

EXECUTIVE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A meeting of Executive Scrutiny Committee was held on Tuesday 17 December 2024.

Present: Cllr Sylvia Walmsley (Chair), Cllr Kevin Faulks (Vice-Chair), Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Nathan Gale (sub for Cllr Marc Besford), Cllr Lynn Hall, Cllr Shakeel Hussain, Cllr Niall Innes, Cllr Ann McCoy (sub for Cllr Paul Rowling), Cllr Sufi Mubeen, Cllr Tony Riordan and Cllr Marilyn Surtees.

Officers: Ged Morton, Jonathan Nertney, Judy Trainer, Gary Woods (CS), Garry Cummings and Clare Harper (DCE&F).

Also in attendance: None.

Apologies: Cllr Marc Besford, Cllr Richard Eglington, Cllr Paul Rowling and Cllr Laura Tunney.

ESC/36/24 Evacuation Procedure

The Committee noted the evacuation procedure.

ESC/37/24 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

ESC/38/24 Minutes

AGREED that the minutes of the meetings held on 12 November 2024 and 19 November 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

ESC/39/24 Financial Update and Medium Term Financial Plan

The Select Committee were provided with an update on the financial position at 30 September for the current year (2024/25) and outline plans for the 2025/26 Budget and the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

There were financial challenges facing Councils across the country, and particular challenges faced locally within Stockton-on-Tees. Significant work was underway to address the financial pressures faced by the Council through the Powering our Futures Programme alongside additional mitigating actions. Progress from the transformation reviews and the first phase of savings had been presented to Cabinet in November.

The cost pressures and demand for Council services continued to grow resulting in an updated projected overspend of £6.6m for the financial year 2024/25. If this materialised, it would need to be funded from earmarked reserves or any one-off funding.

The report also included an update on the projected Medium Term Financial Plan. This incorporated some of the expenditure pressures as well as early announcements

from the Budget on 30 October 2024. There was still significant uncertainty around funding with more detail on the funding announcements expected to follow in the Local Government Provisional Settlement expected week commencing 16 December. This would, however, be a one-year settlement and therefore the information in respect of future years was indicative and subject to a fundamental review by the Government of Local Government Funding.

The report identified a potential further pressure across the MTFP and highlighted potential options for addressing this. This would be considered in the budget report in February.

Key issues highlighted and discussed were as follows:-

- Savings had been approved through the Powering our Futures programme to address the estimated budget gap across the MTFP. Further savings were expected; however, the implementation dates might mean there was a shortfall in 2025/26. If this materialised, this would have to be funded
- With regard to the £90 million funding available to support capital investment in children's homes, it was anticipated that that this would be allocated to individual Councils following a bidding process, however, confirmation of the approach was yet to be announced
- The Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme would allocate funding directly to Local Authorities as they had responsibility for dealing with waste plastic and cardboard. The Council's estimated allocation was £3.5m however this had not been confirmed. The scheme was guaranteed for one year with more information expected about how the scheme would operate in the future
- Ongoing costs of funding Community Safety Officers were £250,000 per year
- Clarification was sought as to whether the £3.25m for Thornaby Cycleways was additional funding or part of the pot of money already secured through City Region Sustainable Transport
- Clarification was sought as to whether there was continued allocation of funding in the Capital Programme for the Norton to Stockton Cycle Scheme
- Whilst every effort was made to predict demand for services, demand for Adult Social Care Services had continued to increase with a higher number of young people having transitioned from Children's Services in Adult Services over recent months. This was due to some children coming into the care system just before transition and changes to care packages. More work in this area would be carried out as part of the Transformation Programme
- The Council was expecting to be fully compensated for the increase in National Insurance contributions and was awaiting confirmation of this in the budget announcement. The impact of the National Insurance increase on commissioned services was a greater concern as it was unclear whether any funding would be available for this. This included services such as Tees Active Leisure
- Local Authorities would continue to receive grant funding to fully compensate for the loss of income from the relief on business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure
- It would be impossible to predict the impact of businesses folding on business rates
- Increases in grounds maintenance costs were due to fixed contract prices coming to an end and higher inflation causing increases in prices
- Further details were requested on the movements in the projected position for Corporate Services

AGREED

- (1) that the financial position for 2024/25, the revised Capital Programme and the emerging issues for the MTFP be noted.
- (2) That the information requested above be circulated to the Committee.
- (3) That details of the Local Government Provisional Settlement and its impact on Council finances be shared with the Committee as soon as possible.

ESC/40/24 Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) Annual Complaints Report 2023/24

The Select Committee were provided with details of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman's annual review letter for the Council for 2023/24. There had been 48 enquiries submitted to the Ombudsman during the year and 13 met the threshold for a detailed investigation by the Ombudsman. Of the 13 complaint investigations, 8 were upheld. All recommendations made by the Ombudsman, following their investigations, had been accepted and implemented by the Council. There was one formal public interest report that was published in 2023/24 relating to school transport.

Key issues highlighted and discussed were as follows:

- The Director of Corporate Services commented that, based on learning from investigations, the Council was looking to make improvements in remedies offered to complainants to reduce the number of Ombudsman referrals, in particular where complaints had been upheld
- The Ombudsman expected complainants to first seek remedy through Councils' complaints systems and would only consider a complaint once this route had been exhausted

AGREED that the report be noted and that regular information be presented to the Committee providing more detail on the breakdown of complaints, trends and themes and resolution at the different stages of the Council's complaints procedure.

ESC/41/24 Forward Plan

AGREED that the Forward Plan be noted.

ESC/42/24 Chairs' Updates

Members were provided with verbal updates on the work of each Select Committee as follows:

Adult Social Care and Health Select Committee

The Vice Chair advised that the next meeting of the Select Committee would be held later that day and Members would be continuing with their review of Reablement Services. North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust would also be providing an update on maternity services.

Children and Young People Select Committee

The Chair advised that at the last meeting the Select Committee had received an update on recommendation 1 "Improve Attendance" from their previous review of Narrowing the Gap in Educational Attainment. The review had culminated in 17 shared objectives and further updates on the other recommendations were scheduled into the Select Committee Work Programme.

The Select Committee's current review was Holiday Activities and Food Programme known locally as Holidays Are Fun (HAF). The December meeting had received information from Children's Services and Public Health and also from Catalyst who managed the provider contract on behalf of the Council. The January meeting would be an informal session and would provide an opportunity, amongst other things, to hear from organisations who had delivered activity as part of the HAF programme, including examples of best practice, successes, challenges and lessons learnt and also hear from young people who had benefited from the programme.

Members requested data regarding take up of HAF places and the Scrutiny Officer undertook to circulate the presentation which the Select Committee had received at their last meeting.

Members discussed the recent Sara Shariff case and the dangers of the automatic right to home schooling. Members suggested that the Select Committee receive an update on the numbers of home-schooled children in the Borough and safeguarding in place and felt that this topic would benefit from in depth review.

Community Safety Select Committee

The Vice Chair reported that the November meeting of the Select Committee had received further evidence in respect of their current review of Welcoming and Safe Town Centres. The Select Committee had received evidence from Cleveland Fire Brigade and the Borough's four Town Councils. An SBC Ward Councillor survey had also been issued in early-December. The next evidence session in early-January 2025 would hear from local business groups / forums.

The December 2024 meeting had been cancelled and re-arranged for early-January 2025. Later that month there would also be a one-off item on Domestic Abuse attended by the Chair of the Domestic Abuse Steering Group which would outline the duties and powers for Councils to help victims.

Progress on outstanding actions from the previously completed Scrutiny Review of Tree Asset Management would be presented to the Committee meeting in February 2025.

Members advised that there were technical issues with the ward councillor survey. The Scrutiny Officer undertook to investigate and extend the deadline for completing the survey in view of the problems.

People Select Committee

The Committee's next meeting would review the summary of evidence and consider draft recommendations in respect of their current review of Disabled Facilities Grants.

The Committee had received evidence from Housing Regeneration and Investment, Occupational Therapy, and Building Services teams, Foundations who were the national body for Home Improvement Agencies and Disabled Facilities Grant, and Stockton & District Information & Advice Service. They had also considered customer satisfaction survey results and consultation had taken place with residents via Stockton Parent Carer Forum.

Place Select Committee

The Scrutiny Officer advised that there had not been a meeting of the Select Committee since the last Executive Scrutiny meeting. The December meeting had been stood down to allow the option appraisal to be reported to the Select Committee before it concluded its review. The next meeting would take place in January and would receive evidence as follows:

- Update on the option appraisal
- Empty Homes
- Feedback on the Common Allocation Policy
- Implications of the National Planning Policy Framework for Affordable Housing

AGREED that the updates be noted.

ESC/43/24 Chair's Update and Executive Scrutiny Work Programme

AGREED that the Work Programme be noted.