

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a virtual meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** on Wednesday, 15 July 2020 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J.Reid
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Armstrong, E.
Beynon, J.
Cartie, E.
Dunbar, C

Dunn, E.
Gallacher, B.
Hepple, A.
Pattison, W.

CABINET MEMBER

Dodd, R.
Homer, C.R.
Jackson, P.
Sanderson, H.G.H.

Business Chair
Culture, Arts, Leisure & Tourism
Leader
Environment & Local Services

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

K. Angus

Executive Director of HR and OD
and Deputy Chief Executive
Service Director - Adult Services
and Community

S. Holmes

Service Director - HR and OD
Chief Executive

P. Hunter

Director of Public Health

D. Lally

Scrutiny Co-Ordinator

E. Morgan

Executive Director - Corporate
Resources - Planning & Economy
Director - Business Development
(Care Services)

S. Nicholson

R. O'Farrell

Democratic Services Officer

M. Taylor

N. Turnbull

51. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Gibson.

Ch.'s Initials.....

52. MINUTES

Councillor Gallagher requested an update on issues raised on 3 June 2020, for the next meeting.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC held on 3 June 2020, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

53. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Cartie declared personal, non prejudicial interest in item 4.2 Covid-19 - Planning for Recovery in Northumberland, as her employer had been a recipient of a small business relief grant.

54. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORTS

The Committee was advised that the following reports were considered by the Cabinet on 23 June 2020. The Committee was requested to consider issues arising from the reports.

54.1 Covid-19 - Northumberland County Council Response

The report provided Cabinet with a full update on the impact of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on the work of Northumberland County Council and provided an overview of the Council's immediate emergency response from mid-March until the date the report is published. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix A).

The Chief Executive outlined the main points within the report which had included:

- Mobilisation of its Emergency Community Assistance Plan (ECAP), Business Continuity Plans (BCP's) and the Council's Emergency Committee.
- Regular meetings of the Covid-19 Executive Team, which set the strategic direction and response priorities for the organisation; and the Business Interruption Management Team, to ensure operational issues were managed across services and essential service delivery was maintained.

Regional arrangements had been addressed by the Local Resilience Forum, which had involved the 6 local authorities within the Northumbria Police Force area and also representatives from numerous other organisations including NHS England, the Ambulance Service, civil contingencies etc. Issues considered had included work on excess death management and coordination of PPE.

Four local priorities had been identified by the Council to ensure that overarching arrangements met the needs of the County:

- Ensuring necessary structures were in place to ensure delivery of an enhanced service in a safe and structured way.
- Continued delivery of essential services in changed circumstances.
- Ensuring the safety and well-being of staff and residents.
- Consideration of recovery and resuming business as usual, at the earliest opportunity.

The work of the Council had been supported by many departments across the authority including front line services and office staff working from home.

Key areas of work had included:

- **Northumberland Communities Together** established a hub for individuals and communities to provide support. The hub delivered and facilitated activity, with a lot of the action taken by communities with support from local businesses; making deliveries, donating food, products and money. Over 13,000 shielded residents had been provided with support or contact.
- **The Business Hub** had been formed with a dedicated team of Advisors to sign-post businesses to the latest Government guidance and support. Over £86 million in grants had been distributed to over 7,650 businesses.
- **Adult Social Care** adoption of a new operating model to support hospital discharges and other additional support for this essential service.

The Chief Executive placed on record her thanks to every staff member who had continued to work across the Council and also the many other volunteers, businesses and organisations who had contributed to the wellbeing and economic wellbeing of the County.

Councillor Sanderson stated that he was extremely proud of the staff that had enabled the Council to continue to function and provide services, particularly within his own area of responsibility, Local Services and Environment, which included street cleaning, grass cutting, planting, emptying of bins. He highlighted the following:

- Working with Suez, the authority had been one of the first to reopen household waste recovery centres and had provided traffic management and signage to ensure that this had been well organised. This had been followed by the reopening of country parks, car parks, public toilets and almost all play parks, where it was safe to do so.
- Currently there was a limited bulky waste removal service whilst screens were awaited for vehicle cabs to enable double crews for heavier items.
- Local Services and Regeneration staff had been involved with the reopening of town centres. The signage and Town Ambassadors had been well received.

- The country parks had been enjoyed by many residents when reopened. Further investment was planned to improve parking at Plessey Woods and QE2 in Ashington.
- The Climate Change Steering Group continued to meet to ensure that key targets within the action plan were met. This would be aided by the appointment of a new Engagement officer.
- The Regeneration Team was actively encouraging investment to facilitate recovery and allow towns to flourish in the future.
- Officers and members had worked well as a team to make difficult decisions regarding the closing and reopening of facilities, with safety being the main priority.

Many of the members complimented officers on the clarity of the reports which had been comprehensive and easy to understand. They also expressed their appreciation to senior officers and staff for the incredible work that had been carried out during the pandemic, including the Communities Together campaign, availability of PPE and requirement of a negative Covid test for residents returning to care homes after being in hospital. They noted the willingness of the Council to work with all partners, not just statutory organisations but also businesses and local people. Councillors had received many positive comments with little or no complaints.

The following information was provided in answer to questions from Members:

- Recovery work was ongoing, not only in terms of the economy and financially, but also in respect of adult social care and childrens and families services. The response from communities had been incredible and whilst it was unlikely that things would remain the same, plans had been developed over a number of years to see how support services would be delivered in the future, to support families to be independent.
- Checks had been made early on to ensure that shielded and vulnerable residents had the support they required. Whilst 13,000 residents had support delivered directly; arrangements had been in place for the remaining 5,000 shielded residents via friends, family, neighbours, the community, district nurses or social workers. As it could not be guaranteed that every individual had been contacted, they had ensured that Northumberland News had been delivered to every household to raise awareness of the hub. Feedback had been positive, although it was recognised that some things could have been done differently or better. Support had been given to care homes in terms of infection control training and free PPE and additional staffing.
- The government funding had been welcomed but more was needed to continue to deliver and operate services. Given the circumstances some of the balancing savings or income generation may not be delivered this year and therefore they would seek additional funding and support from the government whilst teams continued to work efficiently and effectively.
- The needs of all communities and wards were considered individually and officers would build on the work that had happened during the pandemic to ensure any 'gains' from visible and virtual networks were not lost. A report would be considered at Cabinet the following week regarding significant

funding allocated for the community hubs from the North of Tyne Combined Authority.

- Delegated decisions had been made to ensure the Council could operate and these had been notified to members. Some difficult decisions had been made regarding the opening and closing of services, but there had not been any issues regarding the allocation of funding, which had not been made on a parochial basis to ensure equality. Officers had been contacted by some members with regard to support or services in smaller villages, towns and communities with service delivery decisions being made in a risk managed way on necessity to ensure the safety of residents and delivery of services was maintained.
- Telephone diverts for officers depended on the area of work. The majority of staff were working at home and this would continue until it was safe for larger numbers to return to work. Whilst some Councillors found it more effective to meet officers in person, virtual meetings could be arranged subject to officer availability or site visits held observing social distancing. Information would be included in the next Chief Executive bulletin regarding contact with officers. Many Councillors had welcomed the use of virtual meetings and the assistance that had been given by officers in IT. Guidance would be produced for Members to help them set up their own virtual meetings.
- Key members, group leaders and all members had been kept up to date by officers. Meetings of the Emergency Committee could be called by members of officers. A number of meetings had been held with representatives from each group. Another meeting was expected to be held at the end of July / beginning of August to discuss the recovery plans and take advice and to assure the right arrangements were in place.
- Pillar 1 swab testing was being undertaken by NHS laboratories.
- The Health and Well-being Board would act as the Covid-19 Outbreak Control Board, as identified within the Northumberland Covid-19 Outbreak Control Plan. The Local Communications and Engagement sub group was in the process of being finalised and was expected to meet at the end of July.
- The Excess Deaths Management Group was put in place for worst case scenario planning assumptions to plan for a large number of deaths which would overwhelm the capacity of existing mortuaries. It was set up to put systems and processes in place to manage large numbers of deaths and body storage facilities, coroner services to deal with bodies and families appropriately.
- £1.5 million had been secured from the North of Tyne Combined Authority via Government to support businesses and community response and resilience activities such as training and skills.
- Approximately 2,500 staff working remotely represented approximately 60% of the payroll. Those working entirely at home amounted to 40% with the remaining 20% working between the home and office.
- Delivery of services to residents was a key priority alongside the health and wellbeing of staff. There had been regular contact with staff, including telephone calls and surveys, risk assessments, clarification of duties. These would inform how services were delivered in the future.

54.2 Covid-19 - Planning for Recovery in Northumberland

The report outlined the Council's plans to support residents, businesses and communities to recover from the Covid-19 crisis in the coming weeks and months. The report was not intended to be guidance to residents, businesses or other organisations regarding the Covid-19 restrictions and nothing in this report should be interpreted either explicitly or implicitly as guidance. In all cases, residents were asked to refer to the latest Government guidance which was available online. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix B.)

The Recovery report contained a lot of detail about the work which was ongoing around economic recovery and about working safely with partners going forward.

The Chief Executive confirmed that in terms of recovery, it was critical to continue to follow Government and Public Health advice for the wellbeing of staff and residents and be mindful about maintaining social distance and work at home if this was possible. However, it was necessary to regenerate and refresh the economy so that people could get about the county safely to support services and businesses.

The Leader of the Council, commented that:

- The crisis was not yet over and therefore there was a need to deliver services across Northumberland in a very safe way.
- They were attempting to resume all council services back to business as usual, as quickly as was feasible, get towns operational again as they were key to communities, local businesses and economies and encourage people to use them.
- It was estimated the local economy had reduced between 23-25% in the previous 3-4 months. To support the economy in Northumberland, a 6 point plan had been devised:
 - Promote Northumberland's Tourism - a tourism hub had been established to assist businesses with advice and support and a new campaign to encourage visitors.
 - Invest in new infrastructure in schools, leisure facilities, additional parking and housing, which would support the building economy.
 - Work with Government on the Northumberland Line - with an extra £750k to be invested in Blyth Town Centre.
 - Business Hub to continue to give advice and support to small businesses.
 - Climate Change Action Plan - creation of new Northumberland Forest planting 1 million trees.
 - Emphasis on apprenticeships and training - the number of places had been doubled for all age groups.

The following information was provided in answer to question from Members:

- In response to a query regarding the lowering of the pension age and the creation of opportunities for young people, it was reported that youth unemployment in Northumberland had been at an all time low before the crisis and unfortunately it was expected that numbers would increase. Training of young people and quality of output from schools and educational institutions created skilled people to provide good jobs for the future and was considered the basis for a sound economy.
- An outcome of the crisis to be an opportunity to increase skill and income levels. International companies wanted to invest in locations across the county and particularly in the South East, such as the offshore industry, which would create many well paid jobs. The investment was to be encouraged. Raising of skill levels started in schools with improved education, increased opportunities, life prospects and income.
- There were 350 apprenticeship positions in the Council and many contracts included apprenticeship clauses; the question was also included as part of the evaluation process.
- The leadership was aware of the potential of a second spike, however the onus rested with the public to maintain and observe social distancing rules. The most effective track and trace system was being implemented to address the risks of a second spike.
- The Council were building on the opportunities of brexit, and the potential of freeport status for Blyth and Ashington , included in the hinterland, would provide opportunities to trade internationally, particularly in respect of offshore manufacturing.
- It was agreed that smaller parks were as important as the country parks for providing opportunities for fresh air and links with nature. Nearly £2 million was allocated within the Local Transport Plan for cycling and walking initiatives although there had been a delay in commencing the programme due to the pandemic and would link smaller villages to towns.
- Planning permission had been granted for a cinema and an extension to the retail space in Ashington with work due to start in Spring 2021.
- An extra £3.5 million had been granted by the Government to deliver the Northumberland Line scheme which it was hoped would be running by 2023/24.
- The majority of applications for the Emergency Small Business Grants were within the eligibility criteria and had been dealt with efficiently and promptly by the Revenues and Benefits Team, with support from Internal Audit to ensure the right IT and audit checks were built in from the beginning. Further information had been sought if the initial information supplied was not considered to be adequate. There would also be a backward review to ensure the right arrangements had been implemented and the possibility of fraud minimised.
- The Council had recently appointed a new Executive Director of Regeneration, Commercial and Economy who was in the process of conducting a review of arrangements. Staffing had been reviewed in the previous three years with emphasis on business and supporting communities. It was not anticipated that large numbers of staff could be recruited given the need to deliver critical priorities and balancing the budget. A robust review of back office functions was being conducted with

staff being shared. Where there was a critical role or deficit, these would be replaced.

- A written response be obtained from the Executive Director of Finance for all members with regard to the process of business rate relief.

The Chair summarised the discussion as follows:

- Careful consideration should be given to new businesses requiring planning and licensing permission and the impact that these could have on nearby residential areas.
- Incorporation of a Covid-19 box in committee reports.
- The Council had performed very well during the crisis.
- The reports had been well written and informative.
- The positive effect of the work with communities and volunteers be continued and built upon in a constructive way to support and enhance council services.

RESOLVED that the reports be noted and the issue identified by members be included in the work programme.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____