

COUNTY COUNCIL

9 DECEMBER 2015

QUESTIONS FROM AREA ACTION PARTNERSHIPS

QUESTION FROM BISHOP AUCKLAND AND SHILDON AAP

The Bishop Auckland and Shildon AAP has been working on a number of priorities including Children and Young People and Crime and Community Safety. One concerning and recurring theme through our work has been the mental wellbeing of children and young People and we have been concerned to hear about the number of suicides in the south of the County amongst younger people. We were pleased to support the Public Health commissioned project with Papyrus earlier this year and the AAP has also agreed an Area Budget contribution to do further suicide prevention and training in our area. What else is Durham County Council doing to address this issue and could this work be affected by the public health budget decisions within the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review?

Response

Thank you for your question. As the council's mental health champion, I am delighted that the AAP has prioritised mental wellbeing of children and young people.

Any suicide is always a tragic event and is very distressing for family and friends. I am pleased to confirm that council has a very proactive approach to suicide prevention and works closely with partners on this issue.

Our public health service commissions a number of programmes including Mindfulness, Relax Kids, Young People's sheds - known as Crees, a resilience programme in schools and bereavement support following suicide.

The health & wellbeing board signed off the County Durham transformation plan for children and young people's mental health, emotional wellbeing and resilience plan only last month. This is a multi-agency plan and has a workstream focusing on the prevention of suicide and self-harm.

Finally, I wanted to let you know that we are piloting a programme for the Department of Health involving early alerts around suicide prevention that allows a quick response by partners to be put in place within days. Unfortunately, we know from the Government spending review that the public health grant to councils will be cut over the next few years and this will certainly impact on commissioned service, but it is too soon to be able to provide any level of detail on this.

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QUESTIONS FROM WEARDALE AAP

The impact of the Comprehensive Spending Review can already be felt in Weardale, and with additional pressures on DCC and its partners to make savings year on year, there is concern that rural proofing should be a priority consideration to ensure equitable access to services in the Weardale area.

The Weardale AAP recognises the severe challenges facing the Council to balance its budget, but would like to know what measures the Council plans to put in place to ensure those living in rural areas continue to have access to services.

Response

Every effort is made to try and ensure Council services are accessible to those living in rural areas. As portfolio holder for Assets, Strategic Housing and Rural Issues and Chair of the Economic Partnership's Rural Working Group, I have the opportunity to input into the development of all Cabinet and Council proposals to ensure the needs of rural communities are being addressed. However, as a Council with one of the largest geographic areas in the country, it has never been possible to have service centres in every community and users have either had to travel or they have been provided on an outreach basis using a range of facilities. The significant investment we have helped secure in broadband across the county has also helped with this.

Faced with unprecedented and continuing budget reductions, the pressure to further reduce the amount we spend on buildings will continue and the number of Council run service centres is likely to decrease. We continue to lobby Government for Durham to receive a rural funding premium to meet these needs, but so far this has been unsuccessful.

On a more positive note, the Rural Working Group through its work with the North East Farming and Rural Advisory Network has recently helped secure £6 million to support businesses, job creation, and bring more visitors to the area. In 2016 there will also be a call for rural projects to access European investment and we will complete a Rural Action Plan summarising all rural activities in order to identify and address gaps.

Given the importance of ensuring Council run service centres are accessible to all, the Council does 'rural proof' any proposed changes to its transport policies, in addition to carrying out equality impact assessments of proposed

changes that take into account accessibility of special interest groups to services wherever they live in the County.

To demonstrate our commitment to maintaining access to our services, recent changes to our Children's Centres have led to more activity taking place in rural communities. By focussing on maintaining the staff who provide the service and not buildings, we can put on a range of sessions in more villages and communities, therefore providing income for village halls and community centres.

I hope this response gives Weardale AAP some assurance that we do take the needs of rural communities very seriously. Perhaps there is no better illustration of this than the consistent level of resources we allocate to AAPs, no matter their size or location, to support local communities.