

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, 27 March 2019 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid
(Chairman, in the Chair)

COUNCILLORS

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

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

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

P. Johnston
P. Soderquest
S. Nicholson

Interim Executive Director of Place
Head of Housing and Public Protection
Scrutiny Co-ordinator

Councillors G. Hill and G. Roughead
1 Press

52. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC held on 6 February 2019, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

53. 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.
(Circulated for information only as Appendix A).

The Chairman expressed his disappointment that the Committee's suggestion that Town and Parish Councils be advised of any future changes to the operation of car parks within their area, prior to any public consultation was not accepted by the Cabinet. Members agreed that the Cabinet minutes should detail how it responded

to Overview and Scrutiny comments, whether they be supported or rejected so that they could monitor progress as appropriate.

RESOLVED that

- (a) the report be noted, and
- (b) the Scrutiny Co-ordinator raise the issue of how the Cabinet deals with OSC comments with the Council's Business Chair.

53. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORT

The Committee were advised that the following reports would be considered by the Cabinet on 9 April 2019. The Committee's comments would be presented to the Cabinet by the Chairman when it determined the reports.

Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2019-21

Paul Johnston, Interim Executive Director of Place, together with Philip Soderquest, Head of Housing and Public Protection, presented members with the refreshed Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2019 - 2021, updated following changes to legislation and requirements by Government to recognise and support the needs of Rough Sleepers. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix B).

The Committee were advised that the Cabinet would be recommended to approve the refreshed Homelessness Strategy, which supported the delivery of the Council's statutory obligations for our residents who were homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Although the Committee supported the Strategy, members sought clarification and made comment on the following:

- the Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme was a facility to private landlords whereby the Council underwrites the deposit to enable a homelessness person or family to access accommodation;
- when setting out statistics as a percentage, the actual numbers should be presented alongside to give context to them;
- in paragraph 1.10 of the Strategy, reference was made to 922 households contacting the homelessness and housing options service. Members felt that this figure should have been benchmarked against other similar authorities, so that they could understand whether this was a "good" or "poor" number;
- the terminology used in the Strategy should be consistent and legally correct. Officers should check whether such terms as "rough sleepers" or "households" were the most appropriate and used accordingly. Consideration should also be given to appending a glossary to the Strategy;

- although the Committee understood that the aims and objectives in paragraph 2.2 carried equal weight, they felt that the overriding priority should be to “ensure that no one has to sleep rough” assuming that was the correct phrase;
- also in that paragraph, the reference should be to residents with “more complex needs” who were also homeless, and
- with regard to “Priority 3 - Support people through Welfare Reform”, members were disappointed that this was needed, as bureaucracy should not be a barrier to preventing homelessness.

The Chairman then reminded members that on the 31 October 2018 OSC, they had received a report providing them with an update of the service provision for residents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Northumberland. At that meeting the Committee requested a further update to be presented in 6 months to include:

- (1) further investigation into the number of rough sleepers in the county;
- (2) details of the Northumberland Homelessness Partnership;
- (3) the impact the roll-out of universal credit has had on homelessness, and
- (4) 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.

As officers were in attendance, he felt that it would be appropriate to receive those updates as far as possible.

The Committee therefore received the following update on each of those points:

- (1) To support Rough Sleepers in the county, Northumberland had formed part of a regional bid through the Government’s Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) funding, which had recently been successful in receiving an award of £700,000 for the 11 participating authorities (Darlington, Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Redcar & Cleveland, South Tyneside, Stockton and Sunderland) and a further £150,000 for Newcastle City Council.

The level of provision to be made available within the north east region would be prepared in consultation with a team from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The funding would be used to consider how the Council could help entrenched rough sleepers across the region from the streets into accommodation. This work, using Rough Sleeping Navigators, would help inform the number of, often unseen, rough sleepers in the county to provide the basis to further develop services for them.

Members acknowledged that the additional funding would only provide short term solutions and that when the Strategy document was reviewed in 2021, the Committee would review the impact that funding had on the service over the intervening two years.

There was a suggestion that a 'pack' be devised including general advice and key contact details for those individuals and organisations who may be approached by homeless persons or families.

(2) The Northumberland Homelessness Partnership was established in 2011 to:

- help meet the housing needs of people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness by sharing information and working together to allocate housing in the most effective and appropriate way;
- assist the Council and partners in achieving its strategic targets outlined within the council's Housing Strategy and Homeless Strategy;
- provide support and guidance for support providers operating in Northumberland;
- create opportunities for both the Council and its partners to undertake their respective roles more effectively and efficiently;
- share information regarding best practices and new initiatives, and
- consider opportunities to working in a co-ordinated approach to support homeless people with complex needs.

The organisations included in the Partnership were:

- Northumberland County Council
- NHS Foundation Trust
- Supported Housing Providers (Changing Lives, Places for People, StopGap etc)
- VCS Partners (Berwick Youth Project, Crisis, Shelter etc)
- Department of Work and Pensions
- Northumbria Community Rehabilitation Company
- Probation Service
- Northumberland Recovery Partnership

All partners had undertaken to:

- contribute constructively to the aims of the Partnership;
- ensure that the organisation or group they represented made every effort to provide information necessary to facilitate the work of the Partnership;
- respect the fact that Partners had an overriding commitment to meet their own organisations requirements;
- respect the fact that some matters discussed at Partnership meeting were confidential and to observe the confidentiality agreement;
- contribute to the development of housing and homelessness strategies;
- share information relating to their performance in Northumberland, and
- use their best endeavours to access funding to support the provision of services.

The Partnership would normally meet on a quarterly basis, although additional meetings may be arranged if the need arose. Sub groups may meet at other times to address specific issues on behalf of the Partnership.

- (3) The true impact of the roll-out of Universal Credit on homelessness in Northumberland could not yet be determined. The service was working closely with the council's Universal Credit Steering Group to agree performance measures that could accurately determine if a person's homelessness was directly caused by Universal Credit. This would be a challenge as it was considered unlikely that this one factor in isolation would be a direct cause of homelessness. However, this would be regularly reviewed and reported to the Steering Group for consideration as part of the wider impacts of Universal Credit in Northumberland.

Members noted that there was not enough information at this early stage of the roll out of Universal Credit to measure its impact on homelessness, but requested a report be prepared for the Committee when meaningful data was available, including the numbers of people pushed into debt by the changes and the level of that debt.

The Committee were advised that the reasons people had been made homeless were many and complex, but support was available across several services including housing and children's services.

- (4) The updated computer system known as H-Clic, introduced to support the delivery and reporting requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act by the MHCLG, had been successfully implemented and the team were regularly reviewing the data submissions to ensure that officers accurately reflected the information provided by the clients they worked with. Reports were being developed that would provide the service with a clear understanding of any trends, which would also inform the reported performance indicators.

RESOLVED that

- (a) the Cabinet be advised that the Committee supports the recommendation in the report, subject to the comments as set out above;
- (b) the additional update on issues raised by the Committee on 31 October be noted, and
- (c) the Committee receive a further update on the issues previously discussed, when meaningful data is available.

54. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

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

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

Councillor Pattison reported that she had been approached by the Northumberland Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority to enquire whether the Committee should receive a presentation on the work of the organisation.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator undertook to research how this issue had been dealt with previously and make the necessary arrangements for a presentation to be made to the appropriate group.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

55. 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 _____