

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board** held in Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 19 March 2018 at 9.30 am.**

Present:

Councillor R Crute (Chairman)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors A Patterson (Vice-Chairman), E Adam, A Batey, D Boyes, M Clarke, P Jopling, H Liddle, L Maddison, C Martin, O Milburn, C Potts, L Pounder, J Robinson, M Simmons, F Tinsley, J Turnbull and M Wilkes

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Bell, J Chaplow, K Hawley, P Oliver, J Rowlandson, H Smith and A Willis.

2 Substitute Members

There were no substitutes.

3 Minutes of the meeting held on 14 February 2018

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 March 2018 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman with the following amendment:

Page 6 paragraph 1 to read: *'that frontline services were protected for the future'*

4 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5 Quarter 3 2017/18 Performance Management Report

The Board considered a report of the Director of Transformation and Partnerships which presented progress against the council's corporate performance framework by Altogether priority theme for the third quarter of the 2017/18 financial year (for copy see file of Minutes).

The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager advised that despite ongoing financial pressures the council continued to improve or maintain performance and details were provided of those improvements. He further provided details of the key performance challenges noting that needs and demands were similar to that presented at quarter 2.

Councillor Jopling noted the disparity between female and male suicides in young adults and asked what was being done to bring down these figures. In response, the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager advised that suicides in males being higher than in females is a national trend. The Council has a Public Mental Health Strategy that includes suicide prevention as one of its key strands. The Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee have carried out a scrutiny review into this area.

Councillor Jopling further noted that at a recent meeting she had attended with the police it was reported that 30% of the increase in recorded crime was an actual increase in crime with the remainder relating to changes in recording practices. The Chairman noted perception of crime was often a lot worse than actual crime. Councillor Patterson noted that the increase in crime in the Durham Constabulary area was higher than the rest of the country. However, crime levels are generally low in comparison. Councillor Boyes added that Durham were more compliant than other forces in the country and this was borne out by a recent external inspection.

Councillor Adam raised a query regarding Universal Credit and the impact of its introduction on free school meals. Councillor Crute noted that the council were half way through the roll out of Universal Credit and agreed that a review of the impact could be considered.

Moving on to the issue of the Stronger Families Programme, Councillor Maddison queried whether the service were overstretched because they were trying to work with too many families and successfully turn them around by March 2020. Councillor Crute noted that this was being looked at by Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Further discussion took place regarding the response rate to Freedom of Information (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) requests. The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager advised that the target which had recently been increased from 85% to 90% of information requests answered within 20 days was a national one which was accepted to be extremely challenging to achieve. He further provided detail of the role of the Information Commissioner's Office and noted that timeliness of responding to information requests will be taken into account in forming a view of an authority's overall performance.

Councillor Tinsley in referring to paragraph 9 of the report and employment rates queried how those who were economically inactive were monitored. In addition, he noted as referred to in paragraph 12, the North East's economy would be one of the worst affected areas post-Brexit.

In response, the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager advised that the council were able to access figures on the economically inactive and this could be reported via the Economy & Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Moving on, Councillor Wilkes in referring to page 56 of the report and PI NS15 relating to the number of fly-tipping incidents noted that the tracker indicators provided slightly skewed figures because they had been set when performance was

particularly poor. He suggested that by broadening the table the trends would be more clearly identified.

The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager advised that the way in which the tracker information was presented could be reviewed. Councillor Crute added that he agreed with Councillor Wilkes's comments however noted that there was limited influence that could be had on tracker indicators.

Further discussion and debate took place regarding Brexit and concerns regarding structural funding. Councillor Tinsley noted that meetings of core cities were taking place however Durham was not involved and therefore not heard, he added that it was a real concern that the area was excluded.

Moving on, Councillor Adam in referring to PI ref CYPS 19 (percentage of strategy meetings initiated which led to an initial child protection conference being held within 15 working days) on page 46 of the report asked whether the performance in this area was having a real impact upon protecting children he further added that this needed action rather than robust monitoring. The Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Manager advised that both indicators referred to by Councillor Adam suffered because they were based on cumulative data which when performance had been poor had affected the figures for the remainder of the year.

Resolved: That the content of the report be noted.

6 Customer Feedback: Complaints Compliments and Suggestions 2017/18 - Quarter 3

The Board considered a report of the Corporate Director Resources which presented the Customer Feedback: Complaints, Compliments and Suggestions report for Quarter 3, 2017/18 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Robinson in noting the performance in key service areas added his sincere thanks to all the staff who had helped keep services running during the bad weather. He added that in his opinion something should be done to recognise those staff who had gone the extra mile.

Councillor Adam, in referring to paragraph 77 of the report noted that 24% of residents don't own their own smartphone device and noted the difficulties they may face as a result. He therefore queried what action was being taken to address those individuals who may be isolated in this way. In response, the Customer Relations Manager advised that residents who did struggle with getting access to online forms etc. were signposted to the Customer Access Points where Digital Support Assistants would support customers and guide them through online forms etc. In addition, work was being undertaken with voluntary organisations in a bid to assist vulnerable adults who needed additional help. One good example of this in practice was East Durham Trust.

Councillor Crute further noted that an exercise had been undertaken to map access to online facilities and this could be accessed via the Council's website.

Councillor Batey added her thanks to the refuse teams for their work during difficult conditions and noted that some positive steps had been taken from a lessons learnt exercise with the service. She went on to add that she considered it to be potentially useful to residents if a pie chart was provided with council tax bills in order to demonstrate clearly how council tax was spent and what the council reserves were allocated for. She added that there was a lot of misconception about council tax and reserves. Councillor Crute added that he also considered this to be a valid point and agreed that it was important to be clearer to residents how and where council tax and reserves were spent.

The Customer Relations Manager added that she was aware this had been previously discussed as part of the Budget discussions with the Head of Finance (Financial Services) as it would reduce avoidable contact. Councillor Crute suggested that this message be reinforced by the Board.

Further discussion took place regarding complaints against staff and training that staff received in dealing with difficult situations. Councillor Maddison, noted that staff on the frontline did an excellent job however thought that consideration should also be given as to how Councillors interact with customers and the role they play in diffusing situations and the impression they gave.

Councillor Tinsley noted that it would be good to see some comparative data in this regard and also queried whether body cameras were worn by staff to offer a level of protection. It was noted that all bin wagons were equipped with 360 degree cameras which have to date proved to be invaluable in dealing with customer complaints.

Councillor Wilkes raised a number of queries and points including; personal budgeting and escalating debt, automated messaging regarding bin collection updates and the number of complaints upheld and the way in which data was reported. Councillor Crute noted that he did agree that there had been confusion amongst residents regarding bin collection changes over the period of bad weather and further agreed that the council did need to get information out more efficiently. It was also noted that there were issues with the council's website during the period of bad weather due the number of visitors to the site wanting to view school closure information. It was noted that this issue was being addressed corporately. Further discussion took place regarding dissemination of information and how this was also linked to the CRM system

The Customer Relations Manager in referring to the point raised relating to personal budgeting provided an overview of the support and resources available for those struggling with Universal Credit.

Resolved: that the content of the report be noted.

7 Quarter 3 December 2017: Forecast of Revenue and Capital Outturn 2017/18

The Board considered a joint report of the Corporate Director Resources and Director of Transformation and Partnerships which provided details of the updated forecast outturn position for both the Resources and Transformation and

Partnerships service groupings, highlighting any major variances in comparison with 2017/18 budget, based on the position to the end of December 2017 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Wilkes raised a query regarding the underspend of £2/3 million and asked why after the budget had been passed that there was actually this amount of more money in service.

The Finance Manager (Resources & TAP), noted that this was an issue of timing of budget reporting and early delivery of next years' savings. He further noted that underspends in general fund balances were likely to occur. Councillor Patterson suggested that this was an issue of information not being clear enough to determine exactly where the additional resource was coming from.

Councillor Wilkes added that he considered there to be insufficient detail in the MTFP to enable effective scrutiny of savings proposals. A single line descriptor and sum of money was felt to be inadequate. He further asked why it was not possible to follow practice adopted by Gateshead Council who produce a single sheet on each savings proposal with some key facts about what is being proposed, its impact on staff, policy changes etc. Councillors Crute and Patterson asked that this be reviewed going forward, however noted that the role of scrutiny was only to comment on proposals.

Councillor Tinsley suggested that an easy to use information sheet being prepared in advance of next year's budget with the headline messages on it including net revenue budget, income from council tax, government funding, percentage increases from council, police and crime commissioner, fire and rescue service etc. which could be sent to all councillors would be useful to assist them with any queries from residents.

Resolved: That the content of the reports be noted.

8 Refresh of the Work Programme 2018-19 for Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board

The Board considered a report of the Director of Transformation and Partnerships which provided information contained within the Council Plan 2016-2019, relevant to the work of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board in order for members to refresh the Committee Work Programme (for copy see file of Minutes).

Councillor Wilkes added that he would like to review the issue of reserves and look in more depth at cash limits and earmarked reserves. Councillor Crute suggested that this should be done as part of the MTFP review however agreed that this could be taken back to the service for their thoughts on how this could be approached.

Councillor Tinsley further suggested that a paper which detailed the use of reserves would be useful. It was noted that some members felt that the use of reserves could be considered as part of the MTFP scrutiny process whilst others felt that debate on the MTFP is so long that it did not allow sufficient time to talk about reserves and should be considered separately to the MTFP process.

Councillor Adam asked whether the issue of procurement of single use plastics (SUPs) should be considered in the work programme for the coming year. Councillor Crute noted his comments and added that he had no issue with building in procurement into a review of the use of SUPs. However, he did not feel that it needed to be a separate exercise.

Resolved:

- (i) That the information contained in the Council Plan 2016-2019, Altogether Better Council theme be noted;
- (ii) That the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Management Board receive a further report detailing the Committee's work programme for 2018-19 at their meeting on 22 June 2018.

9 Notice of Key Decisions

The Board considered a report of the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which considered 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 new to the plan for March was the Review of the Welfare Assistance Scheme, Proposal to amalgamate Wingate Infant and Junior School and the Proposal for changes to the Charging Policy for non-residential Social Care Services.

Councillor Wilkes referred to section four of the report relating to the Regeneration and Local Services service grouping and noted that no date had been specified for the Durham City Sustainable Transport Strategy (Final) and queried whether this report would be considered at the same time as the report on the County Durham Local Plan. The Senior Committee Services Officer advised that she would forward the query to the service for a response.

Resolved: that the content of the report be noted.

10 Information Update from the Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees - Report of Director of Transformation and Partnerships

The Board considered a report of the Director of Transformation and Partnerships which provided an update of overview and scrutiny activity from January – March 2018 (for copy see file of Minutes).

Resolved: That the content of the report be noted.