

## **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, 27 November 2023 at 10.00 am.

#### **PRESENT**

Councillor D. Bawn  
(Chairman in the Chair)

#### **COUNCILLORS**

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

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

#### **OTHER COUNCILLORS**

Sanderson, G.

#### **OFFICERS**

Bradley, N.	Executive Director – Adults, Ageing and Wellbeing
Elsdon, A.	Director of Finance and Procurement (Deputy S151 Officer)
Gardner, K. Gerrard, S.	Director of Law and Corporate Governance (Monitoring Officer)
Greally, R.	Assistant Democratic Services Officer
Hunter, P.	Director of Strategy and Communications
Neilson, S.	Executive Director – Place and Regeneration
Nicholson, S. ONeill, G.	Scrutiny Co-ordinator Executive Director – Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities
Street, D.	Director of Education, SEND and Skills
Willis, J.	Executive Director – Transformation and Resources

## 17. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Christine Taylor and Richard Wearmouth.

## 18. MINUTES

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 September 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

## 19. 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).

Councillor Grimshaw sought clarification on the slippage in Ashington within the Capital Programme. It was confirmed that the slippage should not have any effect on funding or the timeline of the projects. It was agreed that an update on the Capital Programme would come to the January meeting.

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

## 20. BUDGET 2024-25 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2024-28

Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of the Council presented the report to the Committee on 27 November 2023. Jan Willis, Executive Director of Transformation and Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Alison Elsdon, Director of Finance and Procurement (Deputy S151 Officer) were also in attendance to assist with any queries from members.

It was highlighted that this was not the final version of the budget proposal as Government funding was yet to be confirmed. There was an array of pressures on the Council in the current climate that were factored into the budget proposal. The Authority was still focused on the three priorities and the Leader assured members there would be no service cuts in those areas.

The BEST programme continued to ensure the Authority was working to the best of it's ability and highlighted where efficiencies could be made. It was hoped that there would not be a need for any compulsory redundancies unless they were absolutely essential.

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

- It was confirmed that Town & Parish Councils were going to be contacted regarding enhanced local services however it had not been confirmed when this would take place.

- The report was scheduled to return to the Corporate Services & Economic Growth meeting on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2024 where all scrutiny members would be invited. The Government settlement should have been confirmed by this date meaning the figures would be more accurate.
- All members would have the opportunity to give their priorities on the budget through a questionnaire.
- It was acknowledged that the figures in the report currently were assumptions until the funding was confirmed. The funding would be received on several dates throughout December and January but there should be clarity on the funding received by the end of January.
- Work on the Capital programme was still ongoing. It was acknowledged that the Authority had a large Capital Programme. Continuous additions to the programme could lead to revenue pressures and there was a concern that the programme may not be sustainable long term and therefore conversations would be had to discuss how much can be continued. However, an assurance was made that if the figures stacked up on projects the Council would deliver it.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) the information in the report be noted, and
- (b) the Cabinet be advised of the Committee's comments when it determines the report on 12 December 2023.

**21. BUDGET CONSULTATION 2024-25 DRAFT ENGAGEMENT DOCUMENT**

Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of the Council presented the report to the Committee on 27 November 2023. Phil Hunter, Director of Strategy and Communications was also in attendance to assist with any queries from members.

The document circulated with the agenda was a draft of an engagement document that would be available for those who wish to engage with the budget on a deeper level. The document would sit alongside a shorter questionnaire. The Authority would encourage participation with the consultation through different avenues including social media.

There would also be consultations on the budget through Local Area Committee meetings in January 2024, all scrutiny member meeting and a live Q&A session with the Leader and residents online. Members had attended to policy conferences on the budget in July and September 2023. It was also highlighted that the Authority would meet with a number of representative groups including the FSB and chambers of commerce to consult with businesses.

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

- An assurance was given that the questions in the questionnaire could cover if residents felt they were getting value for money.
- There were concerns that small businesses not affiliated with an association could be missed from the consultation. The Leader highlighted that a new

service had been introduced in the Council to enhance their provisions to small businesses.

- There would be slight modification to the questions from previous surveys.
- It was acknowledged that paper copies of the surveys could be put in community hubs and libraries for the residents that aren't computer literate.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) the information in the report be noted, and
- (b) the Cabinet be advised of the Committee's comments when it determines the report on 12 December 2023.

**22. BEST Update**

Councillor Sanderson, The Leader of the Council, introduced the report to the committee. Jan Willis, Executive Director – Transformation & Regeneration, and Kelly Gardner, Director of Strategic Change, were in attendance to assist with any queries from members. The BEST programme was a detailed look at how services were running and was put in place to ensure services were efficient and giving residents value for money.

Deloitte had been confirmed as the partner for the BEST programme. The next steps were to agree what areas were to be focused on and to revalidate the strategic business plan. The benefits of the programme would be felt throughout the Authority and benefit residents. Progress had been made since the Caller review and challenge board.

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

- It was confirmed that a deep dive into procurement could be brought to committee to look at the pricing of Council's tenders for work such as members local schemes.
- It was acknowledged that it was the second year of funding for the programme. The funding was drawn down as and when it was needed.
- An assurance was given that retraining and upskilling of staff in services was part of the BEST programme.
- The savings outlined in the report were recurrent savings but projected saving would not be achieved in one go. It was an annual saving and the budget would outline what the BEST saving would be. The team were currently working with Deloitte to identify what was needed to the higher end of the projected savings and to accelerate those savings.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) the information be noted, and
- (b) a forward plan of deep dives into specific workstream to be brought to overview and scrutiny

**23. 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.

Members reiterated that a report be presented to the Committee regarding the land at Sleekburn at the next meeting, if this needed to be a confidential report due to commercial sensitivity then so be it.

The Budget report would be brought to the January meeting with an invite to all scrutiny members.

**RESOLVED** that this information be noted.

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

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