



Better for everyone

4 Together Partnership Area Action Partnership (AAP) Minutes of the Board Meeting Wednesday 6 September 2023 Microsoft Teams Meeting

PRESENT:

Mark Booth – Health Representative, Joanne Burnip – Livin Housing, Victoria Murray – DCC Representative, Insp Mike Sammut – Police Representative, Tony Cutmore, Anne Hall, Oliver Peeke, Dennis Ramsey (**Chair**), Cllr Julie Cairns – Chilton Town Council, Cllr Pauline Crathorne – Cornforth Parish Council, Cllr Elaine Peeke – DCC, Lee Copeland – Principal AAP Coordinator, Peter Garrod – Principal Community Development Project Officer, Paula Stockport – AAP Support Officer

APOLOGIES:

Carole Atkinson, Cllr Peter Atkinson, Nigel Jones, Susan Kirby, Cllr Joe Makepeace, Richard Morgan, Cllr Joe Quinn, Paula Nixon, Angela Blanchard

A1. Introductions & Apologies

DR welcomed everyone to the meeting of the 4 Together Partnership Board, and Anne Hall to her first meeting as Public Representative – a brief round of introductions was given.

Apologies for absence had been received, as above.

A2. Agreement of Minutes from Previous Meeting (5.7.23) - Matters Arising

LC reviewed the previous minutes for matters arising, actions and accuracy. There were no outstanding actions or other matters arising, and the minutes were **AGREED** as a true record.

[Cllr PC and OP joined the meeting]

A3. Countywide Partner Issues

A3.1 DCC Budget Consultation (Vicki Murray)

Board members received an update presentation in relation to the Council's current Budget consultation. The presentation gave an overview of the Council's budget for the current financial year, the Council Tax position, budget pressures, and the proposed approach for balancing the budget in 2024/25 and across the next four years.

The consultation asked the following questions of the AAP:

- What is the AAP view on our savings proposals for 2024/25, particularly the £3.7 million of savings derived from back-office savings and efficiencies,

income raising and reductions in third party contributions and savings from changes in the way we deliver front-line services?

- What do you feel will be the impact of this approach to savings for 2024/25 upon you or those you represent?
- What is the AAP view on areas where the council should focus to achieve additional savings still needed for 2024/25 of £6.2 million and £43.5 million over the following three years? Please choose three services you would prioritize for funding reductions from the list to provided.
- What is the view to the council raising the council tax by the maximum amount of 4.99% to protect service provision and ensure the additional savings required are kept to £6.2 million for 2024/25? If you disagree with the 4.99% increase, go back to the list and please choose a further 3 services to reduce.
- Do you have any additional ideas as to where we can raise further income or become more efficient?

Questions/comments were invited from Board members and the following points were noted:

- Cllr EP commented that lots of new houses are being built, which will obviously be in a higher band rate, at what point will DCC increase the low tax base we have? VM responded that DCC conduct a council tax base setting exercise on an annual basis. This is a complex process with a number of factors that feed into the calculations but does reflect any new properties in the County (once banded by the Valuation Office) as a result of house building as a percentage of Band D equivalent properties.
- OP asked whether is there a standard split in relation to the budget, i.e. what is legal/statutory versus non-statutory? Does this change much year on year or is it usually fairly standard? VM responded that the Council spends circa 60% of the net expenditure budget of £539 million on Adult & Childrens' services. The vast majority of the expenditure is on adult and childrens' social care, which are statutory services. VM will link with finance and other colleagues to find out if specific information on statutory/non-statutory services is available, and feedback via the AAP/consultation (**Action 1: VM**). In VM's experience of the areas she has responsibility for, statutory and non-statutory services tend to remain static and don't often change. Given the legislative process that is often required to enact change there is often a lengthy process for this.
- JB commented that in her role with Livin, there is support available for vulnerable residents, i.e. those claiming benefits, but as a housing provider they are seeing an increase in 'in-work poverty' now, these people often fall through the net, what is the impact on these people and has this been considered? VM noted the point that there will inevitably be a change in the demographic of those needing support. The Council provides financial support, advice, and guidance in a range of ways in addition to referring to third party organisations. This includes the Council Tax Reduction Scheme which can support people on lower incomes, as well as support being delivered through the Household Support Fund, though it's unclear what the future of household support will be from Government in future years. DCC also work closely with partners across the advice network to identify where changes are happening, gaps are arising etc – this remains a challenge and will continue to be a challenge as we move into the winter. DCC will continue to provide and layer support through current schemes and work with colleagues through partnerships on initiatives such as Warm Spaces etc.

- TC asked what the implications are of DCC partnering with councils who aren't in a sound financial position. VM responded that, from a devolution perspective, conversations are still in very early stages. Funding around devolution would be specific in terms of what it could be used for. VM will take this point away and discuss with colleagues who may have that knowledge in terms of another authority not being in the best financial position (**Action 2: VM**).
- TC commented that DCC contracts with VCS organisations are not being renewed past March 2024, this causes huge concern as to how will they remain financially viable. VM acknowledged that this is really challenging. VCS organisations deliver essential welfare/debt advice support for DCC, which all has to be taken into account in line with alternative funding such as shared prosperity funding, DCC are still understanding what funding there is, how we can use it, where the overlap is. Support from the VCS sector is not lost on VM who is fully aware of how any potential loss of funding will impact.
- OP noted from the presentation that some service areas (Neighbourhoods & Climate Change and Regen/Economic Development) have not yet been considered for savings – why not? OP feels that a lot of what DCC does isn't statutory, and feels that a 5% increase in Council Tax isn't what we should be doing in these times. VM clarified that all service areas have continually made savings and are included in the savings proposals which have already been agreed – the presentation aims to highlight that we have a bulk of statutory services, fixed costs etc and despite continually trying to make efficiencies in these areas we are limited and as a result it will be necessary to consider further savings across the other areas listed, and given previous reductions already made for non-statutory services, this means we need to consider the opportunities to change the way we deliver front line services.
- TC commented that some services are already provided by VCS organisations, e.g. welfare assistance & advice. TC feels that better support for VCS services could potentially help support savings. There is a wealth of knowledge within the VCS sector, DCC should take advantage of this.
- Cllr PC commented that some areas, such as West Cornforth, look after their own parks and allotments, own leisure centres etc, and are double taxed which doesn't help residents. Cllr PC feels that double taxation should be removed for the Sedgefield area (e.g. Coxhoe area has grass cut etc by DCC), our area relies on parish precepts, this doesn't help Cllr PC's community at all.
- OP asked what DCC spend on cultural events, e.g. libraries, theatres, etc how many people actually use them, the world is changing rapidly. What cost benefit analysis is done, e.g. in relation to the AAPs, what value do they bring? OP feels that areas like culture can always achieve savings. OP also cited climate change, whilst it is appreciated this is a global problem, it's not specifically a County Durham problem, is it really that important to residents? AAPs cost a lot, Cllr budgets – which all need to be monitored etc which costs money, is it really needed/statutory?
- Cllr JC acknowledged the difficulties being faced when looking at potential service reductions, you could realistically go through them all and say what you could get reduce, but most of the areas are connected. More detail would be needed in terms of what is spent versus what is achieved before you could make an informed decision.
- TC acknowledged the difficult position but from his perspective working with those hit hardest who are already living in poverty, TC doesn't feel that DCC should increase Council Tax by the proposed 4.99%. VM added that, if that

proposal is approved, DCC recognise there may be a new cohort of people who would then become eligible for wider support including the Council Tax Reduction Scheme to which there has been no change in criteria for the current year and no proposals for change in 24/25.

- Cllr PC commented that a 4.99% increase will affect a lot of lower income families who are already struggling with the increased cost of living, which we can't currently see an end to, and this would have a huge impact on deprived areas. West Cornforth has one bus, one shop – this does affect a lot of lower working-class people, who will fall into needing more support. Cllr PC feels this should be given very careful consideration.
- Cllr JC commented that people are already trying to keep their heads above water and this proposed 4.99% increase may tip them over the edge and lead to them needing increased support, using food banks etc. Cllr JC asked whether there is potentially a lower increase rate than 4.99% to lessen the potential impacts on individuals.
- OP agreed that a 4.99% increase would push a lot of people over the edge.

VM advised that Board members are welcome to submit additional comments via the online survey, which is open until 20 October. Further information is also available via the website:

[Consultation on our budget proposals for 2024-25 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2025-28](#)

A3.2 Community Engagement Review (Lee Copeland)

LC updated Board members. Work has been taking place over the summer months to look at the various workstreams needed to implement the changes that will be needed as AAPs transition to Local Networks by April 2025, e.g. around funding processes, governance and accommodation. In line with the Budget reductions outlined at Item 3.1, AAPs will lose their premises budgets from 2024-25. This will affect 6 x AAPs, who will be looking to try and gain alternative DCC accommodation within their respective localities rather than paying for premises as we do now. LC will continue to keep Board members updated on progress going forward.

TC advised that the AAP team would be welcome to use the meeting space at Cornforth House if needed.

A4. **Local Neighbourhood Issues**

DR highlighted that he will be attending the next Local Bus Board meeting as the 4 Together Partnership representative early next week, and if any Board member has any specific bus-related issues from across our AAP area they would like DR to take to the meeting, please contact him directly.

A4.1 Neighbourhood Policing Update

Insp MS updated Board members. There have been two main trends over the last few months in the Ferryhill area, which is similar to the countywide and national picture, relating to an increase in shoplifting, and also car crime and burglary. Insp MS highlighted a number of good results locally in terms of arrests and charges. Insp MS added that antisocial behaviour is down overall in Ferryhill.

Insp MS added that if any Board member has any specific queries or issues they'd like to discuss, please contact him directly.

[Insp MS left the meeting]

A5. Area & Neighbourhood Budget Update

A5.1 Area Budget (AB) Update

PG briefly updated Board members in relation to this year's Area Budget project callout. The ranking panel meeting is taking place tomorrow to review the 19 x eligible Expressions of Interest submitted this year. The total funding request is just over £250k, and we have an available budget of £119,900, so the ranking panel members will have a difficult task.

PG clarified that, once the ranking has taken place, applicants will be informed of the outcome and those successful will be asked to start completing full Area Budget application forms. The aim is hopefully to have these ready to bring to the November Board meeting for final approval, with a view to projects starting delivery by January 2024.

A5.2 Neighbourhood Budget (NB) Update

PG clarified there is no NB report today, as there are no projects needing Board consideration. PG will forward an updated summary of spend for all NB/Cllrs by email after the meeting, for information (**Action 3: PG**). If any Board member has any queries in relation to NB, please contact PG.

A5.3 Towns & Villages Programme Update

PG briefly updated Board members. Of the 5 x previously agreed T&V projects, two are now complete and one hopefully should be complete by October. The other two projects are still in development, but it is hoped they should be ready to come to the Board for final approval soon.

A5.4 Fun & Food Funding Update

PG briefly updated Board members; the October half-term round of funding is currently open – please promote and signpost any prospective applicants to the AAP team. The closing date for applications is 20 September. PG highlighted, as previously agreed by the Chair and Vice Chairs, that an upper grant limit of £2,500 per project was agreed for this round of funding.

A6. Date & Time of Next Meeting:

Wednesday 1 November 2023, 6:00pm (venue tbc)

DR thanked everyone for their attendance, and the meeting was closed.