

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Cabinet** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Wednesday 13 December 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor R Bell, Deputy Leader of the Council in the Chair

Cabinet Members:

Councillors T Henderson, C Hood, S McDonnell, J Rowlandson, E Scott and A Shield

Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Amanda Hopgood and Councillor John Shuttleworth

1 Public Questions

There were no public questions.

2 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest in relation to any items of business on the agenda.

4 Quarter Two, 2023/24 Performance Management Report

The Cabinet considered a report of the Chief Executive which presented an overview of progress towards delivery of the key priorities within the Council Plan 2023-27 in line with the council's corporate performance framework. The report also covered performance in and to the end of quarter two, 2023/24, July to September 2023 (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Deputy Leader of the Council thanked the Head of Corporate Affairs and his team for the detailed and comprehensive update on performance against the targets and actions set out in the council plan.

The positive feedback from Overview and Scrutiny regarding the new format of the performance report was welcomed and noted.

The Council continued to deliver strong performance and Councillor Bell summarised some areas to note.

In relation to the environment, latest figures showed a further percentage reduction in CO2 emissions in 2023. Recycling was a very important part of the Council's environmental strategy. Campaigns and increased enforcement activity had led to a reduction of the contamination rate of non-recyclable material put into household recycling bins for the fourth successive quarter.

Focused efforts had been made by the Council to address the local impact of national shortages of children's social workers. It was good to note that the vacancy rate had fallen with fourteen newly qualified social workers joining the Council following successful recruitment campaigns.

In Housing, availability of good housing was another focus for the Council and during quarter two more houses were built due to larger construction schemes and quicker completion rates were being achieved. More empty houses had been brought back into use. Both indicators were higher than their profile targets.

The Council continued to tackle fly tipping with proactive action being taken against perpetrators. The number of incidents remained low and significantly better than our statistical neighbours.

The report also highlighted areas requiring attention. For example, the national shortage of educational psychologists required to undertake education and health care plans meant that the Council were not meeting its obligations to assess cases within the 20 week target. There had been a significant growth in demand in this area and the Council's approach would ensure that children were supported with quality provision in an appropriate setting.

The Deputy Leader of the Council then invited Cabinet Portfolio Holders to comment on their individual areas of responsibility.

Councillor E Scott referred to the inclusive economic strategy which ensured that people have access to good jobs and to cement Durham's status in the region as a great place to do business. Councillor Scott spoke of the solid tourism base being built, the cultural offer and the boost to the economy this was bringing.

The Council were seeing healthy demand for development land demonstrating strong potential in the County. Employability support and skills provision to key sectors meant that more people were achieving higher level qualifications. An investment plan was currently being devised to ensure that the Council were maximising opportunities regionally, nationally and globally.

Councillor S McDonnell, spoke of the digital side of business. The Council now had over 175,000 households with a registered 'Do It Online' account which helped improve efficiency and performance and provided agility and flexibility required in directing resources. From a customer satisfaction point of view more than 3/4 customers gave a five star rating. The County Council continued to be the lead Council for social value.

Councillor M Wilkes placed on record his thanks to the Low Carbon Team which the joint administration had supported and placed into the core of all decision making. Significant improvements included the low carbon depot at Morrison Busty, decarbonisation of heating at Abbey Leisure Centre with Newton Aycliffe, Teesdale and Peterlee Leisure Centres following in due course. New business management systems for energy use operating at the Louisa Centre in Stanley and St. John's in Seaham were paying dividends. Durham County Council had been confirmed as the best council in the region for tackling climate change and one of the highest in the country in terms of communication and involvement with Climate Change. The Council, residents and partners had been securing more grants from government since the Joint Administration took control of the Council from Labour. The Neighbourhood Warden teams were doing a better job than in anytime since the existence of the local authority through tackling fly tipping and other environmental crimes at levels we could have only dreamed of under the previous administration. Fly tipping was still at record lows in the County, down 35% since the Joint Administration took control. Record high fines, scrapping of the previous Labour administration discount meant that residents could be reassured that the Joint Administration had put an end to the soft touch approach to tackle the significant contamination of recycling, with falls in contamination rates in each of the last five quarters.

Councillor C Hood referred to the continuous monitoring of performance in relation to assessments and reviews and the investment of new mobile technology to support staff with the assessment process. The percentage of older people still at home, 91 days after discharge from hospital into reablement remained high, however staff in the commissioning service were undertaking a review to see how capacity could be increased to provide reablement to more people.

Councillor A Shield, commented that the revised Performance Management report provided easily accessible information, was intelligence led, evidence based, and provided the foundation and guidance on decision making considerations by the Council.

Cllr J Rowlandson, commented that although leisure centres appeared at first glance, to still be struggling to gain ground lost during COVID, the figures in reality related to leisure transformation work across several sites which had an effect on the figures. The cost of living crisis continued to have a real effect on communities, but it was pleasing to report that the overall membership to leisure centres was only 543 below target out of a total of 18,748. The launch of the new leisure membership was positive and the new attractions coming to fruition now would improve take up. Other highlights included the continued inward investment in Durham with new infrastructure and business parks. The ambitious plans for Aykley Heads and investment in NETPark were generating interest around established companies in Durham, but also from new companies from around the North East and the world who see Durham as the place to be.

Councillor T Henderson, welcomed the depth and breadth of the report and spoke around the higher demands for services within his Cabinet Portfolio. Councillor Henderson also spoke of the challenging time for families and the associated cost pressures. Councillor Henderson welcomed the progress made to support the service and service improvement in securing better outcomes for children and young people. It was pleasing to note the high levels of positive feedback of early help services from parents, carers, children and young people.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

5 Adult Social Care update on the introduction of local authority assessment by the Care Quality Commission under the Health and Care Act (2022)

The Cabinet noted a report of the Corporate Director of Adult and Health Services which provided an update following the report presented in July 2023, on the Care Quality Commission (CQC's) timeline to commence the assessment of the way local authorities discharge their Adult Social Care duties under Part one of The Care Act (2014); including information relating to pilot assessments and Assurance Peer Challenges (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Councillor C Hood, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adult and Health Services thanked Lee Alexander and the wider team for the compilation of the report and for the update. An immense amount of preparation had occurred since the last update to Cabinet relating to the implementation of the CQC Local Authority Assessment Framework. Preparation for the upcoming CQC assessment continued to progress and it was pleasing to note the improved governance and oversight arrangements provided assurance to members and the executive management team of how the Council are meeting the responsibilities to discharge the adult social care duties under the Care Act. As outlined in the report, there had been significant work undertaken in preparation for the assessment process which included working in conjunction with other local authorities across the North East.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

6 High Needs Block Funding for SEND and Inclusion Support

The Cabinet considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services and Corporate Director of Resources which provided an update on the latest forecast financial position for the High Needs Block (HNB) budget, overview of the HNB sustainability programme and an update on the Delivering Better Value (DBV) in SEND Programme (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Councillor T Henderson, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services spoke of previous reports relating to the High Needs Block funding, the quarterly financial problems and the significant financial pressures which had seen demand and complexity continue to increase since COVID.

At end of the last financial year and for the first time since 2015 there had been a small underspend in the high needs block. As welcome as this was, the Council must recognise the challenges faced with increased demand and sustained high levels of inflation reflected in the report. The DfE have recognised some of those cost pressures to a degree through the annual grant and extra funding to deliver a new programme over next 18 months.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

7 'Think Autism in County Durham' Strategy – Update Report

The Cabinet considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services and Corporate Director of Adult and Health Services which provided an update as to progress following the refresh of 'Think Autism in County Durham': Autism Strategy for Children, Young People and Adults into an updated strategy for 2023 – 2026 (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Councillor T Henderson, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services moved the report which was comprehensive and included a high level of detail around the 'Think Autism' strategy.

Councillor Chris Hood, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Adult and Health Services seconded the report and spoke of the continued support for an all-age approach to autism, which would extend the scope and impact of autism support in County Durham. Councillor Hood explained the need to work collaboratively to ensure that the voice of autistic people was not only heard, but informed opportunities available to those with autism, within education, learning and their local communities. It was vital that people with autism also helped plan accessible health and social care and their involvement in developing training for the workforce. Through collaboration, the Council could ensure that people of all ages on the autism spectrum have the opportunities, advice and support that enabled them to live fulfilling and rewarding lives, within a society that accepts and understands them.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

8 Mainstream Primary and Secondary Formula Funding 2024/25

The Cabinet considered a joint report of the Corporate Director of Children and Young People's Services and Corporate Director of Resources which provided an overview of the forecast Dedicated Schools Grant School Block and proposed local formula for allocating funding to individual schools in 2024/25, where the proposal is that the council continues to align the local mainstream primary and secondary formula funding in 2024/25 with the National Funding Formula (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Councillor T Henderson, Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People's Services thanked the Corporate Director of Resources and his team for all their hard work.

Overall, mainstream primary and secondary schools in the County would receive additional funding of £17.6m next year, a year on year increase of 3.6%, inclusive of an additional allocation of £7.4m for the teachers pay grant. It was disappointing that the Department for Education miscalculated the published figure in July. The proposed formula next year maintained alignment with the national funding formula and had been consulted on through the Schools Forum.

Councillor R Bell, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance explained that the additional £1.6 billion of funding being provided to core school funding next year was welcomed. It was hoped that this would help schools in their budget setting, where they, like the Council were being challenged with inflation and demand pressures.

Resolved:

That the recommendations in the report be approved.