

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Thursday 3 September 2020 at 9.30 am**

### **Present:**

**Councillor E Adam (Chair)**

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

Councillors O Milburn, A Batey, D Bell, L Brown, M Clarke, B Coult, R Crute, S Dunn, T Henderson, C Kay, L Maddison, I McLean, A Simpson and M Wilson

### **Co-opted Members:**

Mr T Bolton

### **Also Present:**

Councillor B Stephens

## **1 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K Hawley, J Higgins, R Manchester, P Sexton and Mrs P Holding.

## **2 Substitute Members**

Councillor M Clarke substituted for Councillor R Manchester.

## **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meetings held on 9 and 16 March 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair.

## **4 Declarations of Interest**

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 The response of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change to the Coronavirus Pandemic**

The Committee considered the Report of the Corporate Director for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change that provided Members with a summary of the actions that the Neighbourhoods and Climate Change Service had taken, working with partners, to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Mr A Patrickson, Corporate Director for Neighbourhoods and Climate Change was in attendance to present the report and deliver a presentation.

Members were advised that this was a new directorate that came together in early April 2020, during the middle of the pandemic.

He indicated that the response of the council, in particular the staff of the council, trade unions, partners and contractors that the council worked with throughout the pandemic was something that the council should be proud of. People had come together in an incredible way to resolve problems and keep vital services going, in some cases delivering new services that were required in response to the pandemic.

He then referred to Environment Services, particularly Refuse and Recycling that had collected from 250,000 households every week. They needed to ensure that the fundamental refuse and if possible, recycling services remained in operation as they could not allow the build-up of waste as it would create a public health issue if refuse remained uncollected. The service were able to maintain the refuse and recycling service in a manner that was safe to staff across the whole county, on the normal timetable, using a number of staff who were redeployed into refuse and recycling. They needed to ensure that there was somewhere to take the refuse and recycling that was collected and were in daily contact with the contractor, Suez to ensure that they were still operational and had plans in place. The service also worked closely with the recycling contractor, Biffa to ensure that the recycling collected could be taken to their facility.

He then referred to the garden waste collection service that was initially suspended at the start of lockdown because of insufficient resource. However, the service was reinstated following the redeployment of staff from other services and the decision being taken to move garden waste collections to Saturdays and Mondays, when refuse and recycling services were not operational. The Corporate Director advised that a number of residents took advantage of the garden waste service during the lockdown and that although, refunds were available there had been very few refund

requests received and in fact take up of the garden waste service had increased. Customers had been advised that the service would continue until the end of November and any missed collections would be added to the 2021 season for customers who renewed.

Members were informed that the Fleet Maintenance service had continued to work throughout the lockdown period ensuring that all Durham County Council vehicles were maintained and roadworthy.

Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) were suspended in March and all sites were closed in accordance with the government's coronavirus regulations. The service worked with the contractor to get ready for when they could reopen to ensure that customers felt safe and that social distancing could be applied on the sites, but the contractor had similar issues with their supply chain too in that some were not operating. The government regulations were subsequently amended, allowing HWRCs to open on the 13 May 2020. While some local authorities had chosen to open their HWRCs immediately Durham County Council waited another week and considered the issues that had arisen in other local authorities in opening their HWRCs, such as the need for traffic management plans. County Durham HWRCs opened on 18 May with traffic management plans in place to ensure that the sites were not interfering with the highway and residents could access them safely. Work was continuing on how HWRCs can get back to normal.

The contract with Suez comes to an end in 2025 and the Council were now working in partnership with 6 other local authorities to look at a joint procurement post 2025. Work on this project had continued during lockdown.

In relation to Parks and Open Spaces members were advised that Durham County Council chose that all of their parks and open spaces would remain open to enable residents to exercise but play equipment would be locked, services were maintained but scaled back.

The winter bedding schedule was slightly knocked back but safe working practices for horticultural staff were established so the bedding plants were used to provide some floral tributes and displays at significant roundabouts and other places throughout the county that were appreciated by the public.

All play areas and equipment were then risk assessed and were open by the end of July 2020. Playing pitches were reopening and the service was in the process of risk assessing and opening the associated pavilions and the historical site at Binchester had now reopened.

A number of other Environmental Services needed to continue during lockdown including Bereavement services where some significant changes were made in relation to the interface with the public, health service and public health. Careful planning and monitoring of the service mitigated the huge impact on this service but

services had been stretched however there was support from a large number of volunteers and redeployed staff which enabled the service to continue.

The neighbourhood wardens were redeployed into many different areas of the service as they often work in pairs and this could not be maintained for social distancing reasons.

Pest control saw an increase in domestic calls and staff were redeployed in this area to support.

Members learned that work continued on climate change projects and they managed to attract funding through lockdown. The Corporate Director highlighted that this is an especially important area of his service and reassured members that although many staff were working from home they had managed to keep in contact with contractors and funders and were able now to put this work into practice.

Environmental Health Officers were very busy working closely with colleagues in Public Health as outbreak and infection control, is part of their role however this had significantly increased as a result of the pandemic.

A coronavirus help line was established where members of the public or businesses could call for advice or ask questions on the coronavirus guidance relating to environmental health issues.

Trading Standards were also responsible for helping businesses and providing enforcement for those businesses who did not comply with coronavirus regulations although these numbers were very low in the County.

As we come out of lockdown Environmental Health Officers were working closely with Public Health England and our local public health services to manage the local outbreak control plan.

In relation to Community Protection services the Corporate Director highlighted how this service had enforced COVID-19 compliance, provided support to businesses and managed and controlled local outbreaks. The service had issued 13 prohibition notices in relation to COVID compliance concerns. The service had received 2053 nuisance complaints during lockdown that were largely due to noise and smoke. The service had supported businesses in relation to compliance advice and had created a Community Resilience Team to investigate local outbreaks and enforce direction to close premises.

The Corporate Director then referred to Technical Services and that the decision was made at the start of lockdown to suspend all but emergency and time critical repairs for the highway teams until safe working practices could be put into place. Members were advised that in consultation with the trade unions a three week rolling review was put in place, risk assessments had taken place and new signage

was made to give the public reassurance. Members were advised that work had taken place with the trade unions and health and safety before putting staff back to work on highways projects. Staff had worked alone or in teams of two. In April work started on highway schemes and now highways maintenance staff were fully back at work and there was only a three week delay on projects.

Members were advised of the Health and Safety implications and that the highways crews worked very closely together and were visible with site and vehicle signage to advise that they were Durham County Council employees and that they were delivering essential highway services. Staff were provided with training before getting back to work which had been delivered in a staged manner. Members were provided with details of the key areas where activities resumed and that the highways programme was back up and running and were provided with details of some of the works that were ongoing including Junction 61 at Bowburn Interchange, New Elvet Bridge, Witton Park Bridge and Chester le Street De-Culverting.

The Highways team had also got involved in the PPE Distribution Cell that was set up at Chilton Depot that enabled the Council to receive and distribute PPE on behalf of the Local Resilience Forum (LRF) as well as the Council.

Partnerships and Community Engagement service were busy throughout lockdown and had created a community hub for residents who had issues with food collection and identified people who were considered vulnerable for various reason during lockdown. The service also created the COVID-19 volunteering unit to provide help to organisations such as the Coastguard, Fire Service and Refuse Café. COVID-19 Emergency Relief Funding through AAPs and Member's Neighbourhood Budgets was provided to 334 projects helping to sustain struggling Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) groups and to provide vital support to help tackling isolation and accessing food. The Corporate Director also highlighted the work of the CCU in helping Durham County Council and the LRF to co-ordinate its efforts throughout the crisis.

In conclusion Members were advised that we were not back to normal and services would continue to adapt and keep changing and look at the advice from Public Health and others to keep staff safe and to keep community services going as much as possible and support the local supply chain.

The Chair thanked the Corporate Director for his very informative presentation and indicated that a lot of thanks needed to go to the staff and services but also the community that had been involved throughout the pandemic. Staff on the front line had gone the extra mile to ensure that the services continued to function without much disruption. He thanked those working on the front line and those working from home who had all done a fantastic job.

The Chair then asked Members for their comments and questions.

Councillor Crute asked how well prepared the service was in looking ahead to mitigate the impact of in particular fuel poverty through various schemes across County Durham such as the Warm Homes Campaign and asked if the pandemic had disrupted any of the plans for these schemes.

In response to the question Members were advised that the work done on helping homes to become more insulated and energy efficient was work that would be continuing. He also advised Members that a stock take had been carried out in April 2020 on the emergency response plan and how many projects in the plan would see significant delays or potential delays due to the pandemic and was pleased to report that the stock take showed that very few of those projects in the long run would have significant delays. The projects that had incurred a delay were the projects where they needed to visit properties or interact with communities as this was not possible during the lockdown period, but these projects would be going ahead.

In terms of preparation for some issues that might come to the authority during the winter period, corporately the council had been considering how County Durham Together can maintain the important work it had been undertaking. He mentioned during his presentation that the staff not only continued existing services but in some cases developed and devised and almost invented new services that this pandemic created a need for and that the County Durham Hub was a good example. The Corporate Director confirmed that the County Durham Hub would remain and that work was ongoing to ensure that it would be able to address some of the issues that they might be facing in winter and some of the issues they may be facing from a community point of view when the furlough scheme comes to an end.

Councillor Maddison thanked the frontline workers that had operated during this period who had done an excellent job. She also wished to show her appreciation to Senior leadership teams that had been involved in the planning behind the scenes. She then referred to the work undertaken at Junction 61 that had caused very little disruption to traffic and thanked all the highways teams that had been involved with the project. She then referred to the transport links to the Amazon site and asked if a decision in relation to bus companies operating a service to bring people to the site, as a number of people relied on public transport and there was a good opportunity to improve the economic well-being for a lot of residents, if transport links could be put into place.

Councillor Dunn wished to place on record his thanks to officers for the way they had coordinated the response across COVID-19. There had been a lot of people in need and vulnerable people and the way they were supported was outstanding. He also referred to Junction 61 and wished to thank the team in the way the work had progressed with minimal disruption for such a massive scheme on what is a very busy junction and that had allowed Amazon to open on time. In response to Councillor Maddison he advised that discussions had taken place with bus operators about extending services into Amazon but once staff were recruited

Amazon would be putting on a bus service to collect staff to take them to work rather than them having to bring cars.

Councillor Kay echoed what had been said by his colleagues and commended the domestic waste collection team who had kept the streets clean and that nothing had been a problem for the crews. He then referred to the Witton Park Bridge which was a major crossing for the south of the county and asked if there was a time scale for the reopening and if it was going to be a twin lane crossing or still single carriageway.

The Corporate Director thanked the councillor for his compliments on the waste collection service and indicated that they were operating in difficult times and many waste streams saw a dramatic increase during the pandemic period.

Mr B Buckley, Strategic Highways Manager responded to the question in relation to the Witton Park Bridge and indicated that the first stage of the scheme was the demolition of the existing bridge, this stage was now complete and they were due to start the construction work on site. They were using the existing supports for the bridge so there was no scope to significantly widen the bridge for two-way traffic but there were some improvements. In terms of time scales they were aiming for an Autumn completion and that the scheme was a £2.5m scheme.

The Chair thanked officers for their excellent work and the presentation that showed the committee the extent of the work that the council were doing.

**Resolved:** (i) That the contents of the report be noted.

(ii) That the Committee receive a further report on the response of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change Service Grouping on the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## **7 Refresh of the Work Programme 2020/2021 - Report of Corporate Director of Resources**

The Committee considered the report of the Corporate Director of Resources that provided Members with an updated work programme for 2020/21 (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer was in attendance to present the report and indicated that the work programme was designed to be flexible to accommodate items that may arise during the life of the work programme but it also provided an opportunity for the committee to respond to any further issues resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In responding to the requirements of virtual meetings the Chair and Vice Chair felt that it was important that the proposed work programme was prioritised, identifying items to be considered at formal committee and items to be considered via briefing

note. The committee would continue to receive quarterly budget and performance information.

The Chair thanked the Officer for the report and indicated that it was difficult to fit everything into the work programme that they wanted this year and that the programme was fluid.

Councillor Dunn referred to the ongoing activity with climate change which hadn't been adversely affected which he was pleased to hear. He noted that it was not proposed to have a full discussion on climate change until March 2021 and asked if it would be possible to consider including a climate response report to the next meeting of the committee in addition to the March meeting.

The Chair advised Councillor Dunn that officers had indicated that a briefing document would be circulated but it was not possible for the item to be brought forward to the November meeting. However, the item may be able to be brought forward to the January 2021 meeting. Although climate change was a priority COVID-19 remained a priority too and it was difficult to relax the COVID process until we know it was behind us.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised that we do not know how many meetings the committee would have between January to April but we were working with officers to see if we could get the item brought forward to a sooner meeting and the climate change emergency response and carbon management plan were both highlighted as priorities.

Mr T Bolton referred to fuel poverty and asked if that information could also include reference to the governments recently announced green energy scheme.

The Chair responded that it was important that they had the latest information from government and would ask officers if they could include this information in their report.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer responded that they had spoken to the Housing Regeneration Project Manager and asked him to include this information in his report.

**Resolved:** That the work programme for 2020/21 be agreed.