

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 4 December 2019 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid
(Chairman, in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

Dunbar, C.
Gallacher, B.
Dunn, L.

Gibson, R.
Pattison, W.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

C. Angus
L. Bennett
S. Nicholson
P. Soderquest
J. Stewart

Scrutiny Officer
Democratic Services Officer
Scrutiny Co-ordinator
Head of Housing & Public Protection
Strategic Housing Manager

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE

Press: 1

31. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors J. Beynon, E. Cartie, J.Riddle.

32. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC held on 30 October 2019, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor J. Reid declared an interest in the discussion on the Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy as he was a director of Advance Northumberland.

34. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (November 2019 to February 2020). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes as **Appendix A**).

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

35. OVERVIEW

35.1 Empty Homes in Northumberland

Philip Soderquest and Julie Stewart provided an overview regarding the issue of empty homes in the county, the measures the Council was undertaking to bring them into use and the challenges that this presented.

Key points of the report included the Purchase and Repair Scheme and Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs). Figures for empty properties by Council Tax band were provided along with details of the nine parishes with the highest number of empty properties.

Discussion followed and a number of points were raised including:-

- A number of powers were available to Northumberland County Council to respond to problematic properties. These were designed to address particular issues such as infestations, disrepair and visual amenity but not necessarily to bring an empty property back into use.
- With regard to EDMOs, a financial decision on the viability of repairing an empty property was required to ensure that the cost could be recouped within a seven year period.
- Eleven properties had been brought back into use with a further four in progress under the EDMO scheme.
- Council Tax data was mainly used to determine the number of empty properties. It was acknowledged that it may not always be clear whether a property was actually a second home or genuinely empty.
- There were a number of empty properties within the Council's housing stock but these were mainly low demand properties due to their location or house type and there were several which were empty pending proposed demolition.
- It was in no-one's interest to have long term void properties on their housing stock.
- Local Councillors had extensive knowledge of their Divisions and this information could be a valuable resource in identifying empty properties.
- It may be useful to work on a town by town basis to do a more detailed investigation of the numbers of empty properties. It was noted that this would have a resource impact on officers.

A view was expressed that the Council Tax raised on empty properties should be set aside to assist in financing schemes designed to bring them back into use.

RESOLVED that

- (1) the report be noted.
- (2) Council be recommended to ring fence the additional Council Tax raised on empty properties as agreed at Council on 6 November 2019 for use in bringing empty properties back into use.

35.2 Northumberland Homefinder Common Allocation Policy

Philip Soderquest and Julie Stewart provided an overview of the Common Allocation Policy and its use in allocating homes across the county through the Northumberland Homefinder system. (Report attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix B**).

Members were informed about the legislative framework surrounding the policy, the banding system, local connection and rural allocation criteria.

Discussion followed and a number of points were raised including:-

- Concern was expressed by two Members that there were inconsistencies in the application of the rural allocation policy and referred to instances when a homeless person was given a house in a rural area. It was noted that this was possible if the homeless person had a local connection under the rural allocation policy.
- It was a choice based system and, as such, any person could bid for a house in another area.
- It was acknowledged that not everyone had access to the internet and so would have difficulty in accessing Homefinder and bidding for a property. There were two dedicated officers who were able to assist in these cases, help identify properties and support them in the bidding process.
- The window for bidding for properties was open for a few days and bids were assessed at the close of that period. It was not on a first come first served basis.
- There were a number of other potential options available to young couples who may have a very low priority on the banding system. However, if real need was identified, this would be reflected by their band. It was also unfortunate that demand was greater than supply.
- All housing providers using Homefinder to advertise available properties pay a charge for every property let. This charge was used to fund the cost of staffing and provision of the IT system.
- It was noted that national guidance would be sought regarding the list of countries identified on page 42 of the policy document, post Brexit.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

36. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed and noted its work programme for the 2019/20 council year. (Report attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix C**).

It was noted that a report on Antisocial Behaviour Issues would be submitted to the February 2020 meeting.

A suggestion was made that a report be submitted to a future meeting on Ash dieback.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Chairman _____

Date _____