

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 Council Chamber, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF on Monday, 10 October 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillor D. Bawn
(Chairman in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Dunn, E.
Jackson, P.
Oliver, N.

Taylor, C.
Wallace, A.

CABINET MEMBERS

Sanderson, H.G.H.
Wearmouth, R.

Leader of the Council
Deputy Leader & Corporate
Services

OFFICERS

Barnes, G.

Greally, R.

Hunter, P.
McMillan, S.
Nicholson, S.
Pringle, S.

Thompson, C
Willis, J.

Revenues, Benefits and Customer
Services Manager
Assistant Democratic Services
Officer
Senior Service Director
Assistant Service Director
Scrutiny Co-ordinator
Business and Community
Engagement Officer
Director of Information Technology
Executive Director of Finance
(Section 151 Officer)

28. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors J. Beynon, P. Ezhilchelvan, M. Murphy and M. Robinson.

29. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors D. Bawn, N. Oliver and G. Sanderson declared that their businesses had received Covid grants. It was confirmed that they would still be present and take part in discussions.

30. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 July 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

31. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Forward Plan of forthcoming Key Cabinet decisions was reported to the Committee. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix A).

Members noted that the Budget 2023-24 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2022-27 was due to come to Committee on 7th November, but J. Willis had advised that this be deferred until the December meeting to allow further information to be gathered.

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions be noted with the verbal amendment.

32. COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

Councillor R. Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services introduced the report. The scheme was one of the most generous in the North East. It was hoped the Committee would endorse the scheme for the next financial year which would provide support 92% Council Tax support to working age claimants. Central Government was providing support for energy bills this winter along with winter fuel allowances for those who were eligible. A briefing note was also attached to explain the Government assistance provided to the Council to help with Council Tax since the COVID pandemic 2020/21.

It was confirmed that the Authority were awaiting confirmation on the continuation of the Council Tax hardship scheme, but no information was expected imminently. G. Barnes, revenues, benefits and customer services manager, was in attendance to answer questions from members.

The following comments were made in response to member questions:

- Members welcomed the additional assistance from the Government however that aid was to combat the energy crisis and that Council Tax support had always been in place. Some members felt that the support provided was only bringing residents up to an expected level of living. It was felt that the Council needed a scheme to help those hit hardest even if only temporarily

to combat the cost of living crisis. By raising the support to 100% it would simplify the scheme to residents and reduce the need for recovery action.

- The scheme which was being proposed was unchanged from last year. It was confirmed that the Authority was one of the most generous in the region. Members were unaware of any major problems with the scheme and it was felt that 8% was a small amount of money. The Council Tax scheme was felt to be generous and had proven to work.
- It was confirmed to members that the forecasted cost of £25,756,617 was for residential homes only.
- Members noted that the future of the hardship fund would be announced in due course. If it was not continued the Council would look into providing similar cover within its own budget.
- There was a suggestion that a national scheme would simplify the process for residents and reduce the workload on officers.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised of the comments made by members and that the Committee supported the recommendation contained in the report.

33. BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY UPDATE

Councillor R. Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services introduced the report. C. Thompson, Director of Information Technology and S. Pringle, Business and Community Engagement Officer were in attendance. They explained that the report gave a summary of projects, some national and some local which were being undertaken to close the historical gap in broadband connectivity.

Due to the diverse geography of Northumberland and the rurality of much of the county, delivering good digital connectivity across the whole county has been a perennial challenge. The Covid crisis in 2020 and 2021 brought the need for good connectivity into even sharper focus with many residents struggling to work from home and children to access online learning.

The following comments were made in response to member questions:

- Members noted that the LFFN project had concluded, and 216 sites had been created with a number of structures being capitalised such as schools and libraries. It was still in the early stages of the project, but it was hoped that other providers would link in with the spine connections. It was hoped it would be the backbone of the future network in the County.
- Project Gigabit is a government infrastructure project which aims to deliver fast and reliable digital connectivity that officers were confident would be started in early 2023. It has a target of connecting 85% of residents. Northumberland has been split into two procurement categories: Type A for North Northumberland and Type B for the rest of the County and parts of Durham. Officers confirmed that a map could be shared with members and published on the website once more details of the premises included are known.

- Members noted that social tariffs were available from most providers however they were not widely advertised. Each provider would have their own eligibility criteria for these tariffs. Also, as part of the procurement process for Project Gigabit, BDUK had requested a social value section. Members confirmed that they had experience of the Council actively pursuing hard to reach communities.

RESOLVED that the information in the report be noted.

34. BUDGET CONSULTATION

Councillor R. Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services introduced the report. The report provided questions included in the 2022-23 budget consultation for members to consider and make suggestions upon. It also sought members views on how to strengthen the consultation and engagement with residents.

The following comments were made from members:

- It was suggested that a section regarding the Council Tax support scheme be added.
- Members suggested that it would be useful to create an interactive budget tool for customers to create their own budget online or a way in which customers could rank the importance of different services.
- It was agreed that it was important to get as much interaction and participation from residents and businesses within the county.
- It was noted that the online response was good value for money and it was important to get the online consultation out to the public for more responses. Members were encouraged to promote the consultation on social media.

RESOLVED that the information be noted and suggestions be examined for inclusion in the Budget Consultation 2022/23.

35. COVID GRANTS AND SUPPORT TO BUSINESS

Councillor R. Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services introduced the report. Members reiterated thanks to officers for their efficient hard work during the pandemic to ensure swift support was given to those in need. It was acknowledged that there was a high number of microbusinesses in the county which made it a mammoth task to accomplish with over 39,000 individual payments being made.

G. Barnes, Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services Manager and S. McMillan, Assistant Service Director were in attendance to answer questions from members.

The following comments were made by members:

- First-hand experience highlighted the efficiency of the service. It was acknowledged that the Authority was the 4th fastest to distribute the support nationally.
- Members thanks officers for the detailed report and commented on the coherence of it.
- Members highlighted the importance of using town and parish councils to relay important communications into the community.

RESOLVED that the information in the report be noted.

36. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received an update on its Work Programme for the 2022/23 council year. The Scrutiny Coordinator reiterated to members that the Budget 2023-24 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2022-27 item would be deferred until the December meeting.

RESOLVED that this information was noted.

37. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED that

- (a) under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item on the Agenda as it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Act, and
- (b) the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure for the following reasons:-

Agenda Item	Paragraph of Part I of Schedule 12A
12	3 - Contains information relating to business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).
AND	The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because disclosure could adversely affect the business reputation or confidence in the person/organisation, and could adversely affect commercial revenue

38. TRADING COMPANIES' FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

The confidential report, which was considered by Cabinet on 21 September 2022, was introduced to the Committee by Councillor R. Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services.

Members welcomed the report. J. Willis confirmed that work was underway to create a rationale for NEHL and a strategic review was taking place of Advance. Members were assured that further information would be provided in due course regarding the future of NEHL.

It was confirmed that there were no active tenders being pursued and none would be until the future of the NEHL company was confirmed.

It was also confirmed that a detailed annual presentation from Advance on its core operations would be provided to the Committee in March 2023.

RESOLVED that the information in the report be noted.

Chairman _____

Date _____