

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 18 June 2021 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Martin (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors R Crute, A Batey, E Adam, P Jopling, R Manchester, B Avery, J Charlton, J Cosslett, B Coult, J Elmer, D Freeman, O Gunn, C Hood, J Howey, A Jackson, C Lines (Vice-Chair), C Marshall, B Moist, K Shaw, M Stead, A Surtees and M Wilson

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L Maddison, R Charlton-Lainé and L Hovvels.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2021 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Matters Arising:

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager responded to a query about the number of hospital admissions relating to women with alcohol related illnesses and confirmed that Durham was higher than the national average for females and males. He would circulate figures to Board Members after the meeting.

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager confirmed that it was an offence under the Environmental and Protection Act to burn commercial waste unless exempt. There was joint responsibility for investigating illegal burning of waste between Environmental Health who would investigate smoke and odour nuisance and the Environment Agency who would take enforcement.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Report on the Council's use of powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 - Q3 and Q4

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which informed members about the Council's use of powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 ('RIPA') during the period 1 October 2020 and 31 December 2020 (quarter 3) and 1 January 2021 and 31 March 2021 (quarter 4) (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved

- i. That the report be received
- ii. That the powers were being used consistently with the Council's policy and that the policy remained fit for purpose.

6 Q4 2020/21 Customer Feedback

The Board considered a report of the Interim Director of Resources which provided the Customer Feedback Report for quarter four, 2020/21 (for copy see file of minutes).

Councillor Crute referred to the low number of statutory complaints which had been upheld and asked whether there was an underlying reason for this, such as an overcomplicated process for service users. He also asked for further information on how complaints were recorded. The Interim Head of Digital and Customer Services advised that the information provided was at a high level but the complaints procedure was regularly audited and feedback requested through the process. Complaints that did not progress to the Social Care or Local Government Ombudsmen were also recorded so there was a full audit trail should a customer complain at a later date.

Councillor Jopling suggested that with regard to the digital skills survey, the response rate was low and the Interim Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that there was a full in depth report of the survey that gathered a lot more information such as age, demographics, disabilities and access issues and a copy would be provided following the meeting. She added that partners such as the Citizens Advice Bureau helped to establish the options available. AAP's and Community Centres were also linked with the Digital Durham Reboot Scheme which offered recycled Council equipment to charities and community organisations.

Councillor Elmer referred to the complaints that had been upheld by the LGO and asked whether the feedback from those decisions would lead to service changes. The Interim Head of Digital and Customer Services advised that a robust investigation was done to understand what could have been done differently and whether development or staff training was required.

Councillor Coult referred to the customer feedback summary and asked what steps had been taken to improve the figures. The Interim Head of Digital and Customer Service confirmed that people had different perceptions on how they should be informed and therefore the service were enhancing automated responses and trying to ensure updates included more context.

Councillor Adam referred to emergency out of hours calls and asked whether they were recorded as he often received reports from residents advising that they could not get through to an operator. The Interim Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that outside of the core business hours, calls were transferred to a telecare service and emergency issues were logged on the CRM with non-emergencies passed to Customer Services. On average there were no more than twenty calls per closed period and the majority related to highways or issues for the clean and green team.

Councillor Marshall commended the efforts of staff who had transformed the way services were provided to ensure residents were able to continue to report issues. With regards to digital connectivity, he advised that there were wider issues to investigate than just access to broadband, such as affordability and access to equipment which had been proven by remote learning in schools during the pandemic.

Councillor Lines asked whether pressures to switch from face to face to digital services had been emerging prior to COVID-19 and whether people who had been forced to make the switch were comfortable with it. The Interim Head of Digital and Customer Services advised that there had been a steady decline of people at Customer Access Points who were choosing to use the telephone prior to the pandemic, but the only way some benefit claims could be processed was in person and the restrictions had led to the digitisation of some of these processes. Additional services and support such as webchat could advise people how to use some of the online facilities with the option of screen browsing. There had been no complaints from those who would have normally attended in person.

The Interim Head of Digital and Customer Services advised that there would be more digitally supported services in future such as access to devices, supported self-serve and virtual appointments, where equipment in Customer Access Points would be offered. Some people may not return so the figures and feedback would continue to be monitored to decide what the offer was going forward.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

7 State of the County Report 2020/21

The Board considered a report of the Interim Corporate Director of Resources which presented progress towards achieving the key outcomes of the council's corporate performance framework (for copy see file of minutes).

With regards to more and better jobs, Councillor Surtees queried the statement that the jobs market had been broadly stable and was making early signs of recovery. She asked whether the statistics provided were measured as the total number of jobs or the total number of individuals who were employed as there was a difference between an individual with one job and an individual who had three jobs, and this could explain why the employment rate was slightly higher. Councillor Surtees advised that she represented Easington which had the highest rate of unemployment in the County, but was also the highest populated area with a fifth of the County's population. The area had had a lot of stagnant wages, no pay rises, ten years of austerity, all exacerbated by COVID-19 and recently there had been an increase in child poverty, echoed across the County.

Councillor Surtees was interested to know the impact of child poverty across the County as it was an issue that was combined with other poverty issues such as fuel, low paid jobs and zero hour contracts, with many residents subject to financial pressures. Although there were brilliant schemes such as welfare assistance, the Council needed a robust system to monitor the impact of child poverty across County Durham. With regards to healthy life expectancy, Councillor Surtees advised that she had reached the expected age limit live a healthy life in East Durham and this was again due to deprivation. Finally, with regards to an increase in Looked after Children (LAC) and Children in Care (CIC), Councillor Surtees had read a recent report confirming that deprivation had a significant impact in children going into care which also had an effect on the Council's budget.

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager advised that the statistics with regards to the employment rate was with regards to individuals employed and not jobs, but he advised that it was artificially high due to the furlough scheme. With regards to Child Poverty, he agreed it was multi-faceted and not something easily measured. The indicator used was children eligible for free school meals, but there was a whole host of issues associated with child poverty such as educational opportunity and access to equipment impacted on education inequality and he agreed that following the impact of COVID-19 on educational attainment, all issues needed to be closely monitored.

Councillor Stead referred to fly tipping incidents being reported per hectare and queried the reasonableness of the measurement given that County Durham was significantly rural, especially compared to South Tyneside which was one of the areas it was compared to.

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager advised that this was a recently developed measure and confirmed that reporting as the number of incidents was not comparative to other local authorities as Durham had the highest population. It had been measured per hectare and per head of population but another difficulty was that that one incident of fly tipping could be a black bag full of rubbish or a lorry load so he was open to looking at alternative methods.

In response to a question from Councillor Adam regarding the nature of the report as this was a basic summary rather than the normal performance report that would be considered at Quarter four. The Head of Transformation, Planning and Performance advised that the full Quarter four performance report would be provided at the next meeting after it had been reported to Cabinet however it was important for information that was publicly available to be presented in order to frame the work programme.

Councillor Adam referred to the key stage four educational attainment figures and suggested that focus in key stage one was also required as there had been reports that children were struggling with writing due to the lockdown period. In order for children to get a good start in life, it was important that both reading and writing were closely monitored in key stage one.

Councillor Adam referred to many changes in government and this local authority and with regards to adapting to climate change, he asked whether there would be a review of the climate emergency response plan in light of COVID-19, to reflect what would be happening in the future as the Council adapted to new ways of working and policy changes.

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager advised that the Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee would look at reading and writing attainment when considering the quarter four performance report and agreed that the climate emergency response plan would need to be revisited as the pandemic had accelerated new ways of working which would undoubtedly have had an effect.

Councillor Jopling queried the additional 2% of waste going to landfill and asked what this equated to in tonnage and why it could not be processed as expected. The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager advised that the process for disposing of waste was either recycling or burning to create energy, however due to the increase in volume a backlog had built up at the

waste plants. The recycling market had also been overwhelmed and therefore some of it had had to be disposed of in alternative ways as due to environmental protection regulations waste could not be stored.

Councillor Gunn referred to pupils eligible for FSM, County Durham was high at 29.4% compared to the national rate at 22.8%. With regards to the government change in the census data for the collection of FMS data and whether it would have any impact on the data that would be collated. That change had already happened and would be impacting on pupil premium.

Councillor Gunn commended the work of staff in Schools and Children and Young People's Services and although she completely understood the reasons behind the target with regards to EHCP's, it was incredibly low at 50% and she felt this should be addressed as the time taken to get a plan was a regular issue raised by parents. The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager agreed that the EHCP target was a low compliance rate and advised that although they needed to monitor this, the regulations were expected to change and EHCP's could be scrapped altogether.

Councillor Gunn referred to the other complex issues regarding LAC/CIC as in addition to deprivation there were other compounding factors such as children and families court delays, which impacted on the adoption process. The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager Data advised that data had been presented to CPP with regards to levels of deprivation and LAC a number of years prior, and there was a predictable correlation which had resulted in the restructure of services and enabled teams to operate according to the needs of certain areas.

Councillor Coult requested that the figures on children Not in Education, Employment or Training were reported by area as this was a factor when considering impacts on young people's mental health.

Councillor Marshall referred to more and better jobs and the report highlighted that the Council was yet to see the impact on the economy from the COVID-19 restrictions. He referred to the County Durham Plan which included plans to create 30000 jobs, with new and affordable homes in the right places. When coupled with the work done on the key strategic employment sites such as Forest Park, Milburngate and the plans for the Aykley heads development which were well underway, this would hopefully provide a much better and optimistic future for residents across the county. More than ever the council needed to see these plans fast tracked and investment in infrastructure and efforts to create jobs doubled.

Councillor Marshall commented that it would be interesting to see how the Council would start to roll out some of the work in place to invest in the infrastructure such as the town and villages, leisure transformation and

capital house building programme, which were key in fast tracking County Durham's recovery. It was important as a Board to monitor not just key performance data which was lagged, but also the intelligence from AAPs and communities as there could be consequences for decisions taken both nationally and locally, that would impact on communities.

The Corporate Scrutiny & Strategy Manager agreed that the Council were in a period of uncertainty, there would be impacts when the furlough scheme ended, impacts due to Brexit, and the public sector and local authorities had an important role to play in delivering capital projects that would have an effect on the economy.

The Head of Head of Transformation, Planning and Performance confirmed that the post pandemic economy could look very different, but it was important to remember that the County had seen boosts in the employment rate, however it was important to continue to monitor.

Councillor Avery was surprised that the figures relating to crime had reduced as he did not believe this to be the case in his locality. There was an issue in Ferryhill of private landlords renting properties to people from all over the country and various crimes had been reported as well as antisocial behaviour, but there seemed to be no control measures to stop this from happening.

The Head of Transformation, Planning and Performance confirmed that the crime data was combined from the police and the council and there had been an increase in antisocial behaviour which had been determined as COVID-19 related and an increase in fly tipping. He advised that local data would be presented in future in order to see specific areas of concern.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

8 Refresh of the Work Programme 2021/22

The Board considered a report of the Interim Corporate Director of Resources which provided the updated work programme for 2021/2022 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Chair reassured Members of the Board that new Chairs and Vice Chairs of Overview and Scrutiny Committees had an open door policy and were open to suggestions on what should be on various work programmes. He also confirmed that they intended to be proactively scrutinising executive decisions prior to them being made.

Councillor Crute referred to the forthcoming review on the decision to close the DLI museum which was due to be considered by Cabinet in September. Due to the timescales and August recess it would be difficult, however he asked that it be considered by the Board prior to this meeting.

Councillor Adam asked for confirmation of dates of meetings and the Head of Transformation, Planning and Performance advised that the diary was in the process of being agreed and he would provide an update following the meeting.

Resolved

That the report be noted.

9 Overview and Scrutiny Annual report 2020/21

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources to present the Overview and Scrutiny Annual report 2020/21 for comment and approval prior to submission to the County Council meeting on 14 July 2021.

Councillor Crute, former Chair of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board advised that the report covered a very difficult year for communities whilst faced a global pandemic and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic the work programme had been paused until emergency legislation was in place and committees could be restarted remotely.

The scrutiny work programmes had to be reprioritised with a reduced timetable of meetings and shortened agendas, but he advised that some good scrutiny had been carried out and was reflected in the pared down annual report.

He advised that review work was limited last year and there were no site visits however, Safer and Stronger Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the important development of a new Road Safety Strategy and the Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee concluded its review examining the extent of GP coverage across County Durham and the range of services offered by GP practices.

The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board scrutinised the Cabinet's MTFP proposals and comments were included in the final budget report to Council. All of the thematic committees received detailed information on the impact of COVID-19 on the various service groupings and heard plans for recovery.

He thanked all Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees, Co-optees, and Officers for their continued hard work throughout this difficult year and asked members to accept the report.

Resolved

That the report be noted

10 Update in relation to Petitions

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which provided for information the quarterly update in relation to the current situation regarding various petitions received by the Authority (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved

That the report be noted.

11 Notice of Key Decisions

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services to consider the list of key decisions that was scheduled to be considered by the Executive.

Resolved

That the report be noted.