

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 Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Monday, 9 March 2020 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.

OFFICERS

Barnes, G.
Bird, M
Hand, C.

Revenues & Benefits Manager
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Executive Director of Finance and
Section 151 Officer
Scrutiny Coordinator
Recovery Manager

Nicholson, S.
Teasdale, K.

Press: 1
D Chapman - Rossendales

37. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC held on 10 February 2020, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the chair.

At this point in the meeting, reference was made to when further information would be provided about the £15m allocation for fixing pavements and minor roads across Northumberland. A further report/update would be provided shortly.

38. 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.)

Members were advised that the Northumberland Cultural Fund item due to be considered by Cabinet on 7 April 2020 would now include both an overview of the expenditure of the funding spent over the past year and information regarding the extension of funding for the following year following a recent review.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

39. CABINET REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY THE COMMITTEE

Members received details of Cabinet decisions on three reports that had previously been commented on by this committee. (Summary enclosed with the official minutes as Appendix B.)

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

40. SCRUTINY REPORTS

40.1 REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR - STRATEGIC COMMISSIONING AND FINANCE

Debt Recovery Arrangements – Support to Customers with Financial Difficulties

The purpose of the report (enclosed with the official minutes as Appendix D) was to set out the support and arrangements in place to assist customers who were having difficulty paying their council tax and rent commitments. A copy of Corporate Debt Recovery Policy was appended to the covering report.

The Cabinet member for Corporate Services introduced the report, or which his key points included reference to the 155,000 properties in the county that council tax was collected from totalling around £204m per annum; the roll out of Universal Credit; engagement work with customers including assistance to prevent people's debts worsening and options for alternative payment arrangements; work with and signposting to the Citizens Advice Bureau for support; and Community Action Northumberland's offer of support for residents' budgeting.

The Revenues & Benefits Manager further advised that in addition to the completed rollout of Universal Credit for new claimants by December 2018, the next stage was the managed migration of existing housing benefit claimants to Universal Credit by 2024. Also, following changes to the council tax support scheme, around 12,500 people in the county previously exempt now needed to pay council tax, so support was provided for individuals affected and work took place with partner agencies.

Discussion followed during which key details of members' comments were:

- thanks were expressed to the Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services Manager and his team for the comprehensive report and support provided to protect people with financial difficulties. Staffing levels in the department needed to be protected/maintained to meet the demand for support. The Citizens Advice Bureau in Ashington in particular had been very busy, dealing with 1932 cases including 585 within one month, so it was important that the level of Council staff were also supported and relevant organisations could continue to work together
- it would be helpful to attain additional information, including:
 - comparisons over a three year period rather than year by year
 - the locations of non payments across the county; did they tend to be more in poorer areas or more widespread across the county, and could this information be provided by each of the 66 electoral divisions, and were any towns particularly affected?
 - what were the shortfalls in payments by different council tax bands?
 - were there any trends/impacts/lessons relating to the significant number of housing developments in the county?
- the importance of further promoting ethical lenders such as Northumberland Community Bank for people to use instead of payday loan companies. This could include members publishing information on social media, putting up posters in community centres and other locations, and whether any information about Northumberland Community Bank could be included in any council leaflets sent out to all households in the future.

In response to questions, members were assured that responses would be organised to the points made. The Chair concluded that it was a very good report, and staff helped many vulnerable people very helpful and professionally.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the contents of the report be noted; and
- (2) answers be organised to the issues raised by committee members.

40.2 DEBT RECOVERY - ENFORCEMENT

The presentation gave an overview for members of the collection, recovery and Enforcement Agent process for Council Tax. (Copy of presentation enclosed with the official minutes as Appendix C).

The presentation was split between a section from the Council's Recovery Manager and Dave Chapman of Rossendales about their respective responsibilities. Key areas covered during the presentation were:

- relevant legislation for debt recovery enforcement
- council tax and business rates in Northumberland
- enabling and payment arrangements
- the process for warning about council tax recovery action and requests for financial information
- the role of and referrals to enforcement agents
- the objectives of the revised legislation that took effect from April 2014
- the three stages: compliance, enforcement and sale
- fees for enforcement, including trigger points for fee application

- the regulation of disbursements and compliance
- ensuring that enforcement services were delivered ethically, including dealing with vulnerability and the impact from vulnerability
- compliance statistics for Northumberland.

A member raised that it would be useful to compare Northumberland's statistics with CIPFA benchmarking. Members were advised that Northumberland participated in CIPFA's annual survey, so this information could be provided.

In response to other questions, members were advised that:

- if residents were declared bankrupt, the Council submitted claims for outstanding debts and costs to be dealt with as part of the bankruptcy
- the Council would consider any individual voluntary arrangement proposals on a case by case basis
- a leaflet was sent out to all businesses in Northumberland about small business relief rates, for which they could get in touch about any queries
- it was too soon to judge any recent impact on the overall collection rate during the current financial year. Members were advised that these figures should be available by June/July 2020.

A member referred to an example of a local business who had been struggling financially but then sought advice from the Council; officers had been very helpful and understanding. The situation had been addressed and the business was still operating. It was important that businesses sought advice about debt management rather than ignoring any financial problems they had.

The Chair concluded by thanking the officers for their good presentation, and added that members were reassured about the process in place.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

41. 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 E.)

Members were reminded about the pre-scrutiny of the Cultural Fund item due at the committee's next meeting on 6 April.

A number of questions had been raised at this meeting; answers would be organised, with the Chair deciding whether the information would be circulated either as written responses or presented as updates to the committee in due course.

The further information about the £15m pavement and minor roads repair programme would also be provided in due course.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

42. FUTURE MEETINGS

Members received a list of the committee's meetings from April 2020 to April 2021.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

Chair _____

Date _____