

**Cabinet**

**15 May 2019**

**Council Activity Report**

**Ordinary Decision**



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## **Report of Corporate Management Team**

**Lorraine O'Donnell, 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.
- 3 This month's report covers:
  - (a) Tenth anniversary of the unitary authority
  - (b) Armed Forces and Veterans support
  - (c) Improving access to online services
  - (d) Foster Care Fortnight
  - (e) Social work in County Durham

### **Recommendation**

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

### **Background**

- 5 The council undertakes a great deal of work across the county.
- 6 This report offers an overview of some key projects.

## Tenth anniversary of the unitary authority

- 7 This year marks the council's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday as a unitary authority. The council came into being on 1 April 2009 following the merger of the former county council with the county's seven district and borough authorities – Easington, Derwentside, Sedgefield, Durham City, Wear Valley, Teesdale and Chester-le-Street.
- 8 Pooling the resources and budgets of the eight former authorities enabled the new unitary body to achieve £20.5 million in savings, which we reinvested in frontline services and the harmonisation of council tax.
- 9 The beginning of austerity in 2010 meant that the new council saw cuts to its funding almost immediately. Over the nine years, we have seen a 55 per cent reduction in funding from central Government – a loss of £244 million to date. A further forecasted £39.5 million of savings are expected to be needed over the next four years. This has been against a background of increased demand on a number of services including those we provide for children.
- 10 However, in spite of these significant financial pressures, we have worked extremely hard to protect frontline services and have been able to continue investing in the county's economic growth.
- 11 For example, during the last decade we have seen a number of landmark developments including NETPark, Jade Business Park, Integra 61, Durhamgate, Milburngate and Freeman's Reach. We were also successful in helping to attract train builder Hitachi to the county.



- 12 The past ten years have also seen significant investment in culture-led regeneration in the county with the development of a packed annual programme of events and festivals as well as signature events such as Bishop Auckland Food Festival, Brass, Durham Book Festival, Kynren and, of course, Lumiere, which this year returns to Durham City to celebrate its own 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This year will also see Cricket World Cup matches taking place in Chester-le-Street and the inaugural Velo of the North – a new closed road cycling event.
- 13 One of our biggest successes has undoubtedly been the creation of 14 Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) which were set up with the aim of ensuring our work is in line with the needs and priorities of local people. During the past decade, residents, councillors, community representatives and partner organisations have worked tirelessly to develop and deliver a range of projects through our AAPs – all with the aim of providing social, economic and environmental benefits to communities.
- 14 AAPs help set our priorities and shape services and have been crucial in ensuring the council continues to connect with local communities. They have also welcomed visitors from a wide variety of international and UK organisations who have heard about our work and are keen to learn from us.
- 15 Since they were set up, AAPs have awarded grants totalling £42 million, which have, in turn, attracted an additional £55.5 million in to County Durham. This means that for every £1 invested by the AAP, an additional £1.32 has been brought in from other sources.
- 16 Funds have been used to deliver more than 6,000 community projects benefitting residents of all ages, the unemployed, local businesses and the more vulnerable residents within their communities.
- 17 A special celebration event honouring the work of the AAPs over the past decade and highlighting a selection of projects to have benefitted from their support took place last month. Each AAP was asked to select an initiative they felt was ‘without equal’ during the past decade. As well as involving local residents in their development and delivery, the chosen projects had exceeded expectations and proved themselves to be sustainable.
- 18 From working with local pubs and cafes to provide meals in community venues in order to tackle social isolation in Weardale, to tackling plastic pollution in rural areas of East Durham and establishing an advice hub in Stanley – the selected projects have helped improve the lives of people of all ages.
- 19 The projects recognised at the event were Beat the Scammers (Derwent Valley AAP); Sponsor a Grown Up (Spennymoor AAP); The Intergen Project (Teesdale AAP and Teesdale YMCA); Stanley Advice Centre (Stanley AAP); the Intergenerational Project and Community Buildings Project (Mid Durham AAP); Cheesy Waffles project (Durham City AAP); Welfare Champions (East Durham AAP); Market Activity Week (Chester-le-Street AAP); Employability Skills Fund (Great Aycliffe and Middridge AAP); Crisis Intervention (Bishop

Auckland and Shildon AAP); Plastic Fantastic? (East Durham Rural Corridor AAP); Days of Our Lives (4Together Partnership); Wheels to Meals (Weardale AAP); and, The Victory Programme (3 Towns Partnership).



## Armed Forces and Veterans Support

- 20 The council holds a Gold Award in the Ministry of Defence's Employer Recognition Scheme. The award recognises employers who demonstrate positive attitudes and policies towards serving and ex-members of the Armed Forces. Participating in the scheme is part of our commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant - a promise from the nation that those who serve, or have served in the armed forces, and their families, are treated fairly.



- 21 We have also operated a Reserve Forces Policy since 2015, providing support to employees who are Reservists with the UK Armed Forces. This includes offering paid time off of up to 10 working days (pro-rata for part-time employees) to attend an annual training camp. The policy is used by other local authorities and businesses in the region as an example of best practice.
- 22 We also now recognise the important role of Cadet Force Adult Volunteers (CFAV) through a new Cadet Force Adult Volunteer Policy, which provides paid leave for uniformed CFAVs so they can attend an annual summer camp or any other relevant activities.
- 23 Last year, we introduced a guaranteed interview scheme for veterans to help those who meet essential criteria overcome barriers to recruitment opportunities. Since the inception of this scheme the council has received 19 applications of which two successful candidates have so far been appointed, a residential worker in children and young people's services, and an ICT engineer.
- 24 In 2017, the council and other local authorities in the region were awarded funding from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund for an Armed Forces Outreach Service (AFOS) to support servicemen and women, reservists, veterans and their families with issues such as housing, benefits, employment, finances and health and well-being. As a result, two Armed Forces Outreach workers now work within our housing solutions team, acting as the first point of contact for armed forces personnel, veterans and their families in particular need.
- 25 This funding is due to come to an end in September 2019. However, agreement has now been obtained to fund the service until the end of March 2020. During this time the outreach workers will be mainly based within the main housing providers in the county, with the aim of helping the 'hidden' former armed forces personnel known to be living in the county but who have not contacted us for support or assistance. A review of the service will be carried out later in the year with a view to seeking a partnership arrangement for co-funding.
- 26 As part of our ongoing commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant, the council chairs a proactive Armed Forces Forum to encourage organisations in County Durham to work together to ensure people are not disadvantaged as a result of military service, or leaving the forces. The forum consists of statutory partners including the council, police, fire service and health organisations; the Armed Forces including regulars, reserves and cadets; Armed Forces Family Federations; and Armed Forces Charities.
- 27 Through the Armed Forces Forum, we have increased our knowledge and understanding of the needs of the Armed Forces community and the range of national and local support services available, as well as promoting the Veterans Gateway website, the first point of contact for veterans seeking support. The forum has supported a number of successful applications to the Armed Forces Covenant Fund as well as an application to the Libor Fund which has enabled the doubling of supported accommodation for veterans in

Sacriston run by a local housing charity SHAID. Support has also been provided to SSAFA who now run a monthly countywide drop-in for veterans to access support from local Armed Forces charities and other statutory and voluntary services.

- 28 The strengthening of military civil engagement and partnership working has been evident during the past five years during First World War centenary commemorations across the county. In particular the laying of the seven commemorative VC stones and associated events and community projects which have been supported by our AAPs.

### **Improving access to online services**

- 29 Improving access and choice for people wishing to transact with the council through digital channels is a key priority for the organisation.
- 30 The increasing use of our Do It Online system means that we now have more than 122,000 customers signed up to an account, resulting in more than 230,000 self service requests having been made so far. An additional 17,000 self service requests have been processed anonymously by people wishing not to register.
- 31 Online is now our preferred channel for service requests where it is available. In March 2019, 55 per cent of people making service requests chose to use the digital self-serve option, with online being the preference for many of our high volume services including waste permits (76 per cent online), allotments, noise complaints, problems with a road or footpath, streetlighting, garden waste and dog fouling.
- 32 However, it is important to recognise that online transactions are not suitable for all customers or indeed the preferred method of choice for everyone. In this respect, we remain committed to our principle of using digital tools to increase choice and not making them the only available channel. All of our digital services can also be accessed via our telephone contact centre while face-to-face services are also available where appropriate.
- 33 Residents without internet access at home can use our online services by visiting our Customer Access Points, libraries and other facilities where they can use public access computers. Customer services advisors who have been trained to support and assist customers to enhance their digital skills are also on hand.
- 34 In recent months, we have introduced online forms for reporting or applying for the following:
- Allotment applications and contracts
  - Animal licenses
  - Council Tax – changes to your payment method

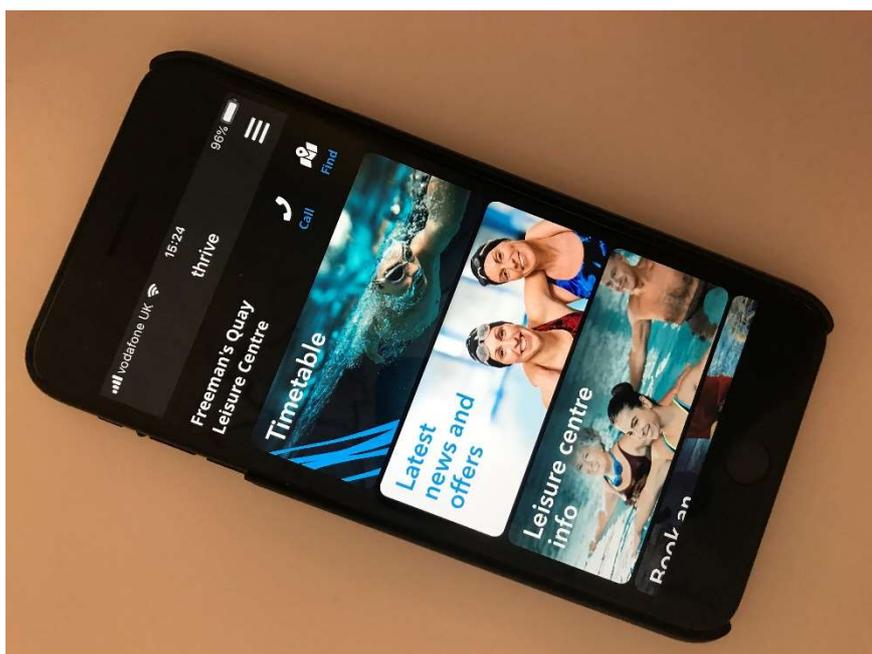
- Council Tax – claim or cancel single person discount
- Durham Institute of sport application
- Information rights request
- Learn to swim waiting list
- Private landlord accreditation scheme
- Safety Advisory Group process
- School transport – apply for a concessionary seat
- Trade/business waste collections
- Taxi licensing

35 Our online services and processes have grown considerably over recent years but we continue to review them, exploring the use of new technology to both enhance the customer journey and improve operational efficiency. This has already resulted in some significant changes to the services we provide.

36 More than 40,000 people a year now use our electronic waste permit scheme, which allows customers to quickly and easily apply for a QR code permit which they receive immediately via email. This can then be printed off or presented on a mobile device to staff at the HWRC site where it is scanned and verified. The scheme, which replaces a much slower, paper-based process.



- 37 The take up of the e-waste permitting scheme has been extremely positive, with 76 per cent of applications now received online and 80 per cent of customers choosing to receive the QR permit by email, regardless of how they initially contacted us. We expect this to increase even further.
- 38 More than 4,000 customers have responded to our request for feedback on the service, with 92 per cent giving us a four or five star rating – 78 per cent of people gave us five stars. Overall customer satisfaction has also increased with 91 per cent of customers saying they were either very satisfied or satisfied with service delivery, that they find it very easy or easy to apply and that they were happy with the time taken to provide the service.
- 39 The scheme was also chosen as a finalist at this year's Local Government Chronicle awards.
- 40 Similarly, our new electronic allotments process now enables customers to apply on line to join the waiting list, view their position on the waiting list and accept, manage and terminate their contract. More than 73 per cent of enquiries are now self-service as a result of the new process and this has led to 300 less calls to our offices each month.
- 41 Meanwhile, e-ticketing has been introduced at the Gala and Empire theatres, enabling customers to print or display their ticket on their mobile device to be scanned at the venue. Uptake for this service continues to increase with 24 per cent of customers choosing this option in February 2019.
- 42 A new swimming app, funded by Sport England, has been developed internally and has already received more than 6,000 downloads. This enables customers to access interactive information such as timetables and class times as well as allowing them to apply for swimming lessons. It also sends notifications about chosen venues direct to customers' mobile devices, keeping them up-to-date with any service changes.



- 43 Online booking facilities for other services are also receiving positive feedback. For example, customers wishing to book a visit from a pest control officer can now book the first available appointment instead of having to wait for up to a week as had been the case with the previous system. Same day appointments are also available for the first time and customers can also cancel or amend their booking, a facility which has reduced the number of failed appointments.

### **Raising the profile foster care**

- 44 Foster Care Fortnight runs until Sunday, 26 May, celebrating and showcasing the commitment, passion and dedication of foster carers while also highlighting the need for more foster carers around the UK.
- 45 In County Durham, we are continually working to recruit good quality foster carers and, in recent months, this has included the use of a range of new marketing and communications approaches to raise the profile of foster carers and the need for more to come forward.
- 46 In March and April, a campaign on Smooth Radio was timed to coincide with a targeted marketing initiative in Consett, Stanley and Newton Hall. Using data provided by our market analysis tool Mosaic, we were able to select addresses that matched our fostering profile (created using data from our current foster carers).



- 47 Specially created postcards were sent to 1,500 addresses in Newton Hall and 1,000 to homes in Consett and Stanley. The cards featured a spring-themed image with the motivational call to action “One child comes into care every day! Could you offer a child a loving home?” The card featured information and dates for upcoming drop-in sessions for both the fostering and adoption teams. The delivery of the postcards was also timed to coincide with targeted posts on Facebook, which were financially boosted in order to push them to as many people as possible in those same geographic areas.
- 48 We hope to see an increase in interest from these three geographic areas over the next six months as a result of the campaign. If so, we will then look at carrying out similar campaigns in other areas of the county perhaps with the inclusion of additional activities such as drop-in sessions within the local area. This would be alongside our countywide mainstream campaigns.
- 49 We are also developing our links with the Methodist church in the county for both fostering and adoption recruitment. The fostering service’s research into who makes good foster carers shows that often people are motivated for philanthropic reasons, or a desire to make a difference in their local community. These people often do other charity or voluntary work and may be involved with their local church either through attendance as parishioners or attendance at events run by the church or at the church venue. Given the community-minded nature of the Methodist church, we chose to approach them first and linked with the minister on Newton Hall as part of the geographically targeted campaign.
- 50 Working with the minister, who also has churches in Carrville, Brandon and Bowburn, we will be attending a range of church sessions, including traditional services, a more informal café church and a fellowship session which attracts mostly retired parishioners. Over the coming weeks, we will also be supplying leaflets, banners and outdoor vinyls for display at the churches. If our presence at these churches is generally well accepted, we will work with this minister to see if we can roll out a similar programme across the county.
- 51 We are also working to break down some of the myths surrounding foster care and who is suitable to be a carer. This work has come about following focus group sessions.
- 52 Further to comments made at the recent Corporate Parenting Panel, we will also be looking to work more closely with the Children in Care Council on future marketing campaigns, including getting further case studies of our children and young people in care to ensure that the voice of the child is present in what we do for the service.



53 The communications and marketing team has also been working closely with our education teams to develop a pack for our looked after children, aimed at promoting a love of reading and improving literacy. The Curious Kids packs replace the previously used Letterbox Books scheme. These bespoke packs have been specially created for the Virtual School by Durham Learning Resources. They are brightly coloured and are specifically designed for different age groups.

54 Each includes a fiction and a non-fiction book which have been chosen to compliment school curriculum topics. They also include a range of activities and worksheets with free gifts and the chance to enter competitions. Every looked after child in Years 2 to 6 in County Durham now receives a pack through the post. Work is also ongoing to provide literacy/reading resources for other age groups.

### Social work in County Durham

55 The role of a social worker is to protect the most vulnerable people in our communities and bring about positive change for an adult or young person, their family and carers. In County Durham, there are about 600 social workers and social work assistants, working with people of all ages to provide support at difficult times and to find positive ways forward in the face of everyday challenges. Social workers also act as guides and advocates.



- 56 A global celebration of social work takes place on World Social Work Day every March. This year, in County Durham, an event was held to highlight the achievements of the profession and to raise awareness of the contribution social workers make to the lives of children, young people, adults, families and communities. This year, the theme focussed on the importance of human relationships. As well as recognising the work of the social work profession, the day was also used as an opportunity for learning and networking.
- 57 Our **adult care social workers** are employed in a range of teams and disciplines including mental health, learning disabilities, older people, physical disabilities and safeguarding. They also work very closely with colleagues in the NHS. In fact, many teams are already integrated to include staff from both health and social care services. This helps to ensure a joined-up approach to better meet the needs of each individual. Social workers also provide support and guidance to people who contact the council for help through the social care direct team.
- 58 Social work with adults often entails working with people who do not have the mental capacity to make informed decisions concerning key aspects of their lives, including where to live and how to care for themselves safely. Responding to crisis is a key feature and our staff engage in a wide range of situations including where there has been a sudden deterioration in health and wellbeing, resulting in the need for 24 hr care services; responding to safeguarding concerns as a result of abuse or neglect; and dealing with situations following a family breakdown, including the death of the main caregiver. Staff are well trained in working in putting the individual's needs at the heart of their

work, providing the most suitable solutions that also respect the wishes and feelings of our most vulnerable adults while also protecting the rights.

- 59 Supporting our social workers and planning for the future of adult care is crucial. We are committed to continuous improvement and are currently introducing an adult care transformation plan to improve outcomes for service users and support workforce development and resilience. Collaboration, integrated working and use of digital technologies will be used to achieve this. Work is already taking place to develop a new case management system for adult care in County Durham. In a separate development, a new online portal for professional development and learning for social workers is to be introduced across the region.
- 60 In County Durham we also continue to support the national Think Ahead programme which offers graduates, and those thinking of a career change, a route into mental health social work. We have taken a group of four students every year since the programme started in 2015, subsequently offering all permanent posts with the authority.
- 61 The programme is helping to increase recruitment and retention in mental health social work and has contributed to culture change, a stronger representation of social work and social models applied in practice. Students on the programme are also more prepared for what to expect in practice, helping them to make a real impact within their teams.
- 62 **Children's social care workers** play a key role in keeping children and young people safe and working towards better outcomes for children, young people and their families. Where it is not safe for children to remain within their family network we will support them in finding an alternative home with carers who are able to look after them and provide every opportunity for them to achieve their full potential. We work with children and young people of all ages, and for those young people who become care leavers we have a local offer that they can access until they are 25.
- 63 We have been working hard to raise the profile of our children's social work team in order to recruit the best candidates for both newly qualified social worker posts and to attract experienced social workers from other areas to join us.
- 64 This work has already resulted in a stronger recruitment result, with 25 new staff joining our children's social care team in March of this year. We are now actively working to fill 44 permanent vacant posts within social care and, so far, have made appointments to 27 of them. A

further 10 candidates are at interview stage and seven more applications are being progressed.

- 65 This recruitment drive is not only strengthening the resilience of our workforce but is having a positive impact on the size of social worker caseloads, which have decreased as a result of recruitment.
- 66 Work continues with our Social Work Academy – a fantastic resource, which sets us apart from many other councils in the way we train, mentor and progress our new social workers, who benefit from protected caseloads, protected time for development and frequent reflective supervision as they work towards completion of their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment.
- 67 We have had five social workers graduating this year from our Step Up to Social Work programme, a government-run postgraduate fast-track programme operated in partnership with the region's 11 other local authorities and Manchester Met. We are currently recruiting for the next programme which starts in January 2020.
- 68 We are also about to start recruitment to a social work degree apprenticeship. This national initiative allows us to offer our own staff the opportunity to develop their skills through a formal programme of learning with Sunderland University, as part of a three-year undergraduate course. We are looking to recruit five experienced but non-qualified members of staff to take up these places, gain a social work qualification and move into a frontline social work post. From experience we are aware that supporting staff to gain a social work qualification enables us to improve our own staff retention rates.
- 69 In March, we held our first Practice Conference in Durham, which was attended by more than 150 practitioners and managers. Our head of children's social care opened the event by setting out her vision and highlighting the fundamental principle underpinning the service's work – 'Every Conversation Matters, Every Day Counts'. Seven workshops were delivered during the day, all of which were focused on sharing good practice and all of which received excellent feedback.
- 70 Our strategic manager for children and family services in the north of the county was successful in obtaining a place on the very well-respected national Practice Leaders course and has attended the first two days of this with peers from across the country.
- 71 Our Signs of Safety implementation is also progressing, with a session in April for our Practice Leaders focusing on assessing risk and applying the model to working with our children in care. An information session has now also been arranged for elected members.

- 72 We also implemented a new case management system called Liquid Logic in February 2019. This has been a significant change for the service and is helping us to improve recording for children and families; improve the monitoring of performance data; and introduce more efficient ways of working for our staff.
- 73 We also continue to work closely with North Yorkshire County Council and South Tyneside Council through the Partners in Practice Programme so that we benefit from external scrutiny and challenge to support our ongoing improvement of services.

### **Background papers**

- None

### **Other useful documents**

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **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.