

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL
CASTLE MORPETH LOCAL AREA COMMITTEE

At the meeting of the **Castle Morpeth Local Area Committee** held at Council Chamber - County Hall on Monday, 15 January 2024 at 5.00 pm.

PRESENT

J Beynon (Chair) (in the Chair)

MEMBERS

D Bawn
R Dodd
M Murphy
D Towns

L Darwin
V Jones
G Sanderson
R Wearmouth

OFFICERS

L Little

Senior Democratic Services Officer

Around 2 members of the press and public were present.

10 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dickinson, Dunn, Foster and Jackson.

11 MINUTES

The minutes of the Castle Morpeth Local Area Council held on Monday 20 November 2023, as circulated, were agreed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

12 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

No questions had been submitted in advance and none were asked at the meeting.

13 PETITIONS

(a) Receive New Petitions – No petitions were received.

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(b) Petitions Previously Received – None

(c) Receive any updates on petitions for which a report was previously considered – There were no updates.

14 **NORTHUMBRIA POLICE**

Sergeant L Robson and Inspector K Benson were in attendance to provide updates on policing within various localities of the Castle Morpeth area. An update had also been circulated in advance of the meeting from Inspector W Daniels who was unable to attend which covered the areas of Lynemouth, Ellington, Stakeford and Choppington.

Sergeant L Robson advised that within the Morpeth area itself there had been an increase of 6.82% which equated to 200 more reported incidents. This had included an increase in the number of public safety/mental health incidents however, a new scheme where the right care/right person from partner agencies would respond to incidents of this type instead of the Police was to be introduced. There had been a 27% increase (31 incidents) of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and reports of youth disorder especially around the bus station was being dealt with and enforcement action being taken. Additional patrols from the Community Safety Officer and extra staff had been deployed in this area. There had been a 0.5% increase in crime however this was due mainly to an increase in motor vehicle incidents and following the arrest of a person there had been no further incidents reported. There had also been an increase in violent crime linked to domestic incidents and work was ongoing to try to reduce this type of crime. There had been a reduction in the number of incidents related to theft and drugs. The target for the next 12 months was to be more proactive, and more enforcement action taken in relation to youth disorder with more community engagement undertaken.

Inspector K Benson advised that comparing the figures for the last 8 weeks with those for the last twelve months there had been within the northern part of her command which was the Belsay area 19 incidents in total with 12 linked to transport including 2 deaths and some serious injuries from accidents on the A696; 2 damage to motor vehicles and 8 road/highway offences following proactive testing and an increased police presence. There had been 5 public safety incidents, 2 reports of crime and no ASB. The previous year there had been 12 incidents in total. Within in the Matfen and Stamfordham area there had been 32 incidents with 17 transport; 2 ASB (1 motor cycle disorder and 1 neighbour dispute) compared to 20 incidents for the previous year. Within the Ponteland/Darras Hall area there had been 56 incidents with 43 crimes which was on par with similar sized population areas such as Hexham and Prudhoe. There had been 38 traffic incidents and 11 incidents of ASB which was quite low with very few incidents of youth ASB. ASB was the lowest it had been over the last 3 years and had been steadily declining since October with the peak being July/August. The team had increased numbers of staff with new officers deployed in Ponteland and a lot of work undertaken to reduce incidents. The priority for the next 12 months was to further reduce ASB working with schools to identify youths and introduce shift changes within the team to cover incidents related to retail theft. There was a community speed watch scheme within the town and a speed

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van utilised in hot spot locations. Work would be undertaken with residents and Estates Committees in relation to burglary and there had been increased patrols following the recent burglary of a Newcastle United player's home in the area.

Councillors welcomed the presence of the Police at the meeting and highlighted that the numbers of poaching incidents in the area had reduced due to the wet weather. Meetings had been set up to try to get funding to stop the increasing incidents of thefts from shops which it was thought was being carried out by people from outside of the immediate area and the recent theft from a security van was highlighted along with the need to prosecute those involved. Concern was expressed regarding the number of road traffic accidents occurring on the A696. Inspector Benson advised that the only data she had was in respect of the 2 accidents within the previous 8 weeks, however she assured Members that the Police worked closely with Highways to look at road signage, street furniture and the safety of roads. Plain clothes operations had been undertaken in relation to incidents of thefts from shops which had resulted in some positive prosecutions. Prolific offenders were kept overnight for presentation to Court the next day and in the case of juveniles the Courts looked to provide diversionary activities. Shops did have CCTV and offenders advised that they would be charged.

Sergeant Robson advised that the Police needed to get better at passing accurate data on in relation to prosecutions and highlighted a monthly newsletter that was now being circulated in Amble and the possibility of that being done in the Castle Morpeth area. He also highlighted "Northumbria Connected" to which Members could sign up to online which provided regular updates. The operation previously known as Farm Watch was now part of Your Northumbria however there was still a rural crime team which was headed by Inspector Gary Neill. In response to a statement regarding the perception that the Police was not doing anything in relation to incidents in Morpeth by a known offender, it was highlighted that it was not possible to advise the public what the Police were doing in relation to gathering intelligence prior to an arrest. The Police also worked closely with the Probation Service and knew who was being released from prison and when and if any breaches in conditions occurred then they would be returned to Court.

In relation to a question from Councillor Murphy in relation to the use of the electric bikes and video cameras which had been purchased by Members of Council in the Choppington/Stakeford area for Police use to deal with ASB, this would be passed to Inspector Daniels for him to respond directly.

It was confirmed that there was a dedicated team in Neighbourhood Policing context which specifically dealt with child grooming and sexual exploitation. Any concerns raised by schools, families etc. would be shared with partner agencies depending on the type of concerns raised. A lot of proactive work was undertaken with schools in relation to the use of social media to target young people. It was stated that those who targeted young or vulnerable people usually had a set criteria on what they were looking for so it was possible there was no difference between numbers within urban or rural areas, but this data was not known by the Officers present.

Inspector Benson and Sergeant Robson were thanked for their attendance and updates they had provided.

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Councillor Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, provided a presentation on the Council's Corporate Plan and budget for 2024-25 where the options for achieving a balanced budget were given. (A copy of the presentation would be enclosed with the signed minutes.) He outlined the consultation process taking place between 12 December 2023 and 26 January 2024 which included presentations at all 5 of the Local Area Committees, an online questionnaire, policy conference, briefings for the political groups and individual meetings, and an online Question and Answer session by the Leader on 31 January 2024.

The Council's three priorities of Value for Money; Tackling Inequalities and Job Creation ran all through the proposed budget with more detailed information on proposed savings available within the Cabinet papers for the meeting on 16 January and further detail regarding initiatives and schemes would be presented at a meeting of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee which all Scrutiny members would be invited to.

Councils had four main sources of revenue, namely:

- Council Tax;
- Government grants;
- Business Rates; and
- Fees and charges for services

Members were advised that the Council constantly lobbied Government in relation to sustainable funding for local services. Increased pressures on budgets were in part due to rising energy costs and prices for supplies and services along with pay inflation. Savings would be made by reducing the cost of overheads and potential efficiencies in the way services were delivered and Members were advised there would be no cuts to front line services. The Council's reserves were in a healthy position and could be used where necessary to manage any transition.

The background to the Council's finances was provided with the baseline gross budget for 2023/24 as follows:-

- Enabling Services (Transformation) - £147.948 million - providing professional and technical services to support residents and businesses directly and enable frontline services.
- Adults - £235.033 million - supporting vulnerable adults to live independently; assessment and good quality care and support services; safeguarding vulnerable adults; and protecting care services.
- Children, Young People and Education - £269.210 million - providing good quality schools (with 94% currently rated good or outstanding); SEND provision; skills opportunities and supporting families; and investing in the future.
- Public Health, Inequalities and stronger Communities - £32.831 million- providing public health functions; Communities Together; leisure and culture; and partnerships with voluntary and community sector.
- Place and Regeneration - £131.699 million – supporting business start-up and growth; regenerating communities; investing in towns and villages;

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investing in jobs and skills development and highways maintenance and improvements.

In response to a question related to not being able to rule out compulsory redundancies for staff it was commented that it would not be the intention of the Administration to use compulsory redundancies as the reduction in the number of staff could usually be managed through a natural process such as staff retiring or leaving the Authority. Whilst it was possible that previously the budget for Adults Services had been larger than for Children's Services, the numbers were accurate and reflected the increased spend on SEND and the investment in skills and schools.

There were various Council Tax schemes being operated by neighbouring authorities, however it was thought that Northumberland's scheme which offered discounts of 92% to 8%, was generous and straightforward for residents to understand. A hardship fund was also being provided and unspent funds from the previous year would also roll over giving a total of support of £26 million for residents, which was a huge element of the budget for those who needed the most help.

In response to a statement that the presentation lacked the detail a budget consultation should contain it was highlighted that information was available online and that the budget consultation survey was open to residents and Councillors and additional information had already been forwarded to Councillors with the opportunity to look in depth at the proposals at Scrutiny and Full Council. Further details in relation to services were then provided as follows:

Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities

These services were impacted by rising energy costs and prices for supplies and services and like all services, budgets were impacted by pay inflation. Investment for a mobile library service vehicle was proposed through the capital programme. In terms of savings, it was proposed to deliver contract savings of £0.200 million and savings from BEST value for money reviews of £0.500 million. These proposals would contribute £0.700 million towards the Council's balanced budget from a total budget for these services of £32.8 million. There were no reductions in these services proposed.

Children, Young People and Education

- Budget pressures related to new children's homes that were being built / acquired to keep Northumberland children in the county which would reduce the cost of out of county placements; additional funding required for short break services for disabled children; the increased pressure resulting from a mandatory inflationary increase of 12.50% introduced by the Department for Education for foster care and special guardianship allowances; and a significant increase in funding was required for external residential placements for children with complex needs. Schools and housing for disabled children would continue to receive capital investment. Savings would be achieved through contract savings; making best use of grants; safely managing demand for services; delivering savings from BEST value for money reviews; making straightforward and sensible efficiencies; delivering service reviews; and effectively managing staff vacancies. In summary

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these proposals would contribute £2.084 million savings towards the Council's balanced budget from a total budget for these services of £269.2 million. No service reductions in these services were being proposed.

Adults

The Real Living Wage had been factored in for Social Care contract budgets however these services were also impacted by rising energy costs and prices for supplies and services along with pay inflation. Savings measures would include making best use of grants of £0.09 million; safely managing demand for services of £3 million by doing things different such as providing better services allowing people to continue to live independently and not in residential homes and driving value in care packages and providing better integrated responses to individual needs to reduce the dependence on the Council. New income would be generated giving a total saving of £3.63 million towards the Council's total budget of £235 million. No service reductions in services were being proposed.

Proposals for the forthcoming year also included continuing to invest in the future of the county through the capital programme, including in Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service and modernisation of the Council's Network Infrastructure which would help drive efficiencies and business opportunities. Wide Area Network provision in all Council buildings was to be provided which could possibly have links for business and schools to join. Significant savings were proposed through the BEST programme, procurement, maximisation of income generation and the management of staff vacancies. No cuts to frontline services were being proposed. Councillor Wearmouth urged residents and Councillors to complete the budget questionnaire.

Members welcomed the additional level of detail provided and stressed the need for the correct type of messaging being provided so that the public understood that savings could be achieved by investment and were reassured that no reduction in front line services would result from the proposals.

16 **LOCAL AREA COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair reminded Members that anything they wished to be added to the work programme should be forwarded either to himself or L Little, Senior Democratic Services Officer. Councillor Towns advised that there had been meetings and further developments in connection with a petition regarding the Island outside of Blossom Park, Pegswood and asked that an update be provide to a future meeting.

The Chair advised that there was to be a Local Area Chairs' Briefing on 29 January which would be discussing the separation of the planning part of the meetings and any feedback from Members would be appreciated.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

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17 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

An additional meeting of the Local Area Committee specifically to consider the Local Transport Plan would take place following the scheduled Planning meeting on Monday 12 February 2024. The time would be confirmed.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

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