

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 3 April 2023 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor C Martin (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, R Charlton-Lainé, J Charlton, B Coult, R Crute, O Gunn, L Hovvels, J Howey, P Jopling, C Lines (Vice-Chair), R Manchester, C Marshall, K Robson, K Shaw, M Stead, A Surtees, D Sutton-Lloyd (Substitute) (substitute for A Jackson) and M Wilson

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Batey, I Cochrane, J Cosslett, J Elmer, P Heaviside, A Jackson, L Maddison and A Reed

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd for Councillor Jackson

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 February 2023 were agreed as a correct record and were signed by the Chair.

The Democratic Services Manager referred to the request made by Councillor Crute regarding Councillor Bell, and the letter sent by Councillor Bell to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the failings within the Council Tax System. To date no response had been received.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Community Engagement (AAP) Review

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhood Services that provided an update on the findings from the independent

consultant on the review of the council's community engagement function and our approach to a public countywide consultation (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Partnership and Community Engagement Services provided background to the report and advised the Board that the consultation period was due to end on 23 April 2023. A report would be presented to Cabinet in June 2023 on the proposed way forward and it was scrutiny's opportunity today to make comments on the findings and proposals from ERS consultants. The full report from ERS was available online and had been discussed at a number of Area Action Partnerships (AAPs), the Health and Wellbeing Board, Safe Durham Partnership and some town and parish council meetings.

Chris Barlow, ERS consultants introduced himself to the Board and said that he had been asked to undertake a comprehensive review of the community engagement process delivered by Durham County Council. A steering group had been established with elected members and officers however the brief was operated independently. He had attended board meetings, 1-2-1 sessions, looked at the online surveys and considered desk based information. He gave a detailed presentation which highlighted (full presentation details can be viewed in the file of Minutes):-

- Strengths of the current AAP approach – Durham put a lot of research into the work carried out and the commitment and quality of staff involved were an asset to the authority
- Rationale for revising the current approach – need to operate differently and Durham were a victim of their own success in the management of funding as was too resource intensive. The volume of work around funding was too bureaucratic and staff wanted to get back out in the community.
- Recommended changes – included hyper-local community engagement with the cessation of the current AAPs. Flexible community networks and the streamlining of funding. Strategic grant process to replace area budgets. Increased opportunities for match funding with four year funding cycle, and the introduction of community development small budgets for grass root organisation.

The Chair thanked Mr Barlow for his presentation and asked members to consider how Durham County Council could potentially engage with the community going forward and what could that model look like. He asked members not to ask specific questions on local matters.

Councillor Surtees had a high regard for the AAPs and agreed that the biggest concern was around the bureaucracy of funding but asked why the decision was taken to deconstruct the whole AAP system rather than

replacing the parts that needed improvements and those parts that people had commented upon. In response Mr Barlow commented on how much time it takes to process the current funding arrangements and the help provided to organisations year on year which was resource intensive. The model would introduce a strategic grant that would be co-produced within communities and would allow staff to work on community priorities with an understanding on the ground. Councillor Surtees added that she was concerned that funding would be agreed by the CDSP and those smaller organisations would be affected. Mr Barlow explained that the funding would be co-produced with partners and that it would not be centralised and although funding would still need approval and sign off it would not need to be agreed by AAP boards. This would free up staff time and allow them to communicate more with people.

Councillor Hovvels said that the AAPs had strengths in reaching out to the community but that they also engaged with national and international visitors and asked if their views had been sought on the proposals. She believed that there was diversity within the County and an understanding of what the community was about. She was concerned about gaps for the voluntary sector in these new proposals and the funding streams. Mr Barlow said that international and national visitors had not been approached as this review was about what was best for County Durham. He added that Durham were doing a lot of things that other authorities were not doing but the emphasis of the review was about the people of Durham. With regards to the grass root organisations and the gaps he said that by enabling frontline staff to engage with the community and discuss projects and help take ideas forward would be beneficial. He said that the proposed funding process was included in full within his report.

Councillor Adam was part of the GAMP (Great Aycliffe and Midldridge Partnership) which worked really well so he asked if something was not broke why fix it. He commented with regards to resource pressures and the different types of funding, that assumptions had been made with AAP boards and the small number of individuals involved. With GAMP he advised that the board is representative of the community it served, just as it was for this meeting of COSMB. With regards to the community development workers he asked how much research had been carried out into whether there would be a duplication of this area of work carried out as some of it would already exist. Mr Barlow said that there were lots of organisations who fund people and work on the frontline with their own workloads and agendas, but what he was referring to in his report was a defined role setting out objectives of what needed to be achieved and was a different role to that already in place. With regards to resources he said that he had spoken to staff and understood the need to enable them to work in the community rather than being tied up in the processes. Referring to GAMP he said that it was a well chaired and well managed meeting that was functional and well attended. However, with a

busy agenda it did not leave room to discuss important issues such as social isolation for the older people in smaller villages. Councillor Adam felt that this was a snapshot from one meeting and that the GAMP board was representative of the community it served. Mr Barlow said that from that one meeting it would not attract the younger people in the community to attend.

Councillor Jopling was under the impression that AAPs should interact with the public and bridge the gap between the county and the public. However, in her opinion this had failed over the last 12 years and not all residents had heard of the AAPs or understood what they did. Streamlining the processes for funding she believed would help councillors have more say over their own budgets. She felt that the AAP agendas were full of presentations that had already been seen in another meeting and wasted a lot of time. She agreed that the staff were efficient and helpful but that the processes were a problem and that the proposals were a better option going forward.

Councillor Gunn had a different perspective to that of Councillor Jopling of her AAP and she did not recognise what had been said in the report. She was sceptical of the independence of the review process and the lack of engagement with councillors. She asked how the 1-2-1 sessions had been selected and asked if the session with Cabinet had been neutral. She asked if a comparison had been based with other local authorities when carrying out the desk based review of the policies and practices. She agreed with the comments made by Councillor Hovvels in that our AAPs had been applauded in the strength of our own AAP boards. She asked how many AAP meetings attended had been ineffective. She felt that there was a cross over between the work carried out between the staff and the local councillors and asked if this had been considered within the report. She said that the list of responsibilities for the community engagement workers was what the AAP staff already did. Mr Barlow agreed that this was what the staff currently did however if they were unburdened from the processes they would be able to engage more. He agreed with the point about the role of the elected members and said that it was evident that some were very good at engagement. The political conflict within his report had come up in the 1-2-1 discussions regarding politics and personalities. Good practice from neighbouring authorities had been found with the likes of Stockton who had a much more streamlined process for funding. He confirmed that all councillors had been asked after AAP meetings to contact him with their views. He did receive some telephone calls from people who did not want to contribute at a large event. He referred to the brief and that meetings with the steering group were open and he was not told what the outcome should be. With regards to the Cabinet meetings he advised that each Cabinet member had their own opinions and views but he received no steer from them as to the expected outcome. He confirmed that ERS had carried out an open consultative process.

In response to a question from Councillor Gunn about who was on the steering group the Head of Engagement and Partnerships confirmed that members were selected in consultation with the portfolio holder and was comprised of Councillors Scott, Shield and Martin. There were three key officers involved and support officers.

Councillor Howey said that AAPs do work well and make sure that people are presented however some councillors were not on the AAP boards. She agreed with previous points in that not everyone knew what that AAPs were. She asked how we could ensure that organisations just starting out knew where to seek help and support and how we got the word out. Mr Barlow said that involvement varied across the areas and that the public representative on the AAP also faced the same challenges as councillors in that not everyone was represented. By having more open forums would allow more dialogue and link back to the priorities of the County Durham Partnership. The Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement Services said that over 15,000 were on the broader forum distribution, however it was not know how many of those contacts were active. The service had worked on publicity about the AAPs and had formalised stickers/posters and they did have a social media presence.

In responding to a further question from Councillor Howey about funding, Mr Barlow said that it would be for the council to decide on the rules and what happened next.

Referring to the consultation Councillor Atkinson said that we were the victims of our own success. He believed that we already had the hyper-model that was being proposed as we involved a number of different bodies in the AAP board meeting, including housing, police, fire and senior officers at the Council. He said that in his opinion if something was not broken we should not try to fix it, and he had no idea how this would all work. Mr Barlow said that there was evidence in the report that showed the majority of people did want things to change and evolve however the decision was for the Council to take forward.

Councillor Coult asked how officers felt about the funding process and Mr Barlow explained that officer felt that over time the process had evolved and was now too resource intensive. They would prefer to do more of the work that the enjoyed being out in the community.

Councillor Wilkes joined the meeting at 10.50 a.m.

Councillor Sutton-Lloyd said that no organisation should become complacent and the review looked at how to manage things better for our residents. He agreed that AAPs were good in part but that marketing was a major problem and had been from day one. He said that in his opinion the process had

become more important than the project and created so much work for officers. He agreed that to free up more time for officers would benefit the community.

Councillor Robson commented that this was a well written and comprehensive report and he was yet to see an organisation that had been run the same way for 15 years without making any improvements. He said that the change was good, healthy and opened up opportunities and productivity. He asked if a progress report would come back to committee. Mr Barlow confirmed that an assessment would be carried out within 6 months of any changes however this would be dependant on what the Council decided to implement. The Chair explained that it would be for Cabinet to make that decisions and then this committee could scrutinise in future.

Councillor Charlton-Lainé said that as staff had been mentioned a lot in the report it would have been beneficial to see their comments, and that if capacity had been so sparse why had there not been a recommendation to employ more staff. Councillor Charlton-Laine asked why the Labour Group had not been invited to the steering group or invited for comment. Mr Barlow confirmed that they had reached out to Councillor Henig, former Leader of the Council to understand the background and the unique role of the AAPs. He went on to explain that it was not his role to question who was on the steering group but he believed that through the consultation he had kept the process as open as possible with members being invited to events. With regards to the staff comments he would not divulge what individual members of staff had commented. The Head of Community Engagement and Partnerships said that staff had been encouraged to take part in the consultation exercise and that he had arranged a meeting with staff prior to the recommendations being reported to Cabinet. He explained that the steering group membership was a Cabinet decision.

Councillor Marshall said that there was a lot of passion around the council from everyone involved in decision making and that people do have a difference of opinion. As Durham was one of the largest local councils it was different to other local authorities in terms of the rurality, diversity and needed a local structure in order to engage with the Council. He asked if there was numerical data to back up the recommendations within the report and asked how many of the AAPs were 'broken' across the county. He had no problem in making improvements to the AAPs but said that a steering group that was not a true representation across the council was not the best way in which to do it. There was no evidence or steer from the Cabinet and with so many differences of opinion he proposed that Cabinet be recommended to refer consideration of the final report and recommendations to full Council.

Councillor Howey commented that she had not made this debate political and said that all members of the Council had been given the opportunity to take part in the consultation process.

Councillor Crute seconded the motion from Councillor Marshall. He was concerned that the steering group had been formed without a representative from the largest political group on the council and said that engagement should have been made through the 126 councillors not just the 10 Cabinet members.

The Chair asked members to vote on the motion for the AAP decision to be made by full Council:

11 For, 8 Against and therefore the motion was carried.

Councillor Manchester was concerned that there would be a lack of local influence and knowledge within the new funding proposals being made by the CDP board. He said that there was a misconception that delays in funding were down to the AAP staff when this was more of a funding team problem. He said that there was a lack of young people on the AAP boards and there was nothing within the report that suggested an improvement to that. Mr Barlow said that the report referred to locally co-produced plans for strategic grants and this would include councillors. With regards to the delays he agreed that this was due to process and the amount of work teams had to deliver e.g. highways. He commented that some areas were stronger with a youth focus but it was proposed that things were done differently with a dedicated role, which would require resource to make that happen.

Referring to the point made earlier about marketing Councillor Gunn said that the key issue was engagement and getting people involved. She asked why such a traumatic change when small things could be improved and make a huge difference. Mr Barlow explained that the direction was clear on the way forward with some elements continuing with key partners. With regards to the AAPs he said that flexibility would be key in helping to improve meetings, with an option for online and bespoke meetings.

Councillor Lines commented that within the report there was reference to concerns about repeat funding to some organisations and activities to be undertaken to find ways of working with repeat applicants with regards to other methods of funding and longer term viability. The new model would allow new and different projects to take place. He asked if there was any action that addressed the emerging ecological and climate emergencies. Mr Barlow said that the longer term grants would allow time for research into other options available. With regards to the ecological and climate agenda he advised that the Council would provide that level of detail.

Councillor Adam said that he welcomed any change for the better but believed this had gone too far in terms of the changes required. He said that we should focus on the positives within the report and streamline the funding process.

Councillor Stead said that the report was very positive and credible and that we should never stop looking at improvements and making things more efficient. He agrees with the flexible approach to funding and he welcomed the input from staff into the consultation process. He believed that the Labour Group did not want to be involved in the process.

The Chair thanked Mr Barlow for his report and presentation and the members for the contribution to the debate. He said that there was still an opportunity to get involved in the countywide consultation and asked members to agree to the recommendations.

Resolved:

- (i) That the findings and recommendations of ERS consultants' final report be noted;
- (ii) That the approach to the countywide consultation and consider what views it may wish to submit to the consultation be noted;
- (iii) That the opportunity for all elected members to submit individual views via the online survey be noted; and
- (iv) That the COSMB recommend to Cabinet that consideration of the final Community Engagement (AAP) Review report and recommendations be referred to full Council.

6 Customer Feedback Q3 Update report

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director Resources which provided an overview of the wide range of information collected from our customers that describe their experiences of using our services, covering performance in quarter three 2022/23 for the period October to December 2022 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager advised that demand had increased, equating to 62,000 extra contacts which was mainly driven by the cost of living crisis. More contact was now through digital channels and face to face contact had fallen by half. He reported that the majority of complaints continued to be about missed bin collections. Regarding complaints, 98 statutory complaints had been received for Adult and Health Services and 44 for Children and Young People's Services. Two of the 20 decisions made by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had been upheld. Paragraph 44 onwards of the report referred to recent developments including the introduction of Chatbot and Eckoh systems.

Members were advised that future reports would combine the customer feedback and quarterly performance reports.

Councillor Adam referred to the missed bin collections and the fact that 785 of complaints were upheld and asked what action would be taken to ensure we delivered an efficient service. He had concerns around the introduction of Chatbot if it included AI and asked if we should be promoting this. With regards to Eckoh he asked that regional dialect would be picked up and if this system would be efficient. In response, the Corporate Policy and Performance Manager said that investigations were carried out into the missed bin collections and the data did not point to the same areas however he would feed the comments back to the service. He confirmed that Chatbot did not include artificial intelligence and was a rules based system that picked up on key words used. With regards to the accents for Eckoh he would feed back this concern to the service.

Councillor Coult referred to the 'what three words' scheme and asked if this could be used across all service areas. In response she was advised that there would be no reason not to roll this out as the capacity is available and would pass these comments back to the service.

Referring to paragraphs 39-42 of the report Councillor Gunn expressed concerns about the number of statutory complaints and asked this was being improved. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager would report this back to the service.

In relation to the introduction of Chatbot Councillor Lines asked if there was any data available to show a reduction in contact points and response times. In response he was advised that this data would be included in subsequent reports.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

7 Q3 Resources Budget Outturn

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the updated 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 December 2022 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager, Resources and Regeneration highlighted the quarter three forecast position forecasting a cash limit underspend of £0.094 million against a revised budget of £25.943 million. He went on to advise that the Resources Cash Limit balance carried forward at 31 March 2023 was

forecast to be circa £0.544 million, and that other earmarked reserves under the direct control of Resources Management Team were forecast to total £15.520 million at 31 March 2023. The revised Resources capital budget was £4.275 million for 2022/23, with a total expenditure to 31 December 2022 of £2.481 million.

Councillor Adam expressed concerns about the under achieved budget, for example for Revenue and Benefits and Digital Services. The Finance Manager explained that there had been some lost income for digital services with the academisation of schools but assured him that Heads of Services were actively looking at the budget and would take into account any income received. With regards to Revenue and Benefits he advised that again this budget was being monitored closely and there should be some improvements seen by year end.

Resolved:

That the forecast of outturn position be noted.

8 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. One new paper petition had been submitted and had completed. The schedule provided a list of those petitions that were active, and those that were to be closed which would be removed from the list prior to the next update.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

9 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:

- Medium Term Financial Plan and Review of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.