

## **PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

16 January 2014

**PRESENT** – Councillor Long (in the Chair); Councillors Carson, Cossins and Harman. (4)

**APOLOGIES** - Councillors Baldwin, L. Hughes, Lawton, E.A. Richmond and Wright. (5)

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE** – Councillor Curry. (1)

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE** – Richard Alty, Director of Place, Ian Thompson, Assistant Director – Community Services, Elizabeth Davison, Assistant Director, Finance and Human Resources, Steve Petch, Head of Strategy and Commissioning and Lead Officer for Place Scrutiny, Mike Crawshaw, Head of Culture and Karen Graves, Democratic Services.

**P33. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS** – There were no declarations of interested reported at the meeting.

**P34. COUNCILLOR RON LEWIS** – The Chair referred to the recent death of Councillor Lewis and asked Members to take a moments silence in his memory.

**P35. MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2014/15 – 2019/20** – Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Chief Officers Executive which had been considered by Cabinet, at its meeting held on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2013, proposing a Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2014/15 to 2019/20 for public consultation.

It was reported that, if approved, the Plan would put in place a two year sustainable plan together with proposals that would significantly contribute to bridging the budget gap in years three and beyond and would give the Council, its partners and the public, the opportunity to test out new approaches and build learning and capacity to deliver financial sustainability beyond 2016/17.

Particular reference was made to the use of reserves over the next two year to bridge the budget deficit and it was highlighted that the Council was carrying a very significant risk in terms of the need to reduce expenditure and that it was essential that cost reductions were delivered on time so that the level of reserves did not become inadequate in future years. It was reported that there were options available if the proposals were not achieved to further reduce expenditure by looking at the future provision of discretionary services which, at this point, it was still proposed to retain if the proposals were not achieved. Officers were, however, optimistic that the proposals would be achieved and there was a clear intention and vision to ensure they were. It was requested that Scrutiny Committees, as part of their work programmes, look and highlight any additional potential areas which could be identified to bridge the gap from 2016/17 and beyond and the vigorous and pro-active approach needed by this Scrutiny Committee to support the implementation.

The submitted report also made reference to the three building blocks of Building Strong Communities, Spending Wisely and Growing the Economy and it was stated that each Scrutiny Committee had a role in looking at specific areas within their individual remits. It was reported that the findings following any work would be reported back to a special meeting of Efficiency and Resources Scrutiny Committee which would co-ordinate a response to Cabinet and also to formulate an early view on the strategy and the direction of travel; the use of reserves and the risks over the next two-year period.

References were made to benchmarking which was undertaken with other authorities in the region regarding charges, the effect of the car parking strategy on car park charges within the Town Centre and use of public health budgets for leisure activities.

Clarification was sought on the information contained in Appendices 4 and 9 of the submitted report and the effect of single status claims on this Council's budget. Committee were advised that the Money Talk Events had more detailed information regarding budgets and that information was still widely available to the public.

It was stated that if the three streams of Building Strong Communities, Spending Wisely and Growing the Economy were successful there would be an effect on the budgets with community working helping to make savings and with every public pound well spent Darlington's economy would benefit.

Discussion ensued on shared services across the Tees Valley and Durham County although Scrutiny was advised that Darlington was very focussed and was as efficient as it could be.

With regard to the Cockerton Library it was reported that it was proposed that the Cockerton Library be community run with no Council subsidy. Approximately 300 libraries in the UK are community run with varying business models being applied and lessons have been learnt by other local authorities on how to progress. Several partners have expressed an interest in being involved in any new model for the library, including Age UK, Darlington for Culture, Darlington School of Mathematics and Science (DSMS) and Evolution. Although Cockerton was a small library and was exceptionally well-used some of the challenges were in relation to the building and utility costs and it was suggested that the provision of a toilet would be an investment for the Library. Committee were also advised that Community Partnerships could access funding that was not available to local authorities and that opportunity should be fully explored. Members were also advised that professional support would be provided from Crown Street Library following concerns that the Library would not survive on reduced opening hours.

In respect of Head of Steam Scrutiny were advised that after 2016 the subsidy of £260k would be withdrawn and that a sustainable solution needed to be found. It was stated that Council Officers had undertaken initial discussions with A1 Trust to develop a sustainable business model which entails partnership working, investment and opportunities on site, volunteers and diversification of use of the site possibly with the creation of a heritage/campus model.

Discussion ensued on the need to retain loans from the National Railway Museum (NRM) and Committee considered that this was an excellent opportunity to celebrate Darlington's Industrial Heritage and Railway Heritage. Scrutiny was advised that

Museum Registration was essential and that the opening hours of Head of Steam would need to be sufficient to meet the registration criteria. It was stated that at this moment in time there were no plans for the purchase of further land to expand the Head of Steam although Members were advised that there were to be small improvements to be made to the Carriage Works.

**RESOLVED** – (a) That the proposals in the Medium Term Financial Plan 2014/15 to 2019/20 in relation to this Scrutiny’s remit be noted.

(b) That this Scrutiny Committee welcomes the ethos of Building Strong Communities, Spending Wisely and Growing the Economy throughout the MTFP proposals.

(c) That this Scrutiny Committee maintains that the Head of Steam Museum is crucial to Darlington’s sense of Place in relation to culture, planning and economic regeneration.

(d) That this Committee is committed to the creation of a Heritage/Campus model and the need to make it viable for the future.

(d) That the Head of Steam Railway Museum and Cockerton Library be encompassed within the Cultural Review Group and the Terms of Reference be amended accordingly.