

Cabinet

12 December 2018

Council Activity Report

Ordinary Decision



Report of Corporate Management Team

Lorraine O'Donnell, Corporate Director of Transformation and Partnerships

Councillor Simon Henig, Leader of the Council

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide an update on work to support some of the council's key priorities.

Executive summary

- 2 The report provides an update on progress towards delivering some of the council's key priorities and summarises a number of other newsworthy aspects of the council's work:
 - (a) Promoting positive relationships across the globe
 - (b) Supporting good causes
 - (c) Reducing single use plastics
 - (d) Working for a sustainable future
 - (e) Fairer deal for children's services
 - (f) #OurDay

Recommendation

- 3 Cabinet is recommended to note the contents of this update.

Background

- 4 The council undertakes a great deal of work across the county.
- 5 This report offers an overview of some key projects and details of recent news items.

Promoting positive relationships across the globe



- 6 The authority's international relations team works with partners around the world to deliver projects that help County Durham maintain positive links with other countries and cultures. Projects also provide activities for young people, often outside of school, which help them develop their skills and aspirations.
- 7 This month, the team has arranged a number of festive initiatives including visits to the German towns of Tuebingen and Giessen for 40 children from four County Durham primary schools. As well as visiting traditional Christmas markets and historic and cultural sites, the youngsters, their teachers and mentors from a local secondary school had the chance to share Christmas traditions with some of their German peers.
- 8 Meanwhile, children from Ramshaw Primary and Consett Infant School have also been making Christmas tree decorations to send to schools in Europe along with an information pack they have made about how they celebrate the festive season. In turn, the schools will receive decorations from the other participating European schools.

- 9 The team is also supporting St Cuthbert's primary, in Seaham, and Bowes Hutchinson primary, Barnard Castle, in linking with their partner schools in Jasz-Nagykun-Szolnok, in Hungary, to exchange information about Christmas traditions through Skype sessions and Hungarian language classes.
- 10 Tomorrow (13 December), young people from Seaham High School and Dene Community School will attend a languages and employability event at Newcastle University where they will be able to find out how having a second language can improve your employment prospects. The event follows a session last month when youngsters from Dene Community School worked with students from Durham University on an initiative designed to show how learning one language can help you learn another.
- 11 These projects are part of a wide-ranging year-round programme of events and activities organised and supported by the team, which last month included a visit by children from the Georg Forster School in Kreis Weisel, Germany, to Park View School in Chester-le-Street as part of the armistice commemorations. The children from the two schools discussed their different attitudes to the First World War and the reasons why people wanted to go to war.

Supporting good causes



- 12 Each December, the council runs a number of seasonal charity projects which give staff the opportunity to help others in the run-up to Christmas.

- 13 The authority supports Durham Foodbank throughout the year, with more than 315kg of food – the equivalent of 395 meals – donated during 2018. Staff have also recently been asked to consider donating toiletry and sanitary products.
- 14 During November, staff are specifically asked to contribute items for inclusion in Christmas hampers and food parcels for families in need. In 2017, staff donated the equivalent of 758 meals for this seasonal collection. This year's total has yet to be calculated but staff have once again contributed significantly via nine collection points at council buildings.
- 15 Since July, 354kg of clothes have also been donated to the charity.
- 16 Local families are also supported through the annual Chairman's toy appeal, with staff donating new toys and gifts for children and young people to be distributed by the Salvation Army. Last year, it took four cars to transport the collected items.
- 17 A further charitable collection takes place on Christmas Jumper Day when members of staff are encouraged to wear their festive pullovers, t-shirts, jewellery and other items for a small donation of one pound. The money collected is donated to the Chairman's charity, which this year is the Royal British Legion.

Reducing single use plastics



- 18 The council is leading the way in efforts to reduce the amount of disposable plastic waste it produces with a wide range of initiatives

being introduced across the authority to cut down on unnecessary single use plastics.

- 19 Up to half a million tonnes of plastic can be found on beaches in the EU – equivalent to all of the rubbish, not just plastic, that is collected in County Durham in two years. In the county itself, 82 per cent of pollutants found on our beaches are plastics and 22 per cent of rubbish in general waste bins is plastic that could have been recycled.
- 20 In order to help tackle the problem, the council has been undertaking a 'quiet revolution' in recent months to reduce unnecessary single use plastics.
- 21 This has included replacing straws, stirrers and takeaway cups in council canteens with compostable alternatives, phasing out plastic overshoes in leisure centres and using paper rather than plastic confetti for the Gala theatre's pantomime Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.
- 22 The authority has also trialled new 'plastic road' technology, which sees normally unrecycled materials added to the mix during resurfacing works, engaged with its suppliers to see if they can do more to reduce their waste and looked at ways to make it harder for staff to buy single use plastics in the future.
- 23 Elsewhere, a number of schools are playing their part, with St Bede's at Sacriston now making its own yoghurt in large batches to cut down the number of plastic pots thrown away.
- 24 The work is ongoing, with current plans including extending recycling facilities for staff and the public at council offices; obtaining additional funding to carry further resurfacing using non-recyclable plastics; the introduction of further procurement controls; and looking at how the collection of plastic bottles and other items at event such as the Miners' Gala could be improved.
- 25 The council is also looking at signing a collective pledge with its partners to significantly reduce and ultimately remove the use of unnecessary single use plastics from operations.

Working for a sustainable future



- 26 During the last 10 years, carbon emissions in County Durham have fallen by more than 40 per cent, largely due to a number of initiatives introduced by the council and its partners to protect the environment.
- 27 The authority works with schools, homes, public buildings and businesses to help cut their energy costs, while developing renewable energy schemes from solar, mine water and hydropower.
- 28 In October, the area's green credentials were recognised with the decision to launch the first ever national Green Great Britain Week in Durham City. A special electric vehicle motor show took place in the Market Place and Millennium Square to promote the benefits of plug-in vehicles for businesses and the public.
- 29 The same month, the authority launched the Solid Wall Insulation Innovation community energy project. Funded by the European Union, it will provide 220 homes in the county built with stone or brick with the latest technology in solid wall insulation. Smart heating controllers will also be installed to monitor energy use. Durham University will research and evaluate the benefits of the system.
- 30 Businesses are being supported in their efforts to reduce energy costs by the council-led Business Energy Efficiency Project (BEEP), which provides advice to SMEs wanting to reduce their energy consumption. Launched in partnership with Business Durham in 2016, BEEP carries out free energy audits and offers grant funding for reducing energy use.

- 31 The project has received international recognition, being singled out for as an example of best practice by the Interreg Europe programme, which supports regional and local governments across Europe in delivering better policy.
- 32 The council is also working on a national level to take carbon emissions, joining forces with partners from Hungary, Italy and Romania to launch a joint bid for funding to carry out research into a potential 'virtual power plant' in the UK, which would provide the opportunity to share and collate information about carbon efficiency.

Fairer deal for children's services

- 33 The leader of the council has warned that the future of children's services across the country hangs in the balance in a column in the Journal newspaper.
- 34 The authority has already been forced to balance its budget since 2010 after seeing government reduced by more than 50 per
- 35 Now, with frontline services already stretched and back office teams significantly reduced – the authority's workforce has shrunk by 3,000 – the council, like many others in the region, is struggling to meet increasing demand for services and in no area is this being felt more acutely than in the provision of children's services.
- 36 Since 2009, the number of looked after children in the county has increased by 88 per cent. A recent study for the Association of Directors of Children's Services has also revealed a national increase in calls from the public and professionals worried about children. However, there has been no increase in funding to reflect these pressures since 2010.
- 37 There has also been a huge increase in the number of special needs pupils needing support, with the council spending £5 million more in this area than it has available in government funding.
- 38 The authority continues to campaign for a better deal for local authorities in the region particularly in advance of the Government's fair funding review which is expected in the new year.
- 39 Last month, the Chancellor's budget including promise of 'one-off' money for children's services but the amounts identified will not meet the scale of the financial challenge the council faces.



#OurDay



- 40 The work of staff across the council was highlighted last month when the authority took part in the Local Government Association's annual #Our Day campaign.
- 41 Developed to celebrate the varied work of local authority employees across the country, the day sees councils using social media to tell the stories of how the everyday efforts of staff help to improve residents' quality of life.
- 42 Across the 24-hour period, the council sent out 26 messages on Twitter. The messages, which were seen 29,407 times, aimed to showcase the diverse range of roles carried out by council staff, from social work to gritting and refuse collection. Staff were encouraged to share and retweet messages, resulting in 71 retweets and 142 likes.
- 43 However, a key part of the campaign is to highlight unsung heroes and back office workers so ICT services, school catering, customer services and elections staff were also among those featured.
- 44 Tweets included facts and figures about the authority's work, with residents informed that the council has more than 200 apprentices, its registrars officiate at more than 1,600 weddings a year and its school catering staff serve more than 780,000 sausages a year to pupils.
- 45 In addition to the Twitter campaign, a short video was also produced featuring members of staff who had taken part in recent filming projects briefly describing their day. The video (available here: [\[link\]](#))

<https://youtu.be/Bo leKqbbKc>) was posted on Facebook and Twitter, where the post was seen 7,641 times and the video was viewed more than 5,300 times.

Background papers

- None

Other useful documents

- None

Contact: Michelle Atkinson

Tel: 03000 268 049

Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable.

Finance

Not applicable.

Consultation

Not applicable.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable.

Human Rights

Not applicable.

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable.

Staffing

Not applicable.

Accommodation

Not applicable.

Risk

Not applicable.

Procurement

Not applicable.