

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 Meeting Space, Block 1, Floor 2, County Hall, Morpeth, NE61 2EF on Monday, 7 February 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillor D Bawn
(Chairman in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Beynon, J.
Dunn, L.
Ezhilchelvan, P.
Murphy, M.

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

OFFICERS

Elsdon, A.
Lally, D.
Greally, R.

Hunter, P.
McEvoy Carr, C.

McNaughton, S.

Nicholson, S.
O'Farrell, R.
Willis, J.

Service Director - Finance
Chief Executive
Assistant Democratic Services
Officer
Service Director
Deputy Chief Executive and
Executive Director for Adult Social
Care and Children's Services
Head of Economy and
Regeneration
Scrutiny Co-ordinator
Executive Director
Executive Director of Finance
(Section 151 Officer)

ALSO PRESENT

Ball, C
Bowman, L.
Dodd, R.
Hardy, C.
Ploszaj, W.
Reid, J.
Riddle, J.
Sanderson, G.
Wearmouth, R.

Portfolio Holder for Business

Portfolio Holder for Local Services
Leader of the Council
Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder
for Corporate Services

17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors C. Humphrey, P. Jackson, W. Pattison J. Watson, A. Wallace and A. Watson

18. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 December 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

20. 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

21. BUDGET 2022-23 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2022-26

Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of the Council, Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Jan Willis, Executive Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) presented the report to the committee.

The following comments were made in response to member's questions:

- It was confirmed to members that the addendum that was circulated wasn't broken down separately due to the Seaton Valley schools consultation which has only recently concluded.
- Members were assured that efficiencies made in Adult Social Care over the years had been scrutinised and appropriately reviewed. . Efficiencies made were not at the detriment to the service and care provided.
- Within Children Services efficiencies were also attained through careful review. It was highlighted that Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements were more costly than Local Authority placements, the service had managed to reduce the number of IFA placement significantly. The service would look to use internal resources first.
- Kyloe House was the secure unit. It was noted that there was a high demand nationally for secure beds. It was agreed that the price increase was appropriate and in line with the national pricing structure.
- Members noted that Children's Services were investing in early help and prevention with families to prevent statutory intervention to assist families in need.
- The management structure review was still taking place. The review of the top tier had been provisionally agreed but not yet formally approved. The

review would now be moving down the structure. It was noted that the £1 million savings was a target but members were assured that it was a robust estimate.

- Members expressed concerns regarding recommendation 38 which proposed to increase Housing rent. It was noted that the Government had previously put a freeze on Housing rent, and it was felt that the increase was necessary as a catch up. Due to the increase in living costs it was suggested that this recommendation needed further discussion with a possible deferral to next year. Glen Sanderson, the Leader of the Council agreed to discuss the recommendation further.
- Members were made aware that the Route 3 option for the Blyth Relief Road was no longer viable. A new bid had been organised and the outline business case had gone to Department of Transport. It was hoped that there would be a report brought to Cabinet soon.
- The New Homes Bonus came from Central Government. There was no expectation for further New Homes Bonus and it was assumed only for one year. The bonus was used to cover any shortfall between Council Tax and services provided. The issue was to be looked at the Fair Funding Review.
- Members noted there were 12 new infrastructure plans for cycling and walking. It was confirmed that Choppington was not one of the new areas.
- It was clarified to members that the caseload for the Revenues and Benefits team had reduced since the introduction of Universal Credit and therefore the Service was able to remove vacant posts. It was confirmed that there were no vacant posts in the Leisure services explicitly but the HR & OD directorate had made efficiencies in Services where possible.
- Members noted that Business rates collected went into a National pot and were redistributed through a complex system. A review of the system was expected. It was also confirmed that the Business Rate Baseline reset was National and guidance had not yet been received.
- Members noted that British Volt was not in the LEP Enterprise zone and it was expected that there would be additional income and benefits.
- Members were aware that fixing landslips was reactive. It was noted that the road outlined in the report was a difficult and technical problem to solve. It was hoped that the work set to be carried out would solve the issue once and for all.
- It was explained to members that it was normal practise for any changes to be delegated to the Section 151 Officer in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services. It was a pragmatic arrangement for minor adjustments as the final Local Government Settlement was usually received at a later stage into the budget papers. If there were significant changes needed the report would have had to go through the normal decision-making avenues.

RESOLVED the Committee agreed to note the recommendations subject to further consideration of the proposal to increase Housing rents.

22. REVENUES AND BENEFITS POLICIES FOR 2022/23

Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of the Council, Jan Willis, Executive Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) and Graeme Barnes, Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services Manager presented the report to the Committee.

The following comments were made in response to member's questions:

- Members thanked Graeme and his team for their hard work and first-class report.
- Members welcomed the Council Tax discount policy that would provide a £200 hardship payment to working age people in need. The grant came from the Covid-19 support fund and it was not expected to continue for future years.
- Members noted that the Council Tax Energy Rebate would not go onto the Council Tax bill. The rebate was a payment that the Council would make to residents on the Council Tax list. It would be paid by either direct debit or cheque. It was acknowledged that this was to be an administratively heavy task and the Service was waiting for guidance from the Government.
- Members were advised that figures could be provided regarding the empty homes premium to show the collection rates on empty properties. Members were assured that all properties went through the appropriate channels in order to collect the necessary bills through statutory recovery and enforcement processes.

RESOLVED the Committee agreed to note the recommendations

23. BUDGET CONSULTATION REPORT

Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of the Council, Jan Willis, Executive Director of Finance (Section 151 Officer) and Phil Hunter, Senior Service Director presented the report to the Committee.

The following comments were made in response to member's questions:

- Members would be provided with demographical information collected from the consultation which would show the diversity of respondents.
- Members noted that way the consultation questions were asked will be looked at to try and receive a clearer picture of the public's view.
- Members noted that there was a statutory requirement to hold a consultation for Business rate users. However it was deemed good practice to have had a public consultation.
- Members noted that the consultation took place throughout December and January due to the Local Government Settlement. It was hoped that as the consultation ran slightly before and after Christmas and New Year it gave those the opportunity to respond. The consultation could be slightly extended in the future.
- Members were assured that all questions posed on online platforms would be responded to.

- Members would be provided with further details regarding the feedback from the consultation and what action would be taken.
- Members noted that the aim was to keep the consultation as straightforward as possible. It was also beneficial to keep similar questions year on year so a comparison can be made.
- It was suggested that a draft consultation be brought to scrutiny in advance of the consultation.
- Members noted the report from the consultation was shared with Executive Directors, Scrutiny, Cabinet and Council. The report was used as part of the decision making for the budget at Cabinet and Council level.
- Members noted that Community Services were the services covered by Councillor Horncastle's portfolio such as regulatory and community safety. Members will be given the detailed list of the services.
- Members were advised that any suggestions around the questions for the consultation could be used as part of a work stream looking at the next years consultation. The work stream would work together to ensure the consultation was a meaningful exercise. It was suggested that looking at how other Local Authorities carry out their consultation could be beneficial.

RESOLVED the committee agreed to note to recommendations.

24. WORK PROGRAMME

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

Members noted that British Volt had confirmed they would attend the meeting in April.

RESOLVED that this information was noted.

25. 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

11 7 - Contains information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding the information).

AND The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because disclosure at this stage may prejudice the ongoing Transport and Works Act Order process.

25. NORTHUMBERLAND LINE

Wojciech Ploszaj, Cabinet Member for Business, Rick O'Farrell, Interim Executive Director Regeneration and Stuart McNaughton, Head of Economy and Regeneration presented this report to the Committee.

The Committee thanked the Officers and welcomed the report.

RESOVLED the Committee agreed to support the recommendation.

Chairman

Date