

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Tuesday 3 September 2024 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor R Crute (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors V Andrews, A Batey, J Charlton, S Deinali, J Elmer, P Heaviside, L Hovvets, M Johnson, C Lines (Vice-Chair), C Marshall, J Miller, E Peeke, K Shaw, M Stead and A Surtees

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors B Coult, C Hunt, C Martin, B Moist, A Sterling and S Zair.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

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 1 - 2024/2025

The Board considered a report of the Director 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 April to 30 June 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Legal Officer (Governance) reported that there were two directed surveillance operations which related to the sale of illicit tobacco products.

One of the authorisations involved two premises and was part of a criminal investigation, which had resulted in closure notices issued to both premises for 3 months. Six individuals were also interviewed under caution and 3 individuals received formal warnings.

In respect of the second authorisation, the surveillance was used to identify an individual who was operating a premises on a daily basis as well as being the believed business owner. The surveillance was able to connect the person operating the retail premises to the residence above. The retail premises was subsequently closed by way of a closure order and enquiries into the business owner were continuing.

The Chair commented that it would be interesting to see what new legislation from government would bring through their anti-smoking strategy and the increase of electronic cigarette sales.

Resolved:

- (i) That the quarterly report on the Council's use of RIPA for the period covering quarter 1 2024/25, be received.
- (ii) That the powers were being used consistently with the Council's policy and that the policy remained fit for purpose.

6 Workforce Strategy - 2024 - 2027

The Board considered a report from the Corporate Director of Resources that provided an update on the council's revised Workforce Strategy for the period 2024 – 2027 following Cabinet approval in May 2024; and the key achievements from the previous Workforce Strategy for the period 2021 – 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of HR and Employee Services presented a detailed report and highlighted that the refreshed Workforce Strategy was a positive future focused document which would demonstrate through our workforce, despite those challenges the Council would continue to deliver against our priorities for County Durham. The strategy would build on the positive work undertaken over 2021-2023 to embed our organisational values, improved employee engagement and develop a council that attracted and retained high performing staff.

The Head of HR and Employee Services went on to inform the Board about the achievements so far through:

- Planning for the Future
- Building Leadership Capacity
- Developing the Workforce
- Being A Good Employer

The Head of HR and Employee Services said that it was important to note that this strategy would not address all issues but had an umbrella focus underpinned by service workforce plans. With regards to recruitment, she advised of the different approaches adopted by the use of social media platforms, and that the Council were no longer struggling with recruitment. The apprenticeship retention was highlighted with 71% of staff remaining with the authority.

Paragraphs 14-18 of the report focused on the priorities over three areas:

- Priority 1 – Enabling the organisation to deliver through our people
- Priority 2 – Being a good employer and creating a people first culture
- Priority 3 – Building capacity and developing great talent

In conclusion the Head of HR and Employee Services said that this strategy was about how to make a difference through having plans in place to support and assess. She added that any changes from central government and the new manifesto would be monitored and regular reports would go through CMT.

The Chair said that apprentices were a valuable addition to the Council and we had seen the benefits through the likes of the Social Work Academy. With 29% of apprentices decided to leave the authority he asked if we knew why and where they went on to. The Head of HR and Employee Services confirmed that this was monitored and advised that this data was presented to CMT as to where the employee has moved on to. Some decide to go into further education or go into alternative employment. She added that exit interviews were held and asked how they had found the programme.

Councillor Elmer asked a similar question in how we monitor when someone leaves and the reasons behind that, and if they were able to provide comments anonymously. The Head of HR and Employee Services said that a staff survey has been conducted a few years ago with a 38% return rate and highlighted that staff felt leadership, development opportunities and training were positive. A further staff survey would be conducted next year. Staff also had the opportunity to write via 'Dear John' and a vast number of questions were dealt with. The Head of HR and Employee Services added that exit interviews and new starter surveys also took place.

Councillor Hovvels was pleased to see the Council were dementia friendly and that wellbeing of staff was a priority. She stressed the importance of support for staff who were dealing with and recovering from cancer and unable to return to work, as she was aware that there were occasions where staff did not feel supported. She asked that face to face interactions were carried out if appropriate to provide that level of support required. The Head

of HR and Employee Services advised that the Council did have a Wellbeing Officer, trained in health and wellbeing, and would be able to provide that support required. She went on to advise that the Occupational Health Services and Counselling Services would also be available to support staff, and that the Council had signed up to the Dying to Work Charter with the Trade Unions.

Councillor Lines was pleased to see the encouraging content within the report and to positive news around recruitment. He asked if there were still some current outliers in recruitment and any teams that were still struggling to recruit. The Head of HR and Employee Services said that the authority were not complacent in recruitment as there were still problems both nationally and locally. There was a robust strategy in place around Residential and Social Care however there were still challenges with regards to Children's Homes. There were still some challenges around recruitment in planning, surveyors, and construction but it was pointed out that the Council could not compete with the private sector. The Council were committed to growing our own talent pipeline and would continue to assess pay grades and look at other attractive benefits to an employee such as the Local Government Pension Scheme.

Referring to residential social care the Chair was aware of the levels of sickness around mental health issues and would be interested to see the correlation of agency staff. The Head of HR and Employee Services reported that we were less reliant now on agency staff as it was difficult to recruit.

Resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted and the adoption of the new Workforce Strategy be supported.

7 Quarter Four, 2023/24 - Performance Management Report

The Board considered a report of the Chief Executive which provided an overview of progress towards delivery of the key priorities within the Council Plan 2023-27 and covered performance in and to the end of quarter four, 2023/24, January to March 2024 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager presented a detailed report and highlighted some key areas including high employment levels, improved domestic waste levels diverted from landfill, consistent demand for children's social care, decrease of sickness levels, £1 million from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to reduce food poverty and apprenticeship retention.

Councillor Elmer referring to paragraph 44 of the report about road traffic accidents said he would be interested to learn more about why these

numbers had increased. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager advised that there had been an update the SSOSC meeting in June and as far as he was aware there was no reported trend but that it was individual reported accidents. He would look further into the figures and provide information to Councillor Elmer.

Councillor Miller was concerned about the figures for people accessing public transport and the difficulties for people trying to get to key locations, often having to travel on 2 or 3 buses. He referred to the satisfaction results from paragraph 311 within the report, and highlighted the bus stops at 69%, waiting time at 60%, punctuality 64%, all of which were lower than the England average. He asked what was going wrong in County Durham. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager would chase this up with the service and provide further details to Councillor Miller.

The Chair said that it would be helpful to see how this compared regionally through NECA and that it would be helpful for this to feed back into the thematic scrutiny meeting.

Resolved

That the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter four performance, and the actions being taken to address areas of challenge, be noted.

8 Chief Executive's Office - Revenue and Capital Outturn 2023/24

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 March 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager, Resources and Regeneration highlighted the quarter four outturn position showing that the service achieved a cash limit underspend of £0.806 million against a revised budget of £4.323 million. The CEO cash limit balance carried forward at 31 March 2024 was circa £0.866 million. Other earmarked reserves under the direct control of CEO total £0.939 million at 31 March 2024 and the revised CEO capital budget was £1.892 million for 2023/24, with a total expenditure to 31 March 2024 of £1.234 million.

Resolved:

That the forecast revenue and capital outturn budget position be noted.

9 Resources - Revenue and Capital Outturn 2023/24

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 March 2024 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager, Resources and Regeneration reported a full year outturn position showing that the service achieved a cash limit underspend of £ 2.089 million against a revised budget of £27.328 million. The Resources cash limit balance carried forward at 31 March 2024 was £1.133 million and other earmarked reserves under the direct control of Resources Management Team (RMT) total £3.420 million at 31 March 2024. The revised Resources capital budget was £4.745 million for 2023/24, with a total expenditure to 31 March 2024 of £3.833 million.

Councillor Miller referred to the reported overspend in barristers' fees of £150,000, which he noted was reported in the last quarter and asked that this be monitored. The Finance Manager explained that this was due to an increase in the number of Children's Social Care cases and the number of ongoing complex cases, but he assured members that this would be addressed within the budget.

Referring to paragraph 10 of the report, Councillor Surtees asked about HB transfer payments and income, and if the Council were making the payments and then when received the uplift from government this would put right any discrepancies. The Finance Manager advised that the second column within the table (Actual Outturn) showed Housing Benefit expenditure of £114.298 million and income of £111.898 and explained that the Council were faced with pressures relating to temporary accommodation and supported accommodation, where the Council cannot claim full benefit subsidy.

Resolved:

That the forecast of outturn position be noted.

10 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 provided an update on the following areas of the plan:

- Medium Term Financial Plan, Council Tax Reduction – would be reported to Special COSMB on 3 October;
- Customer Access Points – would be reported to Special COSMB on 3 October before going to Cabinet on 16 October;
- Leisure Transformation – would be reported to a Special Joint EE/ESC OSC on 23 September;
- Food Waste Collection – had been reported to an ESC OSC on 24 July.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.