise the need to invest in new technology to improve customer services, reduce costs over time and get things right first time.
14. Most residents want to self-serve using on-line applications to access Council services and where customers can self-serve, we will expect them to do so. We will make digital the first option for all of our high volume, low complexity services (such as ordering a new bin or reporting a pothole). This means we can use more of our valuable staffing resources to support those residents who need the most help in accessing our services and getting on-line

Council Tax Recovery

15. I can report to Members that staff in our Revenues and Benefits services have recently taken possession of a privately-owned property in the Cockerton area of Darlington, in order to recover outstanding arrears of Council Tax.
16. The owner of the property owes the Council over £7,700 in Council Tax and over £2,200 in costs and interest but had taken no action to make payment. High court enforcement agents have now taken possession of the property, which will be sold to recover the amounts owed to the Council. In addition, it was discovered the property was being used as a cannabis farm, which has now been shut down and

is being investigated by Police.

17. I am reporting this to assure Members that I will take whatever action that is necessary against those individuals who wilfully refuse to pay their Council Tax, including repossessing their homes if appropriate.

Local Government Elections and European Parliamentary Elections 2019

18. The Local Government Elections took place on 2 May 2019, with Officers from the Elections Team co-ordinating the arrangements for the election.
19. The European Parliamentary Election was held on 23 May 2019. Given the short notice period provided in terms of calling this election, and the subsequent overlap of work in the lead in to the Local Government Elections, the Elections Team successfully worked within incredibly tight timescales to ensure that appropriate arrangements were in place in terms of staffing, securing venues as Polling Stations and liaising with our printers to produce the required paperwork.

Annual Canvass 2019 (Electoral Registration)

20. This year's Annual Canvass commenced on 1 July 2019, and Household Enquiry Forms (HEFs) were delivered to every property in the Borough. Residents were provided with a number of different options as to how they could respond, including on-line, by telephone, by text, or by completion and return of the form itself.
21. A Press Release encouraging completion of the HEF was released on 1 July 2019, alongside a proactive social media campaign.
22. Where appropriate, reminders will be issued to those electors who do not respond, with the initial set of reminders due to be issued at the end of July, and Visiting Officers will be visiting properties throughout August, September and October to encourage the completion of outstanding forms.

Members Induction 2019

23. Since the local elections in May, Officers have undertaken a number of induction and training sessions for new Members to assist them in their early days and it is pleasing to be able to report that positive feedback on the quality of these sessions has been received and that attendances have been good. The Members' training programme will continue throughout the year as and when sessions are identified, however, if there are any particular training needs which any Member feels would be beneficial to them, please contact Democratic Services.

Councillor Charles Johnson
Cabinet Member with Efficiency and Resources Portfolio