

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 2 December 2022 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Martin (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Atkinson (Substitute) (substitute for E Adam), A Batey, B Coult, R Crute, M Currah (Substitute) (substitute for P Jopling), O Gunn, P Heaviside, L Hovvells, A Jackson, C Lines (Vice-Chair), J Miller (Substitute) (substitute for A Surtees), A Reed, P Sexton (Substitute) (substitute for J Charlton), K Shaw, M Stead and M Wilson

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E Adam, R Charlton-Lainé, J Charlton, I Cochrane, J Cosslett, J Elmer, J Howey, P Jopling, L Maddison, R Manchester, C Marshall, B Moist and A Surtees.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Atkinson for Councillor Adam, Councillor Sexton for Councillor Charlton, Councillor Currah for Councillor Jopling and Councillor Miller for Councillor Surtees.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 October 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

The Democratic Services Manager informed the Board that all actions raised had been followed up after the last meeting.

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 - Quarter 2 - 2022/23

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which informed Members of the Council's use of its powers under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) during the period 1 July to 30 September 2022 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved:

- i. That the quarterly report on the Council's use of RIPA for the period covering quarter 2 2022/23, be received.
- ii. That the powers were being used consistently with the Council's policy and that the policy remained fit for purpose.

6 Customer Relationship Management System Update

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director Resources which provided background and overview of the council's Granicus Customer Relationship Management System (CRM), an update on progress achieved in line with the roadmap for short to medium term improvement, and an overview of findings following a recent systems review to understand the potential benefits, implications and risks that may exist by replacing the current CRM system (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services advised that since COVID there has been a general move to online interaction and the way in which the Council have interacted with customers. Feedback was sought from customers and there were high levels of satisfaction overall reported however some performance challenges had been identified. Paragraph 8 of the report gave further details around that. In 2019 CMT approved a more detailed review and appraisal of technology solutions to explore the business case for the potential replacement of the CRM and website. The current roadmap agreed by CMT in September 2021 focused on:

- a. Essential upgrades and maintenance to ensure the systems remain operational and secure.
- b. Compliance with legislation including GDPR and accessibility.
- c. High priority development that will provide the greatest benefit to the customer and organisation

In conclusion, the Head of Transactional and Customer Services advised that the existing CRM contract would be extended on current terms for 2 years in line with relevant contractual clauses and the development roadmap will be updated to ensure alignment with future organisational priorities over this

period. Further and detailed business case development would be revisited in line with these timelines.

Councillor Batey thanked the officer for the positive report. Referring to appendix 2 'What 3 words Pilot Exploration', she asked if this would go ahead as Pelton division would be willing to pilot the work. The Strategic Manager (Digital Engagement) advised that this was being explored and that there were some changes in terms of working practices that would underline the impact of identifying localities better. She went on to say that data geographical spread of usage across the County would be useful in terms of areas of deprivation.

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services added that mapping was used and was useful to see the spread and to inform what we were trying to achieve. She would bring back a further report to the meeting in January that used MAPs of where the customer access points were used as there had been a decrease in footfall.

Councillor Gunn replied that this would be helpful and was concerned for residents from small villages and would give an understanding to ensure residents had the ability and access to reporting any issues.

Councillor Coult suggested that parish councils could be used for those residents who could not access County Council buildings. She thanked officers for the positive progress as this could save a lot of time and money in the future.

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services reported that during COVID the service changed a lot of the ways in which they communicated and interacted with residents. For vulnerable communities this was still being explored.

Resolved:

- i. That the content of the report be noted;
- ii. That the roadmap and its associated progress that defines the short to medium term improvement of the current Customer Relationship Management System (CRM) be noted; and
- iii. That the conclusions of the recent application review and the commitment to extend the current CRM contract in line with relevant contractual clauses and update the development roadmap ensuring alignment with future organisational priorities over this period be noted.

7 Poverty Strategy and Action Plan

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director Resources which presented a revised Poverty Strategy and Action Plan following a consultation exercise undertaken April to August 2022, and presented the updated Child Poverty Action Plan as a separate document which focussed on addressing child poverty aligned with the wider Poverty Strategy and Action Plan (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services highlighted the proposed four key objectives of the consultation of which the overarching vision was “to work together so fewer people will be affected by poverty and deprivation in the county”. The proposed strategic objectives of the action plan were to:

- use intelligence and data to target support to low-income households;
- reduce the financial pressures on people facing or in poverty;
- increase individual, household and community resilience to poverty; and
- reduce barriers to accessing services for those experiencing financial insecurity.

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services reported that the consultation exercise had had a good turn out and she went on to highlight the questions asked and the answers received. A number of gaps had been identified in access, transport, skills and young people. Furthermore, a number of groups were reported as missing such as single people, rural aspect, informal carers and disabled people, people with addictions and those in unexpected situations.

Councillor Crute thanked the officer and her team for the work undertaken to try to tackle deprivation and inequalities. He believed that the role of elected councillors was to remain to lobby government as since the response to last correspondence. He went on to say that we needed to face up to the real reasons as 13 years of austerity had had a devastating effect on the councils resources. He asked that this board write to the Prime Minister to remind him of this and also write to the secretary of state regarding levelling up and remind him that the deprivation we had in the county was worse now. He believed that levelling up was not about the authority spending £s drawing up bids that would be unsuccessful and he wanted to make a point to government before the local government settlement came out in December. He commented that there was a need before greed and that tax cuts for the rich meant public service cuts for the rest of us and it was all about putting resources where most needed to cover deprivation in County Durham.

Councillor Gunn seconded the proposal.

The Chair agreed that a letter be sent to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

Councillor Crute asked to see a copy of the draft letter to ensure it focused on the real problems.

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services reported that there was a really powerful statistic in County Durham but she said that there was also strength in doing something across the region.

Referring to the groups of people missing Councillor Reed asked what support was available for those from other countries, especially when reaching the every child matters agenda. She also commented that there should be free school meals for every child. In response the Head of Transactional and Customer Services advised of the humanitarian support measures in place and that they had a group that met monthly which had a range of mechanisms in place. She also advised of the Child Poverty working Group that provided support for families during school holidays and used welfare assistance to support that. Culture and Leisure provided leisure activities and household support funds provided sources for free school meals. In addition there was a £15,000 fund for investing in children for particular talent, such as music, and this would help the children and young people to explore the potential.

With reference to a recent press release Councillor Miller said that he had been critical of the Cabinet rather than officers and wanted to set the record straight. He referred to page 67 of the papers in relation to the use of credit unions and was concerned that people should not be encouraged to get into debt to get out of poverty. He suggested that the wording could be amended to reflect that. He went on to page 70 of the papers in relation to rough sleepers including ex-offenders and how difficult it was for them to be offered housing. This was due to a two year ban being in place after the offence and he asked that conversations were had with housing providers. In response the Head of Transactional and Customer Services advised that credit unions were in place to support essential day to day items and the main purpose was not to get people into more debt. She would bring the discussion about rough sleepers to a working group with housing colleagues at its next meeting in December. From a customer access point of view she was keen to find out where the people who present as homeless were going and what plans we could put in place to improve their situation. Councillor Miller added that in order to help we needed to change policies.

Further to a question from Councillor Coult about plans to include children with special educational needs (SEN) when focusing on children from secondary schools highlighted in paragraph 79 of the report, the Head of Transactional and Customer Services confirmed that this would be the case. Councillor Coult said that at the recent County Durham Partnership event there was a commitment from everyone to have those difficult conversations around poverty and improve communications. Moving on to paragraph 83 of

the report about schools being utilised more she asked what plans were in place to pilot this. The Head of Transactional and Customer Services explained that there was a learning programme scheme in place to prepare young people for leaving school and she was looking at what extra support needs would be addressed. Furthermore, there was a model in place looking at support in schools with the North of Tyne carrying out a pilot on building the relationship with a parent and children through activities such as cooking. To develop the right model County Durham would require partners to play a role and to have resources in place to support it.

Councillor Gunn was pleased to see that the holiday activities had come along way and had developed since the ideas were first discussed. She thanked the community and voluntary sectors who helped with that but believed there to be a reliance on them and that this had become the norm. She acknowledged that those organisations were recognised and thanked for their contributions but that it should not be forgotten that it was the Council's responsibility to provide the necessary help and support to our communities. Councillor Gunn asked if the wording in the leaflet provided could be looked at regarding warm spaces as she did not feel that it was as welcoming as the one produced by Gateshead Council leaflet. She went on to say that we needed to ensure people felt welcome and that we would provide a warm space with food available, and this in turn would be easier for the volunteers to pass the message on. The Head of Transactional and Customer Services confirmed that they had based their communications on the one produced by Gateshead but she would look into it further. She added that the Warm Spaces working group met fortnightly and she would take the feedback to them to ensure we got the message right. She confirmed that voluntary and community groups have been given a toolkit and resources to use or personalise it.

Referring to warm home hubs Councillor Hovvels pointed out that Northumberland had been doing this for the last three years and that we could learn from them. She asked that information packs were available in the warm hubs so that people would know who to contact for different services. She continued that there was more of a reliance on volunteers but felt that the more we could help them the better it would be for those vulnerable and people who often slipped through the net. In response the Head of Transactional and Customer Services confirmed that key numbers were included in the leaflet and information pack handed out to all warm space hubs. With regards to Northumberland she advised that she did have ongoing conversations with them and that authorities were working collaboratively on this. Councillor Hovvels also advised of warm hub groups in Birmingham and Leeds that were reaching out to those hard to reach groups such as LGBTQIA+.

Moving on Councillor Hovvels about the continued support for Ukrainian families after sponsorships ended in January 2023 and would there be help to allow families to move back to Ukraine or offer a new scheme of support. The Head of Transactional and Customer Services would pick this up with and clarified that it would be discussed at a future working group, and that she would ask that an update be provided to this Board.

With reference to page 45 of the report Councillor Atkinson said that discussions had taken place at the County Durham Partnership event about child poverty and parent poverty and that any monies seem to be directed towards the child. He said that there needed to be a greater understanding of what money goes into a household and what is needed for. He also asked about the money for each household towards energy costs and asked what if the tenant or landlord received this payment. In response the Head of Transactional and Customer Services explained that the discount on energy bills was administered by the government and she believed that the landlords had been asked to passport the money through to tenants if energy prices were not part of the tenancy agreement. She advised that the government had directed the local authority to support off the grid tenants who use oil based heating. In terms of the household support fund she confirmed that this was to support with food and essential bills and the authority were descriptive of that.

Councillor Shaw informed the Board that there was already provision in place to deal with homelessness with housing providers and the probation service, developed with the last organisation of the Council. The Head of Transactional and Customer Services would pick this up with housing colleagues.

Councillor Gunn informed the Board of a groups called Cornerstone who work with ex-offenders supporting them with accommodation and training. She also asked that we acknowledge what schools were doing in terms of administering the household support fund 3.

Resolved:

- i. That the contents of the report be noted; and
- ii. That Cabinet's approval of the new Poverty Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2026, endorsement of the underpinning Child Poverty Action Plan and agreement to receiving annual updates on the progress of the new Poverty Strategy and Action Plan and Child Poverty Action Plan be noted.
- iii. That a letter be sent to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State outlining the Council's position in relation to poverty.

8 Overview and Scrutiny Six Monthly update to Council

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided Members with the six monthly update report which was to be submitted to Council on 25 January 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Democratic Services Manager highlighted the work undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Team, the focused briefing sessions delivered and the key areas of work covered during this six month period.

Resolved:

That the content of the report to be submitted to Council on 25 January 2023, be noted.

9 Resources - Quarter 2 September 2022: Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2022/23

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the forecast revenue and capital outturn budget position for the Resources service grouping, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget based on the position to the end of September 2022 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Principal Accountant, Resources reported a cash limit underspend of £0.324 million against a revised budget of £25.961 million and a revised Resources capital budget of £10.546 million for 2022/23, with a total expenditure to 31 August 2022 of £1.443 million.

Resolved:

That the forecast of outturn position be noted.

Councillor Wilson left the meeting at 10.51 am

10 County Durham Partnership Update

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change that provided an update on issues being addressed by the County Durham Partnership (CDP). The report also included updates on other key initiatives being carried out in partnership across the county (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Partnerships Team Manager informed Members about the partnership event that had taken place on 30 November 2022 with a focus on supporting our communities through the cost-of-living challenges. Actions from the event would cover any gaps that had been identified.

Members were also informed of the work around poverty action, child poverty and raising awareness around safeguarding.

Councillor Atkinson commented that it was a great event and was good to see the work carried out by the partnership and other networks.

Councillor Coult said that it had been a great opportunity to put ideas forward and great to see them being implemented.

Councillor Batey had concerns around transport, access and connectivity to events, groups and projects. She gave an example of a recent healthy eating half term project at Ouston which was not easily accessible by good transport links. She asked that this be built into future projects to enable people to gain access more easily. The Partnerships Team Manager would take this back for further discussions. Furthermore, Councillor Batey said that three of the four recent projects in the Chester-le-Street area was in an outlying area.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

Councillor Shaw left the meeting at 10.55 am

11 Notice of Key Decisions

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which listed key decisions which were scheduled to be considered by the Executive.

The Democratic Services Manager advised that new to the plan was the following:

- MTFP 2023/24 to 2026/27 and Revenue and Capital Budget 2023/24

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

12 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).

The Democratic Services Manager advised that the schedule provided a list of those petitions that were active, and those that were to be closed and which would be removed from the list prior to the next update.

Since the last update four new e-petitions had been submitted. Two were ongoing and two were rejected as other procedures applied. Two new paper petitions had been submitted and had both completed. A list giving details and current status of all active petitions was attached as Appendix 2 to the report.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.