

Cabinet

14 November 2018

Council Activity Update



Report of Corporate Management Team

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Councillor Simon Henig, Leader of the Council

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To provide an update on work to support some of the council's key priorities.

Background

- 2 The council undertakes an enormous amount of work across the county.
- 3 The following provides an update on progress towards delivering some of the council's key priorities and summarises a number of other newsworthy aspects of the council's work:
 - (a) First World War Armistice commemorations
 - (b) Looking after children in care
 - (c) Encouraging reading
 - (d) Mental health
 - (e) Winter preparations
 - (f) Keeping the county clean and green
 - (g) Budget
 - (h) Chairman's medal for water safety campaigner
 - (i) Crackdown on empty homes
 - (j) Electric vehicle roadshow
 - (k) Do It Online reaches 100,000 customers
 - (l) Aycliffe Business Park road improvements
 - (m) Dying to work charter

First World War Armistice commemorations



- 4 To mark the centenary of the end of the First World War a wide range of events and activities took place around County Durham.
- 5 The four-year Durham at War project concluded in September with a conference for volunteers and members of the public. The National Lottery-funded initiative has seen the creation of an interactive website mapping the impact of the First World War on the county and its residents. Thousands of documents, images and audio files have been uploaded to the site since its launch in 2014 and will remain online as a searchable archive. More than 250 volunteers have contributed to site, working with Durham County Record Office.
- 6 Over the past four years, Area Action Partnerships around the county have supported the installation of seven memorial stones commemorating the lives of seven soldiers who received the Victoria Cross for their actions during the First World War. The final stone, honouring Sgt William McNally, was unveiled during a ceremony in Murton last month.
- 7 Pupils from Kreis Wesel, in Germany, visited County Durham this month as part of the county's twinning arrangements and also to share their thoughts and feelings about the First World War with their peers from Park View School, in Chester-le-Street. Together, the two groups have created poems, texts and artwork which they hope will demonstrate hope and unity.
- 8 This month has seen a performance at Gala Theatre of The Muddy Choir – the story of three young DLI soldiers hoping to survive the trenches of the

Third Battle of Ypres. It was followed by a special performance of the Durham Hymns at Gala on Remembrance Sunday. Performed by musicians, actors and brass band players, the Durham Hymns was originally performed in at Durham Cathedral in 2016 to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, drew on soldiers' letters and diaries stored at Durham County Record Office to write the lyrics, with composers Orlando Gough, Jessica Curry and Jonathan Bates creating the musical accompaniment.

- 9 A sound and light installation commemorating the armistice is currently located in Millennium Place and will be on site until tomorrow. Hope, created by Newcastle-based art and design studio Aether & Hemera has been commissioned by the council and features large-scale text sculpture composed of hundreds of colour-changing LED tubes along with speakers projecting voices retelling local people's experiences of the war. Again, many of the stories are contained within letters, diaries and memories held at the record office.
- 10 The council has also worked with the Northern Echo to produce a special commemorative edition of the paper which was published in the week leading up to Armistice Day, while the BBC has been filming in Whitton Park for a First World War centenary piece feature telling the story of the Fighting Bradfords.
- 11 Information on Armistice events, activities and ceremonies has been made available to the public via a dedicated area of the council's corporate website.

Looking after children in care



- 17 The Council undertakes a number of initiatives to promote literacy across the County. In October the county's annual celebration of the written word, Durham Book Festival, took place with more than 10,000 people taking part in events and activities. The programme, a key part of our Festivals programme was delivered by New Writing North on behalf of the Council. It featured a host of writers, artists and thinkers ranging from internationally renowned authors Pat Barker and Kate Mosse to famous names such as comedian Robin Ince and broadcaster Cathy Newman. The festival's Big Read saw 3,000 free copies of Sarah Waters' Booker-nominated novel *The Little Stranger* handed out through schools, libraries, prisons, businesses and to university staff and students, and residents of all ages also had the chance to get involved in the festival through a calendar of community workshops.
- 18 October also saw the Council's library service support National Libraries Week, promoting services, events and activities through social media. And this month, the authority also launched a new ebooks and audiobooks service. Borrowbox can be downloaded as an app and provides library users with access to almost 10,000 ebook titles and 1,000 audiobooks. Titles can be borrowed and downloaded instantly or reserved and automatically emailed when they become available.
- 19 Children can also access books online via Fiction Express. Run by Durham Learning Resource through the county's library service, it gives readers the opportunity to contribute their story ideas to 'live books' which are presented in weekly instalments. It also allows teachers to set summer reading challenges for pupils. Children can also log in at any time at home to access more than 100 completed stories, each of which ends with a comprehension quiz.
- 20 Working with the Book Trust, the Council subscribes to the Letterbox Club, a service which provides colourful book parcels to primary aged looked after children once a month for six months. As well as encouraging children to develop a love of reading, it provides them with personal belongings as, while for many children, it is the first time they have received a letter or a parcel through the post, for some it's the first time they have had books of their own.
- 21 The authority is also preparing to roll-out the READ Durham initiative following a successful pilot with childminders, who were encouraged to take children on story-telling trails in parks before collecting grab bags containing books and activity sheets. With a particular focus on promoting reading to hard-to-reach families, the scheme is aimed at children from birth up to five years of age. New Writing North is looking at opportunities to link activities into next year's Book Festival programme.

Mental health



- 22 The County Durham Partnership's key theme at its annual event in October was mental health, marking World Mental Health Day on 10 October. The event was attended by over 200 people and provided partners with an opportunity to share information about their services and projects, highlighting achievements, best practice and new approaches for supporting people with mental health needs. It also facilitated discussions to look at what more partners can do to support mental health awareness.
- 23 At the event, Durham County Council and the Pioneering Care Partnership both committed to the 'Time to Change' employer pledge, agreeing to introduce positive changes to how they think and act about mental health in the workplace.
- 24 The Mental Health Strategy and Concordat which sets out a strategy for better mental health in County Durham, will be presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board in November 2018.
- 25 Also on World Mental Health Day, Durham County Council employees were offered the opportunity to find out about a range of support services in County Durham with an information event in County Hall. Representatives from organisations including Talking Changes, Samaritans, ManHealth and the Council's Employee Assistance Programme were on hand to provide info about support and advice available to help with difficulties and challenges in life. A free mindfulness session was available for staff to try a number of other activities such as walks, running groups, yoga and singing were promoted to help employees sustain good mental health and wellbeing.

- 26 As part of its commitment to supporting the health and wellbeing of its staff the Council will continue to promote opportunities for employees to lead healthier lives and further workforce development.

Winter preparations



- 27 The Council undertakes a number of activities as part of its plans for keeping people safe over the winter period. As part of its preparation, new replacement gritters and 42,000 tonnes of salt are ready to keep the region's roads moving. Preparations for the cold weather have been underway for some time and our winter maintenance programme for 2018/19 is now up and running.
- 28 This year, several gritters have been replaced, with four new power gritters and 23 new trailer gritters now among the authority's 76-strong fleet of road and gritting vehicles and snow blowers. All of our power gritters have been fitted with 360° cameras to improve safety and provide information on weather conditions. The Council will once again treat 1,700km of priority one roads during normal winter conditions, representing 45 per cent of the road network. More minor roads are not normally treated but at times of prolonged severe winter weather a secondary network of priority two routes will be treated when resources are available.
- 29 Residents can keep up-to-date with information on gritting throughout the county through the Council's corporate website and social media accounts. Live updates are posted on Facebook and Twitter at regular intervals during adverse weather. Information is also provided on individual school closures as and when they happen along with details of any service disruptions.

- 30 The Council also supports Public Health England's 'help us help you/stay well this winter' campaign by sharing messages through Area Action Partnerships, key publications and through One Point, fostering and adoption and Families Information services. The initiative aims to protect adults at risk of flu and its complications, with flu immunisation remaining one of the most effective ways to reduce harm from flu and the pressures on health and social care services during the winter. People aged over 65, pregnant women, those with long-term health conditions and their carers can also receive the flu vaccination for free through their GP surgery or pharmacy.
- 31 We also run flu vaccination clinics for council employees who provide close personal care as part of their jobs with the aim of ensuring staff are able to continue their important work in caring for and supporting residents. A joint letter from Public Health England and the Director of Public Health has been sent to all commissioned care homes promoting the NHS flu immunisation programme to care providers.
- 32 Services will also be providing key messages to residents, including health advice, aimed at ensuring people look after themselves, elderly relatives and neighbours during the winter.

Keeping the county clean and green



- 33 Keeping the county clean and green is a key priority for the Council. We do this through a number of activities, often working with partners and local communities.
- 34 On 19 October, Durham City was named 'Best Small City' in the Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) prestigious Britain in Bloom competition. Tanfield was also a finalist in the village category at the awards. The award has

resulted in the City being invited to compete in Britain in Bloom's highly respected Champion of Champions category next year.

- 35 This national award follows success in the summer in Northumbria in Bloom, including best overall entry and best small city for Durham, and best large town for Chester-le-Street. Meanwhile Sedgefield and Tanfield were successful in the best small town and best small village categories, and Belmont claimed best urban community. The accolades, which included many other medal winners, added to the county's list of success in the annual competition over many years. The Durham City and Chester le Street entries were submitted by Durham County Council with others put forward by either town or parish councils, or local 'In Bloom' groups.
- 36 The success follows on from a range of projects supported by the council across the county to keep the area clean and green, many of which are delivered in partnership with the local community and organisations.
- 37 These include our Operation Spruce Up campaign whereby towns and villages are given a 'clean up' and 'green up' to help foster civic pride. Launched in 2016 to spruce up a town or village from each of the 14 Area Action Partnerships, the campaign was so successful it was expanded and has now visited 22 areas.
- 38 The programme visits a new location each month with the teams assisted by partners including town and parish councils, our area action partnerships, residents groups and local schools and businesses. A survey conducted in communities visited by Spruce Up has shown that 90 per cent of those asked noticed an improvement as a result of the work done.
- 39 In February 2018, Operation Spruce Up won a prestigious 'Keep Britain Tidy' award for campaign of the year, the second year in a row we have won in this category following on from the 'Operation Stop It' campaign win in 2017.
- 40 To help residents dispose of waste, a new ePermit scheme was introduced in July at the council's Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs), increasing the number of applications by almost two thirds. Residents with a van, pickup, minibus or towing a trailer, and those bringing hazardous materials require a permit. Last year we received around 1,600 applications a month. Following the introduction of the ePermit we have seen applications increase to around 2,600 a month, including 600 every weekend.
- 41 Coupled with tougher enforcement, measures such as this are helping to contribute to a continuing reduction in flytipping in the county, with the number of instances now down 23% since the start of Operation Stop It in September 2014.

Budget

42 A Cambridge University study has named County Durham among the worst areas affected by austerity in the country. According to the findings, the county saw spending levels slashed by almost a third (31%) between 2010 and 2017. Nationally, austerity has brought with it a move away from properly recognising 'need' within the allocation of government grant funding at a time when demand for statutory services such as children's and adult's social care has massively increased across the country.



43 Durham County Council has already made £224 million in savings since 2011/12. This has been achieved through a planned yet creative approach which has focused on protecting frontline services.

44 However with further forecasted savings of £35.3 million required over the next four years, the financial pressures facing the Council are set to continue and the impact of the government's ongoing funding cuts will be felt across all areas with significant risks to our funding from the fair funding review.

45 In the face of this, the council has been proactively campaigning for fairer funding for local government and highlighting the impact of austerity at a local and national level.

46 The leader of the council wrote to the government, in his role as chair of the Association of North East Councils (ANEC), to call for fairer distribution of funding in last month's autumn statement. However, the one-off funding announcements in the chancellor's budget statement do not address the significant financial issues and pressures being faced by the council every year. A sustainable longer term funding settlement is required as soon as possible and ANEC will continue to lobby the government for fairer funding that takes our needs into account.

47 Cllr Gunn, Cabinet member for children and young people's services, has also written to the governing bodies of all schools and academies in the county to share her concerns about the financial pressures they are currently facing as a result of the government's lack of investment.

48 Furthermore, in response to estimates of a £19 million reduction in public health grant, the authority is looking at working with other councils and public sector organisations to make the case for the formula for calculating the grant to be changed.

Chairman's medal for water safety campaigner



- 49 A 13 year old boy whose brother died after jumping into a river has been given County Durham's highest honour in recognition of his campaigning to prevent further loss of life.
- 50 Cyle Gosling's older brother Cameron jumped into the River Wear while out with friends on a hot summer day in 2015.
- 51 The 14 year old, who lived at Crook and was a student at Parkside Academy in Willington, had not got his body used to the water temperature first and died from 'cold water shock.'
- 52 In the last year, Cyle, also a pupil at Parkside, has joined forces with Durham County Council on its Dying to be Cool campaign – which aims to make ten to sixteen year olds aware of the dangers of going into cold water without acclimatising.
- 53 Cyle got up in front of his fellow students at Parkside during an assembly to speak about what happened to his brother and life without him, and to educate them about cold water shock.
- 54 He was also the star of a video made by the council which has since been viewed more than 46,000 times on Facebook alone.
- 55 Cyle was also interviewed by the region's TV, radio and newspaper journalists at the spot where his brother died, at the launch of the 2018 campaign.

- 56 He has now been awarded the council's Chairman's Medal, the highest honour the authority can present to individuals and organisations for outstanding voluntary contribution to the county.

Crackdown on empty homes



- 57 The council stepped up its work to breathe fresh life into vacant properties as part of a national awareness campaign.
- 58 By taking part in National Empty Homes Week, the council hoped to promote the support available to people interested in buying empty properties, as well as celebrating success stories and exploring future initiatives.
- 59 Approximately 2.7 percent of homes in County Durham are empty, and the council is working with partner organisations, including the police, fire service, housing providers and community groups, to tackle the problem and help meet the local housing need.
- 60 As part of this commitment, the authority has employed three additional members of staff to work with communities, landlords and partner organisations to bring vacant homes back into use.
- 61 During National Empty Homes Week (15-21 October), the officers met with housing providers Karbon Homes and Livin to look at ways to reduce the number of empty properties on key estates.

- 62 A new online facility for reporting empty properties was also officially launched and the team promoted the financial assistance available to bring long-term empty properties back into use. Since its launch in 2014, the scheme has helped more than 160 people become owner-occupiers.

Electric vehicle roadshow



- 63 An electric vehicle roadshow stopped off in Durham as the county launched a week of action celebrating green technology.
- 64 Businesses and consumers were invited to the free event, showcasing the very latest in electric and ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs), in Durham Market Place.
- 65 The 'ULEV Extravaganza', which marked the launch of Green Great Britain Week, showcased innovative technology from some of the world's leading vehicle manufacturers as well as promoting the financial, social and environmental benefits of ultra-low emission vehicles.
- 66 Visitors were able to discuss clean vehicle technology with experts, as well as owners and users of electric vehicles, and had the opportunity to test drive a range of cutting-edge vehicles from manufacturers including BMW, Nissan, Lexus and many more.
- 67 A free information event, with presentations from Durham County Council and the Office for Low Emission Vehicles, also took place in Durham's Town Hall.
- 68 As well as supporting sustainable transport, Durham County Council has put low carbon economic growth at the heart of its agenda, working with its schools, homes, public buildings and businesses to help cut their energy costs, while developing renewable energy schemes from solar, mine water and hydropower. As a result, it has already reduced carbon emissions in the county by over 40 per cent since 2009, well ahead of its target date of 2020.

Do It Online reaches 100,000 customers



- 69 More than 100,000 County Durham residents have now signed up to Do It Online.
- 70 Durham County Council has reached 100,000 online customers who have registered to its Do It Online account, which has become the council's preferred method of contact for many services.
- 71 Do It Online enables customers to report issues online quickly and easily at a time that is convenient. This includes paying council tax bills and reporting problems such as potholes.
- 72 Earlier this year anyone who opted to go digital with their council tax bill between June and August was entered into a prize draw to win an iPad which had been donated to the council.
- 73 The lucky winner was Stephanie Hughes, from South Hetton. She said: "Signing up was so easy and much quicker than I thought it would be. I have just recently moved house so I decided to sign up for online instead of by post, and now I'm very glad I did. It's great to be able to manage everything in one place."
- 74 Over 3,000 new customers signed up over the summer which means these people are now helping the environment by eliminating the need for a postal statement.

Aycliffe Business Park road improvements



- 75 Engineers have paved the way for more than 3,000 new jobs and a near half a billion pound boost to County Durham's economy.
- 76 With £13 million in Local Enterprise Partnership funding, Durham County Council has been preparing Forrest Park, a 52 hectare expansion of the North East's largest industrial estate, Aycliffe Business Park, which includes Hitachi Rail.
- 77 Now a major step in the development is complete, with a new junction providing better access to the A1(M) and A167, and a 23 mega volt amp sub-station set to ensure businesses have all the electricity they need.
- 78 The improvements are designed to remove existing barriers to the continued success and further expansion of Aycliffe Business Park, with the hope that they will unlock a potential investment of nearly £140 million from the private sector to further develop the site including, due to its location, a possible rail freight interchange.
- 79 Aycliffe Business Park is already the largest business park in the region but the improvements could see the creation of more than 3,000 jobs additional jobs and almost half a billion pounds added to the economy over the next twenty years.

Dying to work charter



- 80 Durham County Council has signed the Dying to Work charter as part of the TUC's campaign for greater employment security for terminally ill workers.
- 81 The council pledged its commitment to staff health and wellbeing, as Council Leader, Cllr Simon Henig; Deputy Leader, Cllr Allan Napier; Cabinet member for social inclusion and HR, Cllr Jane Brown; and Chief Executive, Terry Collins, signed the charter, at the council's County Hall headquarters. Union representatives Beth Farhat, TUC Northern Regional Secretary; David Clegg from GMB; Ian Pritchard from Unison and Mike Routledge from Unite also signed the charter.
- 82 The Dying to Work campaign calls for terminal conditions to be made a 'protected characteristic', ensuring that employees battling terminal conditions will be supported, protected and guided throughout their employment, following a terminal diagnosis.
- 83 In signing the charter, Durham County Council has confirmed that it recognises that safe and reasonable work can help maintain dignity. It has also promised to provide employees with peace of mind and the right to choose the best course of action for themselves without undue financial loss, and has confirmed that it will protect death in service benefits for employees' loved ones.

Recommendation

- 84 Cabinet is recommended to note the contents of this update.

Background papers

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance – Not applicable.

Staffing – Not applicable.

Risk – Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty – Not applicable.

Accommodation– Not applicable.

Crime and Disorder– Not applicable.

Human Rights– Not applicable.

Consultation– Not applicable.

Procurement– Not applicable.

Disability Issues– Not applicable

Legal Implications– Not applicable.