

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 11 January 2024

PRESENT – Councillors McGill (Chair), Cossins, Garner, Keir, Mahmud, M Nicholson and Snedker.

APOLOGIES – Councillors Coe, Mrs Culley and Walters.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors McCollom, Dr. Riley and Robinson.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson (Assistant Director Community Services), Anthony Hewitt (Assistant Director Highways and Capital Projects), Brian Graham (Head of Environmental Services), Richard Starrs (Heritage Action Zone Project Manager), Niccy Hallifax (Bicentennial Festival Director), Paul Dalton (Democratic and Elections Officer) and Olivia Hugill (Democratic Officer).

CLS21 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

CLS22 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY HELD ON 26 OCTOBER 2023

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 26 October 2023.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 26 October 2023 be approved as a correct record.

CLS23 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2024/25 - 2027/8

The Assistant Director, Resources, submitted a report (previously circulated), which invited Members to give consideration to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2024/25 to 2027/28, and forward any views, in particular those in relation to the services and finances which were specifically within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.

The submitted report stated that the MTFP had been agreed by Cabinet on 5 December 2023 as the basis for consultation, and Members were asked to discuss and consider the overall contents of the MTFP, however, with particular emphasis on those services and finances within the MTFP which specifically related to those areas within their remit, and forward any views to a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, to be held on 18 January 2023, for consideration. It was reported that the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee would then agree a formal response to Cabinet on behalf of all the Scrutiny Committees, as part of the consultation.

A briefing was delivered to Councillors on 13 December 2023 which provided an overview and highlighted key points in the plan. It was noted that since the MTFP had been published for consultation, the Council had received notification of the draft financial settlement for 2024/25.

Discussion ensued on the potential for greater working in partnership to reduce costs, with the partnership between Darlington Borough Council, Leeds City Council and the Department for Education in 2019 to develop Strengthening Families being cited. There was an acknowledgement that there were some costs over which there was no control, with the increase in Children Looked After being provided as the example. Members also explored the reasons around the reduction in income from the services provided by the crematorium, and sought clarification on the overall year-on-year savings within the MTFP.

Members requested more information in relation to the costs around the provision of the Council's statutory and non-statutory services, and explored whether there were any further savings to be achieved in terms of how the Council provided its statutory functions. A question was also asked as to what the minimum cost would be to dispense the Council's statutory services.

Members recognised that there would be further savings to be made in 2025/26, and urged Officers to start the process of identifying savings earlier, however received assurances that the process of identifying savings was an ongoing piece of work throughout the year. The associated costs of applying for additional funding was also highlighted, and balanced alongside the costs associated with any failed bids for grants or funding.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be noted, and that the Chair of this meeting, in consultation with the Lead Scrutiny Officers supporting this Scrutiny Committee, be given authority to agree the Minutes of this Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, in order to enable the Minutes to be considered at a Special Meeting of the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee, scheduled to be held on 18 January 2024.

(b) That the minority view of this Scrutiny Committee is that it could not support the MTFP in its current form until fully appraised of the Local Government Finance Settlement.

CLS24 2025 CELEBRATIONS

The Bicentennial Festival Director provided Members with a presentation on the plans in place for the 2025 celebrations, in relation to the 200th anniversary of the World's first passenger-carrying train on a public railway, the Stockton and Darlington Railway.

The presentation covered the aims of the festival ('S&DR200'), which included an eye on developing both national and international partnerships, the focus on a youth driven approach, and a celebration of community achievements. The Festival Director stated that there would be a number of workshops, programmes that would target cultural and heritage enthusiasts, families, multi-generational groups, hard to reach socio-economic groups, and that there would be an education and learning programme. It was noted that there was already interest in the Festival in Germany, France, the USA, New Zealand and Australia.

Members were informed that S&DR200 would be a nine month celebratory festival, which covered March 2025 to November 2025, however it was stated that there would also be much activity throughout 2024 leading into the festival period. The Festival would include experiences utilising museums and libraries in Darlington, Stockton and Shildon, with Teesside University taking the lead on the digital offer, and a three-day celebration in

September 2025 around the inaugural journey.

Members heard about the Heritage Conferences that would be established, and the work within the railway market to ensure that S&DR200 would be central to all communications, with work being undertaken with various national media outlets. Members were also advised on the Community Projects and Volunteering and Shadowing Programme that would be established.

RESOLVED – That the content of the presentation be noted.

CLS25 HERITAGE ACTION ZONE

The Heritage Action Zone Project Manager provided Members with a presentation on the Heritage Action Zone (HAZ), with Members advised that Heritage Action Zones were historic places that had the potential to become focal points for regeneration, areas with untapped potential, rich in industrial, rural, cultural or faith heritage, or areas that may be undervalued and underused, or under significant pressure.

Members were informed of the aims of the S&DR Heritage Action Zone 2018-2023, with progress against the agreed programme outputs developed in 2018 being reported on. The progress against the overarching HAZ programme themes of Research; Protection, Management and Conservation; Heritage At Risk; Community Engagement and Heritage Crime; and Wider Programme and Legacy Projects, was also reported on.

The Heritage Action Zone Project Manager summarised that the purpose of the HAZ was to improve the management and conservation of the heritage of the S&DR to protect its long-term future; to target economic growth through the development of a world-class visitor attraction, including the physical regeneration of key sites, infrastructure and digital access along the 26-mile route; deliver a world-renowned festival to celebrate the bicentenary of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 2025, significantly increasing visitors to the region and engendering community pride across the 26 miles; and to increase knowledge and awareness of the Stockton and Darlington Railway and its significance, and provide opportunities for volunteering, skills development, employment and health improvements.

Members entered into discussion on the work that could be undertaken to protect the Arnold Road bridge; how the promotion of 'Hopetown' would be woven into the communications for the S&DR200 Festival; whether there was sufficient funding available to cover the S&DR200 Festival and related activity; whether any work was being undertaken in relation to the Borough's twin towns; and the future intentions as regard linking the entire length of the original S&DR line, with Members informed that funding continues to be sought to deliver a continuous walking and cycling route, however this is a longer term ambition.

RESOLVED – That the content of the presentation be noted.

CLS26 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS QTR 2 2023/24

The Assistant Director, Community Services, the Assistant Director, Highways and Capital Projects, and the Head of Community Safety submitted a report (previously circulated) to provide Members with performance data against key performance indicators for 2023/24, as

at the end of September 2023 (Quarter 2).

The submitted report provided performance information in line with an indicator set and Scrutiny Committee distribution agreed by Monitoring and Coordination Group on 4 June 2018, and subsequently by Scrutiny Committee Chairs. It was reported that following agreement at Council on 5 December 2019 to align Scrutiny Committees to the updated Cabinet Portfolios, the indicator set had been aligned accordingly. It was reported that of the 35 indicators reported to this Scrutiny Committee, 25 were reported six monthly.

It was highlighted that 24 of the 25 indicators reported had Quarter 2 data which could be compared with Quarter 2 data from 2022/23, and when taking into consideration what is best performance for each indicator 12 of the 24 indicators had increased when compared to the same period as last year, and 12 of the 24 indicators had decreased when compared to the same period as last year.

Members entered into discussion on the income streams for Theatre Hullabaloo and the challenge around using the space following the Covid pandemic, however Members were informed that it was anticipated that the theatre space would be utilised more over the forthcoming 12 months. Clarification was also sought in relation to the Street Champions programme, in terms of the number of Street Champions who were signed up to the scheme, compared with those who were regularly active within their communities.

A discussion was held around the value of the Performance Indicators used, and whether there was any value in refreshing the Performance Indicators submitted to this Scrutiny Committee.

Discussion ensued on the response times in relation to fly-tipping, and the services and resources required to meet the additional housing developments in the Borough.

RESOLVED – That the content of the submitted report be noted.

CLS27 STRONGER COMMUNITIES FUND

The Member with Portfolio for Stronger Communities submitted a report (previously circulated) providing Members with information on the spend and use of the Stronger Communities Fund to date, and invited consideration as to whether the scheme should continue in the following financial year.

The submitted report stated that Cabinet, at its meeting held on 7 February 2023, agreed to the continuation of the Stronger Communities Fund for the 2023/24 financial year as part of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2023/24. It was noted that the fund enabled Councillors to use an allocated amount of money to deliver the objectives of building stronger communities. Each Councillor had been allocated £1,000 with the aim of supporting individuals and groups to enhance access to opportunities to improve health and well-being outcomes, and/or invest in environmental improvements that enhance the local area to the benefit of the local community.

The submitted report set out the spend against the £50,000, to date, together with information on what has been delivered in wards on an individual Councillor basis. It was

noted that all of the funding must be given to the grant recipient by 31 March 2024, and that some Members had not, as yet, allocated any funding.

Discussion ensued on the merits of the Fund and how best that the scheme could be utilised to ensure that it provided the greatest impact for residents, with Members exploring options around the allocation of one central fund compared to the existing format where each Councillor was allocated a grant of £1,000 to support individuals and groups, or enhance local areas to the benefit of the local community.

RESOLVED – (a) That the current spend against the £50,000 be noted; and

(b) That the Economy and Resources Scrutiny Committee be advised that the view of this Committee is that the scheme should continue in the 2024/25 financial year, in its current format, with an understanding and acknowledgement that the funding for the scheme may be reduced pro rata.

CLS28 WORK PROGRAMME

The Assistant Director, Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme and to consider any additional areas which Members would like to suggest be included in the previously approved Work Programme.

Members noted the inclusion of the date for the item on 'Private Sector Housing Landlords'; the removal of the item on the 'Northgate Initiative'; the deferral of the item 'Waste Management (to include Tees Valley Energy Recovery Facility)' to the meeting in June 2024; and the inclusion of the 'Council Plan' on 18 April 2024.

RESOLVED – That the Work Programme be updated to reflect discussions.