

**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 February 2024 at 10.00 am.

**PRESENT**

Councillor D Bawn  
(Chair in the Chair)

**COUNCILLORS**

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

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

**OTHER COUNCILLORS**

Dale, PAM.

Morpeth, N.

**OFFICERS**

Pringle, S.  
Teasdale, K.  
  
Thompson, C.  
Willis, J.

Team Leader ICT Practitioner  
Recovery and Accounts Receivable  
Manager  
Director of Digital and IT  
Executive Director – Transformation  
and Resources

**24. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillor E. Dunn and C. Taylor

**25. MINUTES**

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 29 January 2024, 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. BROADBAND UPDATE

Chris Thompson, Head of Digital and IT, presented the report to committee. Sylvia Pringle, Team Leader ICT Practitioner, was in attendance to assist in presenting to committee and answer any questions from members. The telephony project was making good progress and was on track for digital migration for all by 2025. It was confirmed that communications had gone out to residents including leaflets included in Council Tax letters.

Access to ultrafast broadband had increased by over 200% in the last 2 years in Northumberland, compared to 19.8% nationally. Project Gigabit was a national programme which aimed to provide gigabit broadband to hard to reach areas. In Northumberland there were two types of procurements covering the County which were Type A and Type B. Type A was underway and was set to connect over 3750 premises in North Northumberland. Unfortunately, Type B procurement had stalled which was frustrating as the supplier initially awarded the contract was unable to sign the contract that it had bid for. Buidling Digital UK (BDUK) was already working with other suppliers to identify alternatives and it was hoped plans would be finalised in the near future.

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

- Officers acknowledged that there was consistent feedback regarding the digital telephony and the resilience of it during adverse situations such as storms. Members were assured that officers were working with civil contingency officers to look at alternatives but that they were aware of the concerns raised.
- It was hoped that the contracts would be secured quickly as the vouchers were only valid until March 2025. It was suggested that members could raise concerns over the timescale of the vouchers with members of parliament to highlight the issue. The Chairs of Corporate Services & Economic Growth and Communities and Place committees agreed to write to BDUK along with MP's in affected constituencies.
- The objective of the project was that residents would be connected to internet in some way, however it was important to highlight that not everyone will receive full fibre and it was necessary to manage residents' expectations.
- Members were encouraged to support the scheme and get residents on board as suppliers engaging in the scheme needed to be aware of where there was demand within the County.

**RESOLVED** that Members note the broadband improvement to date and prospects for the future.

## 28. DEBT RECOVERY UPDATE

Keith Teasdale, Recovery and Accounts Receivable Manager, presented the report to committee. The management of income was a key business area for Northumberland County Council. The Council collected income from many sources; some of this activity was governed by legislation while other areas by sound principles of financial management. The key to economic, efficient and effective income management was the creation and maintenance of a clear framework that sets out the approach, principles, ownership and strategy within which all activities would be conducted.

It was essential that income is collected effectively by the Council, and that debt owed to the Council was kept to a minimum. This was because the Council had both a legal duty and a responsibility to its citizens to ensure that income due was paid promptly to ensure it can minimise the burden of unpaid debt and enhance service delivery.

The management of all monies owed to the Council was detailed in the Corporate Debt Recovery Policy and includes the following:

- Council Tax and NNDR Recovery Policy
- Council Tax and NNDR Court Costs and Fees Policy
- Housing and Council Tax Benefit/Support Overpayments Policy
- Methods of Payment Policy
- Write Off Policy
- Sundry Debt Policy
- Overpaid Salaries and Wages Policy
- Bankruptcy Policy
- Enforcement Agent Code of Practice for Council Tax and NNDR
- Housing Income Management Policy

The report usually showed the position as at 30 September of each financial year but had been updated to show more up to date data as at 30 December where that data was available.

The following comments were in response to members questions:-

- It was confirmed that an update would be provided to committee to illustrate the impact of universal credit and increasing housing rates on debt recovery.
- Members would receive confirmation regarding the definition of Corporate Resource Finance within the report.
- Members were informed that Council Tax recovery was driven by legislation regarding reminders. Any recovery costs to residents would be granted by the Magistrates Court when a liability order was made. The small business rates relief was going through an evaluation which would result in some small businesses having to pay rates.
- Business rates reports were submitted to the Valuation Office Agency (VOA), an executive agency of HM Revenue & Customs, with regard to alterations to existing properties or newly built properties and the Council would have to wait until the VOA confirmed the rateable value of those properties to be able to issue bills to the relevant ratepayers.

- It was confirmed that internal postings were done later in the year due to the process carried out by the Authority.

**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.

It was confirmed that the Housing Regeneration Report would be considered at the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 9<sup>th</sup> April 2024.

Members were assured that a report regarding apprenticeships would be included as part of the BEST update.

**RESOLVED** that this information be noted.

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

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