

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 10 December 2020

PRESENT – Councillors Renton (Chair), Mrs Culley, Allen, Bartch, Cossins, Donoghue, Durham, McCollom, Tait and Wallis

APOLOGIES – Councillor Haszeldine

ABSENT –

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Dulston, Keir and Ali

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Ian Thompson (Assistant Director Community Services), Brian Graham (Head of Environmental Services), Seth Pearson (Partnership Director), Elizabeth Davison (Assistant Director Resources) and Hannah Fay (Democratic Officer)

CLS23 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

CLS24 TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THIS SCRUTINY HELD ON 22 OCTOBER 2020

Submitted – The Minutes (previously circulated) of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 22 October 2020.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 22 October 2020 be approved as a correct record.

CLS25 MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

Submitted – A report (previously circulated) of the Chief Officers Executive which had been considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 8 December 2020, in relation to the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2021/22 to 2024/25, including setting a budget and council tax increase for 2021/22.

It was reported that the Council had faced significant challenges over the last decade following the economic downturn and reduction in public sector spending; that to date, the Council had been successful in responding to these challenges but this was becoming increasingly difficult, particularly in respect of a growing elderly population, pressure in the children's social care sector and the major economic impact of Covid-19 which had a direct impact on the Council's finances this year.

The submitted report outlined details of the core offer budget, which had been agreed following a significant consultation exercise in 2016 and allowed reduced expenditure and services to a risk based minimum level with a small investment fund of £2.5m per year. It was noted that in subsequent MTFP's unallocated balances of £6.5m were invested in five areas, namely Community Safety, maintaining an attractive street scene, maintaining a vibrant town centre, developing an attractive visitor economy

and neighbourhood renewal.

The submitted report highlighted areas of saving within the plan and areas of pressure, in particular the significant effect of Coronavirus pandemic on the Council's expenditure and income budgets. It was reported that estimates had been made on the direct service impact of the pandemic in 2021/22 with the assumption services would return to normal in 2022/23; and Members noted the projected expenditure for 2021/22 of £95m.

Reference was made to projected income, including core grant funding to Local Government; in particular the continuation of the Sales, Fees and Charges recompense scheme from April to June 2021 which was estimated to be £0.616m; and the increase in Council Tax and National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), which would provide an increase in income over the period of the MTFP. Members noted the projected income of £94m for 2021/2022.

Reference was made to the Futures Fund allocation, with £3.401m committed to the futures fund themes to date with a balance of £0.699m remaining; and Members noted the recommendation to utilise £0.914m of the unallocated balances to continue the Futures Fund ongoing priorities and commitments into 2024/25.

It was reported that by 2024/2025 the projected general fund balance was £3.504m however this relied on building around 433 Band D equivalent houses per year, no significant overspending, assumptions of a cash equivalent position materialising in the settlement and a Council Tax increase of 1.99 per cent and a further 3 per cent Social care precept totalling 4.99 per cent.

Members entered into discussion on the pressures relating to street scene services, waste disposal and fly tipping.

Reference was made at the meeting to providing costings at the next meeting of this Scrutiny Committee for the potential provision of additional bins (Minute CLS27).

RESOLVED –That this Scrutiny Committee has no comment to make on the proposed schedule of fees and charges for those services within its remit; supports the Council Tax increase of 1.99 per cent plus the 3.00 per cent adult social care precept for the next financial year; and supports the Futures Fund continuation into 2024/25.

CLS26 THE NORTHGATE INITIATIVE

The Managing Director submitted a report (previously circulated) updating Members on the current position of the Northgate Initiative.

It was reported that the Northgate Initiative was a multi-agency programme that had been initiated in the Northgate ward to the west of North Road, to deliver a range of interventions in order to improve outcomes for local residents in all areas of wellbeing including economy, education and childhood, health, environment, crime and security, and social relationships.

It was also reported that the initial programme had been planned to 2024; that whilst

there were some quick wins, it would be years for any measurable improvements to take effect; and that work had recommenced following the curtailment of activity due to the first Covid-19 lockdown.

Details were provided on the vision of the initiative and the achievements made to date, in particular the reduction in the total number of empty properties, which had decreased from 177 in December 2019 to 139 in September 2020.

Reference was made to the allocation of £22.3m from the Government's Towns Fund; that part of the funds focus would be improvements along the North Road corridor; and that the Council had been successful in their application for a new grant programme - Shaping Places for Healthier Lives with an initial grant of £20k.

Following a question Members were advised that whilst the Northgate Ward was a unique area in Darlington, the initiative would create a blue print of neighbourhood renewal and regeneration and help identify a concept to be implemented in other areas of the town; and that the Council had committed to purchasing four terraced properties in the Northgate Ward which would be transformed into eight flats.

Discussion ensued on engagement with residents and landlords.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

CLS27 BACK LANES AND FLY TIPPING

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report (previously circulated) informing Members of the ongoing work with regard to problem back lanes and fly tipping.

The submitted report stated that improving the appearance and cleanliness of problem back lanes, reducing fly tipping and reducing the time it takes to clear away fly tips was a priority for the Council; that there had been a refocusing of resources to deliver on this priority; and that this work was being coordinated through the Back Lanes and Fly Tipping project, with support from Street Scene, Civic Enforcement and Communications working closely together to deliver improvements.

It was reported that Street Scene had seen significant reductions to the level of funding over the last 10 years with a loss of 40 per cent of staff due to further funding reductions in 2016 for street cleaning; that this reduction had a significant impact on the standard of cleanliness and the Council's ability to respond to fly tipping and cleansing of back lanes; and that as part of the 2018/19 budget a Futures Fund had allocated additional resource into Street Scene and a new Community Safety Service was set up.

Details were provided on the back lanes and fly tipping project and the themes of the project were outlined; a fixed term role had been introduced within the Civic Enforcement team to focus on problem back lanes, working with Ward Members and residents and ensuring enforcement action was taken when required; and details were provided on the enforcement action taken.

Particular reference was made to the performance; members were pleased to note

the significant improvements in response times to fly tips from October 2019 to October 2020.

Concern was raised in respect of dog fouling and a request was made for the number of prosecutions for dog fouling for the previous year. Members were assured that there was a good network of bins across the borough, with roughly 800 litter bins; an interactive map was being developed and would be available on the council's website; that increased signage had been placed on dual waste bins; and where there was any evidence of a particular problem area additional bins would be put in place.

Following a question in respect of the number of covert and overt cameras members were assured there was a significant network of cameras across the borough; that the six overt cameras could be moved around based on intel and need; and that a review of CCTV was to be undertaken, which would identify whether any new technology was available to improve and develop the system.

Following a question in respect of back lane gates, the Portfolio Holder for Stronger Communities advised Scrutiny that whilst other Local Authorities had trialed this with varying success, the Council was keen to explore this option further for Darlington's back lanes.

A request was made for Members to be provided with the costs of an increase in the provision of street bins by 10 per cent; and that Members be provided with a breakdown of figures in respect of funding for Streetscene and fly tipping for the previous fifteen years.

RESOLVED – (a) That the content of the report and ongoing work that is being delivered to address issues in back lanes and fly tipping, be noted.

(b) That Members be provided with the costs of an increase in the provision of street bins by 10 per cent and that this be brought to the next Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

CLS28 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - QUARTER 2 2020/2021

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report (previously circulated) together with a detailed performance scorecard (also previously circulated) advising Members of the Quarter 2 performance against those key performance indicators for 2020/2021 which were within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.

It was reported that, of the 16 indicators that were reported six monthly at quarter two, three were showing performance which was better than the same period last year whilst two indicators were showing performance the same; six indicators were showing performance not as good as the same period last year whilst five indicators had not been reported due to coronavirus restrictions.

Discussion ensued on need to review the metrics for the Library service in light of the change to a digital service; and Members requested that ENV006 – Total number of fly tips reported, was split and reported as small fly tips and large fly tips.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

CLS29 WORK PROGRAMME

The Managing Director submitted a report (previously circulated) requesting that consideration be given to this Scrutiny Committee's work programme for the remainder of the Municipal Year 2020/21.

Members also gave consideration, in line with the agreed procedure, to a Quad of Aims which had been received in respect of the School Streets Initiative.

Reference was made to the intention for this Scrutiny Committee to receive an informal presentation from County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue Service in relation to the work they undertake.

RESOLVED – (a) That a Task and Finish Review Group be established to undertake the work outlined in the Quad of Aims for the School Streets Initiative.

(b) That the Work Programme be updated accordingly.