

Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordination & Finance Committee

Wednesday, 11 September 2024

Present: Councillor J Montague (Chair)
Councillors L Bartoli, B Burdis, J Cruddas,
D Drummond, T Hallway, M Murphy, B Pickard,
J Shaw, A Spowart and Mr S Fallon and Rev M Vine

Apologies: Councillors C Gray, L Bones, P Oliver, W Samuel and
M Thirlaway

OV61/24 Appointment of Substitute Members

Councillor A Spowart was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor W Samuel.

OV62/24 Declarations of Interest and Dispensations

Councillor J Cruddas declared a non-registerable Personal interest in Item 6 as she is a Director and Employee of Justice Prince CIC which receives funding for contract delivery. Councillor Cruddas' partner also works for the authority.

Councillor D Drummond declared a non-Registerable Personal interest in Item 6 as they have a relation employed by the CAB, and is on their Board of Trustees.

Councillor Martin Murphy declared a non-Registerable Personal in Item 6, they have a family member who is employed by North Tyneside Council.

Councillor Jane Shaw declared a non-Registerable Personal as she has a close family member who works for Monkseaton High School.

OV63/24 Minutes

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meeting held on 10 July 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

OV64/24 Performance & Financial Management report to 31 May 2024

The Committee received a report that had been considered by Cabinet at its 29 July 2024 meeting.

This report provided a full overview of both the service delivery performance and budget position across the Authority as of 31 May 2024.

In a response to a point about timeliness of Performance & Financial Management reports, the Director of Resources explained that the timetabling of OSCFC could be reviewed if the members wanted.

In terms of performance, service delivery remained strong whilst there continued to be high levels of demand and financial implications in EHCP Needs Assessments, children in need residential placements, children in care/need, home care provision and nursing care placements.

The ambition to deliver 5,000 Affordable Homes is on track against the profiled target with 2,247 homes delivered at the end of quarter four. Council Tax and Business Rates collection remains strong and comparable with national performance, and the Ambition for North Tyneside Programme is progressing well with regeneration projects across the four areas of the borough.

Members queried both the Children's Services and Adults Services figures, enquiring what was driving this overspend, Officers responded that high external placement costs were the cause and that this was an issue for other LAs as well. Officers stated that a more granular breakdown was available within the Service Commentaries section.

Members asked if more emphasis and information on the progress of the 13 MTFP workstreams that were tackling the pressures could be included in future. Members discussed that if workstreams were proving effective, or vice versa, it would be good to see what is being done, also showing some further context to the figures. Officers stated the majority of these were on target but were still conscious of being prepared for unknown factors. Members also asked if there was a growth in Social Care that required overspends, was it prudent to discuss further investment.

Regarding Hazlewood and Churchill, officers discussed they were still hoping for government engagement regarding finances, but things had slowed due to the election. Officers explained that the 4.4m spend had to occur at that time.

A discussion took place about the transfer of budgets between schemes and how this was presented on the report.

A question was asked about what steps were being taken to recover rent arrears as figures were still rising, even if they had slowed. Officers explained that changes between Housing benefit to Universal credit had meant that collections were not being done directly and were now being done differently. The Authority always attempted to work with residents with Court as a last resort, preferring payment plans. Officers reminded members that all 'write-offs' over £50k could only be done with Cabinet approval.

OV65/24 Our North Tyneside Plan Performance Report

The Committee received a report that had been considered by Cabinet at its 29 July 2024 meeting to provide an overview of performance on delivery of the Our North Tyneside Plan 2021-2025.

Officers gave the members a brief tour of the policy priorities, including highlights such as the cycle route, Wallsend masterplan and the Authority being on track against its commitment to become carbon net-zero by 2030.

The future of performance indicators was mentioned by members, A suggestion was made for future reports / graphs to be available as colour prints.

Members asked about EHCPs and the levels thereof, and officers stated that the levels of growth in EHCPs had begun to slow, and the Authority's growth rate was now lower than other regional and national authorities.

Members asked if they could be sent some further info on Project Shield and what work had been done and was planned along the Coast. Officers agreed to send out a briefing report prior to the next meeting.

A question was asked about new public spaces and whether their long term maintenance costs were built into the work at the planning stage. Officers confirmed that nowadays this was increasingly the case. Members were reminded of that any pieces of Council land needing a tidy could be reported via the CFO team.

OV66/24 Financial Sustainability

At Council on 18 July 2024, a member raised a question regarding a report in The Times in April 2024 that referred to Office for Local Government (Oflog) information and the Authority's ranking. This was recorded on the minutes as item C26/24, and a report was requested to be brought to Overview and Scrutiny regarding the Authority's financial sustainability.

Officers stated that the rankings that it referred to were created by the article writer and not Oflog and have not been verified official by any government body. It was stated that the approach used had been criticised by a range of commentators including the LGA.

The report by the Director of Resources responded, in summary, that Local Authorities have been asked to do more with less in cash terms, with significant funding gaps from 2010. Despite this background to the Authority's finances, officers confirmed that overall financial governance and sustainability remained strong and there were a range of checks and balances that were in place and had been for a long time.

Officers and members agreed that the Authority needed to find a balance between the preventative work and the 'now' work and to pay for both.

OV67/24 Work Programme

The Chair asked members to continue to suggest items for the work programme, and confirmed that the work programme would become a standard item on future agendas.