

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

4 February 2025

(10.00am)

Meeting held in: Reception Room, Town Hall, South Shields

Minutes

Present: Councillor Colin Ferguson (Chair)
Councillor Les Bowman
Councillor Rob Crute
Councillor Richard Dodd
Councillor John Eagle
Councillor Steve Fairlie
Councillor Charlie Gray
Councillor Chris Lines
Councillor John McCabe
Councillor Jim Montague
Councillor Dawn Welsh

OSC17/02/25 Apologies for Absence and Substitutes

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Claire Rowntree (and her substitute, Councillor Tracy Dodds).

OSC18/02/25 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

OSC19/02/25 Minutes

Resolved that:

1. the minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 November 2024 be confirmed and signed as a correct record; and
2. the notes of the meeting of members of the Committee held on 10 December 2024 be noted.

OSC20/02/25 2024/25 Budget Monitoring Position Update

The Committee examined a report from the Director of Finance and Investment setting out a revised budget position for 2024/25 and showing the updated forecast spend for the North East Combined Authority's Corporate Budget and delivery programmes. The report had previously been considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 28 January 2025.

Members asked questions of Mags Scott, Director of Finance and Investment, when they examined the degree to which there were likely to be variations in the Corporate Budget and programme delivery. The Corporate Budget was expected to be more predictable and stable and programme delivery was more likely to be subject to variations. A programme performance pack providing an overview of key progress updates, committed funding, forecast expenditure and forecast outputs was due to be presented to the Finance and Investment Board. Officers undertook to provide members of the Committee with a copy of the performance pack. The Committee also noted the different ways in which programmes were delivered which accounted for variations in committed spend across the 5 year programme plan.

It was **agreed** that:

1. the 2024/25 Budget Monitoring Position Update be noted;
2. the programme performance pack due to be presented to the Finance and Investment Board be provided to members of the Committee.

OSC21/02/25 Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

The Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme was presented to the Committee for review and, if necessary, revision.

The Chair explained that there would be a significant period of time between the next two scheduled meetings in March and July 2025. He suggested that if members of the Committee were supportive of the idea, an additional meeting be arranged during April. This would allow time for members to review the operation of the Committee over its first year, consider its future arrangements and formulate proposals for inclusion in its annual report. In considering its future arrangements it was suggested that the Committee would need to have regard to the Government's proposals for mayoral devolution in England set out in the recently published White Paper.

The Committee highlighted the need to develop mechanisms through which it could effectively monitor the performance and outcomes of those programmes reported to the Committee. In doing so the Committee would have to be mindful that delivery of the Authority's missions was dependent on collaboration with others, for example health bodies, and so it would have to work with others to effectively fulfil its scrutiny role.

Members noted that the programme included a scrutiny exercise to review and assess the benefits of transport investment, by examining the impact of the Northumberland Line to Ashington. It was proposed that this exercise be undertaken in January 2026, after one year of the railways line's operation.

The Chair suggested that issues raised by members relating to metro stations in South Tyneside and access to the metro system for users of mobility scooters could be addressed as part of the Committee's consideration of the Local Transport Plan at its next meeting.

It was **agreed** that;

1. the work programme be updated to reflect the issues set out above; and
2. if necessary, an additional meeting of the Committee be arranged to be held in April 2025.

OSC22/02/25 Highways Infrastructure Funding

The Committee met with Jonathan Bailes, Head of Transport Programmes, who provided an overview of the roles and responsibilities of both the combined authority and local authorities with regards to maintaining highways. He also outlined the Authority's proposed approach to the allocation of highways maintenance funding to local authorities as part of the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) and based on the production of a Regional Transport

Asset Management Plan (TAMP). The proposed approach was due to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting in March 2025.

Members asked questions and made comments.

Officers clarified the division of responsibility between local authorities, who would continue to be responsible for the maintenance of critical highways infrastructure, and the role of the North East CA for allocating funding through a fair, consistent and transparent process. This process would be informed by the TAMP and would seek to reduce whole-life costs and mitigate the risk of impacting overall budgets for major interventions. Members welcomed this clarification and emphasised the importance of both the Authority and its constituent councils fulfilling their respective responsibilities. If the North East CA were to determine a region wide approach to the allocation of highways funding, members commented that it ought to ensure that; a) local authorities retain responsibility for their infrastructure; and b) all funding be allocated, in accordance with that process. Members sought assurance that highways funding could not be allocated contrary to the Authority's agreed approach. It was suggested that the Committee could play a role in reviewing the adequacy and delivery of the approach by scrutinising the allocation of funding and assessing performance data collected by the Authority for reporting to the Department of Transport. It was also suggested that the Committee should refer the matter to the relevant overview and scrutiny committee of each constituent council so that they may consider whether they wish to scrutinise their own authority's approach to the maintenance of highway infrastructure within this context.

The Committee also considered:

- a) the financial pressures associated with highways funding which would be subject to the Government's spending review in Spring 2025;
- b) the role for the Authority in lobbying Government and collaborating with Highways England to secure highways improvements across the region; and
- c) the opportunity for the Authority to facilitate and convene joint working between local authorities to deliver or procure highways services such as street lighting.

It was **agreed** that:

1. the clarification of the roles and responsibilities of both the combined authority and local authorities with regards to maintaining highways be noted and welcomed;
2. the Committee's comments set out above be reported to Cabinet at its meeting in March 2025, to be taken into account when it determines the Authority's approach to the allocation of highways maintenance funding to local authorities as part of the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS);
3. a further scrutiny exercise to review the adequacy and delivery of the Authority's approach to allocating highways maintenance funding be scheduled for February 2026; and
4. the issues considered by the Committee be referred to the relevant overview and scrutiny committee of each constituent council so that they may consider whether they wish to scrutinise their own authority's approach to the maintenance of highway infrastructure within this context.

OSC23/02/25 Education Improvement Programme

Work was underway with regional stakeholders to identify new regional priorities which would inform the strategic direction of the North East CA's education improvement programme from September 2025. Councillor Tracey Dixon, Cabinet Member for Education, Inclusion and Skills, accompanied by Adrian Dougherty, Interim Strategic Leader for Skills, Inclusion and Public Service Reform, and Andrew Garrad, Senior Programme manager, attended the meeting to present the emerging vision and priorities and to seek the Committee's views and comments on how the programme might be developed in the future.

The Committee were also provided with an overview of the education improvement work being delivered during the 2024/25 academic year. Work was currently being mobilised through

commissioned services and grant funded support across three interlinked objectives: a) school improvement; b) professional development; and c) responding to local priorities. There were currently 492 schools supported (from a total of 844 across the region) across 748 points of engagement.

The Committee asked a series of questions and made comments when the following issues were considered in more detail:

- a) officers assured the Committee that the Authority had worked in collaboration with the Department for Education, local authorities, academy trusts and charities to identify pressure points and gaps in provision so that the programme would avoid duplication and add value;
- b) the programme had sought to use existing data collection and evaluation mechanisms to reduce the risk of adding bureaucracy in schools;
- c) it was acknowledged that the Authority had no statutory powers in relation to education and so it had to work with others to develop and define its role within the sector;
- d) the programme's future strategic direction would take account of the aims of the new Child Poverty Reduction Unit to build a strategic, long-term and collaborative approach to addressing child poverty in the region;
- e) the Committee expressed an interest in undertaking further work to review and assess the impact of the programme on factors such as attendance, exclusions and child poverty;
- f) the programme included elements to support pastoral care and careers advice in schools;
- g) the Committee expressed its support for the Authority facilitating and encouraging local authorities to collaborate with each other and share best practice;
- h) the Authority had worked with many, but not all, multi academy trusts; and
- i) the emerging priorities for the programme included teacher wellbeing and development. It was suggested that consideration also needed to be given to the retention of teaching staff, to reduce the loss of qualified staff after years of investment and training.

It was **agreed** that:

1. the Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Inclusion and the Interim Strategic Leader for Skills, Inclusion and Public Service Reform, in developing the future strategic direction of the education improvement programme, be asked to:
 - a) ensure that the programme does not duplicate or replicate existing provision in an already congested education sector;
 - b) place emphasis on how the programme can help improve attendance at school, reduce exclusions and reduce child poverty; and
 - c) give consideration to the retention of teachers as well as their wellbeing and development,
2. the Committee undertake a further scrutiny exercise to review and assess the impact of the programme in September 2025 on factors such as attendance, exclusions and child poverty.

OSC24/02/25 Supporting People with Disabilities, Health Conditions and Additional Barriers to Seek Sustained Employment

The Committee met with Councillor Tracey Dixon, Cabinet Member for Education, Inclusion and Skills, Adrian Dougherty, Interim Strategic Leader for Skills, Inclusion and Public Service Reform and Ruth Gaul, Principal Programme Manager, to examine and comment on how the Authority could support people with disabilities, health conditions and additional barriers to seek sustained employment.

The Committee were presented with a report setting out the national and regional policy context, the challenges in the North East labour market, the current support available to residents and details of new integrated, innovative regional employment support including:

- a) Connect to Work, the first major element of the Get Britain Working Strategy, to help connect local work, health and skills support and provide a coherent, systematic, and joined up approach to maximise the benefits available for individuals and local communities; and

- b) Economic Inactivity Trailblazer. In December 2024 the North East CA had been identified as a Trailblazer to bring together health, employment, and skills services to improve the support available to those who are inactive due to ill health and help them return to work.

The Committee were invited to ask questions and to comment on these initiatives to help shape and influence the Authority's approach. In doing so the Committee:

- a) highlighted the importance of working with employers and organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry, Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses to address the stigma associated with long term absences from work;
- b) referred to the current challenges in the education sector caused by a loss of learning and social skills during the Covid pandemic and suggested that the Authority's strategies and programmes to support people into work would need to begin to prepare for the needs and demands of young people currently in education;
- c) explored in more detail how neuro-diverse people could be supported into employment;
- d) highlighted the importance of childcare in supporting people to return to work;
- d) acknowledged the role of the public sector in taking a lead as major employers through their equality, diversity and inclusion policies; and
- e) reiterated the need for the Committee to monitor the performance and outcomes of the Authority's programmes.

It was **agreed** that:

1. the Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Inclusion and the Interim Strategic Leader for Skills, Inclusion and Public Service Reform, in developing the Authority's programmes to support people into employment, be asked to give particular consideration to:
 - a) working with employers and employer organisations to address the stigma associated with long term absences from work; and
 - b) the needs of young people currently in education who may in the future experience different challenges in securing employment due to a loss of learning and social skills during the Covid pandemic;
2. the Committee undertake a further scrutiny exercise in February 2026 to review and assess the development of Connect to Work and the Economic Inactivity Trailblazer.