

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 16 June 2023 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor R Crute (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors V Andrews, A Batey, J Charlton, I Cochrane (Substitute), J Cosslett, B Coult, S Deinali, J Elmer, P Heaviside, L Hovvells, P Jopling, C Lines (Vice-Chair), C Marshall, C Martin, J Miller, B Moist, E Peeke (Substitute), A Reed, I Roberts (Substitute), K Shaw, M Stead, A Sterling and A Surtees

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K Hawley, J Howey, M Johnson, L Maddison and R Yorke

2 Substitute Members

Councillor I Cochrane for K Hawley, Councillor E Peeke for J Howey and Councillor I Roberts for M Johnson

3 Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 3 April 2023 were agreed and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Q4 2022-23 RIPA

The Board considered a report of the Head 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 January 2023 to 31 March 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved:

- (i) That the quarterly report on the Council's use of RIPA for the period covering quarter 4 2022/23, be received.
- (ii) That the powers were being used consistently with the Council's policy and that the policy remained fit for purpose.

6 Digital Strategy

The Board received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources that presented the proposed new and updated Digital Strategy (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Digital Services reported that this was a refresh of the digital strategy adopted in 2019 which had built upon those strong foundations and had adapted to the changing environment we worked and lived in and the developing needs of our communities. She went on to highlight the five digital themes that the strategy was structured around:

- Digital Customer
- Digital Council
- Digital Community

These themes would be supported by two enabling themes:

- Digital Collaboration
- Digital Inclusion

The Head of Digital Services said that this strategy would be regularly reviewed and supported by a delivery plan.

The Chair was pleased to see that this would be subject to review. He asked about the impact of people who did not have access to Wi-Fi, computers or access points. The Head of Digital Services explained that customer channels were more diverse and that there were wider opportunities available and confirmed that they were not closing down ways to contact the council.

Councillor Deinali referred to the digital switchover planned for 2025 and was concerned about those living in rural areas where they did not have connectivity through broadband. She was also concerned about elderly and more vulnerable residents accessing information and other services not addressed within the report. She asked if there were any measurable targets in how we would support these people. The Head of Digital Services explained that there was a national programme for the switchover and a working group had been set up within the council to look at the impact this would have on some customers. She advised that work was taking place in rural areas and although not all problems have been solved there had been some procurement discussions in relation to bandwidth. This area of work

presented a significant challenge but officers were working hard on it, and she would take away these points to discuss at the working group.

The Chair asked if performance indicators would be included and was advised that this would be included in the Performance Management Framework.

Councillor Elmer asked what would happen to older people who felt reluctant to take on new technology or who lacked skills and was advised that the work around developing skills and offering support already took place. The Durham programme of works had set up a new partnership that focused on digital inclusion and how to support skills development. There would be collaboration on the digital theme and how to bring agencies together to support the individual.

Councillor Batey asked if there would be any additional resources to support residents in outreach/library/one-point settings and was advised that the areas being discussed was about maximising opportunities to wrap around what we already had.

Councillor Surtees was concerned for the deprived communities where access was an issue and would like to see strengthened community structure in community centres and for this to be added to the poverty agenda.

Councillor Coult asked if no longer used kits could be donated.

Councillor Sterling referred to access issues to broadband and asked if there was a process in place to negotiate on behalf of residents. The Head of Digital Strategy explained that this was not always in our control but would discuss with the Durham Digital Team who would be able to advise.

She thanked the members for their questions and comments and would take back to the group for discussion.

The Chair thanked the officer for her report and highlighted the importance of not leaving anyone behind as we progressed.

Resolved:

That the report be noted, and adoption of the new strategy be supported.

7 Q4 2022/23 Performance Management Report

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director Resources which presented an overview of progress towards achieving the key outcomes of the council's corporate performance framework and highlighted key

messages to inform strategic priorities and work programmes for Quarter 4, January to March 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager highlighted key messages around the five thematic areas within the Council Plan: our economy, our environment, our people, our communities and our council. Areas covered included engagement with business, major planning applications being determined, levelling up discussions, contamination campaign, adults social care, apprenticeship social workers, education, health and care plans, anti-social behaviour, fly-tipping, licensed premises, sickness absence and recruitment and retention.

The Chair asked members to focus any comments/questions to corporate issues.

Councillor Surtees referred to the local level apprenticeship levy transfer policy and asked about support for local business and would this be offered to volunteer groups. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager would find out details around this and report back.

Councillor Elmer said that contaminated levels were going in the right direction and that waste management was positive on the whole. Referring to regional energy from waste facilities on carbon neutrality and carbon capture and storage he advised that carbon dioxide out of an incinerator was compressed and liquified and stored under the sea. He asked about the scale of operations and for a commitment from the council that we would liquify carbon dioxide and not use it in the oil and natural gas extraction process. He had already asked the Corporate Director to explore this with BP.

The Chair suggested that Councillor Elmer speak to the relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holder and this to feed into the national issues around fuel extraction.

With reference to safeguarding Councillor Miller said that referrals currently stood at 6-8 weeks and asked if there was a priority to reduce this and if so when. He asked about the three surveys completed in relation to dog fouling and asked what areas they covered and the justification for that. He also asked about selective licensing whereby 28% of properties were deemed good but did not cover empty homes. He said that empty homes were a problem and should be brought back into use.

Councillor Moist joined the meeting at 10.15 am.

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager explained that needed to be a deep dive into the data around safeguarding but would feed those points

back to the service. With regards to the dog fouling surveys carried out he believed that it was a random sample to the areas selected but would ensure that the service circulate the national methodology used to members of the committee.

Councillor Deinali also mentioned the level of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) that were 71% higher than last year and asked that this be looked at in more detail to see if there were any related cases in areas of deprivation, the impact and demand in schools and what support was available to families while waiting to be assessed. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager reported that this was the subject of a deep dive at the moment. The relationship between EHCPs and deprivation levels was being examined as part of this study. Councillor Deinali's comments would be fed back to the service.

Councillor Marshall said that the impact of Brexit and other challenges affecting the finances and the ability to deliver should be included within the report. How this was affecting the local economy and the decisions made on the capital programme should have a deeper dive and he asked that big hit items were put in the report.

With regards to safeguarding Councillor Hovvels was concerned about the rise in number and the assessment time. She went on to ask how many empty properties the council owned and also what the latest figures are regarding support provided to refugees from Ukraine. She was aware that the number of sponsors had dropped for families of refugees and there had been a reduction in funding. She asked how this money was still being spent and operated in order to support these families. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager would ask the service to provide Councillor Hovvels the latest status report on the Ukrainian support schemes.

Referring to paragraph 49 of the report on empty properties Councillor Shaw asked for some context around this figure and which areas required attention and if those numbers were going up or down. He had concerns about the resources in place for the selective licensing scheme to be delivered and asked how many people had been prosecuted under the powers. Moving on to leisure centres he was concerned that visitor numbers were under target and asked for an update on works at Seaham and when this was expected to be open. This would be reported back.

The Chair advised that the leisure centres were on the work programmes for Environment and Economy OSCs and the transformation programme will be looked at.

Councillor Peeke was concerned about the number of people leaving the workplace within two years but asked if the remaining 80% of the workforce

had been contacted to find out why they were staying. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager explained that the information was available in the Staff Wellbeing Survey and the exit interviews were reviewed for those staff leaving the authority in a short space of time to identify the reasons. He advised that wellbeing was on the work programme.

With regards to EHCPs and SEND Councillor Batey said that young people who had experienced COVID symptoms had ended up with some vitamin deficiencies and attainment at school had decreased. She asked if the data could be looked at to see if there was any linkage.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

8 Q4 2022/23 Customer Feedback Report

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director Resources which provided an overview of the wide range of information collected from our customers that describe their experiences of using our services, covering performance in quarter 4 2022/23 for the period January to March 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services reported that 2022/23 had been a challenging year with the cost of living crisis and increases in inflation which had impacted our residents and increased demand for services. She informed the Board that telephone contacts had risen by 5%, digital by 21% whilst face to face contact had continued to decline.

The Head of Transactional and Customer Services highlighted that 81% of customers were satisfied with overall service delivery. To continue to enhance service delivery she went on to explain about the introduction of Chatbot and 'what3words'. Customer satisfaction surveys had also been tested via text message.

Councillor Elmer asked if there was a poorer performance when people rang in rather than talking to a person. The Head of Transactional and Customer Services said that they were looking at how to receive feedback from the telephone callers as unless logged on the CRM this may not happen at present. One way to try and capture this was the text messaging previously referred to, and she was looking at other ways in which to engage with people to give a more holistic view.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

9 Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2022-23

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources that presented the Overview and Scrutiny Annual report 2022/23 for comment and approval prior to submission to the County Council meeting in July 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Democratic Services Manager informed the Board that the report reflected and looked back on areas of scrutiny activity over the past year, whilst also setting out potential areas of activity moving forward in this coming year without prejudice. He added that a six-monthly update of scrutiny activity, due in January 2024, was also produced.

Members were advised that areas of activity within the Annual Report included a focus on partnership and policy development working and improving our role in developing emerging policies from a Council perspective. It was also recognised that Scrutiny's influence could be seen in the budget setting process, through policy development, performance monitoring and the drive for continuous service improvement.

The Democratic Services Manager explained that through the Board and the thematic committees, a wide range of topics had been subject to scrutiny, including County Durham GP Appointments and Access, Home to School Transport Services, Inclusive Economic Strategy, Ecological Emergency, Fly-tipping, Road Safety and Open Water Safety. More significantly last year there was an extended role in considering options for efficiencies and income generation opportunities with service area to support the budget. That deeper dive led to a number of recommendations put forward by Scrutiny to Cabinet earlier this year. He went on to advise that the annual report also focused on the key priority areas to move forward, aligning with the Council Plan, the Cabinet's Forward Plan of key decisions, the County Durham Vision 2035, partnership plans and strategies, performance management and were reflected in the various refresh of the work programmes.

The report also summarised the contributions made regionally through the North East Regional Employers Organisation Network where work programmes and priorities were shared and emerging issues that impacted across local authority boundaries and also the North East Combined Authority through its Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Joint Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee were considered. Finally, at a regional level it was important to highlight the collaborative work around health scrutiny to ensure that the impact of changes to health services across local authority boundaries did not adversely impact upon residents of County Durham and more recently the emergence of the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care system and associated integrated care partnerships

had resulted in the establishment of two Integrated Care Systems/ Integrated Care Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committees within the region.

Councillor Deinali asked for some clarity for COSMB in relation to Cabinet and how decisions could be called in and what actions could be taken. The Democratic Services Manager explained of the process to follow.

Resolved:

That the report be noted, and be submitted to the County Council meeting in September 2023.

10 COSMB Refresh of Work Programme 2023/24

The Board received a report of the Corporate Director of Resources that provided an updated work programme for 2023/2024.

The Democratic Services Manager reported that the work programme had been framed around the shared County Durham Vision 2035 and based on the three strategic ambitions:

- More and better jobs
- Long and independent lives; and
- Connected communities.

He went on to advise that the work programme reflected the fourth ambition which captured our corporate initiatives and ambition to be an excellent council. The report set out the level of scrutiny activity within the remit of this Board for the past year and provided a draft programme of items coming forward for 2023/2024 including the HQ and Accommodation Strategy, Digital Solutions, staff wellbeing, devolution and the County Durham Pound. The work programme allowed for an element of flexibility to ensure that scrutiny could respond to any emerging issues and policy changes.

Councillor Marshall commented that information in the capital programme that dealt with town and villages funding, leisure transformation, highways works, was not available to non-Cabinet members but was important to the communities that members served. He expressed concern that there had been a lack of delivery over the last two years and would like to see a report to COSMB on a bi-monthly basis to give an update on the capital programme and when projects would be delivered. He believed COSMB should monitor the capital programme.

The Chair agreed that some elements were included in the individual work programmes as part of the MTFP.

Councillor Elmer commented that if the Council were spending money they should make sure the project was delivered.

Councillor Martin agreed that it was a good idea to have a deep dive and asked the Chair to outline his vision on how to scrutinise the MTFP.

The Chair said that individual OSCs would feed into the MTFP but that in his opinion scrutiny do not make cuts as it was up to the Executive to do that and for scrutiny to scrutinise those decisions.

Councillor Moist stated that some Cabinet decisions were made without any timeline or plan, for example the Leisure Transformation Programme. The new Leisure Centre proposals were made in 2020 and nothing had changed since then for Chester-le-Street. He asked that if projects were not going to be delivered then an explanation as to why would be expected.

Councillor Batey said that it would be helpful for scrutiny to know what consultations were taking place and timescales for reports coming back. She referred to results for a consultation that ended in January still not being published and asked that scrutiny had the opportunity to scrutinise before being published externally.

The Chair said that it was important to keep internal communication with officers and referred to the CRM spreadsheet that members could access to track progress. He said that it was often difficult to do that now. As the new CRM pilot was progressed how asked that there was guidance on how that should be done going forward.

Councillor Cosslett said that it had been frustrating for him to try and get a response from officers as he could not give residents an answer.

Councillor Elmer agreed and said that there was no reasoning behind the delays in receiving a response.

Councillor Martin pointed out that there was a member/officer protocol which should perhaps be strengthened.

The Democratic Services Manager said that the new CRM system would be rolled out to all councillors and in a recent Constitution Working Group report the process behind bringing that system in place and the resource implications had been discussed. He would take on the wider concerns and feed those back to the Head of Legal and Democratic Services.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

11 Update in relation to Petitions

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which provided for information the quarterly update in relation to the current situation regarding various petitions received by the Authority (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Democratic Services Manager advised that the schedule provided a list of those petitions that were active, and those that were to be closed and which would be removed from the list prior to the next update.

Since the last update one new e-petition had been submitted but was rejected as other procedures applied. Two e-petitions were currently ongoing and collecting signatures via the website. One new paper petition had been submitted and awaiting a response from the service. The schedule provided a list of those petitions that were active, and those that were to be closed which would be removed from the list prior to the next update.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 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 advised that new to the plan were the following:

- Customer Access Point Service Offer Reduction Proposals
- Review of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2024/25
- Office Accommodation Strategy Update (exempt report)

The Chair asked that the rules around call-in were circulated to the board for information.

Councillor Marshall referred to the accommodation strategy and asked if there were any immediate plans for Plot C and asked about costs for Plot D, the main civic and office space. He asked if a report could come to COSMB in September.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.

