

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2020-21



Date: March 2021

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Introduction

Welcome to the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2020-21

This report provides a summary of the work of Overview and Scrutiny during 2020-21. This has not been a normal year for anyone, and the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the work of local authorities and the implications for all local authority decision makers has been dramatic.

Scrutiny members, along with all members and officers of the authority, have had to quickly adapt to new ways of working, including a move to virtual and live-streamed meetings.

Over the year, Scrutiny has played an important role in scrutinising the response of the local authority to the pandemic, as well as reflecting the views of local residents in relation to the public health crisis and the continued provision of essential services across the borough.

For practical reasons scrutiny has been taken forward through both formal and informal routes. Scrutiny members have worked to maintain oversight of the work of the local authority, while wishing to avoid unnecessary additional burdens being placed on officers, both inside and outside of the authority, who are already dealing with unprecedented challenges arising from the pandemic.

It was agreed in early summer 2020 that scrutiny sub-committees would resume meetings on an informal basis, to allow officers and Members to acclimatise to the new environment of remote virtual meetings.

The Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee and the Finance Sub-committee were the first to begin holding formal live-streamed virtual meetings. Towards the end of 2020 all scrutiny committees had begun holding virtual live-streamed meetings.

This report provides an overview of the work of the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee, and the sub-committees over this time. The report also sets out the process for identifying priorities and developing the 2021-22 work programme going forward.

The role of Overview and Scrutiny

The role of overview and scrutiny is to provide a 'critical friend' challenge to the Cabinet (and other decision makers), whilst also assisting in the development of key policies and plans.

Over recent years there has been an emphasis on promoting and developing the policy development role of overview and scrutiny. Throughout 2020-21 this has not been the main priority of scrutiny, although it has been possible to continue with some policy reviews carried forward from 2019-20.

During 2020-21 the scrutiny committees have aimed to provide a supportive role with a focus on helping the Council to respond to the pandemic and ensuring the needs of residents are met at this difficult time.

Update from the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee

Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee continued to fulfil its planned work programme during the past year. Due to the challenges that arose from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic its first programmed meeting for June was delayed till August to ensure arrangements to conduct meetings virtually live streamed to the public were in place.

The main concern at the first meeting was to understand the activity to move through the Pandemic Recovery Framework and the Committee requested and received a comprehensive update from the lead officers responsible, including the Director of Public Health.

It has continued to receive regular programmed performance of the Efficiency Savings Programme 2020/21, the Technical Services Partnership with Capita and the Our North Tyneside Plan.

Engagement with the Executive is important, and the Committee has continued its custom to seek the attendance of Cabinet Members to its meetings where items within their portfolio are discussed. The relationship with the executive and scrutiny works well in this respect and Cabinet Members are regular attendees. This includes the Elected Mayor who attended the January 2021 meeting to present her Annual Report.

In line with the Authority's Policy Framework the Committee has continued to receive and provide a scrutiny insight in this respect and has considered the refreshed Children and Young People's Plan for the Borough covering the period 2021-2025.

Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee: Budget Scrutiny

The Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee again this year established a Budget Sub-group to conduct its important role of being a critical friend to Cabinet and providing challenge to the budget.

The membership of the Budget Sub-group was opened to non-executive members of the Council and ten members (20%) were involved over the three meetings that took place. The Sub-group produced a report and conclusions which were subsequently reported to the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee and Cabinet as part of the budget-setting process.

Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee: Review of the Engie Partnership

Overview, Scrutiny & Policy Development Committee established a sub-group to undertake a review of the partnership with Engie and the delivery of the contract which covers services ICT, Finance, Human Resources, Revenue & Benefits and Customer Services. Unfortunately, this work had to be deferred due to the pandemic early in 2020. However, due to its importance, it was restarted in December 2020 and a number of meetings were undertaken throughout January- March, with the aim to report the findings of the review to the Overview, Policy and Development Committee at its March 2021 meeting, before submission to Cabinet.

Update from the Scrutiny Sub-committees

Finance Sub-committee

The Finance Sub-committee has continued to examine the Council's budget monitoring position on a regular basis. The Sub-committee made the switch to having virtual live-streamed meeting and held meetings to the agreed meeting timetable for 2020/21, which will continue into the future.

The meetings involved monitoring the forecast outturn positions for the General Fund, the Housing Revenue Account and the Investment Plan. It continued to receive update information of the effects of Welfare Reform, the effects of Covid-19 and continued to request updates to other budgetary themes where it deems appropriate.

The Sub-group also continued to review the red risks associated with the Business and Technical Partnerships.

Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing Sub-committee

Over the summer and autumn, the Adult Social Care, Health and Wellbeing Sub-committee met virtually on an informal basis. The sub-committee received information from Council officers on the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and plans for the recovery period, including public health and infection control, support for vulnerable people, and support for the adult social care sector. The sub-committee has continued to receive updates on public health and adult social care on a regular basis.

The Sub-committee met with the Chief Executive of Northumbria Healthcare NHS Trust to find out about the Trust's experience of the first wave of the pandemic and plans and preparations for recovery. The Sub-committee has also met with representatives of the CCG to discuss the contract with Livi to provide additional virtual GP appointments.

The Sub-committee have been able to move to virtual live-streamed meeting and will continue to meet on a regular basis for the remainder of the municipal year.

Adult Social Care Sub-group – Review of Domiciliary/Home Care Provision

A Sub-group was established in 2019-20 to review Domiciliary/Home Care in the borough, including the role of the Council in commissioning and facilitating good quality home care services. The sub-group had drawn up a scope for the review and had begun to collect information. Unfortunately this review has been on hold since March 2020 as Members did not feel it was appropriate to continue with the review during the pandemic, given their

wish to involve home care providers in the review. Work on this review will be reinstated in due course.

Northumbria Healthcare Foundation Trust: Annual Quality Account – The Sub-committee welcomed the opportunity to submit a statement for inclusion in the published annual quality account covering views on the Trust’s performance over the year as set out in the Quality Account and the priorities identified by the Trust for 2019-20.

Economic Prosperity Sub-committee

In early September members of the sub-committee met informally with officers to receive a briefing on the “Our Economy” theme within the Council’s Covid-19 Recovery Plan and to formulate a work programme which would complement the plan. Subsequently members:

- a) examined in more detail the transport theme of the Covid-19 Recovery Plan including:
 - i. the Council’s activities to re-allocate road space for use by pedestrians and cyclists and its impact on the local economy;
 - ii. the proposed projects to be funded by Tranche 2 of the Emergency Active Travel Fund; and
 - iii. the impact of Covid-19 on public transport services.
- b) met with representatives from the commercial property sector to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the retail and leisure property market and the future regeneration of town centres;
- c) met with the Cabinet Member with responsibility for regeneration to examine the Council’s Ambition for its town centres. Members paid particular attention to the North Shields Masterplan and the outcomes from the public consultation on the plan; and
- d) examined the most recent employment and skills data, policy announcements, progress and challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Members of the sub-committee were also briefed on the proposed North East Transport Plan and were invited to share their views on the draft Plan.

Housing Sub-committee

The Housing Sub-committee has spent most of its time focused on the response from the Housing Service to the Covid-19 pandemic, looking specifically at the stages of recovery, the current position and the impact on various areas of the service. Members were informed of the level of repairs and gas safety checks that were completed during

lockdown and new working practices adopted that focussed on tenant and staff safety. Discussions were held around the work undertaken to identify rough sleepers and securing accommodation.

Following the initial briefing on the response, the sub-committee looked further into the impact of Covid-19 on homelessness and the provision for current and future support. This focused on the funding available, increases in dispersed accommodation, the operation of the officer team and keeping up-to-date with the latest guidance, winter planning and changes that had been implemented to provide support where restrictions meant certain services could no longer operate as they did before the pandemic. The sub-committee also looked closely at the financial impact of the pandemic on the Housing Service and the various support mechanisms that had been put in place to support tenants.

At its final meeting of the municipal year, the sub-committee will look at the impact of the pandemic on the Empty Homes Standard and look at the delivery of the Affordable Homes Programme.

Looking ahead to next year, Housing sub-committee will continue its role in considering matters relating to crime and disorder.

Environment Sub-committee

The Environment Sub Committee has given consideration to the annual report of the Newcastle and North Tyneside Joint Biodiversity Action Plan and examined the delivery of the action plan in relation to the various schemes in North Tyneside. Members received updates on the activities of some of the various “friends of” groups which operate within areas of North Tyneside including the Friends of Brierdene, the Friends of Holywell Dene and St Mary’s Island Wetland Conservation Group.

In addition, the Sub Committee has examined the major improvement works which had been undertaken in the Killingworth Lake area to increase biodiversity along with works in Northumberland Park and the Rising Sub Country Park. Members also examined the works undertaken with developers to maintain and improve biodiversity of the various development sites across the borough as part of the planning process.

Culture and Leisure Sub-committee

The Culture and Leisure Sub-Committee met virtually on an informal basis in October and December 2020 and March 2021 when the work programme focused mainly on the themes in the Authority's Covid-19 Recovery Plan.

At the October 2020 meeting the Sub-Committee received reports on the impact of Covid-19 upon the Authority's Cultural and Sport & Leisure Services and the challenges for service recovery in line with government guidance. The reports examined the approach to recovery of the facilities closed and events cancelled for public use from March 2020 and the changed Government guidance from July 2020; facilities that remained open for business critical activities only, mainly public health and social care provision to support the most vulnerable, and other facilities and events which had been permitted to re-open under strictly controlled conditions. The Sub-Committee also considered a report on the North Tyneside Draft Allotment Strategy 2020-30 as part of a wider consultation exercise with all Ward councillors, which examined the proposed approach to the management and investment into the allotment service.

At the meeting in December 2020 the Sub-Committee received an update on the services closed for other than limited public use for a second period of lockdown from November, with activity resuming in December 2020 under Tier 3 restrictions. All activities and facilities remained under review and modified if necessary, according to national guidance. The Sub-Committee also considered a report relating to the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) /Covid-19 Cultural Services Recovery Plan, which provided an overview of plans agreed by the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) to promote culture and tourism activities across the three Council areas.

At the March 2021 meeting the Sub-Committee received a further update on the cultural and sport & leisure services recovery plan following the Government's announcement in February 2021. The Sub-Committee also considered a report on the main aims of the new 10-year Sport England Strategy 'Uniting the Movement', which will work to get the nation on its feet through a combination of targeted investment, innovation and the use of new technologies. In addition, much of the focus on the new strategy is on targeted interventions and engagement work with those groups and communities where activity is lowest.

The Sub-Committee also received an update report in relation the North Tyneside Draft Allotment Strategy 2020-30 on the outcome of a review of allotment provision across the borough and agreed new sites which will be considered as part of any current (where appropriate) or future development contributions identified for allotment provision.

Children, Education and Skills Sub-committee

In September and November 2020 the Children, Education and Skills Sub-Committee met virtually on an informal basis and the work programme themes complemented the themes in the Council's Covid-19 Recovery Plan.

At the September 2020 meeting the Sub-Committee received an update on the extent of Local Authority support available to schools in managing their response to COVID 19 and the plethora of government guidance. The Report examined the challenges faced by schools as they identified and tackled the impact of extended school closure on pupils' wellbeing and academic achievement and also covered information on the opening of schools at the beginning of September 2020, managing local outbreaks of Covid 19, Blended Learning, Achievement, Reading, Careers advice and guidance, Mental Health and Wellbeing, Safeguarding and the Education Strategy – Ambition for Education. The Sub-Committee also considered a report on the response of North Tyneside Council Children's Services Early Help and Social Care services to the need to work differently during the Covid-19 pandemic whilst maintaining the highest standards of safeguarding practice.

At the meeting in November 2020 the Sub-Committee received an update on the support for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) during the Covid-19 Pandemic which summarised the amendments to SEND legislation and Government guidance, and the Authority's responses to these changes and support available to children, young people and their families during this time.

The Sub-Committee also considered a report relating to the effectiveness of transition planning for Children with Special Education Needs and/or Disabilities to Adult Services. An update was also received on the impact on staff in Early Help and Social Care services and the support for staff as key workers during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In January 2021 the Sub-Committee held a formal meeting - live streamed on YouTube and received an update on the work undertaken by the Authority and its partners to prevent and protect young people from sexual exploitation and an overview of Corporate Parenting in the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Early Intervention Children's Readiness for School Sub-Group

The Children's Readiness for School in-depth investigation was completed on the basis of evidence gathered pre Covid-19. The report makes a number of recommendations around consulting further with parents, schools and early years providers to identify the scope of any problems with children being ready for school and to improve access to support for parents and early years providers. The Report was considered at the January 2021 Sub-Committee Meeting and referred to the Overview, Scrutiny and Policy Development Committee on 2 February 2021 who referred the recommendations to Cabinet on 22

February 2021. The Cabinet will provide their response to the recommendations set out in the report at a future meeting of Cabinet.

Chairs and Deputy Chairs

The Chairs and Deputy Chairs of all the Committees/Sub-committee have met once this year to consider the work of the scrutiny committees and how this should be taken forward under the circumstances of the pandemic. They will meet again in the near future to consider the work programme for the year ahead.

Future Scrutiny

Preparation for the development of the 2021-22 overview and scrutiny work programmes is under consideration. The Chairs and Deputy Chairs will be discussing possible areas for review in order to prioritise topics for scrutiny during 2021-22, but the focus is likely to remain on the impact of the pandemic and the recovery of Council services. Elected Members, senior officers and the public will be encouraged to suggest topics that scrutiny could usefully investigate.

All suggestions received will be considered by individual sub-committees at the beginning of the new municipal year in order to develop work programmes for the year ahead. Some reviews will carry forward from this and previous years. When prioritising topics, consideration will be given to whether the issue is timely and whether there is potential to have a positive impact on Council policy.