

## COUNTY COUNCIL

22 March 2017

### QUESTIONS FROM AREA ACTION PARTNERSHIPS

#### QUESTION FROM CHESTER-LE-STREET AAP

The AAP is aware of the challenge of creating a vibrant Town Centre given the change to consumer spending patterns.

How can the Council try to support areas to consider and develop innovative uses of premises and space? For example encouraging more residents to live in the Town Centre above shops in vacant first floor accommodation, or more radically trying to diversify the Town Centre offer to include more non-retail activities such as childcare provision, and leisure facilities to change the nature of footfall within the Town Centre.

#### RESPONSE

I would like to thank Chester le Street AAP for their question.

The Council recognises that there is a need to diversify what town centres offer 'beyond retail' and indeed the national trend towards more leisure-based activity in town centres is already being seen here in County Durham.

The recent Chester le Street master plan refresh sets out our ambition for Chester le Street including key priorities around developing Chester-le-Street's offer as a leisure destination; developing a wider programme of events centred on the Market Place; and Improving the quality of the market.. These priorities are in addition to the projects undertaken improving links to the town and the work to attract new retailers and operators.

We actively engage with end users and their agents, often who are seeking premises for activity that is not retail focused. For example, just this month we have been looking for suitable town centre premises for one of the UK's largest childcare providers. We also engage with the creative industries seeking to grow the 'gallery' space concept in vacant premises, alongside the growing leisure and hospitality offer in many of our towns.

Concerning living above shops, we have been delivering support to bring vacant and underused properties back into use in our town centres for some time and this has proven highly successful in some targeted areas. Whilst this support typically focuses on creating employment and supporting direct business needs, we will be looking further to work with property owners who wish to utilise vacant space in order to create new residential units which will add to the vibrancy of our town centres.

## QUESTION FROM EAST DURHAM RURAL CORRIDOR AAP

### Question 1

Economic regeneration is clearly very important to the Council and in particular creating employment opportunities. The Employability Pit Stop scheme delivered by the East Durham Rural Corridor AAP focusses on: personal development and employability skills; digital literacy skills; and promoting increased financial capability, to help its unemployed residents be ready for any employment opportunities which arise.

How successful are other schemes developed and delivered by the Council, and in particular, what more could be done to help those in rural communities?

### RESPONSE

Firstly may I thank East Durham Rural Corridor AAP for the question.

- We have had a number of successes in supporting people into employment and training.
- The Employability offer continues to support individuals back into work, self-employment, education/training and volunteering. There are now Mentoring Officers working across the County to support our residents aged 25+ into employment or training.
- These successful initiatives are in the East Durham, Teesdale, Chester le Street and Mid Durham AAP areas and are funded through AAP contributions.
- In addition, the Think Families programme and the Employability team are taking a joint approach to supporting vulnerable families and ensuring cross-referral of clients and funding alignment.
- DurhamWorks, our in house training arm, continues to support unemployed 16-24 year olds across the county and can offer 1:2:1 advice and guidance, financial assistance and post-employment support to individuals. In terms of the 18-24 year old cohort, the Council has to date engaged with just over 1000 young people in County Durham, including rural communities, and has been successful in supporting 380 of them into employment, apprenticeships or education.
- Finally, one of the consistent issues faced by all ages of Job seekers in many parts of the County is that of transport and accessibility to employment opportunities. We are working with a range of teams to provide a range of options to help to overcome these issues, including the development of a Wheels to Work programme in the Chester Le Street AAP area, and exploring the targeted use of Taxi busses.

## Question 2

Health and older people is a key priority for the East Durham Rural Corridor AAP, and fuel poverty is a contributory factor to poor health for many older persons, particular in rural areas. What is the Council doing to help address fuel poverty and how successful have these schemes been in improving fuel efficiency for those in rural communities?

### RESPONSE

We have made real progress in tackling fuel poverty in County Durham over recent years.

The countywide Affordable Warmth Action Plan sets out the work being delivered. A range of fuel poverty programmes are promoted countywide by our Warm Homes Campaign using a network of 900 community groups, including the Area Action Partnerships.

If I could draw out just a few key examples:

- The Warm and Healthy Homes Project provides warmer homes for low income households with poor health. Joint working with Public Health and the Clinical Commissioning Groups has installed 116 new heating systems over the last 12 months.
- British Gas funded Warm Up North has provided 1,055 fuel poor households with new boilers and insulation measures since March 2016, this is the highest uptake in the region.
- A further 394 fuel poor households have received free central heating systems and insulation measures under the Governments Central Heating Programme, drawing down £1.54m of funding into County Durham in the last 12 months. For the first time, in addition to new gas central heating, oil fired heating and air source heat pumps are also available for rural fuel poor households off the mains gas network.
- Impartial advice is provided to help residents reduce their energy bills and energy debts. Since January 2016, 934 low income households have been assisted to save a total of £137,000.

Further work being undertaken on financial inclusion is complementing this activity, supporting our residents to maximise energy related savings.

We are also currently undertaking some innovative work under the title 'Roots out of Poverty' where 800 front line Council and NHS staff are being trained to offer better support to help people out of poverty, which obviously includes fuel poverty.

In addition the Poverty Action Steering Group has agreed funding for the provision of one qualified Home Energy Advisor for the next three years. They will provide information around energy efficiency, but most importantly enable individuals to save money by changing energy supplier or tariff, and helps people to understand their bills. Those who will be helped through this scheme will primarily be identified

through the triage process for those facing financial hardship following the changes through welfare reform.

To conclude in addition to some of the examples of good work highlighted, a range of new fuel poverty assistance programmes will be rolled out nationally from April 2017 under the Energy Company Obligation and we will continue to maximise the assistance available for Durham households through this activity.