

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD

At a Meeting of **Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 20 October 2014 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor P Stradling in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors A Batey, J Blakey, D Boyes, J Chaplow, R Crute, B Graham, K Henig, A Hopgood, P Lawton, J Lethbridge, H Liddle, T Nearney, C Potts, M Simmons, R Todd, S Wilson and I Jewell (substitute for J Turnbull)

Faith Community Representative:

Revd K Phipps

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Armstrong, R Bell, A Bonner, D Hall, A Shield and J Turnbull.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor I Jewell substitute for Councillor J Turnbull.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 12 September 2014 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The Head of Planning and Performance referred to Item 3 of the minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2014 and advised that Councillor Liddle had been provided with an update regarding the Children's Centre at Witton Gilbert.

Referring to item 8 of the minutes, the Head of Planning and Performance informed the Board that Councillor S Wilson had been provided with the breakdown on hate crimes that had been reported and advised that the information could be provided to other members on request.

4 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 County Durham Partnership Update

The Board considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive that provided an update on issues being addressed by the County Durham Partnership (CDP) including key issues from the Board, the five Thematic Partnerships and all Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). The report also included updates on other key initiatives being carried out in partnership across the County (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Planning and Performance highlighted work carried out within the County Durham Partnership in recent months and the priorities set out in the Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS).

Resolved:

That the information contained in the report be noted.

6 Welfare Reform Update

The Board considered a joint report of the Assistant Chief Executive, Corporate Director, Resources and Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic Development that provided an update on welfare reform and its impacts on the county and outlined proposals to extend the work to encompass a wider remit looking at poverty in the County (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Policy and Communications reported that the following major issues had been implemented by the Government so far:

- Localisation of Council Tax Support;
- Restricting housing benefit payments due to 'under occupancy';
- Applying a 'benefit cap' to any household receiving more than £500 a week in benefit;
- Introduction of Personal Independence Payments (PIP) for new claimants and some existing Disability Living Allowance (DLA) claimants.

It was reported that there were no overall figures available for the UK on how many people would be affected by the changes brought forward by the Welfare Reform Act 2011, however, within County Durham it was still estimated that approximately 95,000 households would be affected by one or more of the welfare reforms.

Since the last report to members, the government had set the cap for total welfare spending at £119 billion for 2015-16, rising in line with inflation to £127 billion in 2018-19. The cap was in line with current welfare expenditure in 2014/15 and included child benefit, incapacity benefit, winter fuel payment and income support, but did not include state pension and Jobseeker's Allowance.

Councillor S Wilson referred to tackling poverty and asked about the criteria that applied for the new family test and was concerned whether one size fits all. The Head of Policy and Communication would investigate and report back to members.

Councillor A Hopgood referred to the credit union salary deduction scheme and suggested that it should not be assumed that this was just used as an alternative facility to high interest or payday loans, when means of securing funding had failed. Many people use the facility to support the credit union.

Referring to paragraph 70 of the report on rent arrears, Councillor A Hopgood felt that the information was written in a negative way and suggested it would be more appropriate to highlight the positive as the Authority had introduced systems to address the issues. The Head of Policy and Communications would consider changing the wording.

Councillor D Boyes asked if residents were kept informed of any issues regarding universal credit that may affect them. The Head of Policy and Communications advised that the Council had adopted strategies throughout all stages of the introduction of the scheme and have continued to work closely with residents to keep them updated on the situation.

In response to a question from Councillor T Nearney regarding the administration of the Universal Credit, the Head of Policy and Communications advised that the main role for the Council was to assist vulnerable residents to access Universal Credit including help and support for people who were not online and required assistance in opening bank accounts.

Resolved:

That the information contained in the report be noted.

7 Update on the Delivery of the Medium Term Financial Plan 4

The Board considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive that provided an update on the progress made at the end of June 2014 on the delivery of the 2014/15 to 2016/17 Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP4) (for copy see file of minutes).

The MTFP 4 had been agreed by Council and for 2014/15 the savings target is just over £23m which forms part of the overall savings target for the period from 2011/12 to 2016/17 of around £224m.

The Head of Policy and Communications reported that delivery of the MTFP programme remains very challenging and the savings for 2014/15 represents an increase of 10% from the previous year. Through the robust approach, the Council continue to manage the savings programme and remain within plan in meeting the savings targets.

Councillor Hopgood commented on the consultation on Children's Centres and expressed concerns regarding public perception that the review was being carried out due to budget savings. She added that the Corporate Director, Children and Adults Services had advised in previous meetings that the Children's Centres were being reviewed as they had failed to deliver the improvements that were hoped for, irrespective of savings targets.

Resolved:

That the content of the report and the progress being made in delivering MTFP be noted.

8 Notice of Key Decisions

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services that provided a list of key decisions which were scheduled to be considered by the Executive (for copy see file of minutes).

The Committee Services Manager reported that since the last update there had been the following movement in items being considered at Cabinet which would be published on 21 October 2014:-

- 2015/16 General Fund Revenue and Capital Budget MTFP 5 and Council Plan and Service Plans had been moved from October and December to November and January;
- Framework for the Future Provision of Fixed Play Sites had been moved from October to November.

Councillor A Hopgood reiterated her previous comments regarding the lack of information from services about major issues such as the Gala Theatre and the Children's Centres consultation which were not included on the notice.

The Head of Planning and Performance advised that the Authority had a legal requirement to publish a list of Key Decisions at least 28 clear days before that decision could be made by Cabinet. The Committee Services Manager advised of the definition of a key decision as contained in the Council's Constitution.

Councillors commented that even though the Authority were adhering to the legal requirements, it would be useful to look into best practice and see how other Authorities report their decisions, and also whether information could be supplied on other decisions that were not classed as 'key'.

Resolved:

That the information contained in the report be noted.

9 Update in relation to Petitions

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

The Committee Services Manager reported that since the last update, 3 new paper petitions had been received and 6 had completed the process. She added that there was a live petition on the council's website on the delivery of Children's Centres which was due to close on Thursday 23 October.

Resolved:

That the information contained in the report be noted.

10 Information update from the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees

The Board considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive that provided an update of overview and scrutiny activity between September and October 2014 (for copy see file of minutes).

Resolved:

That the information contained in the report be noted.