

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 22 November 2024** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult in the Chair

Members of the Committee:

Councillors J Elmer (Vice-Chair), E Adam, R Crute, L Mavin (for Councillor A Simpson), D Nicholls, D Oliver, J Purvis, S Robinson and T Stubbs

Co-opted Members:

Mr B McArdle, Ms K Monahan

Also in attendance:

Ms R Morris (Member of Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee)

Prior to the commencement of the formal business, the Committee welcomed newly appointed co-opted members, Bill McArdle and Kelly Monahan.

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors P Atkinson, L Brown, A Simpson, D Sutton-Lloyd, S Townsend and Mr E Simons (Member of Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee).

2 Substitute Members

Councillor L Mavin attended for Councillor A Simpson.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the Joint Special meeting held on 23 September 2024 and the meeting held on 4 October 2024 were agreed as correct records and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Items from Co-opted Members and Other Interested Parties

There were no items reported.

6 Physical Activity Strategic Framework

The Committee received a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth which provided an update on the Physical Activity Strategic Framework for the Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure section within Culture, Sport and Leisure (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure, Deborah Holmes, introduced the presentation by describing the Physical Activity Strategic Framework (PASF), which had led to the development of the County Durham Physical Activity Strategy for 2023-28, 'Moving Together'. A Moving Together Network was established in 2024, to support the strategy and facilities were transformed into physical activity hubs.

The Committee heard that despite the diverse service offer, the number of people in County Durham participating in the recommended 150 minutes of physical activity per week was below the national average. Sport England's Active Lives survey found that whilst approximately 60% of County Durham's adults were physically active, disparities existed across the county and the figure increased to almost 70% in the more affluent parts of the county, whilst reducing to almost 48% in the most disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, the research found that those living in more deprived areas held the view that they did not have equal opportunities to be active. The framework, therefore, aimed to realign resources to address inequalities.

The Moving Together 'plan on a page' illustrated the vision of the strategy which was that County Durham residents should be more active, enabling them to live longer, healthier and happier lives. The Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure noted that on average, adults in County Durham lived in a state of good health until the age of 59, which was four years below the national average. The Moving Together strategy identified four key priority areas: children and young people, inclusive communities, active environments and health and social care and the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure provided practical examples of the implementation of the framework across each of the four key priority areas.

The Committee heard that the framework was a change of approach and a number of processes were being developed to enable the service to benchmark and review the programme. Details were provided as to the positive impact of the framework to date, including the offer for children and young people; those who were new to exercise and the gym membership offer.

Concluding the presentation, the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure informed the Committee that the service continued to develop the offer, using learning to adapt approaches and embed transformational change.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure for the informative presentation and she commended the team for the good work. Comments and questions from the Committee were invited.

Councillor Nicholls welcomed the work and he remarked on the inequalities in the levels of physical activity throughout the county, saying that whilst people were living longer lives, it was clear that did not necessarily mean healthier lives. He observed a lack of provision for individuals, who were not members of sports clubs, to participate in team sports for fun, regardless of ability. In reply, the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure commented on the changes in behaviour following the Covid-19 pandemic, with activities such as five-a-side football declining in popularity and physical activity levels, particularly in males aged 20-25, reducing. She added that leisure programmes and facilities were, therefore, adapting to changes in demand and the Council's Playing Pitch Strategy had identified a gap in outdoor provision. The findings from surveys of leisure-users and non-users were helping to inform the future direction.

Councillor Adam congratulated the team on the amount of work undertaken and he asked for information on the learning to date, in particular, the reasons why people were inactive and where the areas of focus should be. The Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure referred to the development of the 'Moving Together in Peterlee' pilot project, in partnership with Sport England, to drive forward positive lifestyle changes in the town. It was hoped that learning from that project could be used to develop similar pilots across the county, however, all communities had different challenges. With regard to current data, the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure highlighted that Durham Insight provided current data relating to living in County Durham, including health and wellbeing data, which was used to inform strategic planning.

In reply to a question from Councillor Adam as to what metrics were in place, the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure responded that the service was developing the benchmarking process and an evaluation toolkit. In addition, information was captured through the use of the 'Thrive' membership card and links were established across other Council services, such as Rights of Way, to collate information on the use of public rights of way. Data was also gathered through surveys, including Sport England's Active Lives survey.

In response to a question from Councillor Stubbs, the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure confirmed that community classes usually carried a small cost for the user. Councillor Stubbs replied that individuals must take some responsibility for their health and he pointed out that there were opportunities to be active, for free, such as Parkrun or merely, going for a walk. Councillor Stubbs spoke anecdotally of his experience as a sports coach, saying that most of the young people he had coached, continued to take physical exercise in their adulthood. He suggested that one way to achieve a positive change would be to focus on building foundations for an active lifestyle from an early age and he asked how the service reached the early years cohort.

The Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure explained that one of the target areas was prenatal provision, to encourage new parents not only to attend prenatal classes but also to continue to exercise after the baby's birth, at parent and baby exercise classes. The Strategic Manager added that children were a key priority and work was carried out with early years practitioners and head teachers, to promote good physical exercise habits in young children and this extended to encouraging parents to become involved in the work.

Co-opted member, Rosemary Morris, thanked the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure for the detailed presentation and she asked whether there were specific target areas where physical activity uptake was low. She raised concern at the number of primary school-aged children who were inactive and she asked whether the service encouraged walking buses, as walking to school could make a substantial contribution towards achieving the recommended level of exercise per day, as well as being beneficial to reducing traffic congestion. The Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure confirmed that walking buses were encouraged as the active environments key priority area engaged with schools in respect of active travel and a dedicated officer worked with schools, to promote sustainable travel.

In reply to a question from co-opted member, Bill McArdle, who asked whether work was undertaken with neighbouring authorities, the Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure confirmed that work was carried out across county boundaries, for example, there had been shared-learning with Teesside on Sport England's place-based pilot. Additionally, the work of the North East Combined Authority would enhance collaborative working and the Leader of Durham County Council was the North East Combined Authority's portfolio holder for Culture, Tourism, Sport and the Arts.

Councillor Elmer stated that participation in physical activity should be an integral part of everyday life and society must acknowledge the significant challenge to young people's physical activity levels and overall health, from the use of technology.

Councillor Elmer also commented on the need to embed the 'Move' principles throughout Council services and he referred to a recent Planning Committee meeting at which a bulk development was approved in a location that would inevitably increase the number of families who were dependent upon cars. He stated his support for walking buses and he remarked that there was only one officer responsible for sustainable transport for schools when previously there had been a sustainable transport team. He concluded by stressing the need to adapt transport infrastructure to support active travel, saying that many people who were in agreement with active travel, found it difficult to put active travel into practice, due to the lack of infrastructure.

Councillor Robinson praised the work and he highlighted that a small boxing club, based within Consett Sports Centre in the 1980s had produced a world champion boxer, Glen McCrory. He gave the view that increases in rent led small clubs to relocate from local authority leisure centres to alternative premises and he questioned whether the boxing academy at Peterlee was well-used. The Strategic Manager for Wellbeing, Sport and Leisure clarified that a budget was available to subsidise the use of local authority leisure centres and the Club Durham scheme worked with community sports clubs to provide practical advice and support with funding applications, in addition to supporting talented athletes. The Strategic Manager said she would be happy to discuss the matter further with Councillor Robinson following the meeting.

The Chair concluded the discussion by encouraging members to share the 'Move County Durham' Facebook page and she suggested that the service should consider promoting the 'Move' timetable through the Area Action Partnership webpages. She echoed the previous comments from the Committee with regard to embedding the work across all Council services and she added that she would like to see the government being urged to introduce a trial, to ban cars from entering the immediate vicinity of schools, to encourage pupils who were able to do so, to walk to school.

Resolved:

Members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented upon the information provided in the report and presentation.

7. Durham County Council Theatres and Cinemas

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth which provided an overview of the management of Durham County Council's theatres and cinemas (for copy of report see file of minutes).

The Strategic Manager for Culture, Sarah Glynn, presented the report and delivered a presentation which included information on the regional and national context, details of the Council's three cultural venues, the approach to the visitor experience and current pressures.

The Committee noted that for every £1 spent in the north east theatre sector, an additional spend of approximately £2 was generated in the local economy. The Strategic Manager for Culture described the range of local cultural and entertainment venues throughout the county, including a detailed breakdown of the three cultural venues operated by Durham County Council ie Gala Durham, Empire Consett and Bishop Auckland Town Hall.

The Strategic Manager for Culture referred to the previous presentation and she highlighted that research showed that active engagement in arts, culture and creativity was beneficial for health and wellbeing. The service was developing a programming policy for theatres, in line with the wider service objectives. These objectives were: inclusivity, professional development and supporting local talent, community involvement / social benefit, ensuring a place-based approach and promoting opportunities for young people.

The Committee noted that cultural venues were facing a number of challenges including the age of buildings, sector competition and the need for specialist skills and experience. Film screening attendances were declining year on year and the cinema offer faced strong competition from other operators and streaming services. Initiatives such as 'Event Cinema,' 'Bringing in Baby' and 'Gala Seniors' were part of the work to address the shift in audience behaviour. The catering offer across venues was being considered as part of a wider catering review and the Council's central marketing and communications team delivered marketing of the venues, however, most theatre venues in the country had dedicated marketing teams.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Manager for Culture for the detailed presentation and comments and questions were invited.

Councillor Nicholls commented that society had created a divide between academic and creative skills, with creative skills perceived as having less value. He spoke of how studying drama from a young age had increased his confidence and taught him important life-skills. He added that there was work to be done to challenge perceptions and increase inclusivity and one of those ways was to make culture affordable to all. Councillor Nicholls highlighted that the Gala provided value for money and he suggested more could be done to market the Gala's offer. He also commented that the presentation touched only briefly on dance and he asked what provisions were in place to promote dance. The Strategic Manager for Culture responded that dance formed an important part of the programme and the service supported the dance sector with delivery, such as the work carried out with TINArts dance school.

In addition, the service was considering ways in which to link the festival and events programme with the 'Move' agenda.

In response to a question from Councillor Nicholls as to how the culture offer catered for those with additional needs, Lizzie Glazier, Culture, Venues and Programme Manager, highlighted that relaxed theatre performances, cinema screenings and break-out spaces were offered.

Councillor Stubbs gave the view that the Gala was a great asset to Durham and he expressed concern that cinemas were under-utilised. He referred to the recent recruitment of an Audience Development and Engagement Manager and he asked whether the new post had made an impact. Councillor Stubbs also commented on the number of music venues and music festivals held in areas such as Newcastle and Stockton, saying that contrasted with Durham's limited offer. Highlighting Durham's student population and the income that could be generated from hosting music, he asked whether any consideration had been given to changing the use of cinemas, in order to host live music. In reply, the Strategic Manager for Culture commented that cinema audiences had changed, with an increasing demand for a cinema 'experience.' Initiatives such as 'Event Cinema' had resulted in a higher yield, however, in order to secure new releases, there was a requirement for a fixed number of showings to be held over one week. The Strategic Manager agreed that there were fewer music venues in Durham compared to some of its neighbours, however, a number of successful music festivals were held. She agreed that a market existed for live music and the Empire was particularly popular for live music. The Strategic Manager for Culture added that the service would continue to consider the best use of space at the Gala, as part of future programme development.

Councillor L Mavin recognised the increasing competition from other cinema operators and commented that she hoped that the service would not follow competitors who were offering 'table-service' as that was at odds with the ethos of the Council's 'Move' strategy. In reply, the Strategic Manager for Culture reassured the Committee that the aim was not to offer the same as competitors but to consider how best to deliver a programme which built audience satisfaction.

Councillor Adam asked for clarification on the impact of the recruitment of the Audience Development and Engagement Manager. The Strategic Manager for Culture explained the role of the Audience Development and Engagement Manager was to work across the service to understand audience data, as opposed to marketing. Marketing was carried out through the Council's corporate marketing team, however, competitors had access to specialised, often higher-cost marketing.

Marketing continued to be a challenge across the service, however, in recent years, there had been positive signs, with the success of 'Event Cinema' and an increase in sales for in-house pantomime productions. Councillor Adam suggested that the future development of the marketing strategy should be discussed with the relevant Cabinet Portfolio holder. Alison Clark, Head of Culture, Sport and Tourism, replied that whilst the service would welcome further investment to enable more creative marketing to be carried out, the wider challenges to the Council's budget were recognised.

Councillor Adam referred to the demolition work at Claypath which had impacted the Gala and he asked when the work would be completed and whether any compensation was available for loss of income. The Strategic Manager for Culture clarified that the demolition works, which were required for safety reasons, were carried out by the Council and, as access was limited to the stage door, some shows with larger sets, could not be accommodated. The demolition work was complete and the service yard was back in operation, however, access was likely to be limited again, when the land was redeveloped. The Strategic Manager clarified that some additional costs were covered, however, loss of income was not compensated. The Empire had also undergone building repairs which had resulted in lost income and the older buildings presented a constant challenge. The service, however, continued to consider income streams to offset loss of income.

Co-opted member, Kelly Monahan, observed that the report did not mention the role of amateur theatre groups who perform at venues including schools and community centres. She remarked that for many people, amateur theatre was accessible and affordable. In addition, it offered opportunities for local people to become involved in the arts and to develop theatre skills and she asked for detail as to how the Council engaged with amateur theatre companies. In response, the Strategic Manager for Culture spoke of the importance of amateur theatre in the programme, with the hosting of amateur productions, including the annual pantomime performed by the CBS musical theatre group. The Culture, Venues and Programmes Manager highlighted that all three venues hosted amateur productions and a large number of enquiries were generated from amateur companies. Kelly Monahan then asked, if the Council was unable to accommodate requests from amateur theatre companies, whether it offered support to smaller venues, to host amateur productions. The Culture, Venues and Programmes Manager confirmed that the service provided support and the service's technical team engaged with venues including schools, community centres and leisure centres, whenever they had the capacity to do so, to assist with activities including lighting and staging. The Strategic Manager for Culture added that the service aimed to deliver a programme for theatres which was in line with the wider culture service objectives, whilst balancing budget requirements to ensure sustainability of the venues.

Resolved:

Members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented upon the information provided in the report and presentation.

8. Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided an update on the progress of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Principal Ecologist, Stuart Priestley, presented the report and recalled that Durham County Council was appointed as the responsible authority for the production of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), to improve the biodiversity resource across the county. The strategy was to comprise of a local habitat map to define existing biodiversity resources and to identify where further resources should be directed to deliver nature conservation. A Statement of Priorities would identify the results the strategy sought to achieve (priorities) and actions to achieve the results (measures).

The Committee noted that the LNRS was being developed alongside communities and the process included engagement with stakeholders, landowners and the wider public. The Principal Ecologist confirmed that the first round of consultation was complete and a suite of draft priorities and measures for the plan's delivery were being formulated by partnership-based sub-groups. A proforma for the Statement of Priorities was drafted and engagement was taking place with the Environmental and Records Information Centre for the North East (ERIC NE) to lead on discussions with the sub-groups to develop the mapping element of the LNRS.

The Chair thanked the Principal Ecologist for the update and invited questions and comments from the Committee.

Councillor Nicholls extended his thanks to the team for their work. He noted that Defra's timescale for the delivery of the strategy had been relaxed, and the expectation was now that the LNRS would be completed in autumn 2025. Councillor Nicholls commented that the work was being carried out within the context of the Council's declaration of an ecological emergency and he expected the strategy to be an emerging document. He added that he would like to see the completion of the strategy as soon as possible. The Principal Ecologist replied that Defra recognised that its initial timescale for the production of LNRSs was over ambitious, however, his aim was to draft the strategy by spring, with a view to producing the strategy in the autumn, which would align with work by North Yorkshire and South Tyneside.

Whilst the government had not confirmed the exact timescale, it was expected that the strategy would be refreshed every 3 to 10 years. In addition, the Principal Ecologist referred to the complexities of the production of the strategy, which involved various consultations and internal processes. In the meantime, Defra continued to work on the delivery model.

Councillor Elmer praised the excellent progress and he remarked that the strategy was a rare example of work which received cross-party support. He stated frustration that the Council, as a land-owner, had an opportunity to contribute and that there remained a great deal of work to be done, by the Council, to evaluate land ownership and to understand the opportunities. The Principal Ecologist clarified that work was ongoing with the Corporate Property and Land team with regard to land management for nature conservation and the draft strategy would help to identify gaps. Councillor Elmer gave his view that the Council's current approach was focused on land value in terms of housing and income, however, there were wider issues to consider.

Bill McArdle thanked the Principal Ecologist for the interesting report and he asked for information on the working relationship with neighbouring authorities with regard to the compilation of the habitat map. The Principal Ecologist explained that 48 LNRSs were in production across the country, which would link across regional boundaries. He added that he was in contact with areas including North Yorkshire, South Tyneside and Cumbria with regard to their draft measures and priorities.

The Chair asked if it would be possible for Members to view the draft strategy. The Principal Ecologist explained that Members would have an opportunity to comment on the strategy, prior to the final draft, as formal consultation was required to be undertaken, however, prior to that, the draft measures and priorities would be made available on the website. Additionally, engagement would be carried out with landowners and farmers. The Chair thanked the Principal Ecologist and added that a discussion would take place, following the meeting, as to whether a further informal information session would be required on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Resolved:

Members of the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of the report and welcomed the progress in the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.