

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 1A , County Hall, Durham on **Friday 22 September 2023 at 1.30 pm**

Present:

Councillor R Crute (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors V Andrews, A Batey, B Coult, L Fenwick (Substitute) (substitute for S Deinali), P Heaviside, L Hovvels, M Johnson, P Jopling, C Lines (Vice-Chair), L Maddison, C Marshall, C Martin, J Miller, B Moist, E Peeke, A Reed, K Shaw, M Stead, A Sterling and A Surtees

Prior to the commencement of the meeting the Chair referred to the sad passing of Councillor Leanne Kennedy, tributes had been made at the Council meeting on 20 September 2024, and he asked members to stand for a moments silence.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Charlton, Deinali, Elmer, Hawley and Marshall.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Fenwick for Councillor Deinali.

3 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Surtees declared an interest in Item 9 on the agenda in relation to a petition at Hawthorn.

4 Community Engagement Review Next Steps

The Board considered a report from the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change that provided an update of the council's review of its' main community engagement function – the council's Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) following Cabinet approval on 12 July 2023 to implement a revised model (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement delivered a detailed presentation that from the AAP reform being an early priority for the Joint Administration to the proposed model being agreed for implementation by Cabinet in July 2023 and he went on to cover the following point:

- Consultation responses/feedback
- Consultation –feedback analysis
- COSMB –feedback and recommendations
- ERS principles not to be adopted
- ERS principles to be adopted
- Local Network model
- Local Network Panel
- Local Networks –Next steps

Councillor Jopling disagreed that AAPs were the right vehicle to get messages out to the wider public, as the figures from the survey proved, and that people still did not know what an AAP was. In her opinion the same people attended the AAP meetings and the same people/organisations applied for and were successful in receiving funding. She referred to the potential changes to the County Council electoral division boundaries under the Boundary Commission Review and the impact that would have on some of the towns and areas and whether the funding for the AAP area would follow. She welcomed the change to the funding process as a fairer distribution was required and made AAP resources made available to more groups. Councillor Jopling commented that she had noticed that her particular AAP Board had become more political since her first term of office up to now and asked how we could ensure politics did not come into the board in future. In response the Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement said that further training would be available for the Chair in order to move the agenda on at the meeting and move away from political discussions. A lot of work was being undertaken with regards to the boundary review and time would be needed to work through any changes after the November deadline. With regards to funding he advised that over 600 groups had received this, but some groups returned for further funding on different projects.

Councillor Jopling was concerned that a lot of groups did not have the vehicle or technology available to them to apply for funding and she said that this needs to be addressed. The Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement explained that if staff could be more involved within the community setting and that the funding process was simplified this would help achieve that in future.

The Chair referred to the timetable for the boundary review as two dates had been mentioned on the Commission's website, 28 November and 3 October.

The Policy and Project Support Manager indicated that she would seek clarification on these timeframes.

Councillor Peeke said that the responses to the survey were not good, and she was surprised as so many people were on the forum and asked how many people were accessing it. She went on to discuss political neutrality and how this could be achieved when there was a lack of people wanting to become a board member. From her experience she had asked a family member to join the AAP board that she was a member of as no one had applied. With regards to funding she agreed that it was the same people applying again and again and also agreed that it was difficult for smaller villages and organisations to apply for the funding. She did not feel that AAPs were well known and that the larger organisations were receiving all of the funding. In response the Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement re-iterated his earlier point that over 600 separate organisations had received funding and that staff would have the capacity to reach out more and help those smaller organisations and groups in future. He went on to explain that the new proposals would restrict the membership and as it was inevitable that people would be members of more than one organisation that they would need to declare an interest, which at the moment we were not seeing that. Robust terms of reference would be required moving forward and a single approach would ensure consistency across all areas.

The Chair said that the governance arrangements would go back to Cabinet in September and that this Board would also receive a report to comment upon. He added that it was important to have a consistent approach around reporting any declarations of interest.

Councillor Sterling welcomed this well overdue review and the simplified funding process proposals. She was aware a lot of groups were ran by elderly residents who would need support. Referring to the non-political element she said that this would be difficult to achieve when in some area there would be a huge concentration from one political party. She did not agree that the Chairs should be changed every 12 months as it would make more sense to see through any longer term projects from inception until their end. The Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement explained that the position of chair would alternate between chair and vice-chair so that they would still be actively involved. He appreciated that in some areas there would be different political parties in place and that would reflect the nature of the local area but these proposals were about trying to achieve balance.

Councillor Stead commented that there was a marketing issue around the AAPs as no one had heard of them and that funding was unfairly distributed for those people who applied in the first place. The issue was that if more people were aware of the funding they would apply. He said that it would be

helpful to have a designated landing page for the AAPs that was visually welcoming and easy to navigate.

Councillor Moist said that there was a lot of detail within the report and that we all had views on the AAPs. He had no problem with the political make up of the AAPs as represented the majority of how people voted in that area. The consultation survey responses had been very low and engagement had not been good which could reflect the way people view the AAPs, as not being inclusive or the best vehicle to apply for funding. He was aware that a lot of organisations were ran by volunteers and the recommendations put forward would exclude local members from making decisions about projects in their local areas. He understood the need for change and that the AAPs and the funding process could be streamlined but a better engagement process could have resulted in better ideas being brought forward. Going forward he suggested that uniformity of policies and processes was required and asked that what was 'not' being put forward was looked at and why. In response the Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement said that all suggestions were included in the report and that this process was partly about simplifying the process. The proposed role of a Local Network Co-ordinator would still provide a support role for the members neighbourhood budget.

With regards to funding Councillor Reed said that it was a good thing as helped people and community groups but felt that not enough monitoring took place around this to check if projects and activities took place. As this was the public purse she asked how this would be scrutinised in future. The Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement assured members that the AAP funding was regularly looked at by Internal Audit to ensure transparency. With regards to delivery and assurances he advised that some board members would act as a champion in their area to visit any projects that have taken place or attended any activities that had been arranged.

Councillor Maddison believed that the AAPs should be non political but agreed with points made that it was the same people who applied for funding year on year. She asked how we could engage with the smaller organisations and how we informed them of the funding available. She was concerned that the changes to boundaries and the upcoming elections in 2025 with new members being elected who would need a lot of preparation work by officers to ensure they were familiar with processes. She said that a more phased approach would have been welcomed so that we were not rushing through all of these changes.

The Chair commented that all potential candidates should be aware of the areas and be informed of any issues before they stood for election. He did not feel it was the job of officers to prepare candidates for that role.

The Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement said that they were approaching this with a soft launch before elections in May and would support members in advance of the elections by preparing data profiles on local areas.

Councillor Batey agreed that we needed to evolve and be re-shaped and she did welcome some of the changes, especially the outreach work which would enable organisations to receive the help they required to complete paperwork and for the nature of the AAPs to be explained to people. She said that the AAPs should be politically balanced to serve the way in which the electorate had voted. She added it was the role of the elected member to disseminate information to the voluntary sector and smaller groups by visiting them, talking to them, and supporting them where they needed it. She also agreed that a declaration of interest form was required.

Councillor K Shaw left the meeting at 14.55

Councillor Coult asked that the project catalogue be kept up to date.

Referring to the consultant's report, Councillor Surtees had concerns about the decision making process as they seemed to be the determinant rather than Cabinet making the decisions. She did not feel that the consultation was worth the money that it cost to run. With regards to the working/steering group she asked if the Chair of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board would still be included on the membership and if this would still be relevant given the different political party involved. She went on to say that the removal of the local member in the decision making over a four year plan and instead having strategic oversight was a mistake and too high level. She said that these types of decision should be led by local communities and members and not made at high level. She agreed with a previous point that the timing for this was not great on the run up to local elections in 2025 and during a pre-election period. She felt that engaging for public representatives in April could exclude some people as they would not know at this stage whether they would still be a county councillor or town and parish councillor until after the elections in May.

Moving on to the budget she did not believe that this should be equal across the AAPs and should instead be based on population and need. Councillor Surtees believed that to make the AAPs non political was a breach of the Equality and Discrimination Act as for those members of a political party and the beliefs they held but also for those independent members. As public representatives would be given a fair opportunity she believed the same should apply to members of a political group. Conflict of interest should be demonstrated but that member should not be removed from the board as transparency was the key. Finally, Councillor Surtees did not understand

why the County Durham Partnership was suddenly going to take ownership when they had played no part or had no engagement in the AAPs previously.

In response the Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement would take those comments back and advised that Cabinet would set the direction for implementation and for the membership of the steering group. It was important to note that this was a joint effort and would require the involvement of the AAP co-ordinators.

Councillors Batey and Moist left the meeting at 15.03

Councillor Hovvels commented that all AAPs operate differently and in her experience they had been helpful and had developed good working relationships. She asked if the Town and Parish Councils had been involved in the process. As some communities had better facilities than others she felt that it was about ensuring community capacity and need and identifying what was available and addressing what was not available. She also agreed about the point of being a community champion and leader to ensure these things were carried out.

Councillor Lines commended the Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement on the language used within the report, especially with understanding off of the acronyms. He said that community engagement was really important as was the language that we used, and that it should be clear and easy to understand. He agreed with the point made about getting the marketing right.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and presentation and members for the debate today with what was a very important change. The next report to Cabinet would also be made available for discussion at COSMB.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be received and the comments noted and a further progress report come back to a future meeting, be agreed.

5 Digital Solutions

The Board received a presentation from the Head of Digital Services that supported new ways of working through digital solutions (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Digital Services highlighted the difference between the old and new ways of working, and how COVID had accelerated the response to more digital ways of working.

Members were informed about:

- the benefits of digital solutions to smarter working
- the digital strategy
- digital council
- ways of working
- Office 365
- learning, training and skills
- meeting room video conferencing
- video conferencing usage statistics
- infrastructure
- equipment

Councillor Surtees pointed out that digital was not always the best solution and that we should be mindful for those who did not have any digital skills. She was also concerned that as software was updated and changed not everyone had the funding in place to upgrade equipment to use this new software, especially in schools. The Head of Digital Services recognised that digital was not always key for everyone and that it was still a choice. The team looked at how best to support individuals and organisations with device provision and connectivity. The infrastructure was all about getting the right kit in the right place at the right time. She advised that capital bids had been earmarked for future years.

In response to a question from Councillor Peeke, the Head of Digital Services explained that there were a range of ways and schemes in place to offset carbon emissions including tracking and working with other teams in laptop renewals and recycling devices to get them back into use.

The Digital Durham Manager added that there was a re-boot scheme in place whereby a redundant kit could be re-purposed and sent back out into the community. She advised that there was a scheme ongoing for inclusive training but that if any Member had any queries they could contact the Digital Durham Team.

Councillor Andrews praised the hybrid working as this had allowed social workers at times to type up notes as meetings were taking place rather than having to take work home. The Head of Digital Services said that enabling those members of staff to use an NHS e-mail address had also helped them access GP information, which in turn reduced stress levels and workload.

The Chair commented on the Members pilot scheme for the new CRM and being able to access real time information that was invaluable and asked that this be updated once it rolls out next month. In response the Head of Digital Services said that the team would need to have regular feedback on this and that the more it was used the better it would become.

In response to a question from Councillor Maddison about reporting something on site when spotted the Head of Digital Services said that the system would be tweaked to use 'what three words' and that they were looking at mapping layers.

Councillor L Fenwick left the meeting at 15.33

Resolved:

That the presentation was noted.

6 County Durham Partnerships 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 Interim Strategic Manager, Partnerships informed Members that the CDP event this year would take place on 17 November focusing on celebrating 10 years of health and wellbeing in the local authority and Health and Wellbeing Boards. The event would also coincide with the Lumiere festival coming back to the County.

Members were also informed of the work around the fun and food programme, the economic strategy, the UK's Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2023, and the Government's Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

7 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 were the following:

- MTFP - Update on development of MTFP including consideration of options for consultation
- Council Tax Base 2024/25 and Forecast Surplus / Deficit on Collection Fund
- MTFP - Update on development of MTFP including analysis of the Autumn Statement

- MTFP - Details of Provisional Finance Settlement
- External Contractor Staff Suitability Policy
- Adoption of the Inclusive Economic Strategy Delivery Plan
- Milburngate (Exempt Report) – likely to slip into November

Resolved:

That the content of the report 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 five new e-petitions had been submitted, two were rejected as did not qualify under the scheme. Three e-petitions were currently ongoing and collecting signatures via the website.

Three new paper petitions had been submitted, two had closed and one was rejected as other procedures applied.

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, the petitions that were shaded had previously been reported, one had been responded to and the e-petition had closed for signature and was awaiting a response from the service.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.