

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 8 April 2024 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor R Crute (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors V Andrews, A Batey, J Charlton, J Elmer, O Gunn (Substitute) (substitute for S Deinali), P Heaviside, L Hovvels, M Johnson, P Jopling, C Lines (Vice-Chair), C Marshall, C Martin, J Miller, E Peeke, A Reed, K Shaw, A Simpson (Substitute) (substitute for B Coult), M Stead, A Sterling and A Surtees

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Coult, Deinali and Moist

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Gunn for Councillor Deinali and Councillor Simpson for Councillor Coult.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 February 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 County Durham Partnership Update

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change that provided an update on issues being addressed by the County Durham Partnership (CDP). The report also included updates on other key initiatives being carried out in partnership across the county (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Interim Strategic Manager, Partnerships informed Members that the CDP event held in November 2023 was well attended celebrating 10 years of Public Health in the local authority and 10 years of the Health and Wellbeing Board. The event also coincided with the Lumiere festival returning to the County.

Members were also informed of the work around the fun and food programme, the advice in County Durham Partnership, the Poverty Action Steering Group and the development of Local Networks.

Councillor Charlton expressed concerns about numeracy and literacy skills within County Durham as we had highest number of people with low essential skills, and asked if we were letting people down in the education system. She requested further information around this. The Interim Strategic Manager referred to the targeted work taking place under the Prosperity Funding but would find out particular details and report back.

Councillor Surtees was pleased to see poverty being linked to the report but had concerns that funding was being cut back for the fun and food initiative by introducing a stricter criteria. She said some families would miss out, which was disappointing given we were trying to reduce the stigma around food poverty. She asked that the committee send a letter to the service expressing it's concerns around the application of DfE criteria when funding the fund and food programme initiatives and the risk that strict application of the criteria may mean children from "working poor" families miss out.

Councillor Gunn agreed that this issue affected every variant of County Durham and she found the change in the DfE formula appalling.

Councillor Hovvels said that it would discourage community and voluntary groups from applying for funding and would discriminate against children in the community. She said that it should be free for all, or subsidised, to make everyone feel equal. She went on to say that the community and voluntary sector were already under pressure and under funded so this would only add to the problem.

Councillor Marshall stated that the Child Poverty statistics in County Durham and the North East were shocking and made worse by political decisions within government. He said that there was shame in linking 'fun with food' as there was no fun for those not being able to feed their children. He referred to the many families in his community and the wider community who had welcomed children being fed in school holidays. He believed that there was a link between attainment in schools and the quality of meals being served in schools. He was concerned about the feedback on the quality of meals being provided in schools, even though costs had once again increased. These were additional costs to parents and the schools.

Moving on to AAPs Councillor Marshall was concerned about the ability of the new local networks being able to make local decisions. He was also concerned about the transition arrangements from AAPs to Local Networks and asked for some assurances about the local networks in respect of what they were and how would they work.

The Chair agreed that there was a history with the school meals provider. He referred to a recent Radio 4 interview which focussed on a school in London where school children were asked about school meals. The feedback was that it was poor quality, the portions were small and they were left hungry. This was the same situation being felt in County Durham and needed to be looked into further. He asked officers to liaise with the Chair of Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Reed. He was also alarmed at the figure of the healthy weight of children from reception to year 6 and the lack of leisure facilities could not be helping to alleviate the problems.

On a more positive note, Councillor Reed said that there were some schools in the County who were sourcing their own ingredients and preparing food on site. They offered substantial meals that the children liked, with healthy options available and where allergies were taken into account. She was concerned about the number of take aways in close proximity to schools with some open early before the start of the school day.

The Interim Strategic Manager would take those points back to the Head of Partnerships and Community Engagement.

Councillor Elmer reported that as a governor at Brandon Primary School their meals were very good and to reduce food waste children could select their chosen meal at the beginning of each day. He would be interested in looking at what other schools did. He went on to ask how the County Durham Vision 2035 fed into the County Council Plan and how they informed each other, he also asked how people could get involved. The Interim Strategic Manager advised that the County Durham Vision was developed together with partner organisations and the public, and the Council Plan detailed the council's contribution towards achieving the objectives in the County Durham Vision. Partnership strategies, for example, the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy, supported the delivery of priorities which involved local communities. She invited the councillor to contact her outside of the meeting if he had any further queries about membership of any of the thematic partnerships.

With regards to the letter from the Management Board to the service referred to earlier in the meeting, Councillor Batey was concerned that there would be

individuals would be identified who could participate in programmes so it would be hard to encourage people to apply when the criteria had changed.

Councillor Charlton said that some schools kept food to one side for those children who could not afford lunch so that they did not go home hungry. She was aware that schools were mainly cashless and provided cards, with any free school money being put directly onto the card and so not causing any stigma.

Councillor Surtees welcomed the discussion but did not want the point of the letter to be missed in that we were not able to do what we used to be able to as the funding had changed.

Councillor Gunn praised the good schools in County Durham with good teaching and TA staff who had faced challenging situations over the last few years but said that nourishment and nutrition was linked to learning. All schools were facing budget and staffing pressures but we did not want to let children down.

Councillor Hovvels asked if we could look into the lost funding for training for the voluntary sector as they were the grass roots of the community and this would have an impact across the region.

Resolved:

That the report be noted and a letter be sent from the Chair to the DfE regarding the impact on changing the criteria for Free School Meals.

6 2023-24 Q3 Resources Revenue and Capital Budget

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the forecast revenue and capital outturn budget position for the Resources service grouping, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget based on the position to the end of December 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager, Resources and Regeneration reported a quarter three forecast position showing that the service was forecasting a cash limit underspend of £1.434 million against a revised budget of £27.328 million. The Resources cash limit balance carried forward at 31 March 2024 was forecast to be circa £2.460 million and other earmarked reserves under the direct control of Resources Management Team (RMT) were forecast to total £5.701 million at 31 March 2024. The revised Resources capital budget was £4.746 million for 2023/24, with a total expenditure to 31 December 2023 of £3.096 million.

Councillor Marshall asked about consultancy costs in capital spend as over the last three years we have reduced staffing but as a result asked if we were passing these costs back to external contractors. The Finance Manager replied that this was the capital programme for Resources and the consultancy costs referred to mainly came under the Regeneration, Economy and Growth Service. He referred to the underspend in staffing for Resources and reported that this was a managed position, mainly due to vacant posts that had arisen in advance of planned MTFP savings.

Resolved:

That the forecast of outturn position be noted.

7 2023-24 Q3 Chief Executive's Revenue and Capital Budget

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director of Resources which provided details of the forecast revenue and capital outturn budget position for the Resources service grouping, highlighting major variances in comparison with the budget based on the position to the end of December 2023 (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Finance Manager, Resources and Regeneration highlighted the quarter three forecast position showing that the service was forecasting a cash limit underspend of £0.769 million against a revised budget of £4.323 million. The CEO cash limit balance carried forward at 31 March 2024 was forecast to be circa £0.829 million. Other earmarked reserves under the direct control of CEO were forecast to total £1.200 million at 31 March 2024 and the revised CEO capital budget was £1.892 million for 2023/24, with a total expenditure to 30 September 2023 of £0.691 million.

In response to a question from Councillor Elmer regarding what Central Support and Capital related to, the Finance Manager explained that this subjective category was used for accounting transactions such as capital financing or depreciation. He added that the £352,000 shown in the table against Central Support was a drawdown from Earmarked Reserves to fund spend shown in the other subjective categories within the table, such as Expenditure and Supplies.

Resolved:

That the forecast revenue and capital outturn budget position be noted.

Councillors Hovvels and Marshall left the meeting at 10.20 am

8 Q3 Performance Management Report

The Board considered a report of the Chief Executive which provided an overview of progress towards delivery of the key priorities within the Council

Plan 2023-27 and covered performance in and to the end of quarter three, 2023/24, October to December 2023 (for copy see file of minutes).

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager highlighted some key areas of the report including staff sickness, finance, contact from members of the public and the big challenge of recruitment affecting areas such as social workers, planners, environment health.

Referring to the Carbon Reduction Dashboard on page 102 of the papers Councillor Elmer asked if there had been a significant rise for 2022. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager explained the figures were published on an annual basis from government and 2022 figures were awaited.

On page 164 of the papers Councillor Charlton said that the rise in victims reporting domestic abuse was partly due to people being aware that help was available. She still did not feel that the reduction of incidents was a true reflection but wanted to ensure that resources were available in all of the right areas.

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager informed members that the location of incidents of domestic abuse is routinely mapped and used to allocate resources by the police and other agencies dealing with domestic abuse and its impacts.

Councillors Surtees suggested that the terminology around this was changed to domestic abuse survivors, rather than victims.

Referring to page 221 of the paper Councillor Batey commented on the number of red KPIs relating to physical activity and asked if there could be a correlation between this and the new leisure centres being scrapped and were there enough physical activity opportunities being offered. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager explained that these figures come from a survey so is difficult to obtain further data to a sub-county level, he would consult with the service.

Councillor Miller left the meeting at 10.35 am

Councillor Gunn understood that it was impossible to have leisure facilities in every town or village, however, accessibility was key and were we getting this right and was adequate transport available. She asked if more green spaces were available for free activities such as walking or cycling, which in turn was good for mental health.

The Chair agreed that access to all services was important, especially in rural areas.

Councillor Elmer understood the need for cars in some areas of the County but for those that did not have or did not want to use them a much better transport system needed to be in place. He believed that the recent parking charges introduced in some areas would seriously impact people's lives.

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager would check what information was available in the systems we held to see if there was a way to extract data on the breakdown of memberships in leisure facilities and attendance.

Councillor Surtees said that some children would not be eligible for the free school meals funding now and this would link to the leisure and education issues discussed previously.

Councillor Charlton said that there were a lot of free air open areas that could be utilised but not many children were seen playing as we lived in a culture that was more technology based where they would rather play on their phone or tablet than outdoors.

Councillor Jopling commented on the issues faced by schools in relation to finding suitable swimming venues as the pool in Crook had closed 10 years ago and schools in that area had to transport to Bishop Auckland. It was important to understand where to prioritise funding as cycle routes had recently improved in Crook. She believed that the Council's leisure facilities also needed to look at the market and be competitive.

Referring to physical activity Councillor Elmer said that adults figures showed similar to the national average, however for children this was very different and considerably lower than the national average. This caused him great concern and we needed to look into this more closely and find out the reasons behind it and if children were choosing not to be active.

Councillor Lines referred to the Bus Services Improvement Plan which he believed required a rescue plan. For Leisure Services he said that there were a lot of smaller scale projects that could take place with those in the local community leading on them. If advice was offered around leases and funding this would help people move forward. He added that recruitment continued to be an issue and local authorities were not as appealing as they once were as an employer due to funding issues and some facing bankruptcy.

Councillor Gunn said that there were local activities taking place in some villages but that they often needed a venue. Cuts to Town and Parish

Council funding had not helped as they would often support such requests and the same could be said of the County Council cuts too.

Councillor Batey added that community activities were pivotal and referred to a community building in her area that was waiting to be asset transferred to the local community. She said that we needed to look at the bigger picture as there was not sufficient transport to get to larger venues.

Councillor Shaw said that two leisure centres were cancelled in February that were originally included in the Leisure Transformation Programme. People were being asked to travel to their nearest facility which in his area could mean travelling to Sunderland as no provision was near enough in County Durham.

The Chair said that the Leisure Transformation had seemed to have disappeared from the agenda, from the notice of key decisions and had not been discussed since the MTFP report. He was open for this to come back to scrutiny.

Councillor Elmer said that it was important to analyse the data available and to also look at surveys carried out elsewhere to see how we were different. Young people needed to be asked what they preferred and what were the barriers in terms of access.

Councillor Jopling said that it was important to drill down and find out the reasons as there had been changes since COVID and huge price increases in buildings and construction costs. She added that it was important to realise that we could not deliver the wish list we once had as funding would need to be sought elsewhere.

The Chair commented that political choices had been made and costs had increased.

Councillor Reed referred to the wording in the leisure centre consultation as people were asked what they wanted. If they already had some facilities, they may not have highlighted it as a need as it was already there, such as swimming pools.

Councillor Gunn said that it was easier to access services in urban areas. As far as research was concerned, she did want to ensure that officers had the capacity to look at the areas of work we were asking them to do in terms of the links to poverty, access and bus routes. She suggested that we could work with universities.

The Chair said that we needed to look at the work programmes and report to the relevant committees.

Resolved

That the overall position and direction of travel in relation to quarter two performance, and the actions being taken to address areas of challenge, be noted.

9 Appointment of Non-Statutory, Non-voting Co-optees to Overview and Scrutiny Committees

The Board considered a request to re-appoint the current serving non-statutory, non-voting co-optees for a further two-years (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer advised that the term of appointment for the current serving co-optees would come to an end in June 2024 and therefore the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board in accordance with paragraph six of the protocol were requested to extend the term of appointment for co-optees for a further two years. A full review of non-statutory, non-voting co-optee membership would then be undertaken in 2026.

In response to a question from Councillor Elmer the Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer explained that subject to approval the correspondence was ready to send out in order to receive a response within a two week time period. He added that contact had been made with those individuals who had non-attendance, which had been due to capacity. He advised that it was within the committees power to terminate appointments and seek to re-appoint any vacancies.

Resolved:

(a) That the extension of the term of appointment of existing non-statutory, non-voting co-optees for a further two years in accordance with paragraph six of the protocol (Appendix 2), be agreed.

(b) That a full review of non-statutory, non-voting co-optee membership be undertaken in 2026, be agreed.

10 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 two new e-petitions had been submitted, both were ongoing and collecting signatures via the website.

One new paper petition had been submitted and as the Council had no direct control over the issue, the lead petitioner had been advised and the appropriate organisation had been made aware of the concerns raised.

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.

11 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:

- Medium Term Financial plan and Review of the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2024/25

The Democratic Services Manager explained to the Board that he had attempted to acquire details about the Leisure Transformation Programme and had been informed that options were being worked on for Cabinet, that it was a work in progress and there was no definite answer about when it would be added to the Notice of Key Decisions. He had expressed his disappointment in the delay in coming forward and asked that the next steps would be for it to be reported to COSMB.

The Chair said that in his opinion this looked evasive and members had received no feedback since the MTFP report.

Councillor Surtees felt that this was a blatant disregard for scrutiny and was disappointing as on the work programme for Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with no officers in attendance at any recent meetings and the Chair and Vice-Chair being left feeling that they could not undertake their role.

Councillor Gunn was deeply concerned that this was not allowing democracy to take place for elected members to be able to scrutinise any plans. She asked for clarity around the next steps.

The Chair would link with the relevant Chair and Vice Chair and the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth, and ask that the relevant Cabinet members were invited to attend to explain what stage the programme is at. He asked that this request be put formally in writing to the Portfolio Holder to attend the next EEOC or COSMB meeting. He added that he wanted to work with Cabinet on this issue to ensure that scrutiny have the option to discuss and comment.

Councillor Jopling left the meeting at 11.30 am

Councillor Elmer supported the Chair's request to ask the Portfolio Holder to attend a meeting to explain why there had been a significant delay.

Resolved:

That the content of the report be noted.