

## **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**8 October 2024**

(10.00am)

Meeting held in: The Lamesley Room, Gateshead Civic Centre

### **Minutes**

**Present:** Councillor Colin Ferguson (Chair)  
Councillor Rob Crute  
Councillor Richard Dodd  
Councillor Steve Fairlie  
Councillor John Eagle  
Councillor Brian Gallacher  
Councillor Charlie Gray  
Councillor Andrew Guy  
Councillor Claire Rowntree  
Councillor Amanda Wintcher

#### **OSC6/10/24 Apologies for Absence and Substitutes**

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillor Chris Lines

Councillor John McCabe

Councillor Jim Montague

Councillor Antony Mullen

Councillor Dawn Welsh. Councillor Amanda Wintcher attended the meeting as her substitute.

Councillor Linda Wright. Councillor Steve Fairlie attended the meeting as her substitute.

#### **OSC7/10/24 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **OSC8/10/24 Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 16 July 2024 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

#### **OSC9/10/24 Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme**

At its previous meeting the Committee had agreed a provisional work programme but made a series of comments and suggestions. Following consideration of these issues by the Chair and Vice Chair, the Committee were invited to give further consideration to the development of its work programme and in particular:

- a) to reflect on the outcomes from a series of strategic portfolio plan briefings held with each Cabinet Member;
- b) to consider options to increase the capacity of the Committee to undertake its work; and
- c) to consider and comment on their priorities for inclusion in the work programme.

The Chair suggested that should the Committee agree to arrange an additional meeting in November then it may wish to examine in more detail the establishment of a new Child Poverty Reduction Unit (subject to there being enough detail available), the establishment of a new Mayor's Opportunity Fund and proposals for the creation of new strategic funds to provide regional businesses with the investment they need to start and to grow. Other members suggested housing and culture and tourism as priorities for inclusion in the work programme.

Members stated that if additional meetings were to be arranged they needed to be in accessible locations and at a convenient time in the day to ensure that they were quorate. The Chair undertook to give consideration to the timing and location of meetings but stated that meetings ought to be held in different locations around the region.

**Resolved** that:

1. the outcomes of the Strategic Portfolio Plan briefings in terms of identifying topics for further scrutiny be noted;
2. two additional committee meetings be arranged to be held on Tuesday 5 November 2024 and Tuesday 4 February 2025; and
3. the Chair and Vice Chair work with relevant officers to further develop the Committee's work programme for the remainder of the year taking into account the comments recorded above.

(Note: The remaining items of business appearing on the agenda were considered by members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee when there were an insufficient number of members present to conduct a quorate meeting of the Committee. A separate note of these discussions is attached as Appendix A.)

## Meeting of Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**8 October 2024**

(10.00am)

Meeting held in: The Lamesley Room, Gateshead Civic Centre

### Notes

**Present:** Councillor Colin Ferguson (Chair)  
Councillor Richard Dodd (part)  
Councillor Steve Fairlie (part)  
Councillor John Eagle  
Councillor Brian Gallacher  
Councillor Charlie Gray (part)  
Councillor Andrew Guy (part)  
Councillor Claire Rowntree  
Councillor Amanda Wintcher

The following items of business were considered by members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee when there were an insufficient number of members present to conduct a quorate meeting of the Committee.

#### 1. North East Mayor

The North East Mayor, Kim McGuinness, joined the meeting remotely via video conferencing technology to present and discuss her manifesto priorities and the associated opportunities and challenges.

During questioning members discussed a range of topics with the Mayor including:

- a) the Mayor and Cabinet's approach to collaboration and integration in delivering the Authority's seven strategic portfolio plans;
- b) the timing of policy announcements in relation to Cabinet's decision making process;
- c) the economic ambitions for the region which were likely to form the basis of the Local Growth Plan;
- d) the challenges facing the Authority in terms of securing the capacity, resources and government support to deliver major long term projects in the region;
- e) the opportunities to develop innovative investment partnerships with the private sector;
- f) the scope and nature of the forthcoming public consultation exercise on the North East Local Transport Plan and the role of local ward councillors in promoting and encouraging conversations within local communities;
- g) the varying transport needs of different areas and communities across the region and how devolution would allow services to be delivered in different ways to meet those needs;
- h) the risks of escalating costs associated with major infrastructure projects such as the re-opening of the Leamside Line and how these risks could be mitigated in planning and delivery;

- i) how Investment Zones would create economic benefits for all constituent authorities and the advantages of the authorities working together and acting with one single collective voice; and
- j) the Mayor's desire to secure from Government greater devolution of powers and a single funding settlement at the earliest opportunity.

The Chair thanked the Mayor for joining the meeting and for answering members questions and it was agreed that further meetings between the Mayor and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be arranged in due course.

## **2. Improving and Reforming North East Buses**

In July 2024 the Cabinet had agreed to proceed with the preparation of a Bus Franchising Assessment. The decision followed consideration of a Bus Reform Options Report which outlined the successes and challenges of the current operating model and detailed the benefits, potential costs and implications of two different options for reform. The two options were to either expand the current Enhanced Partnership or implement a franchising scheme. Any decision to proceed with implementing a franchising scheme could only be taken if a Franchising Scheme Assessment (FSA) determined that franchising was the best option. An FSA was effectively a business case which considered its likely effects in terms of delivery and value for money when compared to the best Enhanced Partnership alternative.

Tobyn Hughes, Director of Transport, accompanied by Philip Mickle, Assistant Director of Transport Strategy, and Lucy Keating, Head of Bus Reform, attended the meeting to present details of the bus reform project and the updated Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP). The BSIP set out region's current strategic plan for buses, setting out the vision for improving bus services and growing bus patronage, in line with the National Bus Strategy.

In examining the bus reform project members asked a series of questions of officers when the following topics were discussed in more detail:

- a) the extent to which knowledge and experience gained from the proposed Quality Contracts Scheme in Tyne & Wear and from the introduction of franchising in Greater Manchester could be utilised in preparing for bus franchising in the North East;
- b) the scope of public engagement and consultation in relation to the BSIP;
- c) balancing the development of an integrated public transport system with maintaining popular bus routes and building confidence in bus services;
- d) the implications for the bus reform project of anticipated changes in the legislative framework. The Authority was in regular contact with Government so that it was well placed to accelerate the reform process if permitted;
- e) the impact of multi-operator, multi-modal capped tickets. It was reported that tickets targeted at those aged 21 and under had increased usage in the age group by 25%. Officers undertook to provide members of the Committee with further details.
- f) the improvements to bus services which had been achieved through the BSIP and the Enhanced Partnership and the limitations of the partnership which was based on collaboration with bus operators rather than contractual obligations; and
- g) the key differences between rail and bus franchising.

## **3. North East Local Transport Plan**

Members considered the draft North East Local Transport Plan (LTP) which had been approved by Cabinet for public consultation. The LTP set out the North East CA's transport priorities up until 2040, including plans to deliver the Mayor's manifesto commitments for transport and a list of proposals to create a fully integrated green transport network that works for all.

Tobyn Hughes, Director of Transport, accompanied by Philip Mickle, Assistant Director of Transport Strategy, and Rachelle Forsyth-Ward, Head of Policy and Strategy Development,

attended the meeting to present the draft LTP which was made up of a series of inter-related documents, including the plan, a delivery plan and a summary document.

The Authority was required to carry out a formal public consultation which would commence in Autumn 2024. Consultation feedback would be analysed and the final proposed LTP would be presented to Cabinet for review in March 2025.

During questioning the following issues were discussed:

- a) balancing investment in large scale and long term transport infrastructure projects, such as the re-opening of the Leamside Line, with smaller local incremental improvements in transport services which would have a more immediate impact;
- b) in querying the need for increasing freight capacity on the rail network it was suggested that members may wish to consider in more detail the Authority's ambitions for rail services and how these can be delivered in collaboration with Great British Railways;
- c) members asked that they be notified of the commencement of the public consultation exercise;
- d) the majority of responses would be on-line but good analysis of respondents would allow the Authority to target any gaps in terms of underrepresented communities;
- e) members asked that a further report be submitted setting out details of the feedback received from the consultation exercise;
- f) it was suggested that in order to review and assess the benefits of transport investment, members ought to undertake visits and they could begin with a train journey on the Northumberland Line to Ashington where the Committee could hold a future meeting. It was noted that an external review of the Northumberland Line project was being undertaken and its findings could be reported to the Committee;
- g) the extent to which the Authority's ambitions contained in the LTP were aligned with the transport priorities of each of its constituent authorities and how they would be delivered in collaboration with them.

#### **4. Budget and Corporate Planning Process**

Members met with Janice Gillespie, Director of Finance and Investment, who advised the Committee on the proposed approach and timetable for the preparation of the 2025/26 Budget and Corporate Plan. A draft Corporate Plan and draft budget proposals would be presented to Cabinet on 26 November 2024 and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 December 2024. A budget workshop would be arranged for members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held in January 2025 to consider in detail the Authority's draft budget proposals and recommendations to Cabinet, prior to final approval on 28 January 2025.

Members were also presented with a summary of the Authority's opening reserves at 7 May 2024 which would help inform the 2025/26 budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy.