

COUNTY COUNCIL

22 FEBRUARY 2017

QUESTIONS FROM AREA ACTION PARTNERSHIPS

QUESTIONS FROM 3 TOWNS AAP

QUESTION 1

When we have consulted with Young People in the 3 Towns area, the most common request has been access to Wi-Fi and charging points for phones. We have seen an increase in Young People congregating around areas with free Wi-Fi access e.g. outside the customer access point, which some residents have raised issues with.

Does the Council have any strategies in place to allow young people to access this free resource without raising complaints from other members of the public or being perceived to be a problem? Or are there any plans to invest in Wi-Fi access points in other areas such as parks, town centres and communal spaces?

RESPONSE

Thank you for your question regarding the Council's approach to public access WiFi.

The Council has a wider strategy to improve digital connectivity across the county including fixed line broadband, mobile and WiFi. This is the Digital Durham programme which has already brought access to superfast fixed line broadband to over 110 thousand properties across the region. Whilst work is continuing, effective broadband is now accessible by 96% of the population of the County and this will reach 98% by the end of next year. A third of those who have access have now taken up a superfast service.

We are also working with the mobile providers to improve coverage across the County to ensure consistency and coverage, especially in the more rural areas. Working with our colleagues in the NE LEP we are working to create a 5G test bed to allow the region to be at the centre of the development of this important technology.

As for WiFi, this is underpinned by the fixed line broadband work and we are making free public access to WiFi available from all Council buildings. In addition there are some initiatives to provide WiFi in public spaces, notably in Durham City and Stanley though both of these projects are at an early stage. We would be interested in exploring the potential opportunity with the 3 Towns AAP and would welcome further discussions.

QUESTION 2

In the recent AAP priority survey where over 3,300 Young People voted on their priorities and key issues for their local area. The top issue countywide and second highest issue for the 3 Towns under Employment, Enterprise and Training priority was Money Advice.

Do the Council have any plans to introduce Money Advice into schools or through other mechanisms that Young People can access?

RESPONSE

Thank you for your question.

The Council commends the young people of the 3 Towns AAP and shares their belief that money advice is extremely important for young people growing up in County Durham.

In County Durham there are 3 main areas where young people can access money advice: through their curriculum at school; through specific projects being delivered by some of the AAPs in schools; and through the council's partnership work the National Illegal Money Lending team.

Financial literacy education became part of the National Curriculum for the first time in September 2014, as part of citizenship education in key stages 3 and 4 (ages 11-16). This required it to be taught in local authority maintained schools. Academies and free schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum.

In addition, the new mathematics curriculum is intended to ensure that young people leave school with an understanding of the skills needed for personal finance.

Financial literacy is a part of the whole curriculum and, although schools must ensure it is covered through their programmes of study, there is no discrete focus on it as a part of the inspection of schools currently. Reassuringly, no school inspection reports have indicated that this area of the curriculum is insufficient in County Durham.

However, the Council remains committed to supporting young people and their families to manage their money as effectively as possible, through actions identified in the Financial Inclusion Strategy and Poverty Action Plan.

We are currently working with schools and the community, building on long standing work by three other AAP areas, to encourage a savings culture to prevent further debt dependency with high cost providers. This 'Durham Savers' project is funded, Great Aycliffe and Middridge Partnership, Spennymoor, and East Durham Rural Corridor and works in partnership with two of our local credit unions and three high street banks to engage with schools across the three funded areas.

The Council also works closely with the National Illegal Money Lending team during 'action weeks' which raise awareness about loan shark activity in the local community. Support for teaching staff is also offered with financial education based lesson plans around the dangers of illegal money lending. Proceeds of crime monies are also being used to incentivise young people and their families to join the local credit unions during these action weeks.

QUESTION FROM EAST DURHAM AAP

At the East Durham Board Meeting, held February 8th 2017, the Board recognised and celebrated the achievements of the Financial Volunteers. Developed in response to the impact of austerity measures including Universal Credit, the volunteers promote the value of credit unions to reduce the impact of both legal and illegal loans to those who are financially vulnerable. It was noted that the project is volunteer led and will be continued to be delivered even though the AAP financial investment has ceased.

In East Durham the promotion of the Credit Unions over the past five years has resulted in an increase in membership from under 200 to over 2400. In East Durham, NEFirst Credit Union have achieved £504, 615 in loans and savings of £791,233.

With the capping of benefits and rolling out of Universal Credit, what structures/support will the County Council be able to offer the most vulnerable in our communities?

RESPONSE

Thank you for your question and can I begin by passing on this Council's congratulations on the increase in membership of the credit unions the work in East Durham has achieved, we all know what a real difference credit unions are making to our communities and the financial wellbeing of our residents.

The implementation of welfare reform and the continued effects of austerity cuts across all of the council's strategic themes and has implications across the entire council. As you are aware the council's responses are being overseen by all Cabinet Members, supported by the Poverty Action Steering Group, chaired by the Director of Transformation and Partnerships. Working groups have also been established for specific elements including: Benefit Cap; Universal Credit; and more recently child poverty.

Members have been kept up-to-date with presentations and reports, with the most recent report being presented at Cabinet on 28 January 2017.

We are working with partners including AAPs to understand the impacts and provide support wherever possible.

Many of the strands we have talked about previously remain in place, together with the extensive support the Council already provides which we have touched on in previous County Council meetings including the Community Support Team and Emergency Duty Team, as well as our Housing Solutions team. Our welfare rights team also continue to provide invaluable advice and support to those on benefits.

In terms of what we are doing and plan to continue to do, Cabinet were pleased to be able to allocate each AAP with £30,000 over the last three years from the Welfare Assistance fund to help AAPs build on the excellent work already being done within their communities to help those affected by the changes. A further £10,000 for each AAP has recently been agreed for 2017/18. We have also allocated over £1 million to support employment projects which specifically target the unemployed affected by the changes.

Following success in Crook, work is underway between DWP, DCC and partners in the Peterlee area to improve the way that these organisations work together and to ensure customers, particularly those who are vulnerable or have complex needs receive the help and the support they need. Learning from this pilots will be extended across the County.

The Council has agreed to extend the Council Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme for a further year into 2017/18 in order to maintain the same level of council tax benefit support provided before the scheme was changed in 2013.

We continue to work closely with the County's social housing providers and developing the use of Discretionary Housing Payments to provide short term financial support to tenants whilst we work together to improve their long term situation. The council's Welfare Assistance Scheme remains in place with the council has committing an annual budget of £1 million following the withdrawal of government funding in 2015.

Additional areas where we have put in place measures to help residents include help with heating and steps to help residents avoid the high costs of pay day lenders and loan sharks.

We will continue to monitor this situation and work hard to respond to this changing environment and to provide support wherever possible. We will also continue to report outcomes across the County to members, AAPs and other partners. I am sure I can speak on behalf of councillors from all parties in reassuring you that we take these particular issues extremely seriously and will continue to work together to help those affected.