

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 9 March 2020 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor E Adam (Chair)**

### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors O Milburn, B Avery, A Batey, D Bell, J Carr, B Coult, R Crute, S Dunn, J Higgins, L Maddison, A Simpson, M Wilson and M Wilkes

### **Also Present:**

Councillors J Clare, M Clarke, S Iveson, S Quinn and J Turnbull

### **1 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L Brown, K Hawley, R Manchester, P Sexton and Mr Bolton and Mrs Holding.

### **2 Substitute Members**

Councillor M Wilkes substituted for Councillor L Brown.

### **3 Minutes of the Meetings**

The minutes of the meetings that were held 8 January 2020, 24 January 2020 and 3 February 2020 were agreed as correct records and signed by the Chair.

### **4 Declarations of Interest, if any**

There were no declarations of interest.

### **5 Any Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties**

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

### **6 Media Relations**

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer referred members to the recent prominent articles and news stories relating to the remit of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

'Thousands of trees to be planted to create greener urban areas' (Northern Echo 17 February 2020) related to Durham County Council securing almost £500,000 to plant thousands of trees in spaces where tree canopy was low as part of the Forestry Commission's Urban Tree Challenge Fund across County Durham's towns and villages to create greener and healthier urban areas.

'Low carbon thinkers connect for communities' (DCC 20 February 2020) related to a workshop aimed at finding environmental energy solutions for communities in the North East had held its first session. The new networking event was aimed to bring together people with an interest in community led energy projects. This related to item 10 on the agenda that would be presented by the Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader.

'Council leads drive for greener highways by rolling out rubber roads' (DCC 21 February 2020) related to Durham County Council working with Rainton Construction to use rubber waste from worn tyres and recycled plastic waste to create more durable and environmentally friendly road surfaces.

'Fly Tippers fined by Durham County Council' (Northern Echo 17 February 2020) related to three men and two women being fined after they failed to assist Neighbourhood Wardens investigate the illegal disposal of waste at sites across the County.

## **Resolved**

That the verbal report be noted.

## **7 Fuel Poverty**

The Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Resources and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that provided members with details of the projects and schemes available in the County to tackle fuel poverty.

The Chair introduced the Housing Regeneration Project Manager who was in attendance to provide a presentation to members on fuel poverty and the warm homes campaign. He informed the Committee how those identified as being fuel poor were measured using low income high cost definition that rose from a household's inability to afford to heat their home to a temperature of 21°C in their living room and 18°C in another living areas of the home. He explained that there were 11% of households in County Durham that were in fuel poverty. He added that this figure was lower than the national average and over time had showed a downward trend.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager noted that there were issues with some households in County Durham especially in rural areas where the use of solid fuels was the only option to heat their homes that created higher fuel bills. To tackle fuel poverty in County Durham the County Durham Energy and Fuel Poverty partnership had brought together external organisations to deliver an action plan of seven key strategic elements

- Maintain a strategic partnership to co-ordinate delivery of affordable warmth and energy efficiency programmes in County Durham
- Maintain a countywide housing energy database to target assistance and report on fuel poverty, energy efficiency and carbon reduction programmes
- Maximise the uptake of all current energy efficiency programmes in private sector properties
- Maximise awareness of energy efficiency programmes in Social and Registered Provider properties
- Signpost vulnerable households to income maximisation and debt management services
- Improve the health and wellbeing of residents and reduce health inequalities by minimising the negative health impacts of cold homes
- Provision of energy efficiency advice services

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager advised the Committee that the Warmer Homes Campaign had been launched through Housing Solutions and was a one-stop referral system for those who were eligible to access energy efficiency grants to transform their homes with energy saving improvements such as central heating or home insulation to have a warmer home and lower energy bills.

The Team worked with the Area Action Partnerships, GP surgeries, had door to door promotions and had carried out a mail-out using data from the Revenue and Benefits department to target 23,000 residents who were claiming benefits to raise awareness and put mechanisms in place to get information out to residents about the service. The Housing Regeneration Project Manager explained that residents who were most eligible were those who had cold related ill health like Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and asthma and had an income of less than £30,000. He noted that there had been £1.4 million grant brought into the County.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager told the Committee that 41 GP surgeries within County Durham wrote to their patients to inform them of the grant. He explained that his service were unaware of this data until the patient chose to complete and return the questionnaire to Durham County Council, which acted as permission for the service to make contact with them to see how they could be helped. He noted that residents could also be put in touch with other organisations that offered further services such as the Fire Brigade offering carbon monoxide alarms. He added that for those residents with mobility issues home visits could be arranged to offer help and advice on choosing the cheapest energy companies.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager noted there were issues experienced by some residents who were in fuel debt that prevented them from accessing cheaper energy tariffs. He notified the committee that all energy companies had charitable arms to have fuel debt written off and his service had worked with some residents to allow them to change to cheaper companies and offered them advice on how to manage their money better.

Councillor Wilkes was concerned that some residents were paying high tariffs for their energy bills. He wanted to know if Durham County Council could do anything further through the Durham County News to target elderly people to help them reduce their bills. He was aware that energy prices were reducing, and this would make the figures look better but he was worried that they may disguise issues when they start to increase.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager responded that there was a downward trend regarding fuel prices at present but the Warmer Homes Campaign did take measures to lower energy bills of residents who sought help. Information was published in the Durham County News that was distributed to every household in Durham and the team worked with Durham County Council's Area Action Partnership's to engage with people in the community to promote the service.

Councillor Higgins thanked the Housing Regeneration Project Manager for the information and asked when GP's would be writing out to patients.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager notified the committee that writing to patients through GP's was an annual project and it was proposed that letters would be sent out in March 2020. He stressed that information regarding patients was kept strictly confidential and the team only contacted patients to offer advice when they gave authority through the returned the completed survey.

Councillor Coult asked if there were any plans to target organisations that provided care to the elderly in their own homes.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager acknowledged that the service was always looking for new partnerships and organisations to contact to spread the message further afield. He asked Councillors to let him know if there were any networks, they knew of that may benefit from being contacted.

Councillor Coult agreed to pass on contact details of the organisations that she was aware of.

Councillor Milburn was concerned that the Government's plans to move away from using gas in the future would be implemented immediately and wanted to know if there was a plan B with regards to gas boilers.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager stated that by 2025 no gas boilers would be installed into new properties and it was proposed to have a new form of fuel to supply new homes and businesses other than gas. He stressed that this would be a phased approach for older properties and would not happen overnight.

Councillor Milburn thanked the Housing Regeneration and Project Manager and was glad to hear that there were stages to the process.

Councillor Crute wanted to know if the grants were promoted to the private sector and private landlords.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager advised that a new scheme had been introduced that would allow private landlords the ability to apply for the grants if they were willing to make a 50% contribution. The Housing Solutions Team worked with tenants and if eligible could apply for assistance but required approval from the private landlords before any works could be carried out at the property.

Councillor Crute thought that seeking approval from private landlords may prove difficult if they were not local but was happy that they would be given the opportunity to apply for the grant.

Councillor Adam commented that the selective licensing that was to be introduced would help with absent landlords.

## **Resolved**

- (i) That the report and presentation be noted
- (ii) That further progress report be included in the Committee's future work programme

## **8 External Low Carbon Funding**

The Committee received a report of the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that provided members with information on External Low Carbon Funding opportunities.

The Chair introduced the Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader who was in attendance to provide an update on external low carbon funding. She notified the committee that there had been £20million received from the European Union that had funded numerous low carbon projects including BEEP1 and BEEP2.

In addition, the Sustainable and Climate Change Team Leader noted that it was unclear as to whether the funding would come through for a further four projects that had been successful at the ERDF outline bid stage which included the Durham History Centre Project, the Louisa Centre Mine Water Heat project, the Zero carbon Depot Project and the Auckland Castle Deep Geothermal project. She agreed that she would provide an update on these bids once she received any information. She added that the Government was to create a Shared Prosperity Fund to replace some lost funding.

Councillor Adam stated that there were some interesting projects in the pipeline and the Government should be encouraged to fund them through the shared prosperity fund.

Councillor Avery found the use of mine water to heat Bishop Auckland Castle fascinating. He thanked Officers who had undertaken the housing project at Dean Bank in Ferryhill as now the area looked very attractive.

Councillor Wilkes applauded the huge amount of good work that had been carried out. He thought that there had been a lot of progress made on developing technology that would go into the new history centre to make it a low carbon building. He enquired if new technologies were going into the new build County Hall at the riverside in Durham and asked retrospectively what could be done to make the new build more environmentally friendly and sustainable.

The Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader replied that new buildings could not apply for grants as they did not fit the criteria as there was an expectation that new buildings had low carbon emissions. She noted that although she was aware of work going into the new HQ building, she was not involved directly on the project to be able to comment further with clarity.

## **Resolved**

- (i) That the report be noted
- (ii) That a further update report back to a future committee meeting

## **9 Leisure Centres**

The Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Resources and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that provided an update in relation to activity levels in County Durham and proposals for the transformation of Durham County Council's (DCC's) leisure centre offer.

Councillor Adam stated that the item was part of the work programme of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and on that basis was why it was on the agenda to be discussed.

Councillor Adam introduced the Interim Head of Culture and Sport who was in attendance to provide a presentation to members on the Leisure Centres in County Durham. The Interim Head of Culture and Sport informed the Committee that a report had been considered by Cabinet on transforming Leisure Centres within County Durham in January. She stressed the importance of the benefits of mental and physical wellbeing. They affected people's health to help reduce sickness, improve productivity and in turn boost the economy. It was essential that children remained active as some activity was lost as they got older and in adults it was even less.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport advised that the transformation would make Leisure Centres more accessible and affordable, creating a robust offer across County Durham to get more people active in a safe environment as they were considered as an asset for families to frequent. It was proposed that every leisure centre would be reviewed to gain an overview of who used them; what the catchment area was like; what was the demand for each service provided including the cost; what type of offer would entice people to go and what barriers people experienced that prevented them from attending. She added that there would be a phased approach to refresh the leisure centres, looking at the front of house, how they could thrive as a brand and how some could be refurbished as to not to just include huge sports halls but to use the space in different ways. She notified the committee that the community, stakeholders, schools and Members would be engaged with to help influence the project plan to take things forward.

Councillor Adam appreciated that there was a lot going on with the service and the level of investment that involved the community to be healthier.

Councillor Avery felt it was pleasing that Durham County Council were trying to get communities to be healthier. He often visited Spennymoor Leisure Centre and was saddened that the Council had lost Ferryhill Leisure Centre to the private sector.

Councillor Coult was concerned that there were children and young people that did not do any activities at all decreasing their fitness levels. She commented that activities such as trampolining and climbing parks were trending with young people and these should be incorporated into the leisure centres as not to lose out to private companies.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport stated that as part of the review of each leisure centre the traditional activities were being explored to coincide with change following the understanding and engagement of service users. She added that this would also include the pricing to ensure activities were affordable.

Councillor Adam acknowledged that there was an excellent leisure centre facility in Newton Aycliffe that had outgrown the original building as it was used by children and young people who lived in the area.

Councillor Wilkes made it clear that all Councillors should have been made aware that Durham County Council Leisure Centres was on the agenda so they had the opportunity to attend the committee. He also stressed that the community should be notified of when the leisure centre was going to be discussed. However, he was delighted that work was planned to review leisure centres. He felt that Members should be involved in discussing the details of the leisure centres before going out for consultation with the public.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport welcomed the feedback from Councillors and the review was planned to commence with local members asking for their views.

Councillor Adam felt that there was the opportunity to discuss concerns with village leisure centres in order to rectify them.

Councillor Batey welcomed the consultation through the AAPs. She was disappointed at the lack of winter training facilities for football for young people within Durham. She wondered if links could be made with the Football Association to establish these types of facilities so children and young people did not miss out over the winter months.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport stated that the wider physical activity framework was being looked at to include winter training facilities. She agreed that work could be carried out with the Football Association for bids and create opportunities.

Councillor Maddison was saddened at the lack of cycle storage at Spennymoor Leisure but plenty of car parking spaces. She wanted to know if more cycle storage could be included to encourage people to use their bikes when visiting the facility.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport explained that within the review people would be asked what prevented and enabled them in being active. She noted that if the lack of cycle storage was something that would prevent people attending the leisure centre then it would be considered to implement more bike storage.

Councillor Turnbull wanted to know if discounts could be offered for deprived families to use the all-weather play areas as he felt that they stood empty for long periods of time as people couldn't afford to use them.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport advised that within the review people would be asked what barriers they encountered in accessing services. She felt that this was a good opportunity to review the pricing of activities but done in a way that was both affordable and cost effective.



Councillor Clarke informed the committee that his nearest Leisure Centre was in Consett but that was not in his division of Delves Lane and wondered if the consultation would ensure all Councillors were involved in the review.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport agreed that she would ensure that all local councillors not just those associated with AAP's would be engaged.

The Sustainability and Climate Change Team Leader offered her services when looking at leisure centres within County Durham to see if the buildings were energy efficient.

The Interim Head of Culture and Sport advised that the transformation board were looking at climate change and environmental issues within the leisure centre transformation.

Councillor Adam stated that the Committee was to comment on the report. He suggested that the Committee got involved with discussions around the Leisure Centre offer that would contribute to its future. He felt that there was a requirement from local members to also get involved in the process as well.

## **Resolved**

(i) That the report be noted.

(ii) That the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny committee remains engaged in the significant engagement and discussion to the transformation of DCC leisure centre offer.

(iii) That arrangements are made for a further update to come to a future meeting of the committee.

## **10 Gala Theatre**

The Committee received a joint report of the Corporate Director of Resources and the Interim Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services that provided members with a follow up review of the Gala Theatre.

The Chair introduced the Strategic Manager Culture who was in attendance to provide a presentation to Members on the Gala Theatre following the initial report that had been presented to the Committee in January 2019. The Strategic Manager Culture explained that the Gala Theatre was a 500 seat theatre that included two-screen cinema, café, flexible studio space that could be hired out and an area that was used as a small visual arts gallery.

She informed the Committee that the Gala Theatre had undergone some major challenges over the last twelve months including changes in the audience numbers and the increase in competition with the new Odeon opening.

The Strategic Manager Culture advised the Committee that the Gala Theatre was constantly being monitored and new ideas had been initiated. She noted that a new electronic point of sales had been introduced to make stock control more efficient, that also created useful data to target audiences on their secondary spend in the bar and café. The purchasing of tickets online had not only created opportunities to reduce queues at the box office on show nights but allowed customers to be sent preshow emails illustrating what was on offer on the night and also after show surveys to gain feedback that was invaluable information that would be used to improve the experience and give people what they wanted. A new Programme Manager had been employed to refresh the programme for the Gala Theatre although the programme that had been inherited and would need to run its course before any major changes could be made in 2020. An application for mobile phones was in the making that would allow people to buy drinks in advance and to increase secondary spend.

The Strategic Manager Culture notified the Committee that the seats could be removed from the theatre that made it possible to explore different types of shows that could be offered like live music events, which would tap into a new audience. The Gala Theatre had a very successful Christmas pantomime season that had seen during Christmas 2019 a low attendance from schools that would need to be addressed to see why the numbers had declined. She noted that the major issue was the cinema, following the opening of an Odeon cinema in the same vicinity and another cinema under construction. The Strategic Manager Culture referred members of the committee to the financial element within the report that showed how the Gala Theatre had performed over the last three years and stressed that the Gala Theatre was being monitored frequently to see how things could be improved further.

Councillor Adam indicated that there had been some improvements since the last report working towards positive performance. He felt that it was work in progress as there was still a lot more to achieve. He wanted to know if there was a timescale to monitor the issues surrounding the cinema, particularly in view of the increased competition since the opening of the Odeon Luxe in Durham and the anticipated opening of the Everyman Cinema.

The Strategic Manager Culture responded that the cinema element of the Gala Theatre would be monitored for six months with work ongoing to analyse weekly figures. It was agreed that the situation would be assessed in June to work out the next course of action. She noted that there was plans for a further Everyman Cinema to be opened in Durham and if this came to fruition then it would be very hard for the Gala to remain competitive. She added that options were being looked at to see what could be done with the space and gave an example of operating just one cinema or using the space of the second cinema in a completely different way.

Councillor Wilkes stated that there were approximately 20,000 students within County Durham with a quarter being made up of foreign students. He expressed the idea that if other cinemas were playing mainstream films whether it was worth featuring foreign films for the captive audience to create a niche.

The Strategic Manager Culture explained that the Gala Theatre could not show a film for just a couple of times as the contract with the distributor stipulated that films had to be taken for a week. She had suggested this very idea of showing foreign films when she came into post, however upon looking at the previous programmes there had been seasons where foreign films had been shown including those that targeted Chinese students that had very little attendance. She added that relations had been established with the university and various societies to try to target students as a key audience but this had only confirmed that there were barriers which had proved ineffective as it was found that the Gala Theatre could not give students what they wanted in a cinema experience with comfy seats and quality sound and would travel further afield for this.

Councillor Willkes felt that if students wanted to go to Newcastle cinemas for a better experience then why not refurbish the cinema with more comfortable chairs and better sound systems.

The Strategic Manager Culture advised that there was no guarantee that if the cinema was refurbished that it would attract more students and other customers to the cinema and without the guarantee it would be a waste of resources.

Councillor Wilkes thought that the future of the cinema element of the Gala Theatre should be seriously considered.

The Strategic Manager Culture agreed that the future of the cinema had to be considered and that was why it was being monitored and thoughts were being processed into potentially using the cinema space in a completely different way to generate revenue.

Councillor Dunn thought that it would be a mistake to make any rapid decision at this present time without the relevant information to act upon. He considered that although new cinemas like the Odeon were an exciting prospect for some people but when all was considered, they would rather watch a film in a cinema that was within their budget. He believed there was still a market for the cinema at the Gala Theatre if it continued to provide a cost-efficient service. He felt that June was too soon to make a terminal decision regarding the future for the cinema.

The Strategic Manager Culture sensed it would be sad if the cinema was lost from the Gala Theatre. She explained that there was a lot to consider but everything was being looked at to save the cinema.

Councillor Maddison informed the Committee that she had experienced the Gala Theatre for the first time recently to see a live streaming of a West End show. She felt that the whole experience was wonderful with some of the audience participating with the show. She thought that press releases through the County Council and the use of the website could be used to try to generate interest.

The Strategic Manager Culture highlighted that the cinema offered lots of shows from the National Theatre that were all well attended as not all people could travel to London to see their favourite shows. She thought it was a great opportunity to bring theatre to the people and even though it was on the screen the audience reacted as if they were present in the theatre.

Councillor Batey felt it was a shame that the park and ride could not be used to provide an opportunity to get people to attend the Gala Theatre by means of discounted tickets.

The Strategic Manager Culture explained that the cost price of tickets had been looked at especially through the festival programme and encouragement was required for the park and ride to support the facility.

Councillor Coult informed the Committee that attendance at the Empire Theatre, Sunderland included a £2 charge to park in the car park all night. She commended all the work that had gone into the Gala Theatre and had thoroughly enjoyed attending the excellent Christmas pantomime for the last five years. She thought that a scheme should be introduced to allow people with mobility issues to access the Gala Theatre easily. She was unaware that the seats could be removed from the theatre area that would enable to think outside the box in relation to its survival. She felt that it may be hype with the Odeon cinema that could die down but the cost of a ticket was an issue that they needed to get right.

Councillor Adam highlighted the recommendations on page 76 of the report and noted that big decisions needed to be made regarding the Gala Theatre.

**Resolved**

- (i) That the report be noted
- (ii) That a further report be submitted to a future meeting

**11 County Durham Environment Partnership Board Minutes**

The Overview & Scrutiny Officer referred members to the series of County Durham Environment Partnership Board minutes that had been circulated for information purposes only.

**Resolved**

That the minutes had been received.