

COUNCIL
25 JANUARY 2024

OVERVIEW OF HEALTH AND HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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

Primary Medical Care and General Practice Access in Darlington

2. We welcomed a representative from the Commissioning Lead – Primary Care (North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board) who delivered a presentation and provided an update to Members on general practice in Darlington with an accompanying dataset. The presentation included clear definitions of general practice, the variances in operations and contracts and regulation of practices as well as the role of the Primary Care Network (PCN) in Darlington.
3. Funding and expenditure for GP practices was explained with a summary of the Quality and Outcomes Framework Scheme (QOF), a points-based scheme that provides funding to support aspiration to and achievement of a range of quality standards, by rewarding practices for the volume and quality of care delivered to their patients.
4. Members were provided with a breakdown of the general practice workforce in Darlington, and it was highlighted that a strong focus is placed on ensuring that patients are seen by the staff member with the most effective skillset to deal with their issue in order to maximise efficiency.
5. Demand for general practice appointments was also covered along with the types of appointments now available to residents, namely face-to-face, phone and online appointments. The responses from the most recent patient survey have been received and are expected to be published in July 2024, however, responses from the 1,300 from Darlington show an above level of satisfaction with the service.
6. Questions were raised by Members and included highlighting variances in full time and full-time equivalent staff between practices for which we were informed that practices always aim to reasonably meet the needs of their patients with staff trained and specialised where possible to accommodate needs. Further questions included clarifying criteria for patients' registration at a practice and we were informed that patients can register and change practices where needed and only in the case of a "closed list" would a practice be unable to take further registrations.
7. We raised discussions regarding the availability of Saturday appointments and Members agreed that this could be more effectively publicised and promoted by practices. NHS colleagues stated that the availability of Saturday appointments is included in newsletters however Members' comments will be raised with their colleagues.

8. A further discussion was held with regards to patients who do not attend (DNA) their appointments without cancelling. Members noted that the numbers of DNA appointments are disappointingly high and asked if penalties are present for this – NHS colleagues acknowledged the numbers and highlighted that reminder text messages before and after (DNA) appointments, that practices promote the importance of properly cancelling unrequired appointments and highlighted that where possible practices are more inclined to try and resolve issues and have patients attend future appointments.
9. Members raised points of note to NHS colleagues which included improving online access as timeouts and navigation can be an issue and also clarifying the different types of treatment and appointments between primary and secondary care.
10. Further points of note included that improved phone services are being implemented in Darlington with all Darlington practices now operating with cloud-based telephony. Additional patient surveys are in production with an aim to gather the most relevant and actionable data from patients.
11. We noted the high quality of the presentation and data provided and NHS colleagues informed members that any additional data can be provided if any should request this.

Medium Term Financial Plan

12. We received the report of the Assistant Director Resources presenting the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2024/25 to 2027/28, agreed for consultation on 5 December 2023 with the consultation period running until 22 January 2024.
13. A briefing was delivered to Councillors on 13 December 2023 which provided an overview and highlighted key points in the plan. It was noted that since the report had been published the Council has received the draft financial settlement for 2024/25 and an update was provided to Members highlighting the key points
 - (a) The settlement is for 2024/25 only.
 - (b) The Services Grant has reduced by approximately £800,000.
 - (c) The New Home Bonus has been continued for 2024/25, we will receive approximately £400,000.
 - (d) A number of figures are still to be confirmed, but at this point it is estimated that resources will decrease by approximately £250,000 for 2024/25 and further in future years if the New Homes Bonus ends.
14. A discussion was raised with regards to the Local Government Finance Settlement. Members stated that they had not had sight of this prior to the meeting. Officers clarified that the draft settlement was received on 18 December 2023 and that staff have been working through and interpreting the figures and that all settlement details will be included in an updated version of the MTFP. Some Members expressed the view that more time was required to consider the MTFP in view of the receipt of the Local Government Finance Settlement and could not form a view on the MTFP until this was known.

15. A comment was made that questioned why the construction of energy efficient homes was not above the minimum regulations.
16. We raised questions which included whether the Public Health Grant remains at a similar level as in the past, officers confirmed that the indicative allocation has an increase of just over £100,000. The Public Health Principal welcomed this increase but highlighted to members how some of that increase had to be spent on very specific things such as funding the NHS pay award in public health services provided by the NHS and for delivering new public health duties and responsibilities that have been placed on local authorities recently.
17. A further question related to “intersectional issues”; if the council tackle issues early before they can cause increased spending at a later date specifically relating to maintaining and improving the health of the residents. Officers clarified that the Public Health grant invests in programmes across the authority to contribute to delivering on key Public Health outcomes and objectives and provided examples of programmes that are in place to tackle childhood obesity, weight management, exercise referral, school swimming as well work undertaken by Environmental Health colleagues such as eatery inspections.
18. A further question was asked as to the charges for hire of leisure spaces with Leisure colleagues confirming that charges for spaces are calculated at an hourly rate.
19. Members questioned why some charges are proposed to increase and some are not and the reasons for this. Officers clarified that some charges are nationally set and in other areas managers keep sustainability in mind and as such are conscious that increased charges could result in a reduction in demand and a net decrease in income. A question was raised concerning why car parking charges were not proposed to be increased and an additional point was added from members that charges from parking could be better utilised to improve parking enforcement.
20. Members agreed that the Chair of this meeting, in consultation with the Lead Scrutiny Officers supporting this Scrutiny Committee, be given authority to agree the Minutes of this Scrutiny Committee, to enable the Minutes to be considered at a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee scheduled to be held on 18 January 2024.

Housing Services Climate Change Strategy 2024-29

21. We welcomed the Programmes & Performance Manager - Housing and Revenues who delivered a presentation on Housing Services Climate Change Strategy 2024-29 to be considered before approval by Cabinet on 9 January 2024 with progress of the strategy to be reviewed on an annual basis.
22. We were provided with information in support of the Government’s target of achieving net zero carbon by 2050 including the challenges faced by Housing staff and the strategies in place to handle these and to meet the Government targets of achieving an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating of C for all our council homes by 2030. Members received an explanation of the “Fabric First” approach being utilised, in which the service’s goal is to maximise efficiency in the use of all materials (e.g., insulation,

windows and doors) in carrying out works on council properties with the average spend on each property between £26,707 to £31,410.

23. It was reported that positive progress is being made overall and that the benefits to residents include better quality insulation resulting in shorter periods with heating on and double-glazing keeping heat in resulting in positive feedback from tenants.
24. Members asked questions including enquiring as to the longevity and practicality of external insulation for which officers confirmed that external wall insulation has a thirty year lifespan however owners must avoid drilling through or otherwise breaking through panels.
25. We also asked as to whether home ventilation work is carried out alongside other work, and it was confirmed that certain ventilation work is carried out before or at the same time as carrying out other upgrades. A further question related to whether solar panels are installed on new-builds and if not does this affect costs if installed later. Officers answered that solar panels are not included on new-builds by default due to their higher energy efficiency however costs for installation remain similar if installed during or after building.
26. Discussions were held confirming the length of provider contracts at twenty years. And further points including the effect of the strategy on the capital programme for which officers confirmed that increased internal climate change spend can enable application for greater grants.
27. We acknowledged the quality of presentation and information provided and support the report's onward submission to cabinet and to review progress on an annual basis.

Performance Indicators (Leisure Indicators) - Quarter 2 2023/24

28. We welcomed the Head of Leisure who presented performance indicators for the following areas – Dolphin Centre visitor numbers, school pupils in the Sports Development Programme and number of individuals participating in the Community Sports Development Programme.
29. It was reported that Dolphin Centre visitor numbers have shown a decrease which is attributed to the closure of the main pool due to upgrade works. However, it is noted that other services available at the Dolphin Centre have performed extremely well.
30. The number of school pupils participating in the Sports Development Programme has decreased, however this is attributed to capital project works at Eastbourne Sports Complex which has limited the scope of hostable events.
31. We were informed that the number of individuals participating in the Community Sports Development Programme has increased. Numbers at the Holiday Activity Project remaining consistent with previous years while experiencing improved drop-off rates.
32. We noted the positive figures and expressed thanks for the efforts of all Leisure staff for their contributions to this.

Work Programme 2023/24

33. We have given consideration to the Work Programme for this Committee for the Municipal Year 2023/24 and possible review topics. The work programme is a rolling work programme and items can be added as necessary.

Councillor Neil Johnson
Vice Chair of the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee
O.B.O.
Councillor Mary Layton
Chair of the Health and Housing Scrutiny Committee