

## **COUNCIL – MEETING CANCELLED**

### **13 MAY 2021**

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#### **OVERVIEW OF ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

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1. Since the last meeting of the Council, the following are the main areas of work the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee has undertaken.

#### **Performance Indicators Quarter 3 – 2020/21**

2. The Scrutiny Committee considered the Quarter 3 position in relation to performance against the key performance indicators for those areas within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.
3. As Members are aware, the indicators are measured against targets and are compared to previous years, however, we did note that this has been a very different year in view of the Covid 19 pandemic and that whilst the Council's response to the pandemic has been extremely positive, there has been an impact on some services.
4. It is pleasing to note that performance in relation to sickness absence within the Authority is showing an improvement against the same period last year, with 75 per cent of absence relating to long-term absence which is being closely managed. Stress does still remain the highest absence reason and equates to 46 per cent of all absences, with 26 per cent of this deemed to be work related. We were advised that Officers are increasing efforts in terms of stress risk assessment awareness and absence management relating to stress and are continuing to raise awareness of mental health via the Mental Health for Managers programme. The introduction of 14 Mental Health first aiders alongside the Mental Health Mentors launched last year has provided invaluable support to employees particularly through this pandemic and very positive feedback has been received.
5. In relation to the current position of staff working from home wherever possible, HR Officers are currently analysing the Working from Home Survey which has been undertaken, however, indications are showing that approximately 80 per cent of employees are comfortable working from home and there is no evidence to suggest that this is having a negative impact on the stress related absence.
6. We also had a discussion on the performance indicators in relation to the employment rate, the average annual income of Darlington residents and Darlington employees and the influences which could affect the outcome of these indicators, which we have asked for further information on.
7. Planning indicators are showing a drop in performance in determining both major and minor applications and we were advised that as the authority did not receive many major applications, any delay would have a detrimental impact on the indicator and that, in relation to the minor applications, this was due to resource issues in the current circumstances and we were re-assured that this would improve going forward.

## **Re-opening of Town Centre Businesses**

8. We received a verbal update and presentation from the Assistant Director Economic Growth and the Head of Culture on the work currently being undertaken to support the re-opening of Town Centre businesses once restrictions began to be lifted.
9. At the date of our meeting, there was still some uncertainty around the actual dates for the lifting of some restrictions, however, we were informed of the work which was on-going in preparation of the expectation that hospitality, non-essential retail and other businesses would be able to open from 12 April 2021 and that support was being given around that and ensuring that businesses were equipped to open in a safe manner.

## **Covid - 19 Business Support Grants**

10. Information was provided to us on the current position in relation to the various Government funded support grants which had been allocated to local authorities to enable them to support those local businesses which had been adversely affected by the Covid-19 restrictions, together with a number of other business support measures which were announced in the March 2021 Budget.
11. Some of the original schemes have now closed, however, of the six support schemes which were operating, £11,272,736.81 has been awarded to date to Darlington businesses.
12. On the date of our meeting, a new scheme of support had been launched, which included £5 billion in National Restart Grants to support local economies as they emerged from the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. The Restart grants, supersede the existing wide range of grants with the exception of the Additional Restrictions Grant, and offer those businesses which have been forced to close during lockdown, one off financial support with grants of up to £6,000 for non-essential retail and up to £18,000 for hospitality, leisure, personal care and accommodation businesses. This grant is however, only available to those businesses which received support under the National Local Restriction Support Grant Schemes.

## **Towns Fund – Update**

13. We received a verbal update on the progress, to date, in relation to the use of the £1 million of accelerated funding as part of the Towns Fund – Forward Funding and we were advised that the four project areas identified as part of that funding programme were progressing well.
14. It is pleasing to note that the Authority has been successful in receiving additional grant funding of £70,000 which will go into the fund to assist in its delivery and that the Adult Learning facility proposed within the Towns Fund has now been fast tracked, with £575,000 secured from government in 2020/21. The proposal is to develop a project which seeks to locate the facility within the Northern Echo building.

## **Broadband Infrastructure in Darlington**

15. Information was provided on the current position in relation to Broadband Infrastructure and roll out across the Town. The infrastructure roll out and upgrades to gigabit enabled speeds on fibre to premises are taking place via three different routes, namely commercial roll out; publicly funded and the current Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme.
16. As Members are aware, some areas of the Town and rural areas are not currently well serviced by Broadband and we were advised of what was currently available to communities and to the commitment to ensure that any new build did have access to gigabit enabled broadband. We were also updated on work which was being undertaken with partners and providers and to the challenges which are faced with the infrastructure having a mix of private and public sector providers.

**Councillor Scott Durham**  
**Chair Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee**