At a meeting of the Corporate Resources and Regional Affairs Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Thursday, 29 September 2016 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor I. Lindley
(Chairman, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Davey, S.          Flux, B.
Cairns, H.         Purvis, M.

CABINET MEMBER

Ledger, D.         Deputy Leader

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Angus, K.          Director of HR
Barnes, G.         Revenues Benefits &
                   Customer Services
Mounsey, S.        Revenues & Customer
                   Contact Manager
MacFarlane, M.     Citizens Advice
Nicholson, S.      Scrutiny Officer
Rose, J.           Economic and Inclusion
                   Policy Manager
Todd, A.           Democratic Services

Ch.’s Initials……….
14. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors W. Daley, J.D. Foster, A. Tebbutt, G. Webb and J. Woodman. An apology for absence was also received from the Councillor G. Davey, Leader of the County Council.

15. **MINUTES**

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Corporate Resources and Regional Affairs Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 7 July 2016 be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

16. **DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS’ INTERESTS**

Councillor B. Flux, declared an interest in item no. 7 on the agenda (Combined Authority - Update), as he was a member on their scrutiny committee.

Councillor D. Ledger disclosed an interest in item no. 7 on the agenda (Combined Authority - update), as he was a member on their transport committee.

17. **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

Members considered the latest Forward Plan of key decisions (October – January 2017). (Forward Plan filed with the signed minutes as Appendix A).

RESOLVED that the Forward Plan of key decisions, be noted.

**REPORT TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET**

18. **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

Approval of the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2017-18

The purpose of this report was to seek approval of the committee to recommend to County Council the Council Tax Support Scheme for 2017-18. (Report filed with the signed minutes as Appendix B).

In introducing the report Councillor Ledger and Graeme Barnes, Revenues Benefits & Customer Services Manager highlighted the following key issues within the document:-

- The Council Tax support scheme was required to be approved by 31 January each year.
• The support scheme assisted low income residents by reducing their council tax liability.
• Since 2013/14 the Council’s local scheme had continued to mirror the former council tax benefit scheme and provide support up to a maximum of 100%.
• The scheme had an impact on the council tax base.

Members suggested that track changes or a brief paper highlighting the changes made to the scheme would be helpful to identify clearly any proposed amendments from the previous year’s scheme.

Members welcomed the scheme which would continue to provide support for the most financially vulnerable including pensioners. It was suggested this valuable scheme, once approved, be publicised as a good news item.

**RESOLVED** that The Cabinet be recommended to approve the Council Tax Support Scheme attached at Appendix 1 to be adopted as the Council’s local scheme for 2007-18.

**REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY**

19. **CITIZENS ADVICE NORTHUMBERLAND - RESPONDING TO A CHANGING WORLD**

The Chair welcomed Moria Macfarlane, Chief Executive of Citizens Advice Northumberland to the meeting who provided an update on the recent changes taking place within the organisation. (Report filed with the signed minutes as Appendix C).

Members discussed the roll out of Universal Credit and the problem of homelessness within the county. It was reported that Citizens Advice was the main provider of free quality marked advice in the county but like all organisations needed to demonstrate how it delivered its services. Members were advised of the partnership work and the work being carried out to develop alternative access and delivery channels to meet the demand for advice while making better use of existing resources and a challenging funding environment.

It was reported that following the completion of the merger process a review of the organisation to ensure that it was delivering services which best meet local need and which remained fit for purpose in a rapidly changing world was taking place. It was envisaged that the review would be completed soon.

The committee applauded the valuable work carried out by Citizens Advice to help all but particularly the most disadvantaged people within communities who often had the greatest need and complexity of problems.

**RESOLVED** that the report, be noted.
20. **COMBINED AUTHORITY - UPDATE**

Members were provided with a powerpoint presentation from Janice Rose, Economic and Inclusion Policy Manager regarding the current position regarding the Combined Authority. (A copy of the powerpoint presentation has been filed with the signed minutes).

The presentation:-

- explained the remit and structure of the Combined Authority;
- outlined the Combined Authority's relationship with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), and
- highlighted the initial implications of the Government's removal of the proposed devolution agreement.

The committee were advised that although the proposed devolution agreement had been taken off the table discussions would still take place with Government on the subject. Therefore there was always the possibility opportunity that the agreement offer could be reinstated in the near future. As it was a very recent announcement it was suggested a meeting to update members on any further information from central government following these further discussions could be arranged.

The committee was advised of a concern raised regarding the lack of clarity regarding the Combined Authority’s scrutiny role and function.

Members were hopeful that the devolution agreement would still take place and acknowledged that the Combined Authority and the LEP would still exist and make important decisions about the county.

**RESOLVED** that the information, be received.

21. **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES**

**Debt Recovery Update**

The purpose of the report was to provide members with information relating to the level of outstanding debt owed to the Council so that the committee may satisfy itself as to the efficiency and effectiveness of its collection and recovery policies and systems. (Report filed with the signed minutes as Appendix D).

The Deputy Leader and Susan Mounsey, Revenues & Customer Contact Manager presented the report and highlighted the following key issues:-
The amount of debt written off had nearly halved in 2015-16. However there were still a considerable amount of Homes for Northumberland former tenant arrears awaiting write off.

The data showed that large sundry debts were being collected effectively and efficiently, and that debts in dispute were being addressed.

It was reported that Council tax collection in 2015-16 exceeded the target. The in-year collection rate had dropped slightly this year which was disappointing to the team in percentage terms, but was due to a number of factors, including the amount collectable increasing year on year with the biggest increase to date in 2016-17 of £8.8m and the tax base continuing to grow.

It was reported that business rates collection in 2015-16 exceeded the target.

With regard to housing benefit overpayments it was reported that the team continued to perform well in this very difficult area of debt collection. The level of overpayments had increased recently due to ‘Real Time Information’ received from HMRC.

The target for Homes for Northumberland current tenant arrears still outstanding at the end of 2015-16 was exceeded, and the actual level of arrears was only just above target. The level of former tenant arrears was much higher than the target but was due to not being able to get irrecoverable debt written off.

Teams involved in debt recovery work continued to make improvements in systems and processes to maximise collection of income due.

Following on from a question regarding business rates it was noted that government grants were to be discontinued by 2020 resulting in a greater reliance on business rates income to the Council. However it was reported that the Council remained on top of debt recovery and were mindful of increasing pressures on small businesses.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report, be noted.

22. REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES

Quarterly Report for Workforce (2016/17)

(Report filed with the signed minutes as Appendix E).

The purpose of the report was to:-

- provide a quarterly position statement in relation to workforce related areas of assurance and progress to date within key areas for Northumberland County Council; and
- provide assurance to the Corporate Resources & Performance Overview & Scrutiny Committee that there is provision and monitoring in place to achieve necessary Key Performance Indicators relating to workforce for 2016/17.

The report was presented by Kelly Angus, Director of HR who drew members’ attention to a number of points:-
● Sickness Absence (including current position and interventions taking place).
● Statutory and Mandatory Training and the work required to achieve compliance.
● Staff Survey.

Members were advised that the staff survey was open until 7 October but so far there had been an excellent response rate seen. Members suggested that a copy of the survey be placed in the members room, for information. It was noted that there was an incentive to complete the questions but it was assured that it was still an anonymous staff survey. Information could be gathered at a team level but not identify individuals. It was reported that a full and more detail response to the staff survey was to be provided at a future meeting. A suggestion was made for the information collated from the staff survey to be made available to all county councillors.

RESOLVED that the report, be noted.

REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

23. Corporate Resources and Regional Affairs Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Members considered the Corporate Resources and Regional Affairs Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme. (Work Programme filed with the signed minutes as Appendix F).

It was reported that there were a number of pre-scrutinising cabinet reports scheduled to be considered by the committee over the next few meetings. It was suggested that an additional meeting in mid December or early January 2017 be arranged to set out the implications of the Autumn Statement on the County Council.

RESOLVED that the Work Programme, be noted.

INFORMATION REPORT

The following report was for information only. If a member of the Committee would like further explanation of the report, or has questions they wish to put to the relevant Cabinet Member, he/she should contact Democratic Services Section in order that appropriate arrangements can be made.

24. Policy Digest

The report, available on the County Council’s website, gave details of the latest policy briefings, government announcements and ministerial speeches that may be of interest to Members.

Ch.’s Initials………

Corporate Resources and Regional Affairs OSC, 29 September 2016
The report can be accessed through the County Council’s website at www.northumberland.gov.uk.

RESOLVED that the report, be noted.

CHAIRMAN _______________________

DATE _______________________

Ch.’s Initials………

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