

NORTHUMBERLAND

Northumberland County Council

CORPORATE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

23 NOVEMBER 2017

External Inspections

Report of Alison Elsdon, Director of Corporate Resources

Cabinet Member: Councillor Nicholas Oliver

Purpose of report

To summarise the findings of external audit and inspection of County Council services and arrangements over the last twelve months.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Committee notes the outcomes of external audits and inspections and considers the level of assurance provided.

Link to Corporate Plan

Audits and inspections cover a number of different services of the Council and all priority areas of the Corporate Plan. As part of an assurance framework, they are particularly relevant to 'Developing the Organisation'.

Key issues

The Council and its services receive scrutiny from a number of statutory and regulatory bodies. Key issues are addressed through relevant overview and scrutiny and audit processes in the Council. This report provides an overview of the activity in the last twelve months.

Background

The Council and its services are subject to a number of statutory audit and inspection regimes which aim to provide reassurance to the public. The regimes are less onerous and widespread than the levels of scrutiny given to local government prior to the abolition of the Audit Commission which finally closed in 2015 but there are inspectorates which continue to be responsible for overseeing high-risk areas including the Office for

Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). Councils can also receive intervention from regulators such as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Traffic Commissioners (as the Council holds a Goods Vehicle Operator's Licence for its HGV fleet), Food Standards Agency (FSA), external audit and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. The sections below identify the main sources of inspection and judgement.

Adults and Children's Services. The most significant elements of the statutory inspection regime lie in adults and children services. Ofsted are responsible for inspecting education including schools; inspecting childcare, residential homes, adoption and fostering agencies; and regulating a range of early years and children's social care services. The Care Quality Commission regulates health and adult social care in England and ensures services provide people with safe, effective, compassionate, high-quality care. The Interim Director of Children's Services and the Director of Adults Services and Commissioning are reporting concurrently to the Audit Committee on recent inspection results and their report is attached to this report.

Corporate Governance. The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman conducts independent, impartial investigations of complaints about service failure and maladministration and can help to make sure that local public services and care services are accountable to the people that use them. The Ombudsman submits an annual review letter to each authority confirming the numbers of complaints and enquiries received over the previous financial year. The most recent letter was received in July 2017 and is summarised in the tables below together with comparative information from the two previous years:

Table 1: Complaints and enquiries received

| Service | Adult Care | Benefits and Tax | Corporate and other | Education and Children's | Env't | Highways and & Transport | Housing | Planning | Total |
|---------|------------|------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------|--------------------------|---------|----------|-------|
| 2016-17 | 12 | 7 | 12 | 31 | 8 | 6 | 1 | 18 | 95 |
| 2015-16 | 9 | 5 | 12 | 18 | 6 | 11 | 5 | 22 | 88 |
| 2014-15 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 22 | 10 | 2 | 4 | 21 | 87 |

Table 2: Decisions made

| Decision | Incomplete or invalid | Advice given | Referred back for local resolution | Closed after initial enquires | Detailed investigations upheld | Detailed investigations not upheld | Total |
|----------|-----------------------|--------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------|
| 2016-17 | 7 | 0 | 37 | 24 | 13 | 12 | 93 |
| 2015-16 | 2 | 1 | 36 | 23 | 11 | 12 | 87 |
| 2014-15 | 3 | 2 | 35 | 22 | 10 | 12 | 84 |

The number of cases where the Ombudsman has decided to carry out a detailed investigation has increased slightly over the three period from 22 to 25; and the number where the Ombudsman has upheld the complaint has also increased from 10 to 13 over the same period. Details of significant cases are reported to Members; a specific case is being reported to an Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November.

All local authorities are required to be externally audited. The requirements of the external audit process comprise two main areas: to perform an audit of the Council's published financial statements; and to confirm whether the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources. The external auditor also audits certain grant and subsidy claims such as the annual Housing Benefit Subsidy Audit which gives assurance to the Department of Work and Pensions to sign off the £90 million subsidy claim. It is anticipated that the Council's auditors, Ernst and Young, will conclude their audit of the Council's accounts for 2016-17 by the end of November.

Health and Safety. The work of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) covers a range of activities from shaping and reviewing regulations, producing research and statistics and enforcing the law. It has powers to inspect and investigate accidents and complaints reported to it and also has enforcement powers. As an employer, the Council has to report any accident which has resulted in an employee being unable to work normally for more than seven days and none are currently being pursued by the HSE. An improvement notice was served by the HSE in 2014/15 in relation to Hand Arm Vibration (HAV) and an action plan was implemented to deal with deficiencies in systems and procedures. The improvement notice was closed in August 2015 but the HSE continues to monitor incidences of HAV in the Council. The Council also invited CAPITA to review the Council's approach to the management of health and safety which resulted in development of an action plan to address areas for improvement, including introduction of an online incident reporting system.

Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Processes (JESIP). Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service was externally audited under the auspices of a Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP) assurance process by the national JESIP team. The outcomes of this audit will be used to assist the national JESIP team in preparing a sector specific report highlighting the progress with embedding JESIP across Ambulance, Fire and Police along with any trends and notable practice. Its purpose is to provide emergency service commanders with a framework to enable them to respond together as effectively as possible.

Others. There have been no audits or interventions from the Foods Standards Agency or the Traffic Commissioners in the last twelve months and there have been no peer reviews.

Attached: Review of external inspection reports - Adults and Children's Services: report of the Interim Director of Children's Services and the Director of Adult Services and Commissioning.

Implications

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| Policy | There are no immediate policy implications. |
| Finance and value for money | Value for money work is included in the external audit report. |
| Legal | None. |
| Procurement | None. |
| Human Resources | None. |
| Property | None. |
| Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/> | None. |
| Risk Assessment | External audits and inspections are increasingly focused on risk areas. |
| Crime & Disorder | None. |
| Customer Consideration | The purpose of audit and inspection regimes is to continue to improve the level of services delivered to customers. |
| Carbon reduction | None. |
| Wards | All. |

Background papers:

Overview and Scrutiny reports, Audit Committee reports, email correspondence from services.

Report sign off.

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|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Finance Officer | Alison Elsdon |
| Monitoring Officer/Legal | Liam Henry |
| Human Resources | n/a |
| Procurement | n/a |
| I.T. | n/a |
| Executive Director | Daljit lally |
| Portfolio Holder(s) | Councillor Oliver |

Author and Contact Details

This report has been prepared on behalf of Alison Elsdon, Director of Corporate Resources. For further information contact Stuart Lawson on 01670 623872 or stuart.lawson@northumberland.gov.uk