

**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 Conference Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF on Monday, 13 March at 10.00 am.

**PRESENT**

Councillor D. Bawn  
(Chairman in the Chair)

**COUNCILLORS**

Beynon, J.  
Dunn, E.  
Ezhilchelvan, P.  
Murphy, M.

Oliver, N.  
Robinson, M.  
Taylor, C.  
Wallace, A.

**OFFICERS**

Anderson, J.  
Earl, R.  
Errington, P.  
Greally, R.

Mowbray, A.

Nicholson, S.  
Rose, J  
Willis, J.

Head of Finance - Advance  
Group Executive Director- Advance  
Director of Advance Homes  
Assistant Democratic Services  
Officer  
Head of Project Management -  
Advance  
Scrutiny Co-ordinator  
Interim Executive Director  
Executive Director of Finance  
(Section 151 Officer)

1 member of the press was in attendance.

**46. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13 February 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **48. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor M. Murphy declared an interest in item 5 Advance Northumberland as she was a member of the board. The Chair agreed that she could remain in the meeting but would not partake in any discussion.

#### **49. 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).

It was noted that the date of the meeting had changed to the 17<sup>th</sup> April 2023 to accommodate the report deadlines.

**RESOLVED** that the Forward Plan of key decisions be noted.

#### **50. ADVANCE NORTHUMBERLAND**

Robin Earl, Group Executive Director of Advance, introduced the presentation and his colleagues to committee. The presentation highlighted the work Advance had done in the last 12 months. Advance continued to work with a number of organisations to produce collaborative projects. Leisure centres in Berwick upon Tweed, Newbiggin by the Sea and Morpeth had been completed and handed over to Active Northumberland successfully. There were two flagship projects in the Advance programme that were highlighted to committee: the Energy Central Learning hub and Culture Centre and Market Place. Advance were working closely with the Energising Blyth programme to manage the design process and support stakeholder consultations and business case development.

The housing market had been difficult in recent times due to inflationary pressures but it was important to be aware that the North East was not facing as difficult times as what was being published nationally. Ascent had built 117 homes in the last 12 months with 107 of them being affordable homes. They had active developments in Alnwick, Blyth, Choppington, Ellington and Wooler with planned projects in Bellingham, Berwick and Newbiggin-by-the-Sea.

Advance provided good quality residential and commercial properties for residents and businesses of Northumberland to live and work. As they were private landlords they were not restricted. The current portfolio was performing very well. There was continual recovery post-pandemic especially in the commercial portfolio.

It was confirmed that a financial remodel was in progress. Advance had appointed independent accountants to look over the financial model and give suggestions on how the company would look moving forward.

The following comments were made in response to members questions:-

- It was confirmed that there was no requirement on the current rural scheme at Wooler for affordable housing for locals, but such conditions could be made on future projects.
- Members noted that it took a considerable amount of money, approximately £15,000 per house, to construct a property with sustainable eco-friendly features.
- Advance housing worked with housing associations and the Council for social housing as it depended on who was best placed to take on the rentals due to existing stock.
- Members were assured that there was a healthy stream of work for Ascent homes. The company tried to work on a 5-year cycle for the landbank. It worked closely with the Council for housing estates.
- The reconstruction of the Advance board was still on-going. Advertisements had been published for non-executive directors to bring in more skilled workers onto the board. Interviews were taking place in the very near future. It was confirmed that any board members appointed would go through the correct governance and recommendations would be made to Council which would need to be approved.
- Through numerous consultations it was evident that a new cinema was a priority for the public in the regeneration of Blyth. Members were assured that independent cinemas were becoming more popular post pandemic. It was confirmed that an independent cinema business had already been chosen.
- Members were assured that necessary steps had been taken since to ensure the Bedlington Town Centre project would continue. The officers were confident that the work would restart by the end of the month.
- It was confirmed that all properties apart from two bungalows had been sold on phase one of the Willow Farm site without having to offer incentives. This suggested that the properties were priced correctly.
- The revaluation of properties in the portfolio was done on annual basis. The annual revaluation had potential to alter the profits shown in the financial position. It was confirmed that additional wording would be added to future presentations to clarify the figures and ensure the figures reflect the story of the company.
- Officers confirmed that every effort had been made to help and support the tenant of the Port of Blyth. It was confirmed that they had been informed of the works being carried out and that temporary signage and carparks had been given to the business to assist them.
- Advance strived to help in the County where possible and had taken on projects before that had not necessarily given the company financial benefits. In terms of empty properties it was difficult to fill individual units that were sporadic across the County as it was not economically viable.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

**55. WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee received an update on its Work Programme for the 2022/23 council year.

Members requested that the report regarding inflationary pressures on the current budget be brought to committee. A report was due to go to cabinet in March. A final report up to the financial year end was due to go to Cabinet in May. Officers confirmed they were happy for both reports to come to scrutiny.

Members also requested an update on the position of the NCC lottery.

**RESOLVED** that this information was noted.

**Chairman** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_