

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 Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF on Monday, 11 October 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillor D Bawn
(Chairman in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Beynon, J.
Dunn, E.
Murphy, M.
Oliver, N.

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

OFFICERS

Angus C
Barnes G

Lally D
Greally R

O'Farrell, R
Rose J
Strettle R

Willis J

Scrutiny Officer
Revenues, Benefits and Customer
Service Manager
Chief Executive
Assistant Democratic Services
Officer
Executive Director
Service Director
Economic Growth and
Regeneration Manager
Executive Director of Finance
(Section 151 Officer)

ALSO PRESENT

Ploszaj, W.
Wearmouth, R.

Portfolio Holder for Business
Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder
for Corporate Services

16. APOLOGIES FOR ABSCENCE

Apologies were received from D. Carr

17. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meetings of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 09 August 2021 and 6th September 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

18. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Forward Plan of forthcoming Key Cabinet decisions was reported to the Committee. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix A).

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions be noted

19. COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

Councillor Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, outlined the Council Tax Support Scheme to the members. He explained that it had been set out now as it was needed for budget setting. The scheme was very generous and only second to another Authority in the country.

Graeme Barnes, Revenues, Benefits and Customer Service Manager, gave an overview of the report. It outlined the support scheme set out for 2021/22. It was outlined that the scheme would give 100% support for pensioners who are eligible for Council Tax support as prescribed by government. Working age support was at the discretion of the Council and it was decided that the maximum support given to those eligible in the working age group would be 92%. This was a continuation of the previous scheme which had been a success.

Comments in response to questions raised were as follows:-

- There was concerns that other support for those who needed it had been stopped yet the Council Tax support scheme had not been changed to reflect this, as it would most likely be the same people who were affected by the changes in support who would require support from the Council Tax support scheme.
- Discussions were held on how COVID had impacted residents over the last year and the different methods of support that had been available to them. Members were reminded that a hardship fund exists on a case by case basis with a focus on families with children.
- Members mentioned that there was an initiative launched regarding health & well-being and schemes such as this should be in place to give as much support to those who need it as possible.

- Following a question about awareness of assistance, the Committee were informed that support schemes are communicated with every bill and all enforcement notices. The Council also works closely with Citizen's advice Northumberland to make sure residents are aware of all methods of support.
- If the support scheme was to be set at 100% permanently for the working age group, the scheme would have to go back to consultation. It was suggested that it would be beneficial to see how successful the use of the support funds was to assist with the support scheme.
- Although funding due to the pandemic had been stopped there was a new household support fund introduced which would provide the Council with £2.4 million.
- The Committee discussed additional support that could be offered to help residents with liability above the 92%. It was proposed that the household support fund be used to provide some assistance above 92%.

RESOLVED to advise Cabinet they would like to see a commitment to utilise the household support fund to offer relief above 92%

20. ESTABLISHING A PILOT CULTURE AND CREATIVE ZONE IN NORTHUMBERLAND

Councillor Ploszaj introduced the report to committee and thanked the North of Tyne for the £500,000 fund for the pilot scheme.

Janice Rose, Service Director, gave an overview of the pilot scheme. The rationale for selecting the creative zone was there should be culture already established. Out of the areas shortlisted Berwick was selected as it had potential for growth. The initial fund of £500,000 was for the first year but there was further funding expected over the next 5 years.

The following comments were made in response to discussions:-

- Members enquired as to whether the changes in audience expectations were allowing the Council to be more innovative and they explored the industries covered by the term culture, creative and arts.
- Arts and culture were important in the community and the pilot scheme was welcomed and it was hoped the scheme would be rolled out to other areas.
- It was explained that it was important the pilot was a success and showcased the culture and creative zone and then innovation can be used to expand the scheme. Innovations such as using non-traditional venues to showcase live music etc were welcomed as valid ideas.
- Once the pilot had been a success it was expected that the scheme could be rolled out to other areas within Northumberland.
- Cultural assets were set to grow throughout the sector. Berwick was in close proximity to Edinburgh, Newcastle and London and had great potential to bring in tourism into the County.

- The Committee welcomed the intentions of the North of Tyne Combined Authority and could see how many towns in Northumberland could benefit from these plans.

RESOLVED the committee supported the recommendation contained in the report.

20. WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received an update on its Work Programme for the 2021/22 council year.

RESOLVED that this information was noted.

22. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED 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 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
- 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
9	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

23. CONFIDENTIAL MINUTES

RESOLVED that the confidential minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC held on 9 August 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman

24. ENERGISING BLYTH PROGRAMME

Councillor Ploszaj, Portfolio holder for Business, introduced the report. Rob Strettle, Economic Growth and Regeneration Manager, gave an overview of the report.

The Committee welcomed the detailed report and received assurance that the projects would be funded via a mix of grant funding and income generation.

The members expressed their enthusiasm for the project and welcomed the expansion into the Town Centre. It was felt that there was a demand for training in this area and it was good to see that this demand was to be met.

RESOLVED the committee supported the recommendation contained in the report.

25. NEWCASTLE AIRPORT – SHAREHOLDER LOAN GUARANTEE

Councillor Wearmouth, introduced the report and explained the need for support as the travel sector had been hit hard by the pandemic. Jan Willis, Executive Director of Finance was also in attendance to assist with any queries from members.

Members enquired as to why the Airport was seeking a loan rather than using its reserve funding. The Committee were informed that the Airport's liquidity levels had implications for its current debt liabilities and that the loan would reduce the risk to the Council if the Airport defaults on its current commitments.

It was explained that the report was not looking into whether the Council should be a shareholder but whether the Council should contribute to the loan. Members were reassured that the business model had been assessed by external consultants and there was sufficient confidence that currently there was no risk to the Council if they agreed to the reports recommendations.

It was important to note the Airport is sustained business that had brought employment and investment opportunities. Members agreed that the Council had seen significant dividends from the Airport.

Members were reassured that the Airports other lenders were unified in this approach and a review of the loan would be carried out in the Summer of 2022.

RESOLVED the committee supported the recommendation contained in the report.

Chairman _____

Date _____