

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 31 October 2018 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J.Reid
(Chairman, in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Armstrong, E.
Cartie, E.
Dunbar, C.
Dunn, E.

Gallacher, B.
Gibson, R.
Pattison, W.
Swithenbank, I.C.F.

CABINET MEMBERS

Riddle, J. Planning, Housing and Resilience

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

P. Soderquest
J. Young
G. Gavin
D. Robertson
S. Nicholson

Head of Housing
Strategic Housing Manager
Head of Neighbourhood Services
Fleet Manager
Scrutiny Co-ordinator

2 Press/Public

32. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor J. Beynon.

33. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC held on 3 October 2018, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

34. FORWARD PLAN

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator presented the latest Forward Plan of key decisions (November 2018 to January 2019). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix A).

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

35. CABINET REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY THE COMMITTEE

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator advised members of Cabinet decisions regarding issues previously commented on and been subject of report by this Committee. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix B).

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

36. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

36.1 Retention of Affordable Housing

This report provided an update for members of the retention of Affordable Housing in Northumberland and how this was managed through enforcement of existing covenants and s106 agreements. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix C).

The Chairman referred to this report and the next item on the agenda and advised the Committee that they would receive a report on the updated Housing Strategy, detailing the strategic housing priorities for the county for three years, at the next meeting. He confirmed that members would have the opportunity to comment on strategic housing issues at that meeting.

With regard to this report, the Committee were advised that the figures for Affordable Housing detailed in the Housing Strategy 2013-2018 (1300) were determined in 2012 as part of the strategy development. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment update produced five years later in 2017, determined that there was an annual net shortfall of 151 dwellings per annum to meet the revised need that had subsequently been identified. As referred to earlier, a review of the Housing Strategy was being undertaken to ensure that recent changes in focus and aspiration were captured.

The Committee were advised that it was possible for individuals to apply to the Council to have covenants lifted from properties, but such requests had to demonstrate that there was a genuine need for the change and were only removed under exceptional circumstances.

The Committee noted that there was high demand for affordable housing in Northumberland and were advised that many could be accessed through the Homefinder portal, which banded those with greatest need as the highest priority.

With regard to s106 Planning obligations, the Chairman referred to the “standard format developed by the Affordable Housing Officer, the s106 Officer and the Legal Team which provides a sound basis for the negotiation process with developers” in the report and requested that a copy of the document be made available to the Committee. It was further suggested that member training be offered on s106 Agreements and the Infrastructure Levy.

RESOLVED that

- (a) the report be noted, and
- (b) the standard format for s106 agreements be circulated to the Committee.

36.2 Homelessness in Northumberland

This report provided an update for members of the service provision for residents who were homeless or at risk of homelessness in Northumberland, provided an outline of the key strategic objectives and numbers of service requests received. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix D).

The Committee noted that a high proportion of homelessness could be attributed to domestic abuse. Although the highest number of these were from the former Blyth Valley area, cases appeared to be decreasing within that locality. It was felt that this was a consequence of the early intervention work that the Council was implementing with partner agencies to either maintain tenancies, or provide mediation to move on from a property before reaching crisis point.

Members expressed concern that the figures relating to “rough sleepers” were much higher than those expressed in the report. The numbers were collated from charitable and other partner organisations where homeless people presented themselves on a particular night in October. In 2011, Housing Officers had undertaken the count, targeting the county’s market towns, but found no rough sleepers. It was acknowledged by members and officers that many rough sleepers did not want to identify themselves as such and therefore could not be reflected in the figures. The Committee expressed their frustration that the Government had not prescribed a method for collecting this data and was content to accept the low figures without challenge.

Members were assured that there were no cases of homelessness caused by people living in Council owned property being evicted due to rent arrears.

The Committee were advised that the new computer system introduced to process data in line with Government requirements, was placing huge pressure on the service as it changed the reporting regime.

The Committee felt that a further report needed to be presented to the Committee in six months to include:

- further investigation into the number of rough sleepers in the county;

- details of the Northumberland Homelessness Partnership;
- the impact the roll-out of universal credit has had on homelessness, and
- an update on the implementation of the new processes required to collect data to meet Government requirements, including the effectiveness of the new computer system.

The Committee commended the work of officers in Housing Services who often went “above and beyond” to offer assistance to those in need.

RESOLVED that

- (a) the report be noted, and
- (b) a further report be presented to the Committee in six months to update members on the issues highlighted above.

36.3 Fleet Replacement Programme

This report provided an update on progress made with the delivery of the Council’s fleet replacement programme for 2018/19. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix E).

The Committee welcomed the use of vehicle GPS trackers to robustly challenge services over the need for replacement vehicles before they were ordered.

Members were surprised that some vehicles could take up to seven months to be delivered and even then, that timescale could not be guaranteed, meaning that contingencies had to be put in place if delivery was delayed. Indeed, six gritters had to be hired-in for the start of this winter period at a cost of £29,000, but this figure was offset as the Council was not paying for the new vehicles. It was felt that this was a better alternative to refurbishing older vehicles, which would have cost £81,000, as there was no certainty that they would be needed. The Council’s Procurement Team were seeking to improve delivery times, whilst being mindful that that should not lead to an increase in costs.

Members were further advised that leaving the European Union may have an impact on future gritter orders, as although the current vehicles were assembled in this country, the chassis was made in Germany.

The Chairman noted that reference was made in the report that Fleet Services were working towards replacing a large proportion of small vans with electric vehicles from 2019/2020, and that a report was being prepared setting out details of this proposal. He requested that if the proposal reached an advanced stage a report should be presented to this Committee for appraisal and comment.

RESOLVED that the good work undertaken within both the Fleet Management Service and the Procurement team to deliver a challenging fleet replacement programme during 2018/19, and the requirement for reprofiling of expenditure into the 2019/20 capital programme to cover the cost of vehicles that have been ordered

and are in manufacture, but which may not be delivered by 31 March 2019, be noted.

37. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator presented the Committee's Work Programme for 2018/19. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix F).

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

38. INFORMATION REPORT - POLICY DIGEST

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator advised the Committee that the Policy Digest gave details of the latest policy briefings, government announcements and ministerial speeches which may be of interest to members. The report could be accessed through the service finder element of County Council's website at www.northumberland.gov.uk.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Chairman _____

Date _____