

Notes of the Weardale Area Action Partnership Board Meeting – 17th October 2024

St Thomas Centre, Wolsingham



ATTENDEES

Board Members

Public Representatives: Richard Lawrie (RL)
Will Wearmouth (WW)
Caroline Ford (CF)

Partner Representatives: David Welsh (DW) – Fire & Rescue Service
Julian Haynes (JH) – Voluntary Sector
Michael Laing (ML) - Durham County Council
Jeff Bell (JB) – Business Representative

Elected Members: Cllr Anita Savory (AS) – **CHAIR**
Cllr David Sugden (DS) – Wolsingham Parish Council
Council

Officers Angelina Maddison (AM)
Tracy Edwards (TE)
Fiona Barber (FB)

APOLOGIES

Public Representatives: Kevin Roddam
Adrian Holden
Stephen Thomas
Alison Humble

Elected Representatives: Cllr John Shuttleworth
Cllr Joan Carrick - Stanhope Parish Council
Cllr Helen Barrass – Muggleswick Parish Council
Cllr Olive Wilson – Witton-le-Wear Parish

Partner Representatives: Damian Pearson – Believe Housing
Sarah Lee - Health
Insp. Michael Sammut – Durham Constabulary
Michael Kelleher - Durham County Council

BOARD MEETING

1. Welcome and Introductions

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Declaration of Interest

The Chair asked that Board members declare any interests now or as they arise on the agenda.

3. Presentations:

2025/26 County Council Forecast Revenue Budget Consultation Durham County Council – Rob Davisworth

- Rob Davisworth gave a presentation. This is the first of two consultations with the second taking place during December and January.
- The consultation is live until Friday 1st November and can be found at [Consultation on our budget proposals for 2025/26 and Medium Term Financial Plan 2026-2029 - Durham County Council](#)
- Questions / Comments:
 - CF – Regarding borrowing - what plans are in place to repay debt? RD – the council is allowed to borrow for capital expenditure and to invest in services e.g. buildings, schools, highways, infrastructure, provision of a safe and efficient vehicle fleet and robust IT system. Money is set aside to repay this, and the current levels are sustainable. Increased interest rates have curtailed borrowing level. Debt service costs are rising wouldn't want to go past 900m/1bn figure. Investment in towns to promote economic growth.
 - ML – do we usually borrow from Public Loans Board? Yes. RD explained that the Public Works Loan Board is an office of the Treasury.
 - ML – 70% of budget is allocated to services that are statutory and mostly unseen. These are statutory responsibilities and therefore cannot be stopped and cannot be devolved to others. It is spent on approximately 20,000 people in the county allocated to Adult and Childrens social care, needs and education. For most residents their interaction with the council is litter, neighbourhood issues, safe footpaths etc. Difficult for people to see expenditure as it goes on 'hidden services' for a small amount of people. Budget pressures are real and if the chancellor puts a tax on employers NI the costs will come back to the council for care providers etc.
 - AS echoed this saying that if you speak to community members, they see council tax going to bins being emptied and cutting the grass don't see the rest of it and they don't realise.
 - JB – What is happening with County Hall which is a huge asset to the council? RD – County Hall is coming to the end of its life and people are being relocated to other offices around the county. It will be demolished (asbestos concerns) and site will be cleared, and the area will be regenerated. Potential employment / investment opportunities to try and retain some of the graduates from the university and provide high quality employment. Long term project which needs private sector investment. Hopefully will complement the university and town centre and link with other

infrastructure. JB – will this be a lump sum to the council, or will it be an annual income? RD – a bit of both – plans are still being developed. Floors of the building are being cleared and closed and staff are managed within a smaller section of the building. A lack of alternative meeting facilities for elected members is slowing the process down. ML advised that everything is being valued in County Hall and will be sold eventually.

- WW – over the moon to hear that the potential to keep graduates from the universities in Durham and Newcastle universities through creation of opportunities for them.
- WW - Is Durham financially exposed in the same way as some other councils across the country? RD - Not as over-exposed as other LA's. Most of the borrowing by DCC is to invest in front-line ventures. Any other investment that has involved risk is carefully assessed.
- ML – A common thread in the number of high-profile failures in other LA's e.g. Croydon, Northampton, Thurrock, Nottingham, was the absence of a strong corporate governance to say no. The role of the finance lead is to say no and to be listened to by the members using the motivation that the council is using other people's money.
- RD confirmed that there were some opportunities to widen the council tax base with more houses being built. WW noted that property prices in 1994 drive council tax bands.
- AM – fundamental lack of understanding by residents as to how councils are run and what their statutory obligations are. She asked if it is possible to look corporately at making this easier for the public to understand. She shared the success of the Monopoly game at previous consultations which gave members of the public the opportunity to suggest how to make savings without touching the statutory sector. She noted that after the exercise, people had more of an appreciation of what the council spends its money on and how difficult the decisions are that need to be made. RD – may come to the fore in the next stage of the consultation and will bear it in mind when consultation takes place regarding required additional savings.
- JH – queried whether the 2.99% raise in Council Tax is very low compared to inflation and sought confirmation as to whether the police, fire and parish council precept is on top of that. RD – yes. Police and fire have a limit when raising their precept although parish councils have a bit more scope. JH – last time the raise was around 5%. RD - 3% council tax and 2% adult social care budget. Haven't had any confirmation from the government regarding the adult social care increase.
- CF – A breakdown on the council tax bill would be useful for residents. RD – confirmed that this is usually included but noted that there is room for improvement.
- DW – Is DCC at risk of the government taking from its reserves. RD – unlikely as reserves are held for a variety of reasons. However, the government might say use the reserves first (this has happened in the past). Some authorities have run the reserves right down and consequently have very punitive conditions attached for additional borrowing. In these cases, it is the residents who suffer in the long run.

- The Chair commented that RD has a difficult job balancing the books and has given Board members food for thought. She encouraged Board members to complete the consultation and thanked Rob for attending the meeting.

ScotMid – Steve Beavis, Membership and Communities Manager

- Steve gave a presentation to the Board regarding his role and the work that they do within the Weardale area.
- A Co-operative is a member-owned business operating for the benefit of its members and the community. Not for profit. Scotmid Co-op is not part of Co-op. It is an entirely independent organisation.
- Community groups can therefore apply to both Scotmid and the Co-op.
- Core purpose “to serve our communities and improve people’s everyday lives”.
- To apply for funding, first become a member (cost £1). It will help your application as well as getting member benefits.
- Funding available – central donations – large amounts
- Local level – support people with fundraising for own organisation. Ok to pass on Steve’s details and he can provide vouchers to purchase prizes for raffles or purchase refreshments – just send an email enquiry.
- Community grant – quick and easy application from to complete. Usually for capital purchases needed by groups although it could be to support a bigger fundraising event. Up to £500 grants available. Restrictions – only a person / individual can apply on behalf of the group and they can only make one application in a 12 month period – either applicant or group. Always ask for assistance.
- Community Connect – flagship scheme. Every six months, three organisations are chosen to be in with a chance of winning £5k or £2k. Every time a member shops they can cast a vote. Rookhope crafters won the £5,000 this last time. Weardale stores are superb at organising and drumming up support for the groups. Rookhope crafters thought they were too small but were proved wrong. Does take a while but once you are shortlisted you know you will get at least £2k.
- If you need vouchers to support an event that benefits the community or if you want support of £100/£150 contact Steve.
- AM -asked whether the fire cadets who do an event at the fire station can apply – SB - yes.
- AS shared that the Friends of Weardale Community Hospital had been awarded the £5k absolutely which she said was wonderful and the group are very thankful. AS also commented that the staff in the Co-op at Frosterley are absolutely fantastic – they are like a welfare hub – checking in on people and looking after the community. They are very active in ensuring shoppers have a community card and they offered support when applying for the grant. SB – noted how the Weardale stores work together well and often completely out-vote any region in Scotland.
- DW expressed concern that increased usage of self-checkouts may diminish staff interaction and their recognition as a hub within a community. SB shared that it is not his department but he understands that the staffing is already at a minimum.
- WW – queried eligibility criteria and whether religious organisations can apply. SB - No problem - but the event would need to be open to all.
- The Chair thanked Steve for attending and shared that she was sure he would hear from some of the Board very soon and reminded Board members that AM has contact details for Steve.

4. Agreement of Notes from Board Meeting held on 19th September 2024 and Matters Arising

The notes of this meeting, as circulated, were **AGREED** and confirmed as a true record by those present.

There were no matters arising.

5. 2024/25 Area Budget Update

Area Budget Projects

Frosterley Play Area - £50,000

Status: Application undergoing appraisal

Westgate Village Hall – Kitchen Refurbishment - £5,000

Status: Offer letter sent 06/09/24. Work to commence 05/11/24

Renovation – Stanhope Silver Band - £5,000

Status: Application undergoing appraisal

Weardale Warblers - £5,005

Status: Offer letter sent 30/08/24. Press and publicity to start next week.

Westgate Youth Club - £5,000 (+ £5,000 Youth Fund)

WW – Declaration of Interest

Status: Application undergoing appraisal

Board Ambassador required – AS and WW volunteered.

Save Our Sandwich - £10,000

Status: Offer letter sent 05/08/24

Weardale Show - £5,000

Status: Offer letter sent 28/08/24

Frosterley Youth Club - £6,310 (+ £5,000 Youth Fund)

Status: Offer letter sent 30/07/24

6. Update on Other WAP funding streams:

Poverty Action Fund - £10,000

Weardale Rural Training 2024 – UTASS - £10,000

Status: Offer letter sent 26/07/24. Training underway.

Youth Fund - £10,000

Westgate Youth Club & Frosterley Youth Club – £5,000 each

Status: See AB information above.

Big Arts Fund - £10,000

Double U: The Wood, Willow, Wool, Whittling and Weaving Project - £9,760

Status: Project underway. Board Ambassador required.
JB volunteered.

Fun & Food - £9,725

Fun & Food Christmas 2024

3 applications in development for Christmas delivery:

- Frosterley YMCA - Youth Activity Session
- Mad Alice Theatre Company – Drama – one session#
- Wolsingham Pool – Inflatables - one session

8. Neighbourhood Budget 2024/25 Overview

Cllr Savory - Neighbourhood Budget

- Lydgate Lane Educational Aspect (in development)
- ANPR camera (in development)

Small Grants

- Eastgate Christmas Party

Cllr Shuttleworth - Neighbourhood Budget

- Stanhope Agricultural Society – Bandstand Renewal
- The Weardale Show
- Stanhope Town Sports & Social Club FC
- Xmas Column Wraps (in development)
- Wolsingham Show (in development)

Small Grants

- Cowshill Village Hall Leek Show
- Rookhope Village Hall Leek Show

9. Neighbourhood Issues

None identified.

10. Countywide Partner Issues

None identified.

11. Dates and Times of Future Meetings

The next meeting of the Weardale Action Partnership Board will take place on **Thursday 28th November at the St Thomas Centre, Wolsingham**

The Chair thanked everyone for their attendance and input and wished everyone a safe journey home. She thanked Angelina, Tracy and Fiona for their work in pulling the meeting together.