



Meeting of Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

4 March 2025

(10.00am)

Meeting held in: Quadrant, North Tyneside

Notes

Present:

- Councillor Les Bowman
- Councillor Rob Crute
- Councillor Richard Dodd
- Councillor Steve Fairlie
- Councillor Stuart Green
- Councillor Chris Lines
- Councillor Jim Montague
- Councillor Shane Smith
- Councillor Dawn Welsh

In attendance: Councillor Brian Gallacher

The following items of business were discussed by members and substitute members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee when there were an insufficient number of members present to conduct a quorate meeting of the Committee. Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Tracy Dodds, John Eagle, Colin Ferguson, Charlie Gray, Andrew Guy, John McCabe, Dominic McDonough, Antony Mullen and Claire Rowntree.

1. North East Strategic Place Partnership

Members met with Heather Orton, Principal Housing Infrastructure Manager, Peter Mennell, Director of Housing at North Tyneside Council, and Matthew Bell from Homes England, to examine the development of the North East Strategic Place Partnership (SPP) and comment on its future strategic direction. Dame Norma Redfearn DBE, Cabinet Member for Housing and Land, had also been invited to attend the meeting but had submitted her apologies for absence.

The SPP had been established as part of the “trailblazer” deeper devolution deal to provide a framework for greater collaboration and unlock housing delivery and place-based growth. Officers presented details of the SPP’s strategic objectives, its priority focus areas, governance arrangements and examples of delivery including Forth Yards, Newcastle and the Sunderland Riverside regeneration.

Members asked a series of questions and made comments when the following issues were discussed in more detail:

- a) the extent to which the development of brownfield sites would deliver the Government’s housing targets,
- b) the relationship between local plans, to be determined by constituent councils on how the housing targets would be delivered, and the SPP, whose focus would be to support the delivery of housing according to local priorities and by unlocking challenging sites,

- c) the risk of the growth and overdevelopment of some towns leading to a change in their shape and size and damaging the vibrancy and cohesiveness of communities,
- d) a need for growth and house building in rural, coastal and former industrial areas to sustain communities and services,
- e) the opportunities to set regional design standards and to work with developers to deliver high-quality homes and
- f) the capacity of the SPP to support house building on small sites, for example redeveloping derelict clubs, churches and office blocks.

2. Mayor's Local Transport Plan

The Local Transport Plan (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. Members of the Committee had previously commented on the draft LTP and the proposed approach to an extensive public consultation exercise at its meeting on 8 October 2024. Since then, the LTP had been subject to consultation between 4 November 2024 and 26 January 2025.

Members met with Philip Meikle, Assistant Director of Transport, who presented details of the response to the consultation, its findings and next steps. A reshaped version of the LTP had been produced to reflect feedback received during the consultation which had highlighted:

- A need for greater reference to how transport can support economic and housing growth sites;
- Requests to include taxis as part of the integrated transport network;
- A need to better align the LTP with the North East CA missions and the North East Local Growth Plan;
- Calls for stronger references to freight; and,
- The need to prioritise maintenance and resilience of existing transport assets.

The reshaped LTP would be presented to the Cabinet on 18 March 2025 to be endorsed prior to publication as the finalised plan.

During their discussion members:

- a) expressed their support for a fully integrated public transport system including integrated ticketing and fares,
- b) suggested that all residents living within the North East CA area should be eligible for the Metro Gold Card at the same cost. Officers undertook to provide members with clarification regarding the current eligibility and costs,
- c) welcomed the proportion of consultation responses received from women and examined in more detail the extent and nature of engagement with young people,
- d) queried how the needs of people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act had been given due regard and how the LTP aligned with the Authority's emerging equality objectives and
- e) explored with officers the opportunities within the region to improve freight connectivity, including improved connections with the airport, ports and the rail network.

3. Leamside Investment Corridor

In January 2025, Cabinet had agreed to allocate £500k from the Authority's Investment Fund to develop a Leamside Investment Corridor Strategy. The strategy would set out plans for a broad, ambitious vision for the area around the line; one that was about place-based growth, regeneration, better access to skills and employment, the potential for a new town and/or other significant new housing, and the opportunity to realise significant government and private sector investment. Members met with Mags Scott, Director of Finance and Investment, and Ian Freshwater, Senior Economic Development & Regeneration Officer, to comment on the proposal and help inform and shape the strategy at its very early stages of development.

In challenging the feasibility of re-opening the Leamside Line, Members noted that the Authority had committed £8m to prepare an Outline Business Case incorporating detailed design work and costings for the first phase of the re-opening which would form an extension of the metro system from Felling to South Hylton via Washington. Further work to prepare a Strategic Business Case for the re-opening of the southern leg of the line to Tursdale Junction had commenced and had received support from the Department of Transport, Homes England and other partners as an ambitious scheme of national significance and a catalyst for growth in the region. The business case process and the development of a Leamside Investment Corridor Strategy would be about testing the feasibility of the ambitious, long term plans for the area.

Members offered a range of comments and questions when the following issues were considered in more detail:

- a) the need for local transport connections between the Leamside Line and the centre of Washington,
- b) the importance of improved transport connections to the North East,
- c) the challenges in developing parkway railway stations on the East Coast Main Line,
- d) the nature and range of passenger and freight rail services which could be operated on the line,
- e) the opportunities to unlock significant levels of new private sector investment and
- f) the opportunities to connect key economic sites and communities in County Durham.

4. Equality Objectives

Members met with Emma Patterson, Policy Development Officer, Leigh Mills, Head of Skills and Inclusion, and Robin Fry, Inclusive Economy Adviser to examine progress made towards delivery of the Authority's Equality Objectives for 2024/25 and to comment on the plans for setting longer term objectives for 2025-2028. The new equality objectives were due to be considered by Cabinet at its meeting in June 2025.

In considering the proposed longer term objectives members commented on:

- a) the need to reduce transport related social exclusion to improve transport for all users and allow older and disabled people to travel safely,
- b) the importance of collaborating and sharing data with constituent councils to avoid duplication and to utilise existing activity and knowledge and
- c) their wish to receive details of the action plan to be formulated once the Cabinet approves the Authority's Equality Objectives and to receive an annual report on delivery of the objectives.

5. Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme

Members reviewed the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme.

Following consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair, it was proposed that an informal meeting of members of the Committee be held on Tuesday 1 April 2025 at 10.00am to review the operation of the Committee and to formulate an annual report. A meeting of the Committee to approve the annual report had provisionally been arranged to be held on Tuesday 15 April 2025 at 10.00am in Newcastle Civic Centre.

Members expressed concern that a meeting on 15 April 2025 could be inquorate because it fell within the pre-election and Easter holiday periods. Officers undertook to check the availability of members and consult with the Chair and Vice Chair before confirming arrangements for the next meeting.