

**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, 29 January 2024 at 10.00 am.

**PRESENT**

Councillor E. Dunn  
(Vice Chair in the Chair)

**COUNCILLORS**

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

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

**OTHER COUNCILLORS**

Ball, C.  
Cessford, T.  
Dodd, R.  
Gallacher, B.  
Hardy, C.  
Lang, J.

Nisbet, K.  
Pattison, W.  
Richardson, M.  
Riddle, J.  
Reid, J.  
Sanderson, G.

**OFFICERS**

Bradley, N.

Executive Director – Adults, Ageing  
and Wellbeing

Elsdon, A.

Director of Finance and  
Procurement (Deputy S151 Officer)

Gerrard, S.

Director of Law and Corporate  
Governance (Monitoring Officer)  
Assistant Democratic Services  
Officer

Greally, R.

Kingham, A.

Executive Director – Children,  
Young People and Education

Neilson, S.

Executive Director – Place and  
Regeneration

Nicholson, S.

Scrutiny Co-ordinator

ONeill, G.

Executive Director – Public Health,  
Inequalities and Stronger  
Communities

Willis, J.

Executive Director –  
Transformation and Resources

## 24. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors David Bawn, Daniel Carr, Suzanne Fairless-Aitken, Isabella Hunter, Veronica Jones, Ken Parry, Guy Renner-Thompson, Angie Scott, Mark Swinburn, Trevor Thorne, Alex Wallace, Anna Watson and Jeff Watson.

## 25. MINUTES

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 27 November 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

## 26. 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.

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

The Leader of the Council, Glen Sanderson, introduced the report to committee. It was emphasised that the budget was still in the consultation phase and would not be completed until feedback was received from all stakeholders. There had been two policy conferences with members to discuss the budget as well as meetings with group leaders and presenting to Local Area Committee meetings.

The Leader felt that the budget addressed the three priorities of the Council; achieving value for money, tackling inequalities and driving economic growth. Investment would continue in the County. There were investments planned in the County including Town deals as well as borderland deals. The Northumberland Line due to start operating in the near future and was hailed as a great investment in the County.

There were pressures that affected the setting of the budget such as inflation however the Leader was proud of the budget. It protected frontline services provided by the Council and it was hoped that no compulsory redundancies would be needed.

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

- The Adult Social Care precept was still up for discussion. The additional costs for Adult Social Care far exceeded any funding and precept. It was important to maintain a strong tax base as there could be cumulative impacts.
- Members were assured that the general fund balance had not be touched and there was no proposal to do so. Reserves had been built up to match the fund and money would be utilised prudently in the current climate. The reserves were finite and would need rebuilt but now was not the time. It was agreed that a report would come to committee regarding reserves.
- The Capital programme was undergoing a review on how it was managed and delivered. It was hoped that the programme would move to a 10 year programme to align with the length of projects. The delivery and slippage of projects would also be reviewed. It was confirmed a report would be brought to committee regarding the review. Members raised concerns over the Great Northumberland Forest programme which was receiving external funding but had no political oversight – it was suggested that County should be kept informed.
- The Authority were required to have a medium-term financial plan the plan was a firm proposal and gave a strong indication of the budget moving forward. It was confirmed that a report to Cabinet outlined the assumption that Council Tax would be increased by 2.99% and a 2% increase for the Adult Social Care precept. A report was due to go to Cabinet on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024 which would outline and bring together all the assumptions that were yet to be finalised.
- There was no indication that the Household Support fund was continuing and the budget had been set on the basis it was not.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

## 28. WORKFORCE UPDATE

Sarah Farrell, Director of Workforce and Organisational Development, introduced the report to the committee. The report gave an insight into staff absence and sickness across the workforce. The analysis of the data showed that the majority of short-term sickness was due to respiratory illness whereas long term sickness was mainly due to mental health. It was confirmed from the data that the mental health affecting staff was mainly due to external factors rather than work related stress.

The Authority were now looking to implement several improvements including looking at bolstering the mental health offer to staff. The questions asked in staff surveys were expected to be refined to ensure further insight into incidences and causes of stress. The service was also looking into the Occupational Health offer available.

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

- Members thanked the Director of Workforce and Organisational Development for the in-depth report and asked that a similar report be brought to committee annually.
- It was confirmed that it was difficult to measure staff sickness where it might be masked by home working rather than taking a day's sick leave. Good

management of homeworking and effective communication was key to detecting issues with potential under-reporting. It was suggested that further data should be captured if possible.

- There had been a cultural shift since the pandemic where people were employees were initially happy to work from home. Over time, employees might begin to experience of isolation and loneliness. The Work Smart review had recently been completed and there were recommendations made to clarify expectations around striking a balance between home and office based working that would suit both the needs of the individual and of the council. It would be possible to support a higher degree of office-based working if it could be beneficial to an individual's mental health and bring them closer to the support that they need. It was confirmed that the option of "other" would be removed from the sickness recording system to encourage managers to record absence accurately and therefore provide valuable data.
- The Authority were building their own bank staff to build up resilience if and when needed rather than using external agency at additional cost.
- Where significant absences within a service were identified focus groups would be facilitated through HR, with external facilitation if needed, to investigate the source of the absence and appropriate support and interventions.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

## **29. 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 were advised that an additional meeting was scheduled for Monday 26<sup>th</sup> February 2024. The Chair had agreed that members of the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny committee would be invited to the meeting.

Members asked that a presentation be brought to committee about risk management as it is part of the committee's remit. Officers advised members that a report covering risk management was going to Audit Committee and they were conscious that they did not want to duplicate reports.

**RESOLVED** that this information be noted.

## **30. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item on the Agenda as it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Act, and

- (b) the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure for the following reasons:-

<b>Agenda Item</b>	<b>Paragraph of Part I of Schedule 12A</b>
10	3 - Contains information relating to business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).
AND	The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because disclosure could adversely affect the business reputation or confidence in the person/organisation, and could adversely affect commercial revenue

### **31. CAMBOIS DEVELOPMENT**

Simon Neilson, Director of Place and Regeneration, gave a short update to the committee. The Authority were in regular contact with the Government to discuss options for the site, however there has been no firm proposals agreed at this stage.

Members were reassured by the update and felt it was positive that the land was not being sold off prematurely. It was felt that investment was wanted on the land but that it had to be the appropriate investment.

**RESOLVED** that

- (a) the update be noted, and
- (b) the Committee will receive further updates as is necessary

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

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