

Darlington's People's Parliament Minutes 25.4.16

Attendance – 11 members (Members initials for the purpose of the minutes - JD, CE, DL, GTJ, HL, HS, JM, NB, SR, VB, EW) 5 support staff/volunteers (initials for the purpose of the minutes - LH, SA, JBo, ED, JB), Councillor Veronica Copeland, Mark Humble (Darlington Borough Council, Helen Watson (Darlington Borough Council Supporting People)

(We had 3 written responses about the cuts from members who couldn't attend on the day)

Councillor Copeland explained why the Council have proposed cuts due to reduced Central Government Funding. She explained how each department had to 'put things into the pot' on what could be a proposed cut. Adult Social Care hasn't got a lot as a lot is statutory.

Removing companion bus passes proposal discussion

JD– asked why this was happening

HL – why is it you can use pass earlier on a weekend and not on a weekday?

V. Copeland – so buses aren't over packed on a weekday, people need to get to their employment, it's after 9.30am after consultation with Bus Company.

HL – drivers take the blame and they shouldn't for people not being able to use their passes before 9.30am.

V Copeland – drivers are front line workers therefore take the stick

M. Humble – what is important is for the council to understand what are the impacts, how will this proposal really affect people? Then feed this into the cabinet.

SR – I have a direct payment and employ's a PA uses the companion pass. SR will have to cut something else back if companion free travel stopped, I won't be able to afford to go out as much.

JB – It's a big impact as although his Direct Payment is provided it is unlikely to be enough to cover all travel costs and therefore SR won't be able to achieve what the Direct Payment is meeting the need of – social interaction and social inclusion.

V Copeland – Can we have a letter from Parliament to summarise what the impacts are, i.e the effect on appointments, the costings for someone on such a tight budget

NB – I travel on my own.

JB – Its going to impact on a particular group of disabled people, those who require support to travel will be impacted. In effect it is taking away their right to free travel if they have to pay for their companion personally. How was the calculation of the amount of money that this proposal will save arrived at? Some people have said the companions are not always issued with a ticket.

M Humble– DBC wont fund it any more, it's how many (passes) we give out not how many times its used.

VC – No we pay for the journeys, we get charged a block amount for issuing the pass then on top for the journeys. The bus companies will be informed that this will be withdrawn.

HL – I've been asking if I've moved house yet, I have moved house. We have a house that is like a palace.

VC – really pleased for you

HL – lived in a house with no heating or hot water for 2 months, I am settled now.

JD – if you are going to write to people can you do it in an easy read version? I rang up to ask for easy read they said yes but sent her the same letter.

VC – at the moment there are lots of letters with information on them being sent out, we'll ensure that we will try and provide this.

JB – Parliament been asked to look at the Council's current accessible information standard status. There is no point in sending out information if people don't understand it.

VC – asking for leeway, due to reduced staff etc.

JBo - read MC letter he had forwarded in his absence – The letter talked about unfairness, the poor and disadvantaged are being targeted, it feels like you kick the dog that doesn't bark as don't have the powers of redress. Cuts can create stress and mental health issues which then causes further strains on public services/ resources. If people become hospitalised cost more. Letter also, talked about concerns over unpaid business tax which is not addressed enough.

GTJ- I got this letter, it's addressed to me but it's about my son's bus pass. I don't understand it. It's got no date on when this will stop (companion element).

V. Copeland – It's not agreed it will definitely happen yet so you are ok for now.

SR – PIP/ESA assessments, not good, difficult to get there for the appointments.

VC – That's Department of Work and Pensions not DBC.

SR – I was asked questions like can you dress and wash yourself. Not very nice to be asked that. They stop your benefits.

VC – very cruel scheme, have you had your benefits stopped

SR – yes

JB – Leads to multiple impacts on people, benefits can be stopped, and whilst awaiting appeal can't have free dental care. Obviously, whilst benefits stopped people have little or no money to pay for PA expenses including travel. If the companion element stops this would be a further strain on a person who's benefits have been stopped. Also, if they need support to attend (benefit) meetings again they may be liable for

companion bus charges whilst benefit's suspended putting further strain on the person.

VC – have you appealed?

SR – yes but waiting, living off job seekers, have to take letter to a third party don't know who this is, I have to go to a court

VC – very stressful, if you can't fully understand of what's expected of you

JM – they should provide a support worker to help you through it

JD – I don't know how I am going to manage at my ESA appointment, I don't even know how to get there. I have rang but they not very helpful.

JB – there is another gap where people are being sent information but not eligible for the support.

JD – If they (Council) get rid of DISC what am I going to do?

VC – Council don't get funded for prevention work unfortunately so we are looking at what to spend the little bit of money that is not statutory, (what we have to spend) on.

H. Watson – DISC and couple of others housing related support providers fell into discretionary so has been part of the cuts proposals. Anyone who is on one of these services has had a letter with proposals asking for impacts. There is a different pot of money called future fund which means there is potentially some funding for these services but would be at a reduced level. We have had a very good response from the letters working through all impacts.

JD – Disc managed to get me my flat – I'll lose my flat if I don't have support what will be done about this? As I've moved so many times I've been told I won't be re-housed

H. Watson – DBC housing may have a duty to accommodate people. Regarding the support services there may be the opportunity for some services to continue at a reduced level. If this happens the main thing that support would focus on would be keeping people in accommodation and prevent homelessness.

JD – If I lose my 2 hours support I'll lose my flat.

H. Watson – we need to wait for the decisions to be made at end June – we'll work with the organisations to look at a way forward. It is a difficult time, reassurance between now and June same if it will be different then will work with organisations on way forward.

HL – we had an issue when we were trying to move as we needed a guarantor looking at assuring £23,000.

H. Watson – Housing 700

JM – in future companies and housing should issue guidelines to help people who have a learning difficulty

H. Watson – this is a very good point

V Copeland – our own housing officers are extremely specialised and can help people –good that there are other organisations but we are not pulling the rug from under peoples feet, support is still there.

SR – same thing as JD said about Disc, who would I turn to if DISC closes down? They are helping me look for a flat I have a visit tomorrow, if you close DISC where would I go to.

H. Watson – there are no decisions yet, as V Copeland has pointed out DBC has a housing service. Where we have people that have support we'd need to look to see what's best after we know the decision.

SR – has got a letter – it will be a big impact as I won't get the help I need. My social worker is leaving, and won't know what to do with this either.

V Copeland – if you have an assessed need then social services have to provide the support

JB – not everyone has an assessed need and they don't always qualify for other support/services. These people may still need support but don't get it.

H. Watson – yes there is a large group of people

V Copeland – nothing is ever cut and dried, legislation can be a blunt instrument. Can see it all in your faces how much it's affecting you. Let's move on to other areas.

GTJ – All these changes to the library, there are vulnerable children using these services, people don't like change it will mean a lot of people won't use the 'new' services.

VC – moving library into Dolphin Centre may mean people using it for the first time. Children are using the Dolphin Centre already it's very accessible

GTJ – not final yet is it?

V Copeland – there still will be a library but you're right no decision made yet

JB – GTJ's son accesses groups at the library for disabled children.

VCopeland – yes everything will continue, yes they can have story time, there will be a big space

GTJ – it doesn't look big enough

VCopeland – there is enough, the rooms using as marriage rooms will be used as the library. The proposal is that the registry office is moved to the town hall. They are considering using the council chamber as the main marriage room

GTJ – I can't comment as not been in these rooms

VCopeland – yes they are big rooms, converting into library

GTJ – are you using the wi-fi area?

VCopeland – yes may be putting computers there, easy accessible computers plus reading sessions and the most popular books could be in this area

GTJ – Darlington's cuts are the talk of the town

JB – the benefit of coming today to explain some of the proposals and hopefully settle some worries

VCopeland –Dolphin Centre it's a service we don't have to provide but we know it's something that's valued by the residents of Darlington, there's private places (gyms etc.) that people can go and join up to

JB – this wouldn't be an option for everyone as some people cannot afford it

VC – Government say we don't have to provide leisure centre but we do. The pool is a good Olympic size but don't have to provide it

Lunch

JB – reductions in AGE UK, ground works etc and health hub closing in dolphin centre and the move more team?

SR – Shopmobility closed

VCopeland – this was a D.A.D's decision the council hasn't funded it for 3 years or more

SA – took loads of calls at least 30 plus from people whose being impacted upon

VC – no-one making a who-ha to the council, small number of people, inundated with emails from people re market and library which is why it's important for me to attend today to hear your views. I am meeting with Lauren from DAD tomorrow who will present information on multiple effects that disabled people are impacted on from the cuts. Very difficult decisions none of us want to make cuts or see people disadvantaged. Services for social care are being impacted on. Budget of £87.5 million £54 million is spent on adult and children social care the bulk being on adult social care. You are still getting what your statutory rights are.

JB – I have taken a few calls from people asking for mobility equipment.

SR – what will it mean for DBC to stay in or come out of the EU?

VCopeland – we signed up to Human Rights, a lot of employment laws, free travel there is a lot of advantages. Fell that disability and equality rights would not be as strong if left.

JM – have we already left the EU?

VCopeland – no it's on 23rd June – you must exercise your vote are you all registered? Police crime commissioner election is first.

JD – doesn't know if she's registered or not.

SR – wants to know the impacts on us

M. Humble – Stopping the funding to Aspire – the council have a service that helps people into work and it's called Aspire only been around a couple of years. It works with a small number of people to help them get into work. A lot of the work they do is work with employers. Grassroots were part of this. The proposed saving is the salary of Paul and his team.

VCopeland – proposal to close the library, only one library possibly moved into Dolphin Centre. There will be no more mobile libraries,

HS – I used to rely on mobile library when was young.

VCopeland – reduction in street cleaning, the dog owner is responsible for picking up the poop. Now responsible to have your dog chipped, and get DNA sample so that it can be tested and owner caught.

JD – Who is responsible for the students throwing litter near the college?

VCopeland – they are responsible for their own actions, we expect our citizens to take on responsibility. I pick up my litter you should too

JD – I have a bad back

VC – we'll get you a litter picker. The football pitches and parks will not get grass cut as often. There will be no grants for voluntary sector organisations. Would include reductions in rates and the free removal of rubbish.

JB – there will be no grants and the rent will be increased as well?

VC – yes there will be the reviews of rents, there will be no concessions for rents. DAD, AGE UK all voluntary sector organisations

HL – Will the tea dance be affected?

VC – we've been looking for sponsorships, there is some money for events because of the economic value. Last year the mayor sponsored it he gave £1,000 form Mayoral funding.

HL – is it ran by GOLD

VCopeland – Gold, CAB and the councils events team. We've been lucky with the weather

JM – Does it involve churches? i.e food banks

VCopeland – no this is funded by the church

M. Humble – DAD get £10,000 for information service we are not going to give them this anymore if proposals accepted

VCopeland – charities get their funding from a wide range of places, very small amount from the Council. And that small amount we do give we are having to pull, they will reduce what they do but will still be there and we're grateful.

HL – your hands are tied and there is no-where to go

VCopeland – appreciate your support

HL – was at the meeting at the Dolphin Centre and was heated, I respect what you do it's harder now than years ago.

VCopeland – Considering closing children's centres and offerring support to families.

H. Watson– They are at McNay Street, mount pleasant, Dodmire, Skerne park and Haughton.

VCopeland – built and set up with funding from the government for families to get a better start in life. Some families had chaotic lives, not enough time for their children to try and fill the gaps i.e toys, books, theatres etc. Families who didn't know how to play with their child.

JM – give parents a break

VCopeland – yes and all service in one place, proposal to have a service but at a reduced level.

M.Humble – Other cut proposals are Blue badge parking, cemetery and allotment charges. Christmas lights, the shops like us to light up the town but we feel that the shops should contribute.

VCopeland – we have tried to get volunteers to get involved with the Cockerton library, unfortunately people dwindled away. There wasn't enough interest to keep it open.

JM – was manpower a problem?

VC – yes we couldn't rally a big enough group to keep it open. People weren't prepared to sign on the dotted line

HL – you don't seem to get the volunteers or commitment

VCopeland – volunteers have limited time, volunteers are elderly, not available there is a wide range of volunteering out there

HL – I used to work in the heart foundation

EW – Last year my friend and I live in a house. Last year I got assessed and my care charges have doubled, I get invoices for my care. DBC wanted one instalment

M. Humble – would need to speak to you about this outside this meeting

SA – alongside what Edward is saying what about the charging proposals? Not sure who it will affect in the room but members will want to pass on their impacts

V. Copeland and M. Humble explained that this is running alongside all of this and happy for someone to come along to another meeting

SR – what is the B&Q being made into

VCopeland – don't know

JM – another chain company nothing to do with the council

VCopeland – if they want to change will have to apply for planning permission. What do you think about the new complex in town? When I went past really buzzing

JM – Nandos open, looks good. Looking forward to cinema

VCopeland – cinema due to be open end May

HL – Woolen Mill is heaving

VCopeland – doesn't know who owns it. The main focus of the council is economic growth, get more people in. Means council tax/ employment/ business rates in. Big company meaning lots of good things

JB – but means it impacts negatively on disabled people, it feels like looking after majority

VC – we do spend the bulk of money on social care

JB – but that's people's statutory right

VCopeland – we have to look at the other side of story – faced with the dilemma of balancing everyone's demands

JB – I appreciate this but we need to consider what message this sends to people and how that might feel - like people who work are the priority for public transport, people are already getting lots of money spent on them for adult care services, business and high paid jobs are the focus, use a private health club for leisure and the new development when certain groups of people are less likely to have the money to enjoy these things.

CE – Civic being closed

VCopeland – only for refurbishment

JM – are you getting rid of some library stock, I saw books being given away

VCopeland – rotation of the stock, people don't want to read books from 1920's sell off the books that we're finished with. Give them away to encourage people to read.

JM - I'm thinking of setting up with audible, can download

HL – like the fact that there are more car parks,

VCopeland – the multi storey was part of the agreement of the complex. The council have built the car park we'll get the money back through the

charges. People with a blue badge will have to pay in the multi storey parking on the street is still free for blue badge holders.

JB – was there talk of a transferrable ticket?

VCopeland – The council are looking at how this is organised as this would be beneficial for a number of people

HL – the area near M and S is too busy with too many buses.

VC – yes it is a contentious area. After many surveys this was the most popular place for being dropped off.

EW – When you get into town and you have to wait while changing drivers on the bus you have to wait outside. It's no good on a bad (weather) day, you can't get on whilst changing

SR – buses go round again once changed their driver

VCopeland – buses are ran by private companies, for profit. How are they for their accessibility?

JM – easier for wheelchair user if they go on first so they don't drive into anyone. I don't know how many more wheelchairs you can get on the bus

VC – there is a limit and there is a difficulty with wheelchairs and push chairs.

JM – those who are more able can get on more easily but because there is space trouble it won't always be possible for people who use a wheelchair to get on.

M. Humble – talked about cuts. There's something called the core offer, which is all the stuff the council will do. And the futures fund which is a pot of money that DBC have set aside to address the things that are being cut that the council still want to do.

VCopeland – Things that proposing will have money spent on that are being cut - looking after the parks. School crossing patrols – where possible schools take on this it is the ultimate responsibility of the parent to get their child to school safely. Suggestion to keep the local studies area – may go to Head of Steam. Some money for cultural

development/ festival and events – it's important to have a lively town. Maintaining the Head of Steam – railway celebrations we are the home of railways how can we not have something to celebrate it. We are having talks with lottery heritage/ Shildon and national railways. Crisis support and community care fund for charities to bid into. Financial and debt advice. £160,000 going back into the housing support. Community development and engagement, street champions getting out and about litter picking etc. Public health – will keep sports development team. Contribution to local strategic development. The Mayor. Voluntary Sector money to bid on. £50k for wild flower meadows. £50k for volunteers. Still quite a lot available, these are some suggestions.

HL – are community pso's funded by council

VCopeland – funded by council tax. DBC involved in it as far as we tell them what we think are the priorities. The police have to face cuts as well. They are committed to keeping Bobbies on the beat.

SR – thanks for coming given us a lot to think about

VCopeland – these are proposals nothing been decided yet – we want to hear your views. We are not closing the market we are looking for investors.