

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a remote meeting of **Cabinet** held on **Friday 5 June 2020 at 10.00 am**

Present:

Councillor S Henig (Leader of the Council) in the Chair

Cabinet Members:

Councillors A Napier (Deputy Leader of the Council), J Allen, O Gunn, L Hovvels, C Marshall, A Patterson, K Shaw, B Stephens and A Surtees

Prior to the commencement of business, Councillor Simon Henig, Leader of the Council, welcomed attendees to the Council's first remote Cabinet meeting.

1 Public Questions

There were no public questions.

2 Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 18 March 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2020 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 COVID-19 Planning and Response - Report of Corporate Management Team

The Cabinet considered a report of the Corporate Management Team which provided a summary of the actions the council had taken, working with partners, to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and the framework for recovery planning (for copy see file of minutes).

In introducing the report, Terry Collins, Chief Executive, stated that information contained therein dated from the 26 and 27 May, therefore, some of the information may have been superseded. The Chief Executive provided a detailed overview of the report, highlighting a number of the key actions taken by the council in response to the pandemic.

He extended his personal thanks to staff for their flexibility and positive attitude, despite the pace of change. He also thanked partners, including Durham Constabulary, the County Durham Fire and Rescue Service, CCGs, NHS trusts, Durham University, trade unions, educational establishments, AAPs, community groups and all organisations and individuals who had helped and supported the council throughout the emergency. The Chief Executive also thanked elected members for their support and guidance throughout the challenging time.

The Chief Executive expressed his gratitude to the community of County Durham, recognising the many messages of support received by frontline teams and he commented that the patience and support of the community had been greatly appreciated. The Corporate Director of Adult and Health Services, Jane Robinson, presented the report in depth.

In moving the report and recommendations, the Chair said his thoughts were with all those who had lost family and friends to this terrible virus. He expressed his gratitude to all staff for their hard work and paid tribute to the large number of community groups and volunteers, as well as front-line staff across all organisations.

In seconding the report, Councillor Alan Napier, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Finance, extended his condolences to those families who had lost loved ones. He placed on record his thanks to communities across County Durham who had come together with the council to provide support, including local businesses, who had played their part to minimise the impact of COVID-19.

Councillor Napier referred to the business grant scheme and the work undertaken with businesses to assist them to submit grant applications. He was pleased to report that Durham County Council was one of the first local authorities in the country to deliver the grants and he reported that the council had also processed reductions in business rate liabilities for over 2,000 businesses. He thanked the staff for their exceptional work.

Councillor Napier commented that lobbying of government had taken place, to gain further support for businesses unable to access the initial business grant funding, and, the scheme had been extended to assist more businesses. He added that government lobbying will continue, to request that unallocated grant funds be used to support businesses throughout the county.

Referring to the revenue funding made available to the council from the government, Councillor Napier explained that this amounted to £33.2 million, however, whilst the first allocation of funding was based on need, the second allocation of funding was based on population, which had reduced the county's allocation by 22%. Estimated costs and lost income was £50 million, producing a shortfall of approximately £17 million. Councillor Napier expressed his view that resources should be allocated according to need, adding that government had been lobbied, to set out the requirement to fully fund the council's COVID-19 pressures and to request that future funding be allocated, based on need. He concluded his comments by calling on the government to ensure local authorities are properly funded to aid recovery.

Councillor Lucy Hovvels, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adult and Health Services, passed on her sincere condolences to all those who had lost loved ones. Throughout the pandemic, a key priority had been to protect the most vulnerable residents and she thanked all care staff and front line workers for their incredible work in extremely challenging circumstances.

Councillor Hovvels explained that the council had put in place a comprehensive range of financial and practical support to independent private care homes. The response from the council had been in line with government guidance which had changed and evolved throughout the pandemic.

Referring to the partnership work that had taken place, Councillor Hovvels commented on the importance that the integrated approach to health and social care had been in this regard. The council had also worked with the military to roll out a mobile testing programme, however, there had been difficulties, with testing stations often located many miles away. In response, Councillor Hovvels had written to the Secretary of State for Health to express her concern, however, no reply had been received to date. In conclusion, Councillor Hovvels emphasised the vast amount of work that had been carried out within the health and social care sector and extended her gratitude to social care staff and partners.

Councillor Brian Stephens, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Local Partnerships commented that the neighbourhood and community support effort had been at the heart of the response to the pandemic. Community hubs had contacted every shielding and vulnerable household within the county to offer help and support where needed, and, £1.5 million had been made available to support local community groups. Members noted that critical functions such as the household waste collection service had continued to work effectively during lockdown and the council was now working to restore all services in a safe manner. He placed on record his thanks to staff and community partners who had worked long and hard to support the people of Durham.

Councillor Olwyn Gunn, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services, offered her condolences to those who had lost loved ones during the period of the pandemic and expressed her sincere gratitude to NHS, care staff and all front line workers.

Commenting on the proactive advice and guidance provided to schools and parents throughout the pandemic, Councillor Gunn recognised it enabled business continuity and ensured that schools received the relevant public health advice. Curriculum development advice was provided to schools as they prepared to close, together, with advice as to how schools could fulfil their free school meals commitment. The council worked with schools to resolve the challenges that came with the introduction of the national free school meals system.

A key area of work was to support schools to remain open to provide education for the children of key workers, with over 240 schools remaining open. In the light of national scientific advice, the delay in the track and trace system, and, the high regional rates of infection, schools were advised to delay the date set by national government for a phased reopening. Councillor Gunn emphasised the council's priority continued to be the safety of children and staff, adding that the position would be reviewed as the situation changed.

Members noted the council had fulfilled its statutory duties in relation to safeguarding, child protection and social care and this had included the use of social media and digital platforms to successfully maintain contact with children and young people known to social care. Councillor Gunn expressed her gratitude to the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel for their work with looked after children and care leavers. Support had also been provided to foster carers, and, residential homes had continued to function at normal capacity. In conclusion, Councillor Gunn placed on record her thanks to all members of staff in Children and Young People's Services and all head teachers and their staff, for their flexibility and resilience in the face of the challenges.

Councillor Joy Allen, Portfolio Holder for Transformation, Culture and Tourism, expressed heartfelt sympathies to those who had lost loved ones and thanked everyone who had worked tirelessly on the front line throughout the crisis.

Referring to the ambitious transformation programme, Councillor Allen commented that, through modernising work practices and equipping staff and elected members with the necessary tools to enable remote working, this had led to the crisis being much less challenging than it would otherwise have been.

Councillor Allen paid testament to the Transformation team staff redeployed to establish the Durham Together community hub and to oversee the operational side of a community hub, alongside leisure and library services. Referring to the many ways in which the service had mobilised in order to continue to offer services, Councillor Allen explained that the service innovated to enable residents to access library services online, enabled doorstep book delivery services to vulnerable residents, and offered ancestry services online. In addition, the Community Arts team alongside partners, delivered interactive story-time sessions, and, the DLI collection team developed a range of digital resources which will be available to schools in the autumn term. Volunteers who regularly use the research centre worked remotely to support the development of exhibitions at the Durham History Centre and the Culture team worked with Durham University to commission an online festival which it is hoped will attract national attention.

Visit County Durham provided business support, advice and guidance to the county's businesses to understand the impact of COVID-19 and these findings had been shared with Visit England and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Tailored advice was provided to hospitality and tourism businesses. Councillor Allen referred to her disappointment at the cancellation of the Bishop Auckland and Seaham Food Festivals, however, a virtual food festival had been held online, enabling traders to sell their products. Acknowledging that it is essential to protect Durham's tourism future, the team developed a Virtual Visitors campaign to encourage the public to enjoy Durham from the comfort of their own homes. In addition, the council supported English tourism week to highlight the importance of tourism to local economies. Councillor Allen expressed appreciation to all staff who had continued to deliver essential services and implement an impressive range of new services.

Councillor Carl Marshall, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Economic Regeneration, echoed the thoughts of Cabinet colleagues and offered his condolences to those affected by the coronavirus and he thanked all those who had supported each other throughout the pandemic.

Focusing on the business response, he paid tribute to those businesses that had continued to operate through extremely difficult times. Acknowledging the long road to recovery, Councillor Marshall committed to make every effort to continue to support businesses. He applauded the adaptability of those businesses that had utilised their skills to support the crisis through the production of protective equipment and those that had worked with international organisations to carry out research into a vaccine. Councillor Marshall thanked all key workers who had risked their health to safeguard others.

He commented on his lobbying of government for assistance to sole traders, SMEs and the leisure, tourism and hospitality industries and he added that he will continue to pressure national government. Councillor Marshall thanked transport operators who had helped to keep key workers connected, adding that work was taking place to ensure a return to full network coverage as soon as possible.

Referring to the importance of continued support for regeneration, he commented that he was aware that, despite the circumstances, inward investment enquiries were continuing. He emphasised that work to support regeneration will be vital for recovery and the council will continue to work alongside the North East Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses and other business networks throughout the county.

In conclusion, Councillor Marshall gave thanks to all staff, not forgetting those who had worked in the background to maintain the essential services.

Councillor Andrea Patterson, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Rural Issues, gave her condolences and expressed gratitude to NHS staff, care workers and all those who had been part of the work to help those most in need of support.

Councillor Patterson paid tribute to staff and referred to the technology that had been put in place to ensure services could be maintained. Referring to Durham County Council being the largest authority in the north east, she spoke of the huge effort undertaken to put policies in place to allow staff to continue to work safely. Staff had been retrained and volunteers had been redeployed in order to support the most vulnerable.

Referring to the scale of the effort, Councillor Patterson commented on how proud she was of everyone who had been responsible for keeping services running. Work will continue to take place with trade unions to develop policies and practices with feedback from trade unions and staff on the work carried out thus far being very positive.

With services moving online quickly, the significant investment in technology enabled work to continue as normal and helped staff to continue to work, often in locations which were not their usual place of work. Councillor Patterson commented that, without the input from Human Resources and ICT, the response from the council would not have been as efficient and she extended her thanks to staff and elected members. Concluding her comments, Councillor Patterson referred to the rural nature of the county and the impact on these communities in particular, and, she added that she would ensure the future recovery plan acknowledges rural towns and villages.

Councillor Angela Surtees, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Social Inclusion, thanked staff, partners and communities across the county and passed on her condolences to families who had lost loved ones during this difficult time.

Referring to the ways in which the council had been able to continue to protect the most vulnerable in the county, Councillor Surtees explained that the welfare assistance scheme had been maintained. With the council seeing the demand for living expenses double during the time of the pandemic, Councillor Surtees expressed her pleasure that the council had been able to offer support, with the scheme being relaxed in order to help more people, for longer. Furthermore, the council had worked with landlords and individuals, to assist them with housing related issues, adding that the council would continue to support them. The council had also increased council tax support, and, as the council had maintained its own local council tax reduction scheme, persons of working age making a claim for support had their council tax bill reduced by £300, which was double the amount recommended by government. The council had also suspended recovery action and allowed residents in difficulty to defer payment of council tax.

Finally, Councillor Surtees referred to a report published in May, by the Office of National Statistics, relating to the impact of the virus in more deprived areas which showed that deaths from COVID-19 were significantly higher in more deprived areas. Councillor Surtees said this will be considered, alongside the impact of poverty more generally throughout the county, as a core part of the recovery strategy.

Councillor Kevin Shaw, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Strategic Housing and Assets, expressed his sincere condolences to those who had suffered loss. He extended thanks to officers of the council for the work undertaken to support the community, businesses, and, individual needs. He paid tribute to the work of the housing teams who had supported general housing needs and landlords and tenants, and, the homelessness teams who had ensured that no-one was made homeless during the pandemic, with new cases being quickly resolved through partnership working. He concluded by thanking local communities who had joined forces throughout the pandemic.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.