

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH OSC

At the meeting of the **Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC** held at Meeting Space - Block 2, Floor 2 - County Hall on Monday, 12 July 2021 at 10:00am.

PRESENT

D Bawn (Chair) (in the Chair)

MEMBERS

J Beynon
P Jackson
N Oliver
A Wallace

L Dunn
M Murphy
M Robinson

OTHER COUNCILLORS

G Sanderson

OFFICERS

| | |
|-------------|--|
| K Angus | Executive Director of HR/OD and Deputy Chief Executive |
| G Barnes | Revenues, Benefits and Customer Service Manager |
| D Lally | Chief Executive |
| L Little | Senior Democratic Services Officer |
| R Little | Assistant Democratic Services Officer |
| S Nicholson | Scrutiny Co-ordinator |
| R O'Farrell | Executive Director - Corporate services – Planning & Economy |
| J Rose | Head of Economy and Regeneration |

1 MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The membership and Terms of Reference agreed by Council on 26 May 2021 was circulated for information.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Taylor and Wearmouth

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3 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 8 March 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

4 **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

Councillor Oliver advised of an interest in item 8 on the agenda and would leave the room when this was being discussed.

5 **FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS**

RESOLVED that the latest Forward Plan of key decisions be noted

6 **BORDERLANDS**

The Cabinet report outlined the implications of the Borderlands Place Programme for those towns prioritised in the Business case approved by the Government to prepare a Place Plan to identify economic projects eligible for investment from the Borderlands Growth Deal. Councillor Sanderson, Leader stated that this was a wonderful programme to be part of and recognised the work of J Rose and her team.

J. Rose – Head of Economy and Regeneration, introduced the report and provided a presentation, a copy of which would be attached to the signed minutes and uploaded to the website.

Following questions from Members; it was established that:

- Officers would work with communities to decide which projects to take forward in individual towns. Support from officers provided initially would also encourage towns to bids for additional funding with the expectation that the communities would become self-sufficient and take projects forward.
- Place planning would look at all proposed projects in a town with the economic projects going forward through Borderlands and other ways of funding explored for other projects.
- Briefings would start with Ward and Town and Parish Councils once it has been agreed by Cabinet and then rolled out to Communities. T. Kirsop would be the lead officer with sessions to start over the summer and roll out in Autumn.
- It was expected that benefits would ripple out to outlying areas of towns.
- The team had been sufficiently strengthened and were confident that they had the resources to deliver, however if there were any issues then this could be brought back to Cabinet.
- There was a need to bring culture and housing back into town centres to increase footfall and make town centres attractive for people to walk around and change the dynamics. Opening up the evening economy in town centres was also important.

Members welcomed the investment in the town centres that the Borderlands Deal

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would bring and congratulated those involved during the negotiations over the last 3 to 4 years.

RESOLVED that Cabinet be advised that this Committee support the recommendations as outlined in the report.

7 **WORKFORCE REPORT**

K. Angus - Executive Director of HR and OD and Deputy Chief Executive, introduced the report paying tribute to the staff of the Council for their resilience and the emergency response provided for Covid as well as continuing with all business as usual activities. The year had been very different, and staff had adapted fantastically to undertaking different ways of working and a wide number of health and wellbeing activities had been developed to assist and support staff during this period.

The report provided:

- An annual position statement in relation to strategic workforce related areas of assurance, workstreams/associated action plans and progress to date within key areas for Northumberland County Council for the full financial year of 2020/21
- Assurance to the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee that there was provision and monitoring in place to achieve necessary Key Performance Indicators relating to the workforce on an ongoing basis.
- Elected members with an overview of the strategic direction for the Council's workforce related matters as part of the Covid-19 recovery plans for the county as these continued to evolve.
- Members with an overview of the monitoring and actions taken during the period from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021 in accordance with the Council's Whistleblowing Policy for employees. Members were asked to note that other aspects of Whistleblowing which were not employee related were logged and maintained by the Council's Monitoring Officer.

Following questions from Members it was established that:

- The newly introduced Temporary Staff bank was growing and was also assisting in the recruitment of permanent staff.
- The Council had excellent relationships with trade unions who were very much involved in working in partnership with the Council. There was a trade union representative on the Workforce Committee and regular informal trade union meetings took place with the additional involvement of trade union colleagues in the Council's policy sub-group. There was also the Joint Consultative Committee which had just met the previous week. There were many mechanisms to allow contributions from trade union colleagues which were valued.
- The whistleblowing service Safecall and the whistleblowing policy, in line with legislation was for employees, who are workers. Safecall was a subscription service to which the Council paid fees to cover staff only.

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- Members of the public and Elected Members could still use Safecall as named or anonymous callers, but any issues received would be overseen by the Monitoring Officer.
- There were currently three Deputy Monitoring Officers who were in place and would be able to address any necessary issues for elected members.
- The Whistleblowing Policy was currently under review to ensure that it was explicit in relation to members of the public and elected members that they need to refer those matters of complaint to the Monitoring Officer. K. Angus could arrange for the policy to be recirculated to the committee if required.
- Mrs Angus clarified that if a member of staff wished to make a complaint against an elected member their line manager would aim to resolve this informally, if the matter was not resolved it would need to go through the formal process as a code of conduct complaint which the Council already had an established process in place.
- The procedure for making complaints was outlined in the Constitution, however information could be provided to members and discussed through the Member Services Working Group to ensure that elected members were clear on the procedure.
- Exit interview statistics would be included in future workforce reports.
- The Council were working hard to reduce the reliance on agency staff with Heads of Service looking at alternatives to their long-term use.
- There were significant concerns regarding the increasing number of employees who had tested positive for Covid in the previous week and this would be closely managed. Staff are being provided with ongoing support in line with the Council's health and wellbeing policy for those staff suffering the effects of Long Covid.

In relation to concerns regarding the turnover of S151 Officers, discussions had taken place with the Leader to ensure that a stable Executive Team was in place.

Councillor Dunn proposed an extra recommendation that the Members Working Group reviewed the Whistleblowing policy in regards to Elected Members and then this be returned to this committee, this was seconded by Councillor Jackson.

RESOLVED that:

- (i) The Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee noted the contents of this report.
- (ii) Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee continue to receive an annual update of this report for every financial year.
- (iii) 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 was noted; and
- (iv) The Members Working Group review the Whistleblowing policy in regards to Elected Members and a report be brought back to this Committee.

Councillor Oliver left the room at this point.

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8 DEBT RECOVERY

G. Barnes - Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services Manager introduced the report which provided the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee with information relating to the level of outstanding debt owed to the Council so that the Committee might satisfy itself as to the efficiency and effectiveness of its collection and recovery policies and systems. The Write-Offs report was circulated for information only.

It was noted there was a typographical error on paragraph 52 of the Debt Recovery report. It should read “therefore those on Universal Credit are performing worse than those that aren’t”

From members questions it was established that:

- G. Barnes would circulate to the members of the committee the write-off policy which was included in the corporate debt recovery policy.
- Write-offs were reported annually to Cabinet and the arrangements for this were contained within the Council’s finance and contract rules.
- There was a council tax support scheme for people who were on low income which lowered their tax liability depending on circumstances. That scheme could support up to 92% of council tax liability and with the Government’s Covid Hardship payment of £150 removed this liability for a number of customers

RESOLVED that this information was noted.

Councillor Oliver returned to the room at this point.

9 WORK PROGRAMME

The committee was asked to review and note the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and Monitoring Report for the 2021/22 council year.

RESOLVED that this information was noted.

10 URGENT BUSINESS

Councillor Hunter had requested that the Committee be advised of the statutory consultation on the new timetable for the East Coast mainline between Edinburgh and London which was to be introduced.

R O’Farrell, Executive Director advised that a briefing note had been circulated to Members earlier in the day. There had been four separate consultations packaged together and these would cause significant impact on the County with a loss of 24 services per day. The North East region as a whole would be adversely affected by these proposals and the only gain was one extra train an hour to Newcastle and a reduction of 5 minutes on the journey. The Council supported the suspension of these introductions and that a task force established to look at

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capacity. The Leader of the Council had written to the Department of Transport and had also asked that the four MPs from the area object to the proposals. The response from these was not yet known.

Members expressed their dismay at these proposals and requested that a representative of the body proposing these cuts be invited to attend this Committee to explain the reasoning behind these proposals.

RESOLVED:

1. The Committee supported Councillor Sanderson effort's in relation to the proposals; and
2. A representative of the body proposing the cuts be invited to attend this Committee to explain the reasoning behind the proposals.

11 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED

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

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

| Agenda Item | Paragraph of Part I of Schedule 12A |
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- 12 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 it contains confidential information which is subject to commercial Non-Disclosure Agreements and because disclosure could adversely affect the business reputation or confidence in the person/organisation and could adversely affect commercial revenue.

- 13 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 it contains confidential information disclosure of which could adversely affect the business reputation or confidence in the person/organisation and could adversely affect commercial revenue.

12 **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the confidential minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC held on 8 March 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman

13 **REPORT OF RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET**

RESOLVED that the confidential report circulated to members was noted.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....