

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

At a **Special meeting** of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Wednesday 20 December 2023** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Elmer (Vice-Chair), E Adam, L Brown, R Crute, C Lines, J Purvis, A Reed, A Simpson, T Stubbs and Mr P Walton

Also Present:

Councillors V Andrews, A Batey, E Scott and K Shaw

The Chair welcomed members of the Economy and Enterprise and the Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committees who were invited to the meeting in respect of agenda item 5.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors P Atkinson and S Townsend.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitute members in attendance.

3 Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

4 Items from Co-opted Members and Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members and interested parties.

5 Strategic Leisure Delivery Framework – Update

The Committee considered the Strategic Leisure Delivery Framework update report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth. Alison Clark, Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism attended the meeting to present the report, which was a precursor to a report to a Special Joint meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee in the new year, on the Leisure Transformation Programme (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Introducing the presentation, the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism referred to evidence which shows that physical activity supports overall physical, mental and emotional health. Health in County Durham is below the national average and there is disparity in health and life expectancy within the county, with those living in the more affluent parts of the county living longer than those living in disadvantaged areas. Those living in disadvantaged areas of the county also have lower physical activity levels. In light of this, the focus on service delivery is to maximise resources to ensure access for all.

The Committee noted current provision includes 14 indoor leisure facilities, a comprehensive community wellbeing programme and digital provision through the 'My Wellness' app. Abbey Leisure Centre provides a Move Hub which is a service for those who wish to become more active or have been inactive due to ill-health or injury. It is intended to establish Move Hubs across as many leisure facilities as possible.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism explained that a major restructure of the service was undertaken in 2023 which led to the development of the Strategic Leisure Framework. She added that the framework has five priority themes of places, people, society, systems and enablers which will make the outcomes deliverable. In terms of places, the service is striving to ensure assets are maximised such as the work on the Move Hubs and work within communities such as Sofa to Cycle at Shildon Leisure Centre. The framework is designed to improve how the service works with partners, within and external to the Council, in order to better utilise the county's outdoor assets.

The Moving Together strategy, developed alongside County Durham Sport and Public Health will be launched in 2024 and this will set out the countywide strategy for a whole system approach to enable people to move each day. The strategy has identified four key priority areas namely, children and young people; inclusive communities; active environments and health and social care settings.

With regard to the next steps, the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism spoke of the continued progress to make a difference to local communities by removing the barriers to physical activity. Future plans include targeting specific areas such as the top 30% of areas of deprivation as well as older people, those with a long term illness and women and girls. The Committee noted grant funding was secured from Sport England to develop a Moving Together pilot in Peterlee, to embed long-term lifestyle changes.

The Chair thanked the officer for the presentation and invited comments and questions from the Committee.

Responding to a comment from Councillor Batey who raised concerns at the delay in the reporting of the Leisure Transformation Programme, the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism commented that the Leisure Transformation Programme will be going to Cabinet early in the New Year, the Chair continued by informing the Committee that the Leisure Transformation Programme report will be considered at the Cabinet meeting on 14 February 2024 and that a Special joint meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be arranged to take place as soon as possible thereafter.

Councillor Batey commented that the terms 'strategy' and 'framework' throughout the report were confusing and the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism clarified that the overarching Moving Together strategy is a combined strategy with Public Health and County Durham Sport, whilst the local delivery framework seeks to set the context for service delivery within the strategy.

Councillor Adam referred to the four key priority areas of the Moving Together strategy and he questioned why children and young people were chosen as a key priority as opposed to older cohorts who may have more health needs and may be more restricted in their access to leisure facilities. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism explained that as young people are doing less than the recommended levels of exercise and there is an increase in the number of young people carrying excess weight in the county, this supports the approach to prioritise young people. However, the needs of older people and those less able are recognised and the development of the Move Hubs aims to identify the specific needs of the communities within which they are based. She confirmed that going forward more activities for older people will be developed, in their local communities.

Councillor Adam also pointed out that leisure centres tend to be located in urban locations and he asked how the service planned to encourage provision in rural areas. Councillor Adam then referred to the Moving Together pilot and asked why Peterlee was selected for the pilot.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism spoke of the work undertaken with partners to support activities in rural communities including the development of coastal and railway paths, work being undertaken with partners to provide activities in rural areas and the training of local community members to deliver and support local activities. With regard to the Peterlee pilot, she clarified that Peterlee was chosen for the pilot as the area met with Sport England's criteria and the other considerations which were levels of deprivation and ill health, the current levels of activity and the size of the population.

Councillor Lines was pleased to see the plans included improved working with partners and services within the Council and he gave the view that, in the past, some community related projects had been hindered by the Council, rather than enabled and he urged the Council to do more to assist community projects. He highlighted that there is an urgency to embed this approach across the Council to support and enable local community projects.

Councillor Elmer highlighted his concern at the low levels of physical activity and he commented that many people prefer to participate in informal physical activity and he stressed the need to ensure the appropriate infrastructure is in place to improve air quality to encourage active transport. He spoke of the links with the strategic priorities of the Council and the need to transition away from prioritising private vehicles and to provide more active travel opportunities. Councillor Elmer agreed with Councillor Lines that the Council must do more to encourage partnership work with external organisations and to support local community projects.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism agreed that the low levels of physical activity are concerning. She recognised that services provided by the Council will only form part of the solution as barriers to participation in physical activity are complex and it was clear that there was more work to be done to improve physical activity messaging through the use of social media and also to support the transport infrastructure.

Councillor Andrews commented that one of the original concepts of the NHS had been that healthy children grow into healthy adults and it seemed that almost 80 years after the NHS was established, this had not been achieved. She highlighted the significant issues to be addressed such as inequality, the rural nature of the county and the ageing population and she emphasised the importance of collaborative working with services including health, transport and education, for a system-wide approach.

Resolved:

1. That the report be received.
2. That members provide comment in relation to the report and presentation focusing on the Strategic Leisure Framework.

6 Library Provision – Update

The Committee considered the Library Transformation update report and presentation delivered by the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism highlighted that the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service is a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. An overview of assets was provided, which includes 39 libraries, a mobile library service, the library headquarters and an online offer which has become increasingly more popular since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Committee noted that the number of active borrowers is below pre-pandemic levels, that the physical library asset is in a relatively poor state and there is a lack of digital access in some areas. However, in relation to in-person library visits the trend is upward but not at pre-pandemic levels. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism outlined the results of the Phase 1 Library Transformation Needs Assessment which identified nine key actions for change and confirmed that work is ongoing in relation to the recommendations from the Needs Assessment.

She confirmed that activity in the short term will focus on the areas which can be undertaken within current budgets, including the review of the physical library network, assessing digital content and infrastructure, a stock policy review and the development of strategic outreach and participation.

Summarising the physical library network, the Head of Culture, Sport and Leisure informed the Committee that library venues had cost £3.2 million in the financial year 2022/2023. On average across the 39 libraries, staffing costs accounted for 70% of expenditure, the condition of library venues were graded as satisfactory or poor and she confirmed that many venues fell into the poor category and that library locations are based on the former district council boundaries.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Leisure highlighted that the review seeks to ensure the best service offer for the future. She continued that Counterculture Partnership LLP was commissioned to carry out the digital review which highlighted areas for improvement such as a lack of facilities for self-check-in and check-out and that the library management system is out-dated and did not meet users' needs. The review resulted in twelve recommendations and a framework to take forward digital transformation over the next five years. An application had been made to the Arts Council England Libraries Improvement Fund to support the modernisation of the digital library infrastructure, with the outcome expected in March 2024.

In addition to digital transformation, the Phase 1 Needs Assessment had identified a need to review the stock policy of the service as the previous stock policy review took place in 2012.

The Head of Culture, Sport and Leisure continued that attracting and retaining library users is one of the aims of the stock policy review which will be carried out by providing the best possible choice of materials, in a wide variety of formats, to reflect the interests of the whole community.

The Phase 1 Needs Assessment also recommended the development of vibrant and sustainable outreach, participation and partnership working. In response to this recommendation, an Outreach and Participation team was established to improve links with communities and projects such as the Durham Book Festival. Members noted that the library service was successful in securing the maximum grant available through the Know Your Neighbourhood project, to support reading for wellbeing and to address chronic loneliness.

In the future, work will continue on co-location planning and the investigation of funding streams available to enable the service to achieve its outcomes.

The Chair thanked the of Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism for the presentation and she highlighted that page 107 of the papers for this meeting, within the Counterculture report, provided details of the library profile by each ward. The Head of Culture, Sport and Leisure was thanked for her presentation and comments and questions were invited.

Councillor Crute asked whether the Council had considered undertaking the library review in-house, as opposed to instructing a consultant and he asked for details of the cost of the review. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism confirmed that the Council had considered carrying out the review, however, the government recommendation is that library needs assessments should be carried out with an independent partner and she added that the key findings of the review were informed by the local perspective. The Head of Culture, Sport and Leisure agreed to supply details of the cost of the review, for circulation to the Committee.

Councillor Crute then referred to the recommendations set out in paragraph 15 of the report and he asked for clarification on the recommendation to invest in core infrastructure and the recommendation to move away from developing in-house solutions. The Head of Culture, Sport and Leisure explained the reference to moving away from developing in-house solutions referred to digital delivery as, in some cases, purchasing digital solutions may be appropriate.

Councillor Stubbs commented on the reference that Woodhouse Close library is well placed as its user demographic is similar to that of the leisure centre and he requested clarification on the point. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism clarified that those who use libraries and leisure centres have commonality in that they are using the facilities in their leisure time.

Councillor Stubbs also commented that the report did not include details of any plans to work with third parties, such as Amazon, the Post Office etc, in order to increase footfall. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism confirmed that the service has not explored the private sector and that the aim is to increase the physical offer and also make the digital offer more compelling. However, the service may investigate the private sector offer in the future.

Councillor Adam noted the Counterculture report identified inequalities throughout the county and that the Inclusive Economic Strategy found a lack of fast and reliable broadband in parts of the county which leads to digital exclusion. Referring to the Aycliffe West division which has a high level of deprivation, Councillor Adam raised concern that whilst the report stated ambitious plans for outreach will be developed, the recommendations within the report did not identify outreach and digital plans for the Aycliffe West area. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism referred to the review recommendation that the library service should align with key Council priorities including broadband and digital rollout strategies. She highlighted that the physical library network is based on historical district council boundaries which in some cases, no longer reflects where libraries need to be located. Therefore, the initial focus is on improving the physical library asset, as well as outreach work and there are a number of ways in which the public are served in addition to physical libraries, such as the mobile library service which may deliver books direct to people's homes.

Councillor Scott commented on the valuable contribution libraries make to health and wellbeing and she added that she would welcome communities becoming more involved in libraries, for example through community libraries and outreach work such as reading cafés and she highlighted that it requires creative thinking and she concluded by commenting that she would like to see the service expanded.

Councillor Elmer highlighted the importance of libraries retaining their identity to provide access to knowledge for all and he cautioned that aligning the library service to key Council strategies risked the service being subject to constant change in order to fit the political agenda. He therefore believed that more consideration was required as to what the strategic outcomes for the library service should be. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism replied that the alignment of strategies would not change the core purpose but aimed to ensure that the library service remains relevant in the future.

Councillor Reed raised concern that the survey on the physical state of buildings showed that they were all either satisfactory or poor and she asked what criteria was used for the survey. In response, the Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism explained that the standard criteria for the assessment of Council buildings was used for the survey of library assets.

Councillor Reed noted that active borrowers are not the only people who use library facilities and others use libraries for social interaction or as warm spaces. She added that co-location of libraries should not lead to facilities being moved further away from users and she requested more information on co-location plans. The Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism clarified that community support is considered in all co-location plans and the service recognises that high-street based libraries are popular and that access to public transport routes is vital.

Echoing members' views on the contribution libraries make to the quality of people's lives, the Chair commended the work of the library staff, whose service is valued by so many.

Resolved:

1. That the content of the report and presentation be noted.
2. That members provide comment in relation to the report and presentation focusing on Library Transformation in the county.

7. Such other business

Members were reminded that the next meeting of the Environment and Sustainable Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be held on 19 January 2024.