

EXECUTIVE MEMBER REPORT TO COUNCIL NOVEMBER 2015

FINANCE

Support for Middlesbrough Residents impacted by SSI Closure

1. Special support for SSI workers and those affected by the Redcar steelworks situation was offered at Middlesbrough House on two Wednesday mornings in October, when Middlesbrough House would otherwise be closed for staff training.
2. Although much help has been offered through the SSI Hub at Redcar, there are certain benefits, such as Housing and Council Tax Benefit that can only be claimed through the local authority where people actually live. I was also aware of confusion amongst some of the SSI workers, many of whom had not had previous experience of the benefits system, around what to claim, where to go, when to claim and generally how to go about it.
3. As well as Revenue and Benefits staff dealing with claims for Housing and Council Tax benefits, help and advice was offered by Welfare Rights staff on other benefits potentially available and advice was also available for those finding difficulty in making payments.
4. Middlesbrough residents affected by the SSI closure can find information on their rights, employment opportunities, welfare and other assistance on the Middlesbrough Council website at www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/ssi

Budget Update

5. A members briefing giving an update on the council budget, which was to be held on two occasions in November, has been postponed until January to allow for the impact of the Chancellor's Autumn Statement to be analysed.
6. It was announced this week, on 9th November, that the Department for Communities and Local Government, as well as the Department for Transport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Treasury, had agreed funding plans involving an average of 30% spending cuts over a four year period to 2019/20, ahead of [the announcement on 25th November](#).
7. Departments had been told to prepare for cuts between 25% and 40% from 2016/17 to 2019/20. Whilst the agreements by these departments is separate to the local government settlement, it had already been announced that the Tory

Government would “look at transforming the approach” to financing local government.

8. Previous experience has shown that Middlesbrough and other areas in the most need have been subject to the harshest, above average cuts in virtually all aspects of Conservative Government cuts, with the more affluent areas on the country suffering the least.
9. The Local Government Association said that [councils would face a massive £16.5billion funding gap](#) by the end of the decade if authorities also received a 30% Spending Review cut.

1st Capital Monitoring Review 2015/16

10. On November 3rd I took a report to the Executive providing an update on the council’s Capital Programme 2013/14-2017/18.
11. Capital expenditure is defined as expenditure which creates, enhances the value of or extends the life of an asset. Capital receipts, such as from the sale of land, can only be used for capital expenditure and so may not be included in the revenue budget.
12. The report outlined that over all, there is a decrease in funding required from council resources of £476,000.
13. Due mainly to additional external capital resources there is an increase in the gross value of the Capital Programme of £1.8 million. This includes
 - £800,000 awarded to the Council from the Homes and Communities Agency to bring 50 empty homes back into use
 - £568,000 from the University Of Teesside who has requested that the Council undertake additional public realm works around the Southfield Road area. All of the works will be funded by the University.
 - £473,000 on schools
14. A briefing session for all members on the Capital Programme and to outline how members can submit bids to the Members’ Small Capital Scheme Allocation is to be arranged shortly.

HR – ORGANISATION & GOVERNANCE

Trade Union Reform Bill

15. The draconian measures contained in the Trade Union Reform Bill and the Council’s opposition to them were highlighted in my last report to Council. The Bill has been discussed further at Works Council.
16. Unfortunately, the Bill continues its passage through the Houses of Parliament and is currently at the Report Stage in the Commons.

17. I am currently in discussion with officers as to what measures can legally be taken to mitigate its impact when the Bill eventually become law. A further report will be taken to the Works Council on this issue.

Democratic Services Review

18. It was agreed some time ago that as part of the Change Programme which applies throughout the Council, Democratic Services would be a subject to a 50% reduction in budget. Some of these saving have already been delivered but the review required to deliver the total saving was delayed until later in 2015 due the additional staff resources required in preparation for and during the three elections that took place this year.

19. Democratic Services covers a range of functions which includes support to members but also other functions relating to governance and local democracy

20. In relation to those services which do support members, I was keen that members would have an input into deciding which aspects of services are prioritised for the future and to this end a Members Services Review Workshop was arranged for November 3rd 2015.

21. Ideas were sought around

- The key priorities for areas of continued support
- Areas where things can be done differently
- Areas which are not felt to be as important or members can self-serve

22. The changes to the staffing structure is a separate issue and as with other service areas a process to be carried out by officers and not for members.

23. The briefing also outlined an improved electronic facility for councillors' casework. As many have commented the current version of the Onestop shop provided electronically is complex and I'm informed was only ever intended as a temporary solution. The new solution will be part of a new, improved, Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) which manages all of the council's interactions with residents, as well as councillors, and will make it easier and faster to submit service requests and queries. This forms part of the Customer Strategy referred to in my earlier reports to Council this year.

24. The design for a new system for councillors is still very much work in progress. I recently attended a demonstration by the company who will be delivering the new system and who are already working with other councils. I have subsequently been asked by them to become a member champion, providing input and feedback on the requirements of members and will be using information already provided by members and will seek further views as appropriate.

25. Further arrangements are to be made for members who could not attend this particular briefing.

ICT

26. Due to technical issues which are still ongoing, the roll out of the tablets that was planned for earlier this year will not now take place until into the New Year.
27. Some members have asked me about access to their council emails on their own portable devices, such as smartphones or tablets or laptops or computer. I am pleased to report that webmail which some, particularly those who work and so are away from home a lot, used under Lotus Notes is now to be made available again under our new email system. This has involved bringing in the necessary security measures that are required by the government.
28. Members should shortly receive an email explaining how they will be able to access this facility. For those who are happy just to use their council equipment no action is necessary.

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