

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MANAGEMENT BOARD**

At a Meeting of **Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Friday 23 October 2015 at 10.00 am**

#### **Present:**

**Councillor J Armstrong in the Chair**

#### **Members of the Committee:**

Councillors P Stradling, E Adam, R Bell, H Bennett, K Corrigan, R Crute, S Forster, B Graham, J Hillary, P Lawton, J Lethbridge, T Nearney, C Potts, L Pounder, J Robinson, M Simmons, J Turnbull and S Wilson

Councillor Potts informed the Board that Scrutiny would be attending a Bite the Ballot campaign at Consett Academy on 2 November 2015 to encourage young people to engage in the community and the work of the Council. The Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny would give a presentation on the role of Overview and Scrutiny and would be open to questions. Councillor Adam added that students from Greenfield School would be attending Parliament on 18 November 2015 and would then report back to Aycliffe Town Council.

#### **1 Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A Hopgood, M Nicholls, A Shield and Mr R Patel.

#### **2 Substitute Members**

There were no substitute members.

#### **3 Minutes**

With the addition of Councillor S Forster's apologies, the minutes of the meeting held on the 18 September 2015 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Referring to points raised from the minutes of the meeting held on the 18 September 2015, the Head of Planning and Performance provided the following updates:-

- Item 5 paragraph 5 – it was confirmed that the percentage of female staff leaving through voluntary redundancy was reflective of the make-up of the workforce. The Head of Policy and Communications would give a verbal update on total head count figures in future;

- Item 6 paragraph 7 - comments were fed back to the Assistant Chief Executive regarding the living wage and the Head of Policy and Communications would advise on the national impact during the Welfare Reform and Poverty Issues item being reported at item 5 on the agenda;
- Item 6 paragraph 9 – information requested regarding Durham Ask case studies, had been emailed to members on the 7 October 2015.
- Item 7 paragraph 2 – the age range of adults who were admitted into permanent care was a national indicator and the only basis for comparison. Supplementary information could be provided;
- Item 7 paragraph 5 - domestic abuse statistics were provided to Cllr Lethbridge;
- Item 7 paragraph 6 - evidence update from Public Health England in relation to e-cigarettes had been circulated to members.

#### **4 Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **5 Welfare Reform and Poverty Issues**

The Board considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive that provided an update on the Welfare Reform and Poverty Issues Cabinet report, 21 October 2015 and to inform Members of the proposed consultation on the draft County Durham Poverty Action Plan (for copy see file of minutes).

The Head of Policy and Communications reported that in order to focus on the actions necessary to respond to challenges facing the county's residents, the Poverty Action Steering Group had developed a draft Poverty Action Plan based on the following six key themes:-

- Attitudes to poverty and raising its profile;
- Focus on child poverty;
- Involvement of agencies with direct involvement in poverty;
- Credit and debt;
- Further welfare reform and benefit changes;
- Work and personal wellbeing and sense of worth.

In response to a question from Councillor Wilson regarding Child Poverty and the change in measures, the Head of Policy and Communications advised that the issue had improved but remains a concern. He added that the Council had achieved improvement in figures, however not at the same level as other parts of the country.

The Head of Policy and Communications responded to a question regarding employment figures and advised that the figures were based on Job Seekers Allowance claimant figures. In response to a follow up question on the number of zero hours contracts, he said he would try and find out if this information is available.

In response to a query from Councillor Nearney regarding the Housing Solutions Service and working with housing associations, the Head of Policy and Communications advised that a housing partnership was established with East Durham Homes, Durham City Homes and Dale and Valley Homes when the welfare reform was introduced in 2013. The Housing Solutions team work alongside teams from Living and Cestria Homes as well as private landlords. The Department of Work and Pensions provided workshops on universal credit for social housing providers and private landlords to ensure they had involvement and an understanding of the changes.

Councillor R Bell asked if a summary of advice services was available, the Head of Policy and Communications responded that a directory had been produced and he would arrange for the link to be emailed to members. He would also enquire if it was possible for the directory to be adapted geographically.

Councillor Crute asked how officers were monitoring the impact of universal credit and any unintended consequences in future. The Head of Policy and Communication responded that they were working closely with partners to monitor the impact and were provided with regular updates.

Councillor J Robinson referred to the unemployment figures and asked if the closures at Redcar Steelworks would have an impact in County Durham. He enquired if figures were available in relation to zero hour contracts and the number of incapacity benefit claims. He referred to the possible negative impact on businesses due to increases to the national minimum wage. Councillor Hillary added there may also follow a wider implication with a freeze on benefits and cost of living increases. The Head of Policy and Communications replied that he would make enquiries regarding the impact from the job losses at Redcar Steelworks. He acknowledged there would be an impact from the national minimum wage on businesses and highlighted potential problems they would be facing. He would find out if an evaluation was available on the impact locally and internally and report back to members.

Councillor Hillary referred to the Action Plan on page 55 and asked for a more realistic timeframe with regards to the Review of overall structure of employment-related training, skills, funding and employability provision in County Durham and revise to improve effectiveness.

Responding to a question from Councillor Adam regarding the Council's strategy on tackling fuel poverty and high energy costs, the Head of Policy and Communications advised that he would consult with colleagues in Regeneration and Economic Development and report back to Councillor Adam.

Councillor M Simmons enquired if figures were available on the number of people that had lost their motability allowance, especially in rural areas.

**Resolved:**

- i) That the contents of the report and progress being made by the council and its partners in addressing welfare reform and the wider poverty issues in the county be noted;

- ii) That the proposed consultation on the draft County Durham Poverty Action Plan be noted.

## **6 County Durham Partnership Update**

The Board considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive that provided an update on issues being addressed by the County Durham Partnership (CDP) including key issues from the Board, the five thematic partnerships and all Area Action Partnerships (AAPs). The report also included updates on other key initiatives being carried out in partnership across the County (for copy see file of minutes).

The Principal Partnerships and Local Councils Officer informed the Board that there was a slight change in the report format having taken on board feedback from members, all Area Action Partnerships now feature more strongly. She highlighted priorities and key areas of focus carried out within the County Partnership in recent months.

The Chairman referred to the Mid Durham AAP and the funding secured from the Big Lottery's Reaching Communities Fund for the rebuild of Hamsteels Community Centre. He informed members that the project had also received funding through the Capital and Revenue budget and work on the new facility was due to start at the end of November 2015. He commended the work of the Chairman and Clerk of Cornsay Parish Council.

In response to a question from Councillor Wilson regarding the number of asset transfers still waiting to take place, the Principal Partnerships and Local Councils Officer advised that 15 transfers were still outstanding. She added that all outstanding transfers had individual timelines and action plans which would be provided to Councillor Wilson.

### **Resolved:**

That the information contained in the report be noted.

## **7 Update in relation to Petitions**

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services that provided an update on the current situation regarding various petitions received by the Authority (for copy see file of minutes).

The Senior Committee Services Officer reported that since the last update, 4 e-petitions had been submitted, of these, 1 was withdrawn by the petitioner, 1 was rejected and 2 did not qualify under the Council's Petition Scheme. She added that 7 new paper petitions had been received, and 8 had completed the process. There was 1 live e-petition on the website relating to amending or abolishing the Bedroom Tax which was due to close at the end of December 2015.

Councillor R Bell commented that there was no response from the service regarding the petition to save the Walls of Barnard Castle on the petitions table and asked if a response could be obtained.

Councillor J Robinson referred to the number of petitions rejected and suggested that the

criteria be reviewed to determine if the scheme was user-friendly.

**Resolved:**

That the information contained in the report be noted.

## **8 Notice of Key Decisions**

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services that provided a list of key decisions that were scheduled to be considered by the Executive (for copy see file of minutes).

The Senior Committee Services Officer reported that since the last update there had been the following movement in items being considered at Cabinet:-

- Council Tax Base 2016/17 and Forecast Surplus/Deficit on Collection Fund - added to the plan for the 18 November and 16 December 2015;
- Council Plan and Service Plans 2016-2019 - added to the plan for the 18 November 2015;
- Bishop Auckland Regeneration Framework Review – the date had been changed from 16 December 2015 to 16 March 2016.

**Resolved:**

That the information contained in the report be noted.

## **9 Information update from the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees**

The Board considered a report of the Assistant Chief Executive that provided an update of overview and scrutiny activity from September 2015 to October 2015 (for copy see file of minutes).

**Resolved:**

That the information contained in the report be noted.

The Chairman agreed that in order to keep members informed, the next item of business could be reported.

## **10 Public Health Grant**

Councillor J Robinson informed the board that in June 2015 the Department of Health announced there would be an in-year reduction of £208m to the local authorities' public health grant which equates to an in-year cut of £3.1m for Durham County Council. The funding formula from 2016 onwards would be changing which could possibly result in cuts of up to 19.6m. He advised that the public health grant and the consultation response would be discussed at the Adult, Well-being and Health Scrutiny meeting on 4 November 2015.