

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

2017 - 2018

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. CORPORATE SERVICES AND ECONOMIC GROWTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Councillor David Bawn
Chairman

1.1 I would like to thank my colleagues on the Committee, particularly my Vice-Chairman, Lynne Grimshaw for all her hard work. I am sure all the Committee would wish to place on record their gratitude to the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, who has facilitated our decision making process and assisted my role as Chairman, both inside and outside of the meeting room. The work of the Committee has been greatly assisted by the regular attendance of Cabinet members and senior officers, for which I am grateful. This has been a busy year for the Committee with extra meetings being organised to facilitate the pre-scrutiny of reports to Cabinet.

1.2 The Committee members have played a valuable and constructive role in the Council's strategic policy making areas this past year and continues to provide overview of financial and workforce monitoring issues.

1.3 The Committee have considered 15 reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Cabinet, and in addition to supporting the majority of them, members have put forward comments and suggested amendments, many of which have been accepted and included in the final decision. The following reports have been subject to that process:

- Write Offs 2016/17
- Portland Park
- Approval of the Business Rates Revaluation Relief Scheme
- Approval of the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2018/19
- Potential Loan to Alexa's Animal Charity
- Potential Loan to Haltwhistle Social Welfare Centre
- Setting the Council Tax Base 2018/19
- Estimated Year End Collection Fund Balances 2017/18 - Council Tax and Business Rates
- Corporate Plan
- Gilsland Station
- Proposal on Shared Services
- Potential Grant to Northumberland Community Bank
- Medium Term Financial Plan 2018/22 and Budget 2018/19 (to which the members of all four OSCs were invited to attend and comment)
- Active Northumberland Financial Position 2017/18
- Enterprise Zone - Bates Terminal Blyth - Infrastructure Works

1.4. In addition, the Committee have considered a number of overview and scrutiny reports, including:

1.4.1 **Ashington - Blyth - Tyne Line** - in December, the Committee discussed the benefits and strategic economic significance of reintroducing passenger services alongside commercial use of the existing freight lines of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne rail line. With regard to concerns regarding level crossing safety across the route, assurances were given that all crossings would be subject of a risk audit to ensure that the most appropriate measures were put in place, whether that be barriers or foot bridges. Members also discussed the possibility of including additional “stops” along the route, but were advised that a number of factors had been considered when choosing station stops, including travel times and catchment areas. The Committee agreed to receive further updates as the scheme was progressed.

1.4.2 **Debt Recovery** - the Committee received regular reports which provided information relating to the level of outstanding debt owed to the Council. Members continue to be satisfied as to the efficiency and effectiveness of the collection and recovery policies and systems. However, they have raised concerns regarding the potential impact on Universal Credit on the poorest and most vulnerable people in the county, which formed the subject of an all member briefing in February. It is proposed that a further briefing would be presented to members prior to implementation of Universal Credit in Northumberland later this year.

1.4.3 **Workforce** - in September, the Committee considered the Annual Workforce Report. Members were assured that robust measures were in place to identify patterns of sickness absence. Members expressed concern at the levels of absence due to stress, but were assured that the revised Corporate Training Needs Analysis (TNA) which had been developed for all Northumberland County Council staff, had been amended to require all staff to receive annual stress awareness training from 2017/18 onwards, to ensure that staff and managers were aware of the potential onset and interventions available to support stress management within the workplace.

1.5 The Committee continues to receive the following monitoring reports:

- 2016/17 Outturn Report
- Performance Outturn 2016/17
- Financial Monitoring
- External Inspections
- Performance Scorecards

David Bawn
Chairman – Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC

2. COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**Councillor Jeff Reid,
Chairman**

2.1 I would like to take the opportunity to thank every member of the Committee, as well the Scrutiny Co-ordinator and all the staff who have presented reports to us for the support that they have extended to me as Chair, which has ensured professional meetings together with excellent presentations for members throughout the year. I would also like to thank Ian Swithenbank, as my Vice Chair, has been helpful and supportive throughout the year.

2.2 Many of the reports the Committee has considered during the past year have been pre-scrutiny of decisions yet to be taken by Cabinet. However, the Committee have examined a number of issues which members have raised for review such as the Tree and Woodlands Policy and Grounds

Maintenance. The Committee have also accepted requests from officers to provide overview of strategic issues through the policy formation process, including the New Code of Practice for Maintaining Highways and the Northumberland Road Safety Strategy. The Committee also considered the application from the Police and Crime Commissioner to sit on the Council and the relevant Council committees dealing with fire and rescue issues.

2.3 The Committee have made comment on 13 reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Cabinet. The following reports were approved subsequent to that process:

- Food and Feed Service Plan 2017/18
- Union Chain Bridge Restoration Project
- Proposed SLA with the Northumberland Theatre Company
- Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan
- Interim Planning Policy Position Statement
- Northumberland Fire and Rescue Plan (Integrated Risk Management Plan) 2017-21
- Community Housing Plan
- Management of Unauthorised Encampments
- Ponteland Neighbourhood Plan
- Northumberland Local Plan
- Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site: Future Funding and Governance
- Funding for the North Pennines and Northumberland Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty
- Northumberland Cultural Strategy 2018-2030

2.4 Whilst considering the 'Funding for the North Pennines and Northumberland Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty' report, members noted that the Northumberland Coast AONB was designated in 1958, covering the area between Berwick-upon-Tweed

and the Coquet Estuary and felt that it should be extended further south, perhaps as far as Blyth. The Committee therefore sought Cabinet approval to gather evidence to present to Natural England concerning the need for a boundary review of the Coastal AONB. The Cabinet endorsed that proposal and the Committee will examine this issue further in 2018/19.

2.5 As stated above, the Committee have considered a number of overview and scrutiny reports during the last year, including:

2.5.1 **Grounds Maintenance Review** – in January, the Committee reviewed the performance of the grounds maintenance programme undertaken during 2017/18, and identified improvements to service delivery that would be delivered in 2018/19 to ensure that the Council achieved the best possible outcomes for our communities within the resources available. Members welcomed the works the grounds teams undertook regarding weed control and grass cutting, and the initiatives which had been designed to support and engage with communities to achieve bloom awards.

2.5.2 **New Code of Practice for Maintaining Highways** – in January, members were advised of the highway infrastructure asset management and maintenance in Northumberland. This was in preparation for the Committee to receive regular reports in the coming months to assist in the formulation of the revised Code of Practice - Well Managed Highway Infrastructure, which highway authorities across England and Wales were expected to comply with by October 2018.

2.5.3 **Tree Policy** – in March, the Committee considered an update on the Council's tree and woodland management work and policies in advance of a full review of the Tree and Woodland Strategy prior to its expiry in 2020. This issue arose due to members' concerns that there were many residential streets in the county where trees, not appropriate for that setting, had matured and were causing unintended problems, such as blocking light to properties or causing hazards through overgrown roots. However, they were also aware that this was an emotive subject for many residents who enjoyed the amenity that trees provided and who may be opposed to any plans to remove them. The Committee agreed to examine this issue in greater detail in 2018/19 in advance of the Strategy being renewed in 2020.

2.5.4 **Northumberland Road Safety Strategy 2018-23** - in March, the Committee reviewed the Northumberland Road Safety Strategy which would be updated based on the new priorities set based on accident data analysis and a revised strategy developed for the next five year period from 2018 - 2023. Members felt that road safety issues, particularly for older people, should be promoted more widely via social media, at Council facilities such as leisure centres and libraries, and in partnership with colleagues in health and social care. They also suggested that cycle routes should be clearly signposted to encourage their use, particularly where they divert users away from busy roads.

- 2.6 **Policing and Crime Act 2017: Request from Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria** - Council referred a request from the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Northumbria to be co-opted as a member of the authority and a member of all decision making bodies that Northumberland Council have in relation to Fire and Rescue Service issues, including the Cabinet, the Firefighters' Pension Scheme (FPS) Local Pension Board, and the Disputes Panel - Fire and Rescue Service to the Committee for consideration. The Committee invited the PCC to their January meeting to explain the reasons for her request, but she declined to attend. Members felt that the collaborative working that already existed between the Council's Chief Fire Officer and the Chief Constable already provided the high level partnership working that was required and agreed to recommend to the Cabinet and Council that the request be refused.

Jeff Reid
Chairman – Communities and Place OSC

3. HEALTH AND WELLBEING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Councillor Jeff Watson,
Chairman

3.1 The Committee have been very busy in 2017/18. I would like to thank Lesley Rickerby, my Vice-Chair for her assistance, together with all officers who have provided support to me and the Committee Members through some very complex issues throughout the year. I have tried to involve interested individuals and bodies in the work of the Committee whenever possible, which was best illustrated when dealing with Rothbury Community Hospital referral.

3.2 The Committee have considered many overview and scrutiny reports during the last year, including:

3.2.1 **Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and North Durham STP Joint Health Scrutiny Committee -**

in July, the Committee agreed to establish a Joint Health Scrutiny Committee involving all local authorities affected by the Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and North Durham Sustainability and Transformation Plan (STP) and any associated review proposals. Members were advised that the STP was intended as a planning process which was able, where necessary, to propose reconfiguration of NHS services across Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and North Durham. Although the current draft STP included few concrete proposals of this kind, the expectation was that the further development of the planning process would result in a number of linked proposals for changes straddling multiple local authority areas. It was anticipated that a single Joint Committee would address all such proposals emerging from the Northumberland, Tyne and Wear and North Durham STP process

3.2.1 Rothbury Community Hospital - in October, following a number of updates at previous meetings, the Committee scrutinised the decision of the NHS Northumberland Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to permanently close the 12 bed inpatient ward at Rothbury Community Hospital and shape existing services around a Health and Wellbeing Centre on the hospital site. In doing so, the Committee considered detailed documentary evidence from the CCG, Save Rothbury Community Hospital Campaign Group and minutes from a number of meetings at which this issue was discussed. During the meeting, attended by more than 60 members of the public, the Committee received oral presentations from the CCG, the Campaign Group and the Local County Councillor following which the Committee agreed to refer the matter to the Secretary of State for Health. I would like to thank Liam Henry, Legal Services Manager and Jackie Roll, Democratic Services Manager for their guidance through what was a very complex process.

3.2.2 New National Ambulance Response Times - in October, the Committee received a presentation from the North East Ambulance Service

about the new national ambulance response standards, which were to formally come into effect on 1 April 2018.

3.2.3 The Committee heard that a study by the University of Sheffield analysed more than 14 million 999 calls and found that the proposed changes to call handling and despatch would enable ambulance services to use their resources much more effectively, so that up to 750,000 vehicles would be available to immediately respond to emergency calls each year in England. The evaluation further found that there would be no safety issues for patients from those 14 million calls arising from the proposals.

3.2.4 Members were concerned that patient expectations of the service, heightened by media campaigns, may not be matched by the revised standards. The Act FAST campaign relating to having a stroke, for example, advised people to call “999”, but the new standards may result in an ambulance response time of up to 40 minutes, which may then lead to further patient distress. They warned that this may result in a loss of confidence in the ambulance service. Members were also advised that, although ambulances despatched to rural areas had further to travel to reach patients, it was unlikely that they would be diverted to other calls, given the sparsity of the population in those areas. I wrote to NHS England following the meeting setting out the Committee's views on the new standards.

3.2.5 **Immunisation Programmes** - in March, the Committee received a detailed presentation provided by both NHS England and Public Health England, about the various immunisation programmes and the latest information regarding their uptake levels in Northumberland. The main areas for discussion included:

- Routine Childhood Vaccinations for 0-5s
- Catchup for 5-19 Young People not Vaccinated with MMR
- HPV for Teenage Girls
- Teenage Boosters
- Meningitis Catch Up for School Leavers & Students
- Shingles & Pneumococcal for Older People
- Flu Vaccinations for the Range of Target Age & Risk Groups.

3.2.6 Members made a number of comments on the presentation and the CCG undertook to follow up on the issues raised at the meeting.

3.2.7 **Quality Accounts** - in March, the Committee received detailed presentations about the quality of services offered by NHS healthcare providers:

- Northumbria NHS Foundation Trust Annual Plan and Quality Account 2017/18.

- North East Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust Annual Plan and Quality Account 2017/18.
- Newcastle upon Tyne NHS Foundation Trust Annual Plan and Quality Account 2017/18.
- Northumberland, Tyne and Wear (NTW) NHS Foundation Trust Annual Plan and Quality Account 2017/18.

3.2.8 Members agreed that a formal response would be sent to each Trust setting out the Committee's comments.

3.6 **Monitoring Reports** - in 2017/18, the Committee received the following overview reports:

- Director of Public Health - Annual Report
- Update on Learning Disabilities Transformation Agenda
- Update on Primary Care Extended Hours Programme - CCG Update
- Joint Children's and Adult Services Complaints Annual Report
- Safeguarding Adults Annual Report and Strategy Refresh
- Welfare Rights Annual Report
- Mental Health Transformation Programme
- Winter and System Resilience Preparedness
- Ambulance Handovers/Delays/Waiting Times
- Dental Services in Coquetdale
- GP Practices in Northumberland: Overview of Access Models

Councillor Jeff Watson
Chairman - Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee

4. FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



Councillor Guy
Renner-Thompson
Chairman

4.1 This year the Committee have met on eleven occasions despite being scheduled to meet bi-monthly, dealing with 36 substantive reports, more than any other OSC. I would like to thank the Committee members and officers for the full part they have played in dealing with such a substantial workload. The insight and wisdom they have given continues to ensure effective scrutiny. Arrangements have been made for the Committee to meet monthly next year to better cope with the anticipated programme of work.

4.2 The Committee have made comment on fourteen reports and strategy documents prior to determination by the Cabinet. The following reports were approved subsequent to that process:

- Changes to post 16 Transport Payment Options
- Regionalising Adoption Proposals
- Education in Belford
- Proposed Closure of Acklington Church of England First School
- Report by the Local Government Ombudsman and Social Care Ombudsman
- Education Infrastructure Contribution Policy
- Outcomes of Consultation on School Organisation in Belford
- Education in the West of Northumberland
- Schools National Funding Formula
- School Admission Arrangements for Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for the 2019/20 Academic Year
- Education in Belford
- Netherton Northside First School
- Consultation Exercise for Proposed Changes to Post 16 Transport Policy
- Outcomes of the Special Education Needs and Disability Strategy and Capacity Consultation

4.3 The Committee have also considered many overview and scrutiny reports during the last year, including:

4.3.1 **Annual Report of the Virtual School Head Teacher 2015/16** - in June, the Committee considered the education achievement of pupils looked after by Northumberland County Council during the academic year 2015/16. Members welcomed the report and congratulated staff on the good progress made, which would have a major impact on the long term prospects of young people.

4.3.2 **School Transport Safety** - in September, the Committee considered an overview of the Council's approach to managing the safety of children who access home to school transport. Members welcomed the use of CCTV on

school transport and were advised that this would be written into the new specification when contracts went out to tender, although it was noted that a number of contractors had already installed CCTV. Members heard that whilst the functioning of seat belts was checked as part of monitoring procedures, it was not possible to check every individual belt due to timescales. The Committee therefore recommended that schools be encouraged to promote 100% seat belt use and suggested that a buddy system should be implemented whereby older pupils helped younger ones.

4.3.3 Northumberland Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB) Annual Report - in November, the Committee welcomed Paula Mead, NSCB Independent Chair and Robin Harper-Coulson, the LSCB Business Manager to their meeting to provide an overview of the work carried out under the multi-agency arrangements for safeguarding children in 2016/17. The Committee commended the Board on the work undertaken and their detailed and comprehensive report, which included the following key achievements:

- the four Early Help Hubs were now well established and provided an effective line of communication between the NSCB and frontline practitioners;
- three serious case reviews had been undertaken with learning embedded through the prompt delivery on the actions plans;
- training of taxis drivers in identifying child sexual exploitation with safeguarding conditions now built into Licensing policies, and
- launch of Operation Encompass which was now being expanded to involve GPs.

4.3.4 Elective Home Education - in February, the Committee considered the rise in parents choosing to home educate since September 2016 and the actions taken to ensure children were well educated and safeguarded. There was concern regarding the lack of adequate powers to monitor the level of education and to ensure adequate safeguarding. Members welcomed the introduction of the Home Education (Duties of Local Authorities) Bill which started its journey through Parliament in June 2017 and were advised that the infrastructure was already in place to allow the Local Authority to implement the proposed changes, but additional staffing would be required and it was unclear whether the Government would provide resources to support the duty.

4.4 Monitoring Reports - in 2017/18, the Committee received the following overview reports:

- Safeguarding Activity Trends Report
- Northumberland Adult Learning Services Annual Report

- Trans Identity and Gender Diversity, Supporting Young People in Northumberland
- Consultation Process for Closing or Making Changes to Schools
- Finance and Performance Quarterly Report
- Principal Social Worker's Report
- SIF Improvement Plan
- Adult Learning Service Self-Assessment Report for 2015-16
- Fostering Service Annual Report
- Adoption Agency Annual Report
- Regional Adoption Agency Update
- Director of Children's Services Role - Review of Test of Assurance
- Director of Education and Skills Annual Report and Presentation on Educational Outcomes 2017

4.5 **Recruitment and Retention of Teachers Task and Finish Group** - the Committee have established a task and finish group in response to the difficulties encountered in the recruitment and retention of teachers, especially in rural areas and the impact this had on schools. It is anticipated that the Group will report its findings early in the next Council year.

Councillor Guy Renner-Thompson
Chairman - Family and Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee

5. POLICY DEVELOPMENTS - IMPACT ON SCRUTINY

- 5.1 The Overview and Scrutiny function will play an important role in subjecting policy proposals to independent analysis and help the Cabinet and its Partners consider the long-term implications of the decisions being taken. Scrutiny can also provide valuable assurance to the public and stakeholders that their views and concerns will be taken into account in the way the new measures are shaped and implemented.
- 5.2 To retain public confidence, it is important that all existing and new forms of service delivery are subject to robust and public accountability. Scrutiny can harness the challenging and investigative aspects of its work together with its positive role in contributing to policy development and the restructuring of local services.

6. WORK PROGRAMMES

- 6.1 The work programmes will continue to be delivered through a number of mechanisms, for example:
 - (a) Revisiting previous reviews and issues considered, focusing on progress made with recommendations contained in the reports
 - (b) Light touch reviews on particular issues
 - (c) Task and Finish Working Groups to look at in depth investigations;
 - (d) Receiving information on policy/strategy areas as part of their overview function
 - (e) Cross cutting issues will be considered by joint meetings
 - (f) Referrals from the Executive or Full Council.
- 6.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen have regular briefings from Directors and Service Heads on current and potential issues which may impact on the respective committee's future workload. These meetings are crucial in managing the work programmes, to ensure that particularly significant issues are given priority.
- 6.3 In addition, the Council's Business Chair has confirmed the following methods by which members can influence the scrutiny work programme:
 - 6.3.1 **Scrutiny**
 - (a) Any scrutiny member can ask for an issue relevant to their remit to be scrutinised by giving notice to the scrutiny officer and notifying the Chairman.
 - (b) Any five non-scrutiny members can also request an issue is scrutinised by informing the scrutiny officer and the relevant Chairman.
 - (c) These requests then go to the Business Chair for consideration and referral. It might not always be the case that the item requested by a committee member is

best suited to that committee, or due to workloads or overlap of interest, may see it given to another committee to carry out.

- (d) Occasionally, items are raised that need more work and may be sent to working groups which may then make recommendations or present their findings to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise and determine how the matter should be further progressed.
- (e) Scrutiny should also respond to any requests from Council or Cabinet to review particular areas of Council activity.

6.3.2 Pre-scrutiny

The Administration have kept in place the pre-scrutiny system, whereby the majority of reports to be determined by the Cabinet are first considered for comment by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Any comments or recommendations arising from the OSC meeting are presented to the Cabinet by the Committee Chairman prior to the matter being determined.

- 6.4 It is envisaged that the scrutiny function will continue to contribute positively to policy development, community engagement and participation, performance monitoring and scrutiny of partners and improvements in services provided.

7. CALL-IN

- 7.1 Overview and Scrutiny Committees can exercise their right to call-in, for reconsideration of decisions made, but not yet implemented by the Cabinet. There were no call-ins in 2017/18.

8. VISITS

- 8.1 The Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Teacher Recruitment and Retention Task and Finish Group met twice outside County Hall: Ponteland High School on 5 October 2017 and Prudhoe High School on 22 November 2017.
- 8.2 The Health and Wellbeing Committee visited Hexham and Haltwhistle hospitals in October 2017. This was particularly useful for new members to familiarise them with healthcare in that area.

9. CHALLENGES/AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

- 9.1 The key challenge for both members and officers this year is to continue to make

scrutiny more effective and outcome focused.

- 9.2 To maintain and build on the current levels of member engagement and attendance by focusing on priority issues of concern to members, providing concise information in appropriate formats and offering a range of training and development opportunities which meet member requirements.
- 9.3 To take on board the increased powers and responsibilities of the relevant legislation.
- 9.4 The Overview and Scrutiny Committees will continue to monitor the status of their recommendations to Cabinet. The aim, as always, will be to achieve best practice standards and to make a positive contribution to partnership working and service improvement.

10. FURTHER INFORMATION

If members would like to receive a copy of any of the reports referred to above, please contact the Scrutiny Co-ordinator. Feedback on scrutiny work or suggestions for possible issues to be included in the work programmes are always welcome. Members are invited to contact the Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen or the Scrutiny Co-ordinator.

11. AUTHOR AND CONTACT DETAILS

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