

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the Chairman's Dining Room, County Hall, Morpeth on Monday, 9 December 2019 at 10.00am.

PRESENT

Councillor D. Bawn
(Chair, in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Beynon, J.
Cessford, T.
Grimshaw, L.
Parry, K.
Robinson, M.

Roughead, G.
Seymour, C.
Simpson, E.
Swithenbank, I

ALSO PRESENT

Oliver, N.

Sanderson, G.

OFFICERS

C. Angus
G. Barnes
M. Bird
P. Jones
S. Nicholson

Scrutiny Officer
Revenues and Benefits Manager
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Service Director, Local Services
Scrutiny Coordinator

Press: 1

26. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC held on 11 November 2019, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the chair.

27. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY CABINET DECISIONS

Members received details of forthcoming reports to be considered by the Cabinet. (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix A.)

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

28. CABINET REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY THE COMMITTEE

Members received details of Cabinet decisions regarding issues previously commented on and been subject of report by this committee. (Summary enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix B.)

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

29. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORTS

The following reports would be considered by Cabinet on 10 December 2019. The committee were asked to comment on the proposals contained in the reports.

REPORT OF THE INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF REGENERATION, COMMERCIAL AND ECONOMY

Northumberland Climate Change Action Plan 2020-21

The report provided an update on the actions taken by the County Council since declaring a Climate Change Emergency in June 2019 and sought Cabinet approval for the proposed Climate Action Plan for 2020/21 and the associated additional capital and recurring revenue expenditure. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix C.)

The report was introduced at the meeting for the Cabinet member for Local Services and Environment, who firstly thanked the Service Director - Local Services and other officers for their work taking forward this council priority. Further key points included the creation of a steering group involving key partners, plus aims for the County Council to halve its carbon emissions by 2025 and become carbon neutral by 2030. A bid had been successful for planting large trees, and a scheme was being developed to offer all households a free tree to plant. Further work would be arranged to encourage people to use bus services more, for example the X18 up the Northumberland coast.

The Service Director - Local Services added how there would be implications for future generations if action was not taken now. It was not just a County Council issue but one for society, and engagement work involved councillors, officers, businesses and residents. Other actions being taken forward included additional renewable energy projects, a proposed hydro scheme in Hexham and work with Northumberland National Park Authority and the Forestry Commission about carbon capture options. The action plan would be a living document and continue to be reviewed. Another key source of action for renewable energy measures was air and ground source heat pumps; without these the 2030 target would be unreachable.

Detailed discussion then followed of which the key points from members and

responses were:

A member stressed the need for housing developers to ensure that their buildings were as carbon neutral as possible. Members were advised that a level of minimum standards were already in place, but would require the government to change building regulations to deliver it. Representations in support of this were being made to the Local Government Association.

A member queried whether native deciduous trees would be used for the tree offer proposal, and referred to work in previous generations to plant trees at reclaimed coal sites. This had involved a role for district councils and been well received. He also added that consideration was needed for suitable types of trees for urban areas to avoid any damage to infrastructure. The Cabinet member responded that this proposal was being developed and once it ready to roll out, all such guiding information would be available. People would be encouraged to participate and there would also be an option to grow a tree by seed and then plant it in the new Northumberland forest. Tree Officers were also considering options for enhancing tree coverage around car parks. Members also suggested that people might have the option of sponsoring a tree.

A member questioned any work planned with schools about the tree planting proposals and any funding to support this. Members were informed that possible revenue funding sources were being considered. The Cabinet member referred to how young people were very engaged in climate change concerns and praised the work of teachers and schools already undertaking relevant work.

Replying to a query about the proposed Climate Change Commission, members were informed that universities had been invited to participate. It was intended that the commission and its membership would be independent so that it could help support and work on the Council's plans.

In response to a question about what county council land had so far been identified for tree planting, members were advised that 29 locations had been identified, most of which were in south east Northumberland, plus locations in Prudhoe and Hexham. A list of these sites would be circulated to members. Northumberland National Park Authority also had a role to play as they could ensure carbon capture gains through their land management practices. A member questioned whether it was best to have so many sites in the south east of the county due to any impact on the urban network; members were informed that criteria for planting had been applied and urban areas with limited tree coverage fit the criteria for receiving the funding better. Rather than just planting small trees, it was intended to also plant older trees that would enable a greater immediate visual impact.

In response to a question about how residents could interact with this programme, dialogue about sites would be encouraged, and an email address had been set up. Discussions were taking place with the Head of Communications about publicising this work and seeking feedback from residents. A member added that volunteer groups might like to arrange tree planting work.

A member commended the Cabinet member and Director of Local Services for their work. He added that there should be no duplication of activities under way or planned by key stakeholder Combined Authority and its other constituent local authorities, who had also declared climate emergencies.

Members were further informed that regular updates on this action plan would be presented for scrutiny. Members were very pleased with and offered their thanks to all involved in the report and welcomed the proposals, so it was thus:

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this committee supports the recommendations as outlined in the report.

30. SCRUTINY REPORTS

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR – STRATEGIC COMMISSIONING AND FINANCE

Debt Recovery Update

The purpose of the report was to provide the committee with information relating to the level of outstanding debt owed to the Council at 30 September 2019 so that the committee might satisfy itself as to the efficiency and effectiveness of its collection and recovery policies and systems. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix D.)

The Cabinet Secretary and member for Corporate Services introduced the report, during which he drew attention to a number of key highlights:

- council tax collection continued to perform well, although there had been a slight fall due to the impact of changes with the reduction in the level of support available under the Council's council tax support scheme
- workload had increased due to the high number of new properties built in the county, resulting in an additional £7m being collected in council tax compared to the previous financial year
- work continued to encourage more people to pay council tax by direct debit
- the collection rate for businesses had slightly decreased due to the change from 10 payment installments to 12
- housing benefit overpayments mostly concerned private tenants
- rent collection was the highest performing in the region but there had been a 0.027% increase in rent debt. Work took place with tenants to help collect the payments before they got into financial difficulties.

The Revenues and Benefits Manager added some points including the overall council tax debit of £204.7m, the benefits to residents if they paid by direct debit; findings from the roll out of Universal Credit during late 2018 including the average time of five weeks for recipients to receive their benefit following their application, for which supporting strategies were being put in place. An outturn report would be due to be presented to this committee in six months' time.

A member welcomed the collection rates but questioned why the number of

invoices had increased yet debts had increased and whether this represented different priorities for staff time? Members were informed that this was as a result of the continued implementation of the Oracle system; work continued to address this.

A member referred to an example in the report regarding a resident who had taken extra hours but their case had not been picked up until a HMRC check, and what could be done to ensure that such cases did not happen nor did large amounts of debt be accrued by individuals. Members were advised that this was a housing benefit overpayment case, and housing benefit provision had been the responsibility of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which had taken this over from Local Authorities in 2015. The Council sent monthly updates to the DWP about debt recovery.

A member expressed concern about the impact of the council tax support scheme changes and the five week turnaround for Universal Credit applications which led to some people getting into debt; a delayed payment of £413.70 for the five weeks would be difficult for the Council to make up, so could this be closely monitored and support be given to people who needed it? Members were advised that targets could be impacted by people now paying council tax for the first time, and the overall performance was reasonably positive, and work would continue to take place to monitor the situation. The five week timescale for Universal Credit was built in the DWP process and could not be influenced by the Council.

In response to a query it was further clarified that the increase in housing benefit debt was up by 0.027%. An update on the work available to help people in debt could be organised for this committee and also jointly involve customer services.

A member asked if officers in services other than finance might be well placed to support and advise people in debt; members were advised that advice was given by both revenues and benefit teams and customer services, but the Citizens Advice Bureau operated the government contract to give advice to the public. A member asked if a report could be requested from the about how the Citizens Advice Bureau could come to give a presentation about their support? Members were advised that the Citizens Advice Bureau had previously given a similar overview to the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, so clarification would be needed about whether that could come to this committee as part of the next debt recovery update or perhaps to the other OSC; this would need to be confirmed by the Chairmen's Group in due course.

Councillor Oliver and Mr Barnes were thanked for their attendance and it was:

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report be noted; and
- (2) requests made for additional updates be followed up after the meeting.

31. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and Monitoring Report

Members received the committee's work programme and monitoring report for the 2019/20 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix D.)

The Scrutiny Coordinator referred to the request during the previous discussion about support for benefit claimants to be asked to provide at a future meeting. Chairmen's Group would confirm which overview and scrutiny committee would receive both that and future updates on the climate change action plan.

Furthermore, the bailiffs report proposed for the next meeting needed to be deferred to March due to the presenters' availability. This left no business for the 13 January meeting so it was agreed that it would be cancelled.

It was also confirmed that all overview and scrutiny committee members would be invited to attend for the budget presentation at February's meeting.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report be noted;
- (2) the meeting on 13 January be cancelled;
- (3) other arrangements for agenda items be followed up as agreed.

Chair _____

Date _____