

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Friday 22 January 2021 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor R Crute (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors A Batey (Vice-Chair), E Adam, R Bell, D Boyes, M Clarke, A Hopgood, B Kellett, H Liddle, L Maddison, R Manchester, C Martin, O Milburn, C Potts, J Rowlandson, A Savory, H Smith, F Tinsley, J Turnbull, M Wilkes and A Willis

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Chaplow, P Jopling, J Makepeace, J Robinson and A Shield.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members in attendance.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 December 2020 were agreed as a correct record to be signed by the Chair.

Matters Arising

The Head of Strategy responded to a question from Councillor Turnbull regarding Members being informed of staff having left due to ill health or having passed away. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services had advised that Members should be informed of senior officers or those working closely with members who had left or passed away and the information would normally be given to group leaders by Corporate Directors or Heads of Service.

With regards to Councillor Hopgood's query about the consultation on leisure services not showing in key decisions, the Head of Strategy confirmed that the decision that proceeded the consultation was a key decision, however once it had been taken it did not need to be retained on the forward plan.

There was no need for fresh notice if it was a decision that gave effect to a previous decision.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Workplace Transformation: Enabling Smarter Working

The Board considered a report of the Interim Corporate Director of Resources which provided an overview and update on workplace transformation and the enablement of smarter worker approaches together with a joint presentation by the Head of People & Talent Management and Head of Digital & Customer Services (for copies see file of minutes).

The Chair commented that the Council had been well prepared for the pandemic due to the transformation programme leading up to it and this had assisted in providing business as usual, despite some challenges.

Councillor Wilkes thanked officers for their work but noted that there were still some basic services that could not be applied for online and one example of this was a parking permit. The parking shop was closed due to COVID-19 and there was no ability to submit a form online, although the form was available to print. He suggested that this service should be available online, particularly during the pandemic, but also to ensure the Council was operating as efficiently as possible.

Councillor Wilkes then referred to CRM reports which he said were not always submitted using the system as it was easier for Members to send an email with photographs attached to the helpdesk. In his experience the photographs did not always make their way to the relevant officer and he asked when the Council would be in a position when issues such as these were fully rectified.

The Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that the Council had a significant digital transformation programme which included process reviews and the digitisation of those processes would take place over a period of two years. Some of the work had been impacted as a result of COVID-19 which had changed prioritisation. There were some processes that were not digitised due to the incompatibility of legacy systems or that they were a lower priority after taking into account customer feedback.

As part of the response to COVID-19 the Council were reprofiling and reprioritising work for example evidence required by DWP for benefit claims was now all digitalised. She confirmed that she would report Councillor Wilkes' comments regarding parking permits to the service.

Finally the Head of Digital & Customer Services confirmed that everything would eventually be digitised but if the service knew that an application was due to be upgraded, there would be no need to digitise the service until the new application was in use.

In response to the issue Councillor Wilkes had been having with the CRM, she confirmed that photographs should be forwarded by the helpdesk and asked him to report any instances that this was not happening, and she would ensure that it was investigated.

Councillor Wilkes confirmed that he was aware that the Council had inherited hundreds of pieces of software on local government reorganisation and asked whether it would be appropriate to outsource some of the work if this type of investment would speed up the process and be more cost effective. Household waste sites had recently been subject to increased costs due to traffic management and he was aware that there was an ongoing piece of work to create a booking process, but this had been an issue since April 2020. He suggested that if it was more cost effective to outsource work then this should be considered.

The Head of Digital & Customer Services confirmed that as new or changing pressures emerged, a range of options were considered to tackle issues and provide the best resources cost effectively. As part of the reprioritisation process, this would include considering whether additional resources were needed in terms of redeployment or the recruitment of additional staff. With the significant change in customer needs that had been seen over the previous ten months the priorities could change significantly and the service was trying to find the right balance between the high priority pressures and the ongoing programme of work.

Councillor Tinsley also credited the staff who had been working over the previous ten months and he advised that compared to other government bodies the Council had more flexibility over access to systems when considering customer needs. One example of this was Universal Credit, which was only available online. He referred to the biggest challenge which had been homeworking and for some people was more productive and he believed that it was here to stay. He confirmed that HMRC were offering up to £6 per week tax relief for people who were working from home as a result of COVID-19 and asked whether the Council's 8000 staff were aware of the ability to claim this to cover increasing bills at home.

The Head of People & Talent Management confirmed that the information had been communicated to staff a number of times via the intranet and there had been a large take up in terms of accessing support, whether it be financial or for those with caring responsibilities.

Councillor Hopgood confirmed that there was a quick assessment for claiming the tax relief available on the government website. She thanked both the Head of People & Talent Management and the Head of Digital & Customer Services for the way in which the staff had been able to adapt to the new ways of working so well. She was pleased to see staff welfare was being considered but she was conscious of staff working more hours than they would normally and asked whether this working was being monitored.

The Head of People & Talent Management confirmed that the Council were outcome focused and recognised the constraints of working in a home environment. They gave people the flexibility to work their own preferred hours, which assisted those with young children at home. Managers were continuing one to one meetings with staff and were in regular contact to ensure staff were aware they could reprioritise work to take some of the pressure off.

The Head of Digital & Customer Services confirmed that MyAnalytics was a Microsoft tool that allowed staff to manage their time effectively and although it was anonymised data, the team were looking across the organisation to identify what hours people were working and how many people were working out of hours.

Councillor Adam confirmed that the way that he operated as a Councillor had transformed completely and he appreciated the work that had been done to ensure the transition to home working was seamless. He referred to the feedback focused on positive outcomes, but there were some negative aspects around staff wellbeing and resilience that needed analysis. He asked whether there were any informal meetings for staff to feedback information on how they were feeling as 35% of employees and 48% of managers had indicated that their mental health had been worse during the period.

The Head of People & Talent Management confirmed that they were trying to collate the responses from staff and management surveys to identify the key themes. A lot of work had been done with managers who wanted to support staff and recognised that this had been a difficult time. There was a lot of additional support, managers had been trained remotely, around 80% had attended Managing Mental Health and Wellbeing, recognising the signs. There had not been an increase in the Employee Assistance Programme, although she acknowledged that not everyone wanted to speak to someone on the phone about issues.

The Head of People & Talent Management commented there were a large number of mental health champions across the organisation and staff could contact them ,HR or the Trade Unions. She felt there was a more open

culture around mental health issues and the Council was trying to be as flexible as possible. Isolation has been an issue so managers are being encouraged to do as much as possible through MS Teams.

Councillor Martin asked whether there were enough ICT staff to deal with the level of work that was ongoing. The Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that there was sufficient staffing capacity providing that the service was efficiently prioritising work. There had been some reprofiling of work in order to carry out high priority work.

Councillor Kellett queried the process of distributing a thousand laptops allocated for pupils and given that demand was high, what would the Council do if they needed to allocate additional devices.

The Head of Digital and Customer Services confirmed that the scheme was operated by the schools and DfE and the first phase was to give out devices to disadvantaged children. The team assisted with support in installation and getting the devices sent out to schools but the scheme was administered between the schools and DfE.

Councillor Maddison also thanked staff and said that she was often frustrated when ringing an officer who was unable to answer the call. She asked whether there was a simple way of sending a message to the person calling to explain they were in a meeting. It was agreed the Head of Digital and Customer Services would contact Cllr Maddison directly to discuss her concerns.

Councillor Maddison asked how reports that had been submitted multiple times were coordinated. The Chair confirmed that performance indicators showed over 80% of calls were answered in the set time.

He thanked both Heads of Service for their reports and response to questions.

Resolved:

That the information and presentation be noted.

6 Poverty Issues

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided an update on the most recent welfare, economic and poverty indicators for the County. The report also set out the progress of the Council and Partners' efforts to address and alleviate poverty, including a summary of the actions to respond to the negative financial impacts experienced by

residents as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the poverty action strategy and plan (for copy see file of minutes). The Head of Transformation stated that government announcements, policy and guidance was updated daily as the position with COVID-19 changed rapidly and some information contained in the report had been superseded. He referred to the announcement made the day previously by the DWP to extend the DurhamWorks programme.

Both the Health and Wellbeing Board and Councillor Surtees, Portfolio Holder for Social Inclusion had written to the Government to press home the importance of the Universal Credit £20 uplift to residents in County Durham and request a continuation of the uplift.

The Chair commented that there had been various changes since the report had been written and an awful lot of information to take in.

Councillor Wilkes had requested figures with regards to Universal Credit and been advised that 13 months ago there were 30000 claims and that had increased to 52000. The Government had failed to commit to whether the Universal Credit uplift would continue which put people in a position of worry. It was accepted that a lot of taxpayers' money had been spent by the Government to get through the pandemic, but they had failed to recognise how serious an impact it had been for some. He was concerned that there was not going to be the level of support needed on 3 March to get the County through the next 12 months and the Council should be lobbying the Government to continue the £20 uplift.

Councillor Wilkes continued that there was a lot of pressure on officers but due to online systems and some being under the control of other organisations, the length of time claims were taking was not being reported to Members making it difficult to identify and rectify problems and he asked whether any information was available.

With regards to the letter being sent to Government, the Chair advised that in his opinion, the £20 uplift should not just be extended, but made permanent. In addition to allowing families in need to put food on the table and heat their homes, it was also putting money back into the local economy. Councillor Wilkes confirmed that the uplift equated to £1m per week going back into the local economy and advised that it would be disastrous for it to be taken away.

The Head of Transformation confirmed there was momentum to lobby the Government on this issue and confirmed that both the Portfolio Holder of Social Inclusion and Health and Wellbeing Board had asked for similar communication to be sent to Government on their behalf.

With regards the pressure on staff to process benefits in a timely way, the Head of Transformation confirmed that the Revenue and Benefits team had been working with the social care sector to prioritise work dealing with an increase in welfare assistance and council tax claims and the ban on evictions. He referred to the County Durham Hub and confirmed that community hub staff had been allowed a level of discretion to provide emergency food parcels on weekends when welfare rights staff were unavailable.

With regards to the increase in Universal Credit claims, he was not able to give any detail on how claims were handled, but he was aware that a significant part of the increase was from people under the age of 24 and therefore much of the employment support had been directed to that age group. Staff were under strain and additional resources had been put in, but also the service were pragmatic and used resources where they were most needed.

Councillor Bell referred to Free School Meal vouchers that had been issued during lockdown and asked whether the school were still receiving funding for those children despite been given vouchers to provide meals at home during term time. The Head of Transformation advised that he believed funding for FSM was retrospective and therefore there was no element of double funding. Some schools did not participate in the voucher scheme, particularly those that were in rural areas that did not have access to eligible supermarkets and would therefore be likely to provide their own meals for collection or delivery. He did not believe there was a was any financial incentive for schools to provide their own meals but he confirmed that he would refer the query to the FSM team for a response.

The Chair suggested that the information be submitted to the Children and Young Peoples Overview and Scrutiny Committee who were investigating take up of FSM as part of a wider issue.

Councillor Adam commented that the Universal Credit uplift needed to be maintained and he was of the opinion it should be increased to support the local economic recovery following the pandemic. With regards to the self-employed income support scheme, despite the huge amount of money that had been paid out to support businesses, Councillor Adam referred to specific businesses that had received very little. Two examples were hairdressers and tattooists that had been given no income yet still had a huge amount of expenditure. People were finding this extremely difficult and he asked whether the Council were aware of the number of businesses that were affected and the effects this had had on them, and also the impact that this was having on the local economy. He asked whether this would have an impact on council tax as this would impact the Councils income and ability to support the community.

The Head of Transformation confirmed that all of the schemes had criteria attached and gaps had been identified in the scheme for self-employed payments which were based on a three year rolling average income, therefore even if parents had taken maternity leave, payments were reduced. There was also a difference between businesses closing because of COVID-19 and closing because there was no work available due to COVID-19.

With regards to the rise in Universal Credit, the Head of Transformation confirmed that self-employment was one of the reasons behind the rise in figures, although he was unable to confirm the numbers. The Council and other organisations were acutely aware of the impact on the economy should the various schemes end at the same time, and he believed most organisations in the Country would be lobbying for the phasing out of those benefits as the economy opened up and recovered. Business Durham were in regular contact with businesses and whilst retail and hospitality sectors had been severely impacted, there were logistical opportunities as more goods and services were distributed online. He added that both Amazon and Morrisons had opened in the east of the County providing 350 jobs when most needed and this partially offset some of the economic shock.

Councillor Hopgood confirmed that businesses that worked out of someone else's premises were unable to claim anything as she had found with a none profit business she was involved with providing before and after school care. Since they had to keep the business open by law for key worker children, not everyone could be furloughed despite income having dropped by 95%, and no ability to get any funding to stay open.

The Chair referred to businesses that were unable to claim any financial benefits if they did not have a property to operate from. The Head of Transformation confirmed that although national schemes were welcome, there were some that were falling through the gap and he would liaise with Business Durham to see what advice could be offered to those affected.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

7 County Durham Partnership update

The Board received a report of the Director of Neighbourhood Services and Climate Change which provided an update on issues being addressed by the County Durham Partnership (CDP). The report also includes updates on other key initiatives being carried out in partnership across the county (for copy see file of minutes).

Councillor Hopgood confirmed that this was a good report highlighting many positives and she was a huge advocate for AAP's but a lot of the report focused on projects that had already been done and some of the work that was equally important, went unseen. There was an area that facilitated and connected groups, making a huge difference in the community. An example in Durham, was of a group that were making and donating visors and a deaf group that required visors to lip read. This cost nothing, it did not involve a project, but two groups were linked together and it had a massive impact and should be promoted.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

8 Notice of Key Decisions

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

Councillor Hopgood suggested that there was no time to input by the time this document was able to be considered as it included information regarding decisions that had already been made. She asked for the Chair to consider a working group to look at how this document could be adapted to a useful tool for the Board to consider decisions prior to them being made. Councillor Bell commented that this should not require any additional work as the information would be available to the Corporate Management Team.

The Chair confirmed that the document was a legal requirement and the Head of Strategy advised that the notice reflected the legal requirement and the timescales that were required to publish information ahead of the executive decisions. She advised that the Scrutiny Team did consider the document and referred to the final column at Appendix 2 where scrutiny involvement was detailed. The Chair confirmed that it did flag up issues that were coming up for scrutiny but was essentially a formal legal document.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.