

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

16 July 2024

(10.00am)

Meeting held in: Committee Room 2, Durham County Hall

Minutes

Present:

- Councillor Colin Ferguson (Chair)
- Councillor Rob Crute
- Councillor Chris Lines
- Councillor John Eagle
- Councillor Dawn Welsh
- Councillor Linda Wright
- Councillor Richard Dodd
- Councillor Les Bowman
- Councillor Shane Smith
- Councillor Andrew Guy
- Councillor Claire Rowntree
- Councillor Dominic McDonough

OSC1/7/24 Apologies for Absence and Substitutes

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillor Brian Gallacher. Councillor Les Bowman attended the meeting as his substitute.
Councillor John McCabe. Councillor Shane Smith attended the meeting as his substitute.
Councillor Antony Mullen. Councillor Dominic McDonough attended the meeting as his substitute.

OSC2/7/24 Declarations of Interest

The Chair welcomed members to the first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Dawn Welsh declared a personal interest around Electric Vehicle Charging and explained that she worked for an EVC infrastructure company.

Councillor John Eagle declared a personal interest as he was employed by Nexus.

OSC3/7/24 Appointment of Vice Chair

The Chair asked for nominations for the position of Vice Chair.

Councillor John Eagle, seconded by Councillor Rob Crute, proposed Councillor Claire Rowntree for the role of Vice Chair.

Resolved that Councillor Claire Rowntree be appointed to the role of Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year.

OSC4/7/24 Work Programme 2024/25

The Committee considered a report from the Policy and Scrutiny Officer which set out the process to establish a provisional work programme for the 2024/25 municipal year.

It was noted that the Committee's remit was different from that of the local authority in that it was required to take a more strategic regional view. The key purpose of the Committee was outlined as; providing review and challenge of decisions made by the Cabinet and Mayor, helping to understand policy development and facilitating information flow between the Committee and local Committees.

Following discussions at the induction workshop it was confirmed that a draft work programme outline had been developed.

Questions and views were then invited and in discussion, it was noted that:

- Four meetings per year would not cover the full range of business and therefore options needed to be considered in terms of additional formal meetings, informal briefings, Task and Finish Groups. It was felt there was too much of a gap until the next meeting.
- There needed to be a system in place for the Committee to receive Cabinet reports.
- Updates from individual portfolio holders should be brought to Committee on regional issues, in particular regarding housing which was a regional and local issue.
- Bus reform options should be built into the work programme before the issue was considered by Cabinet.
- There should be a focus on child poverty as a regional issue.
- There needed to be more on plans for regional businesses to gain inward investment as well as green business plans for the future. It was also suggested that there should be a focus on how those plans affected rural areas as there was a risk of the rural economy being missed.
- The Committee had a role in having an overview on general policy from government in order to consider how this could impact the region.
- Portfolio delivery plans were due to be reported to Cabinet at the end of July, it was agreed that this would provide a useful starting point to engage with prior to the next meeting.
- Sub Committees would provide more focus on specific areas with a deep dive report back to Committee.

Resolved that:

- (1) the provisional work programme for the year ahead be agreed subject to any changes throughout the year to respond to matters as they arose;
- (2) the Chair, Vice Chair and relevant officers consider the feedback set out above with a view to further developing the work programme and reporting back to the next meeting of the Committee in October 2024; and
- (3) a series of briefings be arranged throughout the summer period to provide members of the Committee with an overview of the Authority's strategic portfolio plans and to inform the development of the work programme.

OSC5/7/24 Initial Transport Programme and City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement

The Committee considered a report from the Director of Transport which provided an overview of the initial transport programme. The report provided an overview of the existing delivery structures, the funding from Tyne and Wear authorities and also grant funding. It was confirmed that the

Transport Programme followed the key drivers of the devolution deal and was supplemented by the manifesto commitments made by the Mayor which would be further developed.

A summary of the funded activities was provided. It was also noted that a report was due to Cabinet on 30 July 2024 around bus reform options, including an option for bus franchising. It was acknowledged that the Local Transport Plan (LTP) would be refreshed in line with national policy change, local priorities and funding availability and that the Committee would want input into that process.

An update was provided on the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS). It was noted that £563m of capital funding was accessed for the North East for the period up to March 2027, £147m of which was new funding. The increase in the settlement consolidated a number of funding streams. It was also noted that initial CRSTS funding would not include delivery of CRSTS projects in County Durham, but that an additional £72.844m of capital funding would be available from 2025 to support local transport improvements in the county.

It was acknowledged that there were delivery challenges in terms of using the funding by the deadline in 2027, as the Authority was behind other authorities who had been granted earlier access to CRSTS. It was noted that the government was keen for a decarbonised transport network and reduced emissions. A business case would therefore be reported to Cabinet before submission to government, with capital delivery as soon as funding was released.

It was reported that the proposed CRSTS programme had assembled 40 schemes, totalling £181m. The Committee was advised that this was substantially overprogrammed, however this was based on a best practice approach as schemes would change in scope and scale as they progressed. It was also confirmed that the next round of CRSTS funding could provide for any schemes that did not go through the first round.

The Committee was advised that the programme was based on the initial pipeline schemes set out through the previous North East Transport Plan, an overview of the programme plans was provided.

Questions and views were then invited and in discussion, it was noted that:

- Getting bus reform right was important for the whole region and therefore there needed to be the ability for the Committee to undertake pre-scrutiny work so that its views could be shared with Cabinet during decision making.
- The Authority only had a certain amount of decision making powers in terms of transport and therefore it was suggested that transport organisations be invited to attend future meetings. It was acknowledged that relationships had been developed with those organisations and it was anticipated that they would welcome the opportunity to speak to the Committee.
- More needed to be included within the Authority's plans around linking isolated communities, in terms of long-term plans and what difference could be made on the ground in the short-term.
- Officers undertook to provide members of the Committee with supplementary information on the amount that had been spent on consultants in progressing transport projects.
- The Committee wanted to understand how the £1 spend equating to a £2 benefit was calculated. It was confirmed that this was evaluated through various aspects, including modal shift, journey time savings, health and active travel benefits and carbon emissions. There was a differentiation between primary benefits and additional savings in terms of the wider economy. It was questioned whether this linked to inward investment and an uplift to the regional economy and whether this was a catalyst to improving lives for residents. It was confirmed that this was monitored over time in terms of policy development and helped form what was next for CRSTS.
- There needed to be more connectivity, bus services were not currently linked with rail services and more needed to be done to link the two to ensure no communities were isolated. Particularly in areas where new housing was being planned.

- Future green rail needed to be a consideration in future plans as well as tourist buses to the Northumberland coast.
- A number of major roads through the region were undergoing works causing congestion which had an impact on emissions. It was suggested work on linking up the timing of the works would be helpful.
- The LTP was an opportunity for suggestions to be made as it developed and to look at what was a priority and what structures were needed in order to get the best results.
- Many of the common points raised by the Committee were acknowledged in the LTP and the Mayor's manifesto and there had been a commitment to make changes in the first term of office, it was acknowledged therefore that this would test the strength of the devolution deal.
- Further clarity was needed about how the Scrutiny Committee and the Transport Advisory Board fitted together.
- In terms of value for money, the Authority had an assurance framework which every decision had to pass through, also the Finance and Investment Board had the opportunity to review decisions prior to approval.
- Some short-term solutions could be delivered by local authorities, therefore it was important for members to engage with their own authorities to understand short-term actions while the long-term plans were being made. It was also noted that the Committee needed to have an awareness of what was being discussed at a local level.
- Opportunities for the combined authority to fund some of the grass roots community transport organisations should be considered as many of them could benefit from more sustainable funding.
- There needed to be resilience in terms of planning, in the event that government announced policy changes. It was confirmed that there was a lot of policy still to emerge, however government had said it wanted regional growth plans developed which should align with the LTP.

Resolved that the overview of Authority's initial transport programme and emerging City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) programme be noted.