

**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, 25 September 2023 at 10.00 am.

**PRESENT**

Councillor D. Bawn  
(Chairman in the Chair)

**COUNCILLORS**

Beynon, J.  
Dunn, E.  
Grimshaw, L.  
Oliver, N.

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

**OFFICERS**

Farrell, S.

Gerrard, S.

Greally, R.

Hindhaugh, P.

Jones, P.

McMillan, S.

Nicholson, S.

Willis, J.

Director of Workforce &  
Organisational Development  
Director of Law and Corporate  
Governance (Monitoring Officer)  
Assistant Democratic Services  
Officer  
Head of Corporate Commissioning  
and Procurement  
Director of Environment and  
Transport  
Head of Economic Growth and  
Inward Investment  
Scrutiny Co-ordinator  
Executive Director –  
Transformation and Resources  
(Section 151 Officer)

1 member of the press was in attendance.

## 08. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Paul Ezilchelvan, Colin Horncastle and Richard Wearmouth.

## 09. MINUTES

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26 June 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

## 10. 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.

## 11. REGENERATION UPDATE

Councillor Wojciech Ploszaj, Cabinet Member for Supporting Business and Opportunities, introduced the presentation. An assurance was given that there was no plan to drop any of the planned programmes highlighted in the presentation. Sarah McMillan, Head of Economic Growth and Inward Investment, gave the presentation to committee (attached with the minutes). The presentation outlined the role of the service and gave an update of regeneration within different categories; town & community, cultural investment, rural stewardship & growth, economic growth and strategic sites.

The following comments were made in response to members questions:

- Members were assured that there would be a seamless transition into the new Combined Authority. All scheduled projects and programmes would still be delivered. There would be a process to agree new priorities but the Authority was in a strong position and key opportunities would be recognised. It was confirmed that the Leaders red lines were still in place.
- It was confirmed that the small business service will be advertised in early October and information can be shared with Councillors.
- An assurance was given that businesses were communicated with through various mechanisms regarding the town plan. It was confirmed that businesses were contacted through an open consultation and businesses also sat on the town plan boards.
- There were many cultural investments across the whole County, there were only a select few highlighted in the presentation but members were assured that there were many investments planned.

- It was clarified for members that the Authority used the DEFRA definition of rural which meant that elements within Blyth and Cramlington were classed as not rural.
- Members were assured that as soon as there was news regarding the Sleekburn site it would be brought to committee. Members requested a report come to the next meeting even if it was confidential due to the commercial sensitive nature.
- It was confirmed that the cinema project in Ashington had successfully submitted a business case. The next step was to evaluate the business case to assess whether it was still viable. This was being done in consultation with the Town board.
- There was an acknowledgement that it was difficult to evaluate how far the town regeneration reaches and the effect it has on outlying villages however outputs were always embedded into projects and wider data could identify the impact made. It was suggested that residents surveys could be a way gauge people's feelings.
- Members were assured that funding for town & community regeneration was given from the Government and North of Tyne where the opportunity arose.
- It was acknowledged that Northumberland was behind the national curve for fast broadband roll out. Chris Thompson, Head of Digital and IT, would be able to give a more detailed update of the progress to committee.

**RESOLVED** that the information in the presentation be noted.

## 12. PARKS AND GREEN SPACES

Paul Jones, Director of Environment and Transport, introduced the briefing to the committee. It outlined a response to a request by members who sought an explanation as to why £250,000 allocated to the Parks Enhancement Capital Programme had not been utilised and an assurance that it would be spent 2023/2024. The response outlined the projects that the money would be utilised for. It also gave an overview of works that were completed in 2022/23. It was also highlighted that the services had managed to increase the overall number of parks in the County achieving the prestigious Green Flag status from 11 to 12 this year, which recognises them as being amongst the best parks in the country.

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

- An assurance was given that remedial work from storm Arwen was scheduled in Gallagher Park. There was a huge parks programme and the service were committed to certain programmes and were also developing proposals.
- Officers were happy to confirm with members what works were in the programme.
- Members were assured that the service recognised Wansbeck Riverside as an asset to the County. The Council had invested in the play park at Wansbeck Riverside.
- Officers confirmed they were happy to look at future investments and would look into suggestions from members.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

### **13. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE 2023-24 – Position end of June 2023**

Jan Willis, Executive Director of Transformation and Resources (Section 151 Officer) introduced the report to the committee. The report outlined that the Authority was expected to have an overspend of £4.5 million, this included drawing down funds for the 2023/24 pay award which was awaiting agreement. It was not unusual for a forecasted overspend at that time of the financial year.

The report highlighted several pressures throughout the Authority including children's & young person's services including residential care placements and housing services due to energy prices. However, members were assured that there were mechanisms in place to help manage pressures such as; managing discretionary spend and deferring non-essential spends as well as a mechanism having been put in place regarding filling vacancies. An assurance was given that the overspend could be managed.

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

- It was acknowledged that the next report for financial performance due would show the second quarter and would hopefully show that the budget was moving in the right direction.
- A detailed piece of work was to be undertaken regarding the overprogramming of the capital programme as it was acknowledged it was out of kilter. There were external projects which created delays in the programme as well as inflationary pressures affecting the timeline. However, an assurance was given that once the work was completed proposals would be brought to committee. One proposal was to create a 10-year capital programme.
- It was acknowledged that the social care services was one of the pinch points for the budget. The social care funding model was due for review and the Authority awaited Government proposals. It was one of the biggest challenges faced by Local Governments.
- There was confirmation that the Authority was not borrowing externally whilst inflation was at its highest. The Authority were following an under borrowing strategy and were not taking on any additional external borrowing.
- Members were assured that detailed work was being undertaken within Children's services within school transport. It was acknowledged that the number of children with an SEN statement were increasing nationally. Work was also being done regarding residential placement – the strategy would be to open more provisions within Northumberland to decrease the need to rely on external residential placements.
- It was confirmed that once cleared with Gill O'Neill, Executive Director - Public Health, Inequalities, and Stronger Communities, information regarding the recommendation to transfer £1.556 million from the reserve to provide additional services to reduce poverty and health inequalities would be circulated to members.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

#### **14. PERFORMANCE OF THE NORTHUMBERLAND LOTTERY**

Pam Hindhaugh, Head of Corporate Commissioning and Procurement, introduced the report to committee. The report gave the committee an update on the performance of the Northumberland Lottery since it was launched in April 2020. Northumberland County Council in collaboration with Gatherwell Ltd (an External Lottery Manager) operates an online lottery which contributes 50p of every £1 ticket sold to whichever local good cause the ticket player has chosen to support. Community groups and registered charities apply to join the Lottery via the Council's branded lottery website. Once approved by the Council, organisations are provided with their own branded page within the site and provided with regular updates, and bespoke marketing materials to help promote the lottery. The groups/charities then retain 50% of all ticket sales generated via their web page. This is paid to them on a monthly basis directly via Gatherwell and provides a regular income stream (subject to ticket sales).

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

- Members suggested it would be a good time to advertise the lottery post pandemic to encourage more participation. An assurance was given that the lottery could be publicised to community groups.
- Members shared that they were pleasantly surprised with the performance of the lottery.
- It was suggested that additional criteria was added to ensure that charities who benefit from the scheme cannot contradict the Council's corporate values. It was confirmed that in the terms & conditions any application can be rejected without a reason given.
- There was an assurance given that those who tried to exceed the number of prescribed tickets would receive information about gambling awareness. However, this has not been needed as of yet.
- There was confirmation that the chances of winning was 1 in 5 and legal the lottery must have the funds available to pay out the winnings.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

#### **15. HR ANNUAL UPDATE**

Sarah Farrell, Director of Workforce and Organisational Development, presented the report to the committee. The report outlined the annual position statement in relation to strategic workforce related areas of assurance. The report gave assurances to the committee that there was provision and monitoring in place to achieve Key Performance Indicators. It provided members with an overview of the strategic direction for the Council's workforce.

The report highlighted how retention strategies were working as staff turnover had decreased. Recruitment issues had been recognised in late 2021 and the service

had introduced four streams to try and combat these struggles. It was acknowledged that there was a perception regarding local government jobs and the Council worked hard to promote the benefits of working within a Local Authority. It was highlighted that managers were not deterred to fill vacancies in departments but that they were encouraged to fill posts creatively.

There had been a decrease in appraisals being completed but members were assured that remedial action was in place to combat this. There had also been a lower response rate to the staff survey than in previous years. However, in previous years there had been an array of incentives to complete, and it was felt that it was more positive for staff to respond to the survey without pressures as it could give a more accurate picture

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

- Members raised concerns over the level of sicknesses in services and commented that these areas usually saw the highest vacancies. There was also a concern over filling vacancies. It was agreed that a report covering sickness numbers by department be brought to committee.
- Concerns were raised regarding departments needing to find efficiencies and the potential for those efficiencies to be found by not filling vacancies which had the potential to increase staff workload dramatically.
- It was acknowledged that collecting feedback from leavers was difficult as there was no obligation to provide it. However, members were assured that leavers data collected could be brought to committee.
- The Director of Workforce &OD confirmed that a temperature check of frontline staff and pressures could be obtained through the staff pulse surveys. Outcomes from the pulse surveys could be shared at a future committee.
- It was acknowledged that there was an aging workforce and efforts were being made through talent management and succession planning to accommodate this.
- It was confirmed that the WorkSmart project was being reviewed under the BEST use of resources workstream. There had been an increased trend for workers to return to County Hall since restrictions were lifted post pandemic. As long as services were being delivered there was still scope for agile working. It was confirmed that all officers had equipment which allowed agile working and that officers should be easily contactable regardless of their location.
- The WorkSmart review was still on-going but once completed the results and recommendations would be shared with the committee.
- It was not confirmed whether the Transformation post would become a permanent position, the success of the role would help determine the future of the position.
- Apprenticeships were being more tailored within the Authority to attract quality candidate. Apprenticeship posts provided a continuation into fulltime employment within the Authority with departments being encouraged to only offer apprenticeships where an employed position could be offered at the end.
- It was clarified that although the Authority did not have a positive action policy that recruitment was mindful of inclusivity. A further update could be

provided to include a breakdown of demographic in the workforce including the protected characteristics.

- Members requested details on historic vacancies within departments to identify longstanding vacancies where recruitment was difficult.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) the report be noted;
- (b) the Committee agreed to continue to receive the Workforce Update annually;
- (c) the data that was contained in the whistleblowing report and the ongoing work to promote a safe environment for staff to raise concerns through various mechanisms across the Council be noted;
- (d) the continued use of Safecall across the Council as an additional mechanism for staff to raise concerns be supported, and
- (e) the additional information requested by members as set out above, be presented to the next meeting of the Committee.

**16. WORK PROGRAMME AND MONITORING FORM**

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.

It was identified that a report regarding super-fast broadband and a further update on the outstanding issues arising from the HR Update would come to a future Committee.

Members asked that a report be presented to Committee regarding risk assessments to make the committee aware of their role to scrutinise the risk assessment.

Members also requested that a report be presented to the Committee regarding the land at Sleekburn as soon as information was available, regardless of commercial sensitivity and if required that a confidential report be shared if necessary.

**RESOLVED** that this information be noted.

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

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