

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 2, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF on Monday, 26 June 2023 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillor D. Bawn
(Chairman in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Beynon, J.
Dunn, E.
Ezhilchelvan, P.
Grimshaw, L.

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

OFFICERS

Gerrard, S.

Greally, R.

Neilson, S.

Nicholson, S.

Teasdale, K.

Willis, J.

Director of Law and Corporate
Governance (Monitoring Officer)
Assistant Democratic Services
Officer
Executive Director – Place &
Regeneration
Scrutiny Co-ordinator
Recovery and Accounts Payable
Manager
Executive Director –
Transformation and Resources
(Section 151 Officer)

1 member of the press was in attendance.

01. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Chairman reported the membership and terms of reference for the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC which were agreed by Council on 17 May 2023.

Membership

10 Members (5:3:1 Ind Gp, 1 LD) (LD place given to ING)

Quorum – 3

Chair: D. Bawn

Vice Chair: L. Dunn

Conservative	Labour	Independent Group	Liberal Democrats	Green Party	Ind Non-Grouped
D. Bawn	L. Dunn	C. Taylor			M. Robinson
J. Beynon	L. Grimshaw				
P. Ezhilchelvan	A. Wallace				
P. Jackson					
N. Oliver					

Terms of reference:

- (1) To maintain an overview of the Council's Annual Budget and Budgetary Management via the Medium Term Financial Plan.
- (2) To review the state of Northumberland and the County Council's activity in delivering its Corporate Plan.
- (3) To maintain an overview of the Council's performance management arrangements; highlighting areas of poor performance and monitoring recovery delivery plans.
- (4) To maintain an overview of the Management Agreements in place between the Council and Advance Northumberland.
- (5) To monitor, review and make recommendations about:
 - Corporate Services: Organisational Development, Health and Safety, ICT Strategy, Corporate Governance, Financial Services, Procurement Strategy, Risk Strategy, Shared and Traded Services
 - Partnership development coordination with local organisations
 - Relationships with external bodies
 - Regeneration and Economic Development

- Strategic Transport Network and Infrastructure
- Employability, Skills, and removing barriers to work
- Capital Programme and Asset Management
- Support to VCS organisations and the Council's relationship with town and parish councils.

RESOLVED that the membership and terms of reference be noted.

02. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 April 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

03. FORWARD PLAN AND CABINET DECISIONS

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

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions and Cabinet decisions be noted.

04. PRESENTATIONS FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS ON FORTHCOMING ISSUES

Simon Neilson, Executive Director – Place and Regeneration, gave a presentation to the committee. Which provided an overview of the directorate structure for place and regeneration. It outlined the services within the directorate that would fall under the remit of the committee. The presentation also highlighted potential areas where the committee may want to focus on.

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

- It was acknowledged that there were frustrations with the delays surrounding the former British Volt project at Cambois. There was commercial sensitivity around the project, and it was suggested that a report come to scrutiny. The report would include both public information and a confidential part to discuss more sensitive matters.
- Officers confirmed that there would be a regeneration update to the committee which would give members an overview of the broad programme. The committee would then be able to select specific areas where it would like further information brought to scrutiny.
- The devolution deal was expected to be a smooth transition. There were responsibilities from both the Authority and North of Tyne that would transcend into the devolution deal. There was a healthy relationship between all

Authorities and there had been a good track record of working well together in the region.

Jan Willis, Executive Director – Transformation and Resources gave a presentation to the committee which outlined the structure and responsibilities of the new directorate. It suggested possible upcoming areas that may be of interest to the committee. The BEST value action plan had lots of different workstreams that could be brought to scrutiny to look at in more detail. Digital access projects would look at broadband connectivity within schools and more rural areas.

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

- It was confirmed that different workstreams from the BEST delivery programme could be examined at committee. Commercialisation opportunities would fall under the BEST asset workstream. It was reiterated that the BEST delivery programme was a 3 year programme and there would be different priorities throughout its delivery.
- Capital programme delivery would look at better forecasting and making sure resources are put in place to delivery projects in a timely manner. It was acknowledged that currently there was an issue with overprogramming which led to frustrations with delays and escalating costs. Delivery is becoming more challenging due to the current economic conditions and high levels of inflation affecting construction costs and raw material prices, however officers remain focused on what can be controlled.

RESOLVED that the information was noted and the issues identified for further examination be included on the Committee's work programme.

05. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2022-23: POSITION AT THE END OF FEBRUARY 2022 (PROVISIONAL OUTTURN 2022-23)

Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services introduced the report to committee. Jan Willis, Executive Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer), was present to respond to member's questions. The report outlined the provisional outturn of the Council against the budget for 2022-23 which was based on the position at the end of February.

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

- It was acknowledged that similar themes had ran throughout the year including the position on vacancies. It was noted that a strategy had been implemented early on in the financial year to review all vacancies in the Authority to generate a saving on the budget.
- The employment offer was being looked at through the BEST programme and it was hoped that as the job market improved the difficulties with recruitment would ease. It was noted that a workforce report would come to committee in September.

- The reserve for defective streetlighting was due to the contract ending with the current company therefore a sinking fund was being created to meet future maintenance costs.
- It was confirmed that Adult Services had previous issues with the delivery of budget savings as team responsible for reviewing packages of care had been diverted to other work, however the savings were back on track and Adult Services had underspent overall.
- Day-to-day delivery of services would continue to be prioritised to ensure that there was no impact on the services due to staffing vacancies.
- The pay forecast would change depending on what vacancies were filled and what the pay award would be, which was yet to be determined.
- The officers did not have information readily available to explain why £250,000 approved in 2022-23 for parks and green spaces that was not utilised. Members felt that projects in parks and green spaces that were delayed should be communicated with them. Members requested a short report on the Queen Elizabeth II Park and projects in Bedlington.
- Value for money was not just about external suppliers. There would be a workstream through BEST to establish baseline value for money which could be brought to a future meeting.
- Members thanked officers for the exhaustive report.

RESOLVED that

- (a) the information be noted, and
- (b) a report be presented to the next meeting setting out the proposals for ensuring the delivery the Parks and Green Spaces Programme.

06. DEBT RECOVERY UPDATE

Keith Teasdale, Recovery and Accounts Payable Manager, introduced the report to committee. The report gave an update on the debt position since March 2023. The report showed that sundry debt had increased due to several reasons. There was still a backlog from the pandemic which had meant that Council Tax and Business Rate arrears had increased. Claimants were moving over to Universal Credit which made it difficult for overpayments to be reclaimed. A service review had been undertaken and a recruitment drive had happened with people coming into post.

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

- The report was a snapshot as of 31st March, but it was a constantly moving target. It was impossible to say that everything was 100% right however officers

were confident that it was a low error rate. If members had individual cases that they wanted officers to look at Gillian Caisley would be able to assist them.

- Officers felt that it would be 2025 onwards before everyone would be transferred over to Universal Credit. The service was looking at how the Council Tax Support Scheme would evolve to reflect this.
- As part of the annual budget the service did give forecasts on caseloads, but it was acknowledged that it was difficult to do this with any accuracy as it was the DWP who were driving the roll out of the scheme. There was potential for there to come a point after the roll out where administrative costs would become unsustainable if systems and processes weren't adapted which was why they were being looked at now.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

07. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received an update on its Work Programme for the 2022/23 council year, including an assurance that the additional issues identified at the meeting would be included.

RESOLVED that this information be noted.

Chairman _____

Date _____