

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, 3 July 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
J. Stewart
K. Hadfield

Interim Executive Director of Place
Head of Housing and Public Protection
Strategic Housing Manager
Committee Services and Scrutiny
Manager

8. MINUTES

With regard to Minute No. 6.2 (Additional LTP Capital) Councillor Gallacher advised that he had not yet received the additional detail he had asked for.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC held on 5 June 2019, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

9. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (July to October 2019) (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix A).

It was noted that the Housing Strategy report would be submitted to August's Cabinet.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

10. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORTS

Housing Strategy for Northumberland 2019-21

The report presented the draft Housing Strategy for Northumberland 2019-2021 providing details of the proposed strategic objectives for the Council's Housing Service for the following three years. (Report attached to the signed minutes as Appendix B).

The report was introduced by Mr Johnston who advised that the report looked both backwards at what had been achieved, set against the national and local context for challenges, and forward, identifying the three main objectives of the Strategy. He stressed that the Strategy was about broad objectives, not specific actions against those objectives.

Mrs Stewart detailed the main points of the consultation, and the three key strategic priorities - Affordable and Quality Housing, Healthy People and Sustainable Economies and Communities. These were quite broad and challenging but had been identified strongly as being important.

A number of issues were raised by members including:-

- A member asked for clarity regarding the additional Council houses to be built. Mr Soderquest advised that the County Council had assets in the General Fund and the HRA. Strategic Estates would look at the Council's portfolio to identify any suitable properties and the same would be done through the HRA. The aim would be to make the best use of the Council's existing assets, but it was likely that additional properties would need to be purchased.
- A member queried the use of garage sites referred to on page 8. Members were advised that this referred to the traditional garage blocks within Council estates, which would be looked at to see whether any were viable for development. Modern methods of prefabricated construction meant more sites were now viable than had been the case previously, and small infill sites could be developed without large levels of disturbance. Potential sites, and what was appropriate for that location, would be assessed on an individual basis. What was lacking at the moment was volume in order to bring costs down.
- A member suggested that the Council should also look at its own garage sites to see what was potentially available and suitable. Mr Soderquest advised that the Council's estate would be looked at in broad terms to see where available land could be matched with the need for affordable units.
- In response to a query regarding control and management of the contracts and the revenue and capital associated with the project, Mr Johnston advised that there were a number of complex calculations in deciding whether a site was viable to purchase including the cost of acquisition, clearance costs and construction costs. The housing industry worked on

buyability assessments and a set of calculations would always be applied to determine viability. Any revenue generated would remain as that and would not be recycled into capital. Rental income was ringfenced to the HRA for the benefit of tenant services, as opposed to going into the general fund. As part of the delivery plan, the ownership mechanism would have to be explicit.

- In response to a query regarding Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO), members were advised that there had been some success in this area but there were still some significant challenges to be met. The expectation was that a return would be seen on any Council investment, and for properties with a high repair cost, this was just not possible. Work was therefore ongoing on how better to deal with such properties. Mrs Stewart explained to members the long and detailed process that had to be gone through before a property could be subject to an EDMO. Members were keen to ensure that the list of properties was as comprehensive and as up to date as it could be, and the Chair suggested that this could be subject to a future report to Committee. A member asked whether it could be checked if an individual property was on the list and agreed to pass on the details to Mrs Stewart.
- The Chair queried how difficult it would be to deliver the Strategy when there were people and organisations whose aim was to make money out of it, such as developers. Members were advised that the Draft Local Plan recognised different rates of affordable housing delivery across the County so developers would already be aware of the percentage expectation for each area. This strong policy position meant there was less room for an Inspector to take a different view at any appeal.
- The Chair felt that the move to promote landlord self regulation was not strong enough. Mr Johnston advised that a large number of private rented sector houses made a significant contribution to the provision of housing and local authorities did not have the right to inspect these properties. Instead, officers tried to work with them to provide a better product overall through increased competition.

Members had a detailed debate on whether the proposed three year Strategy was appropriate, or whether it should be five years, with views expressed in support of both. Officers assured members that the Strategy would be kept under annual review regardless of its length, although there would be no fundamental changes to the three priorities during its lifetime. The Strategy would then be subject to a full revisit at the end of its term.

It was **RESOLVED** that:-

- (a) Cabinet be informed of the divided view of the Committee regarding whether the Strategy should have a three or five year term, and that Cabinet should consider which was more appropriate; and
- (b) a request be made to Chairmen's Group for a report to a future meeting of the Committee on EDMOs and the empty property list.

11. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

11.1 Public Protection Service Requests 2018-19

The report presented to the Committee, for its consideration and comment, an overview of the numbers and types of service requests received by Public Protection in 2018/19. (Report attached to the signed minutes as Appendix C).

Mr Soderquest introduced the report, highlighting the main points and advised members that demand was still being measured internally, though it had been removed as a KPI. The report showed a significant breadth of activity across the service. Underneath requests for service, a number of programmes were still being carried out such as the food and feed safety and standards service plan.

A number of comments were raised by members including:-

- A member had been contacted a number of times about neighbourhood disputes in her ward and felt that the demise of the LMAPS meetings had had a detrimental effect on direct police liaison, and people were feeling increasingly vulnerable. Mr Soderquest advised that there were mechanisms in place. Multi agency working group meetings were held and members would be brought into these discussions. Also, a single point of contact had been identified for every member and staff were always trying to find improvements in the delivery of services. He reassured members that anti social behaviour figures had remained constant in the last few years. It was commented that often wide differences in ages between neighbours could spark neighbour disputes. Mr Soderquest agreed that there were issues of toleration, but a whole range of things contributed to anti social behaviour.
- A member queried whether the extra income which came from SLAs with town and parish councils was seen as a positive thing. Mr Soderquest advised that where an SLA was in place, a more dedicated resource could be provided in the locality e.g. by doing more proactive work with actual people on the ground. This worked well for the Service and for the town and parish councils. The member commented that there needed to be more contact with town and parish councils about their individual needs, with a steer away from County Council policy where appropriate. Mr Soderquest confirmed that there were core components within SLAs but they also reflected individual needs and wishes.
- A member commented that Cramlington Town Council had their own officer but the Council would like him to be equipped with a bicycle and camera. Mr Soderquest agreed to look at this. She also queried whether there had been any investigation of what other authorities did on dog fouling enforcement. Mr Soderquest confirmed that officers did look at other Authorities and service reviews were currently being undertaken to identify issues such as this. Environmental education was a really important part of the service they provided.
- The Chair queried whether, if town and parish councils could direct officers to focus on the priorities in their areas through the SLAs, this then impacted on the figures. Members were advised that regardless of what the priorities were, if a report was made on something then it would be investigated so the figures reflected the calls which were received. The SLAs were about

enhanced provision over and above what else was provided. The Chair asked whether it would be possible next time for the figures to be provided in such a way as to identify which were positive and which were negative so then good news stories could be highlighted. Mr Soqerquest agreed to look at this.

- A member commented that enforcement figures were improving as more staff were now trained to identify issues. She queried whether there was any scope for other outdoor staff such as beach wardens or parks staff to be similarly trained. Mr Soderquest confirmed that the Service already worked closely with Neighbourhood Services on the Clean and Green agenda so he would follow this up.
- The Chair asked for detail of micro-chipping figures which Mr Soderquest agreed to provide.

RESOLVED that the content of the report, and the member comments made above, be noted.

12. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

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

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Chairman _____

Date _____