

CORPORATE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH OSC

REPORT TO COUNCIL

6 SEPTEMBER 2023

INTERIM SCRUTINY REPORT

As part of the review and redraft of the Council's Constitution (agreed at the Annual Council meeting), members also approved a review of the Council's scrutiny function. The review provided members with clarity on how we should approach scrutiny, in particular, setting our own work programme in accordance with the Committee's priorities and by ensuring that scrutiny can be effective in supporting policy development and monitoring performance in critical areas.

1. Work Programme

At our meeting held on 26 June 2023, I asked Simon Neilson, Executive Director – Place and Regeneration and Jan Willis, Executive Director – Transformation and Resources (S151 Officer) to provide the Committee with an outline of the key issues that are expected to emerge over the next six months or more, so that members could identify which of those matters could be developed or monitored through the work programme

The Committee identified the following areas for further examination:

- Regeneration – whilst we welcomed the progress with many of the initiatives that were being developed, particularly around Energising Blyth, members remained concerned regarding the former British Volt site. Although we acknowledged the commercial sensitivities in this area, it was something that we intend to keep under review.
- BEST – although we had previously received reports on establishing the BEST programme, members requested an update on progress so that we could identify the work streams which we felt needed more detailed examination and monitoring.
- Capital Programme – members expressed their concern regarding delays in delivering some projects which, in some cases, had led to increased costs due, in part, to higher construction and raw material prices. We will therefore monitor the delivery of the capital programme to ensure that any delays are kept to a minimum.

In addition, the Committee had agreed to receive at forthcoming meetings a performance update on the Northumberland Lottery; the Council's Workforce Annual Workforce Update, and on the operations of Advance Northumberland.

2. Financial Performance

Also in June, the Committee considered the provisional outturn of the Council against the budget for 2022-23 which was based on the position at the end of February. Although members were content with the comprehensive report, they identified two issues which would require further examination by the Committee:

- Vacancies – members noted that a recurring theme in the Financial Performance reports was the number of vacancies that had remained unfilled. Although we understood that a review of vacancies was necessary as part of the budget reduction process, it was also acknowledged that there were some issues regarding recruitment. We there agreed to explore this further within BEST.
- Parks and Green Spaces Programme – we were concerned that the £250,000 approved in 2022-23 for this programme had not been utilised. We have therefore requested that a report be presented to the next meeting which we expect will include an assurance that the schemes will be progressed expeditiously.

3. Debt Recovery

The Committee continues to monitor the Council's debt position. Although we acknowledged the hard work of the recovery team, we noted at the last meeting that sundry debt had increased, partly due to the backlog created by the pandemic, but also because claimants were moving over to Universal Credit which made it difficult for overpayments to be reclaimed. However, additional staff were now in post, so we anticipate that the issue will have eased by the time of our next six-monthly report.

I can therefore report that I am happy with the direction the Committee is taking following the recent review and intend to ensure that the OSC will be more proactive in early stage development work in formulating new policies and strategies; to investigate matters of interest and concern to the wider community, and to keep under review the performance and financial position of the Council.

COUNCILLOR DAVID BAWN

CHAIRMAN