

ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 3 November 2022

PRESENT – Councillors Mrs H Scott (Chair), Boddy, Crudass, Harker, L Hughes, Lee and McEwan

APOLOGIES – Councillors Mrs D Jones, Mills, Paley and Wright

ABSENT –

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE –

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Mark Ladyman (Assistant Director Economic Growth), Brett Nielsen (Assistant Director Resources), Anthony Hewitt (Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects), Anthony Sandys (Assistant Director - Housing and Revenues), Brian Robson (Head of Capital Projects), Claire Gardner-Queen (Housing Manager), Andrew Perkin (Business Growth and Investment Manager), Lee Downey (Complaints and Information Governance Manager), Shirley Wright (Democratic Manager) and Michael Conway (Mayoral and Democratic Officer)

ER18 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

ER19 MINUTES

Submitted – the Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 1 September 2022.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes be approved as a correct record.

ER20 CUSTOMER SERVICES DIGITAL STRATEGY

The Head of Housing gave a presentation on the progress of the Council's Customer Services and Digital Strategy Review.

The presentation covered the vision of the Strategy which aimed to deliver excellent customer services which were easy to use, provided value for money to all the Borough's residents, and, wherever possible, provided digital access to all of the Council's services, together with the key progress to date and the focus for the next 12 months' ahead.

Discussion ensued on the need to work collaboratively with other large organisations which were also moving to digital access for services, workshops which were being developed through Learning and Skills to offer training for those who wanted to develop their skills; the need for all staff to be aware of the differing needs and abilities of residents in being digitally engaged; and the resources available through Customer Services to ensure that those residents who did not use online services, were supported either in person or via the telephone.

Members also suggested that to make it easier for those having difficulty completing on-line forms, all forms should readily and clearly include a contact number for assistance.

RESOLVED – That the progress to date on the Customer Services and Digital Review Strategy be noted and that a further update report be submitted to the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee scheduled for 2 February 2023.

ER21 COMPLAINTS MADE TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT OMBUDSMAN

The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) together with a report (also previously circulated) which was scheduled to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 6 December 2022, in relation to the outcome of cases which had been determined by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) and the Housing Ombudsman Services (HOS).

It was reported that during the period 1 April to 30 September 2022, 15 complaints had been determined by the LGSCO with none in relation to the HOS, with two of those complaints being upheld, one in relation to how the Council had dealt with an appeal for home to school transport which had resulted in the Council agreeing to review the Appeal Panel's decision and polices and the second in relation to the failure on behalf of the Council to properly consider the findings and recommendations of an independent investigation carried out under the children's statutory complaints process

Further details on all of the cases on which the LGSCO had reached a decision were set out in the submitted report.

Members particularly highlighted the complaint in relation to the home to school transport appeal and discussion ensued more generally on digital access to meetings, including Council Committee meetings.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be noted and Cabinet be advised that this Scrutiny Committee is satisfied with the outcome and organisational learning from the cases.

(b) That, as part of the Council's Digital Strategy vision, this Scrutiny Committee recommends that further work be undertaken to look at digital access to all of the local authority's meetings.

ER22 COUNCIL TAX EXEMPTION FOR CARE LEAVERS 2023-24

The Assistant Director Housing and Revenues submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting Scrutiny Committee's views on a proposal to implement a Council Tax exemption for care leavers under the age of 25 from 1st April 2023.

It was reported that, since 2018, provision had been made in the Council Tax Support Scheme to provide care leavers under the age of 25 up to 100 per cent support with their Council Tax costs, however, as this was means tested, some young care leavers received less than 100 per cent support, depending on their income and other circumstances. If the proposal, under section 1a of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, was approved by Cabinet, it would mean that all care leavers under the age of 25 would receive full Council

Tax exemption.

Reference was also made to the financial implications of the proposal, which, it was considered would be minimal, given that most care leavers under the age of 25 were already in receipt of support with their Council Tax costs under the existing scheme.

Discussion ensued on the responsibility of the Council to support young care leavers whilst they were developing their skills and confidence to live independently and the stability and assurances it would give them with their Council Tax costs.

RESOLVED – That the report be received and Cabinet be advised that this Scrutiny Committee supports the proposal.

ER23 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT - SCHEME APPROVAL 2023-24

The Assistant Director Housing and Revenues submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting this Scrutiny Committee's views on the draft Council Tax Support Scheme for 2023-24 (also previously circulated) which was due to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting scheduled to be held on 8 November 2022.

The submitted report outlined the background to the approval of the last local Council Tax Scheme which had become operational with effect from 1 April 2022 and reminded Members that the Council was required to set a Council Tax scheme each year and that, as part of that scheme, was also required to consider whether any changes should be made to the existing scheme and, where any changes were made, consider what transitional protection, if any, should apply to anyone affected by those changes.

The submitted report set out the details of the proposed Scheme for 2023-24 and it was reported that there were no significant changes proposed to the existing scheme other than the proposal considered at Minute ER22 above in relation to care leavers under the age of 25.

RESOLVED – That the report be received and Cabinet be advised that it has no further comments to make on the proposed Council Tax Scheme for 2023/24.

ER24 COUNCIL TAX ENERGY REBATE

The Assistant Director Housing and Revenues submitted a report (previously circulated) advising Members of the delivery of the Council Tax Energy Rebate Scheme in 2022, which took place between April and August 2022.

It was reported that, in February 2022, the Government announced a package of financial support to help households with rising energy bills which included a £150 non-repayable payment for households in England in Council Tax Bands A to D, known as the Council Tax Energy Rebate, and £144 million of discretionary funding for Council's to support households who were in need but not eligible for the Council Tax Energy Rebate, known as the Discretionary Fund.

It was reported that a total of 45,026 Council tax Rebate payments had been made to eligible

residents amounting to £6,753,900 and a total of 5,153 Discretionary Fund payments had been made amounting to £231,870.

The submitted report outlined the processes for the delivery of the scheme and the work which had been undertaken by staff, at short notice, to ensure that appropriate mechanisms were in place to ensure that the payments were passed onto households.

RESOLVED – That the thanks of this Scrutiny Committee be conveyed to the staff involved in ensuring the efficient and effective delivery of the scheme.

ER25 DARLINGTON BUSINESS SUMMIT 2022

The Chief Executive submitted a report (previously circulated) updating Members on the activities which took place as part of the Darlington Business Summit 2022, which was a three-day event for businesses and residents to find out what business opportunities were available in Darlington, with the aim of showcasing the information, support and opportunities for local businesses and promoting and supporting job opportunities for local residents looking for new employment or a change in career.

Details of the three-day programme were contained in the submitted report and it was reported that post evaluation feedback had identified that some applicants had progressed to job interview stage and many positive comments had been received by businesses who had participated.

Discussion ensued on the success of the event, the need to continue to monitor the job opportunities which were secured as a direct result of the Summit, together with those who were currently employed but looking for a change in career and subsequent specialist events which would focus on those sectors which were having particular difficulties in recruiting.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

ER26 ECONOMIC GROWTH STRATEGY FOR DARLINGTON - A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

The Chief Executive submitted a report (previously circulated) outlining the approach for the refresh of the Darlington Economic Strategy.

The Assistant Director reported that although there was no longer a legal requirement to produce a Local Economic Strategy, a strategy document continued to play a key role in setting out local ambitions to support marketing activities and awareness and a refreshed strategy would enable continued nurturing of the economy and ensure that Darlington could respond to current and future challenges and realise new and emerging opportunities.

The submitted report outlined the emerging economic drivers and challenges together with the aims and priorities of the Economic Growth Strategy

Reference was also made to the achievements and progress against the 2012-26 Strategy which had delivered on a number of the priority actions, identified a range of interventions for the Council and actions for partnership delivery and developed and progressed the wider local economy.

Discussion ensued on the success of the current strategy, the environmental issues which needed to be taking into account in refreshing the strategy such as climate change and the need to consult and work in partnership with local businesses to drive the strategy forward.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted and that interim progress reports on the refresh be submitted to this Scrutiny Committee every three months.

ER27 PROJECT POSITION STATEMENT AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING - QUARTER 2

The Group Director of Services submitted a report (previously circulated) together with a report (also previously circulated) scheduled to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting to be held on 8th November 2022 giving a summary of the latest capital resources and commitment position to inform monitoring of the affordability and funding of the Council's capital programme, together with an update on the current status of all construction projects which were currently being managed by the Council.

It was reported that the Council had a substantial annual construction programme of work which was delivering a wide range of improvements to the Council's assets and more critically to Council services and that there were currently 46 live projects being managed with an overall projected outturn value of £186.155 million and that the majority of the Council's projects were running to time, cost and quality expectations, however, they were being monitored in view of the current pressures on resources in the construction sector nationally.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

ER28 REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2022-23 - QUARTER 2

The Group Director of Operations submitted a report (previously circulated) together with a report (also previously circulated) which was being considered by Cabinet at its meeting scheduled to be held on 8th November 2022.

It was reported that the Council's projected reserves at the end of 2022-23 were £22.662 million, a £1.351 million decline on the initial 2022-26 MTFP position and Members were advised that this reduction in reserves, included a brought forward amount of £0.384 million from 2021/22, £0.539 million of projected departmental overspend, and a decrease in corporate reserves of £1.196 million.

The Assistant Director Resources reported that of the £22.662 million projected reserves, there was a commitment to use £22.490 million to support years two to four of the current MTFP, leaving £0.172 million of unallocated reserves.

Discussion ensued on the projected overspend in Children's Services which was mainly due to an increase in the Adoption and Placements budgets and it was reported that although processes were in place to control the overspend, it was anticipated that there would be some unexpected movement within that budget with additional cases coming forward.

Particular reference was made to the employee pay award and it was reported that

the 2022/23 pay award had assumed a pay award of three per cent, however, the pay award had been agreed at £1,925 across all pay scales, which equated to an average increase of 6.5 per cent for all employees and a budget pressure of £2.079 million. This had partly been offset by the decision to remove the increase in National Insurance which had been budgeted from April 2022.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted

ER29 WORK PROGRAMME

The Assistant Director Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to the work programme of this Scrutiny Committee for the remainder of this Municipal Year.