

## NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

### COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** on Wednesday, 6 April 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

#### PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid  
(Chair, in the Chair)

#### MEMBERS

Cartie, E.	Hardy, C.
Castle, G.	Mather, M.
Dodd, R.R.	Morphet, N.
Gallacher, B.	Richardson, M.

#### CABINET MEMBERS

Riddle, J.	Local Services
Sanderson, G.	Leader of the Council

#### OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

M. Child	Programme Manager - Great Northumberland Forest
D. Laux	Head of Technical Services
R. McCartney	Infrastructure Manager
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
K. Westerby	Highways Delivery Manager

#### 56. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Dodd who would be arriving late to the meeting.

#### 57. MINUTES

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC held on 2 March 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

#### 58. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (April to July 2022). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

Councillor Cartie expressed her disappointment that the Blyth Relief Road items was not going to be considered by this scrutiny committee. The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that the issue fell within the remit of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC.

It was suggested that she could approach the Chair of Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC regarding attending the meeting and request to speak or forward her views to another member of that committee.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

## **59. SCRUTINY REPORT**

### **59.1 Development of the Potland Burn Biodiversity Net Gain Site**

The Chair reported that this item had been deferred due to staff absence and would be considered with a funding report at the next meeting on 11 May 2022.

Councillor Gallacher enquired whether it would be possible to involve Ashington Town Council and Pegswood Parish Council as well as local County Councillors.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator commented that the decision had been made by Cabinet and that the scrutiny committee were being given the opportunity to discuss the implementation of proposals.

## **60. OVERVIEW**

### **60.1 Presentation on Great Northumberland Forest**

Mark Child, Programme Manager - Great Northumberland Forest, explained that he had commenced in June 2021 working with a small team to progress work on the Great Northumberland Forest (GNF). The forest was a DEFRA funded and Council hosted initiative with a plan to plant millions of trees and create more woodland landscapes in the county by 2030 to help tackle climate change, biodiversity decline and promote health and wellbeing and support a thriving local economy. (A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes).

The presentation outlined the following:

- Phase 1 - planting of a million trees by 2024 and creation of 3 new forests.
- Phase 2 - formation of Northumberland Woodland Creation Partnership to facilitate a step change in the pace and extent of tree planting schemes across the county. The partnership comprised 14 organisations which met on a 6-weekly basis.

- Phase 3 – Programme Launch in November 2021 with a focus on wider engagement with landowners, farmers and communities.
- Current activities:
  - Development of website [www.nland.uk/GNF](http://www.nland.uk/GNF)
  - Mapping.
  - Engagement Strategies – a free service to explore and discuss opportunities, how they would work and funding.
  - Management of the Local Authority Treescape Fund which had enabled over 3,000 trees for community led planting.
  - Working with Local Services to support and explore opportunities for the future management of the council's woodland and new tree planting.
  - Supporting communities and parish councils with the Queen's Green Canopy Jubilee celebrations.
  - Working in partnership with the recently launched NE Community Forest on schemes around the county boundary.
  - £1.6 million in additional capital funding from DEFRA secured over the next 3 years to support more work.

Members made the following comments:

- Trees needed to be planted and managed. Permission to remove trees also required that new trees be replanted.
- Where woodland was damaged, significant work would be required to remove and replant areas.
- Tree planting for protection and shelter had prevented wind damage to farms and buildings.
- Consultation and planning of transport routes should be incorporated within the process to enable removal in the future.
- The change in focus from agriculture to forestry should not be allowed to damage communities and rural facilities.
- Clarification regarding the Northumberland Woodland Creation Partnership's mission to boost rural economic prosperity by growing the forestry and wood processing sector and impact on the agricultural sector.
- Investment in the highway network. Town and Parish Councils were concerned about the damage to the highway from large timber haulage vehicles and speeding through smaller villages.
- Engagement with schools and community groups in planting schemes was noted and welcomed.
- Concerns regarding the introduction of heavy industry in new areas and the advantages/disadvantages of bonds versus sections 106 agreements.
- Whether consideration be given to adding 'Plan' to the name Great Northumberland Forest as this brought to mind one vast unbroken collection of trees rather than a large number of smaller plots.
- It had not been appreciated that the forest would involve sections of commercial planting for future harvesting as previous emphasis had focused as it being a solution to climate change and that native broadleaf trees would be left in the landscape to grow and capture carbon. A monobloc of a single type of tree would not increase biodiversity.

- More opportunities for involvement of Councillors.
- If there was a climate emergency, the priority should be what was best for the planet, not the economy. Others thought that the economy could not be ignored. If the wood could be used for a commercial purpose. Reference was made to the increased use of timber in house building and construction purposes.
- Community orchards were proving popular and successful as well the acquisition of community woodland.
- Methods of combining commercial forestry with carbon capture, benefits of biodiversity and timber production be explored via use of scots pine and also adopting forms of continuous cover forestry which mimicked natural processes rather than clear fell.

The following information was provided in response to questions:

- A definitive total of trees planted to date could not be provided at the meeting. Trees were planted in differing densities between 1,100 to 2,500 stems per hectare. Other planting included individual trees, hedge rows and small groups.
- It was expected that more trees would be planted by 2024 than the Committee on Climate Change's initial target.
- The council's website indicated the results of the initial mapping exercise and where efforts would be prioritised and was focused in the south east and mid-Northumberland where there were fewer constraints to tree planting.
- Discussions were being held with the Estates team to explore opportunities and availability of council owned land for tree planting.
- Officers sat on the NE and Cumbria Timber Transport Forum to develop strategies for the future management of the forest areas.
- It was not intended for there to be wholesale changes in land use from agricultural land to forestry, but more about how trees could be integrated into the landscape for the multiple benefits they can provide.
- Funding from the Local Authority Treescape Fund (LATF) in 2021 had enabled tree planting projects in Blyth and Cramlington.
- Planting of larger "standard" trees, 10-12 feet, as part of the 2021 LATF had been delayed until Autumn 2022 due to not having the capacity currently to carry out maintenance with the additional work required following storm damage.
- Trees needed to be planted at the entrance to towns so they could assist with pollution from vehicles. Town and Parish Councils had recently been contacted to submit expressions of interest for Round 2 of the Local Authority Treescape Fund which could be used to replace storm damage standard trees or 0.5 ha of small whips. The Forestry Commission's Urban Tree Challenge Fund could be used to plant new trees in urban and peri-urban areas.
- There was a link between increasing woodland cover and the availability of fiber material for the processing sector, depending on the scale deemed appropriate by landowners for their own businesses. The increase in the

forestry sector, was not intended to replace agriculture jobs, but to work alongside.

- Officers were involved in engagement not direct delivery. However, parties interested in timber as an outcome were recommended to consider and engage with Highways and planning regarding access and with the Timber Transport Forum on agreed timber transport routes.
- Some forestry roads could be constructed under permitted development rights and did not require planning permission depending on proximity to the highway and whether was land deemed to be in forestry use. If it was within 25 meters, it could require permission otherwise details would be provided under the Environmental Impact Assessment which stakeholders, including the Council, would be consulted upon.
- Engagement with landowners with significant forestry operations had not yet commenced in full but they hoped to do so in the near future. Initial support had been aimed at farmers, given loss of European subsidies.
- The National Forest Inventory was a survey carried out every 2 years, which mapped areas of woodland and tree cover (over 2 ha). It gave an indication of species type, between conifer and broadleaf. Forestry statistics also released data on national and county wide tree cover. In Northumberland this was believed to comprise 50% spruce/conifer and the balance made up of other species, but would be checked.
- The requirements and objectives of the landowner determined the species for new planting and what was best suited in the GNF. A very rough estimate suggested this was broadly 2/3 conifer and 1/3 broadleaf.
- The UK Forestry standard set out criteria which set out how much of a single species could be planted, required a minimum of 10% open space within a woodland and 5% native broadleaf. There had been a focus on native broadleaf on smaller schemes with larger schemes involving more conifers where there was a productive focus.
- Native broadleaf species such as oak, took longer to mature but locked in carbon for a longer period. Local sawmills produced material for chipboard and burning which had a shorter life, but also fencing with a duration of 10-20 years. It was hoped a significant proportion would be used in the construction industry which locked carbon up for a longer period.
- All land had a value and high value fertile land was used for crop production. Woods had been used in the past for fuel, shelter and food. Trees when they reached maturity stopped growing and the amount of carbon sequestration reduced.
- Information was provided about an ecological site classification tool on the Forestry Research website which provided data on suitability of tree species (conifer and broadleaf, native and nonnative) at locations, nutrient levels and rainfall requirements and yield class (growth per year).
- If conditions were suitable, the management of continuous cover forests meant that sections of trees could be removed every 5-10 years and therefore the market was not flooded at any one time, it was less disruptive and regenerated itself naturally. Forestry standards promoted use of continuous cover, rather than clear fell, where conditions were suitable.

- Scot's pine was a native species which would form a significant component of tree species planted, depending on objectives; the species also had links to red squirrels.
- The Great Northumberland Forest was a vision to see more trees in the landscape. Multipurpose forestry enables the best of both worlds, carbon sequestration, improving nature, creation of habitats, produce timber with a use whose income could be reinvested into the woodland for its ongoing management and maintenance which could be used for health and well-being.
- Research had found that managed woodland sequestered more carbon than unmanaged woodlands. Young trees grew at a faster rate and sequestered more carbon than mature trees.
- The GNF team sat within the Council's Regeneration, Commercial and Economy Directorate; was funded by Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and Nature for Climate Fund and reported to the Northumberland Woodland Creation Partnership Steering Group and England Tree Planting Programme.
- The website and mailbox be promoted and shared by members if they received enquiries expressions of interest regarding planting on land.

The Chair sought clarification regarding political accountability and reporting mechanisms within the Council. He also wished to see greater interaction with and involvement of elected Members.

It was noted that the work programme included an item on the Tree and Woodland Strategy. The Scrutiny Co-ordinator agreed to review the issues raised during the meeting and when it would be appropriate for the matter to be reconsidered.

The Chair and Members thanked the Programme Manager - Great Northumberland Forest for his presentation.

**RESOLVED** that the presentation be received.

## **60.2 Local Services – Highway Maintenance**

Officers from Technical Services were present to provide an overview on the operation and challenges of Highways Maintenance. (A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

David Laux, Head of Technical Services, introduced himself and his colleagues who included Robin McCartney, Highways Infrastructure Manager responsible for maintenance polices, transport asset management plan and development of the capital programme and Kris Westerby, Highways Delivery Manager, responsible for inspection of roads, area teams, repair of defects and delivery of the capital programme.

The presentation covered:

- Highway Law on Maintenance - section 41(1) Highways Act 1980 “...duty to maintain the highway.”
- Section 58(1) Highways Act 1980 - Special defence in action against a highway authority for damages for non-repair of the highway.
- The Highways Asset - roads, footways, structures (bridges, culverts, retaining walls), streetlights and illuminated signs, gullies, drainage, safety fences, verges, trees
- Processes to manage and maintain the safety of the asset and to minimise public liability exposure
  - Transport Asset Management Plan, Highways Inventories, inspections, assessment of asset condition
  - Development and implementation of maintenance investment programmes
- Functional road hierarchy and road inspection frequencies – monthly to yearly and ad-hoc.
- Inspection processes by inspectors trained to LANTRA national standard
- Target times for inspecting third party reports of defects
- Defect assessment and repair response times for those which meet hazardous defect criteria:
  - Carriageway - 40mm deep and 300mm in any one direction.
  - Footpath - a 20mm vertical trip.
- Inspector guidance manual based on the national ‘Well managed highway infrastructure Code of Practice’ using a risk-based approach.
- Data regarding number of reactive repairs and customer complaints – only 4,071 of 12,620 third party defects in 2020/21 required repair following inspection.
- Assessment of defects and type of repair required
- Snapshot of daily reactive repairs on the network
- Condition monitoring and maintenance programme development involving manual and camera-based asset surveys to create the major capital works schemes.
- Management of footways and cycleways, bridges, drainage, gully data/monitoring, other assets (street lighting, traffic lights, signs and lines, safety fences, soft landscaping)
- Performance data
- Annual budgets
- Improvements and innovations:
  - Camera based surveys to assess road condition and identification of missing signs against recorded inventory.
  - Development of Horizons system to determine the best investment strategy to maintain the asset.
  - Climate carbon impact – working with Future Highways Research Group and the Association of Directors for Environment Planning and Transport. Recycling of tar-based planing material (otherwise needs to be disposed of a hazardous waste material) and use of warm temperature asphalts, alternatives to cement in concrete.
  - Web reporting and feedback to customers via Fix My Street with automated responses and updates of action taken.
  - Integration of One Network in the Council’s website.

- Investment in new equipment including JCB Pothole Pro, gritters, hotboxes and jettors

The following issues were highlighted by Councillors:

- The information contained within the presentation was extremely useful and should be made available to all members of the Council, perhaps at Local Area Councils.
- The interactive reporting system was eagerly awaited and would save officer time.
- Updates on schemes would be welcomed as Councillors were contacted by persistent individuals about particular issues.
- Whether roads in industrial areas should be in a higher category as they were used regularly by HGVs.
- Feedback be given to members on third party reports and road inspections in their areas.
- It was queried whether the timing of inspections undertaken on a less frequent basis was carefully considered, to take into account damage occurring during the winter period.
- It was reassuring and only right that the costs of repairs to the network be reclaimed following an accident.
- It would be more proactive and work out cheaper if the Council were able to fix smaller potholes.
- Longer warranties were required from contractors completing micro-surface and surface dressing works.
- The new equipment, including gulley wagons were welcomed.
- It was hoped that the new systems, such as Horizons and web interaction for the public, were implemented sooner rather than later.
- It was noted that dangerous potholes may be reported multiple times, although the new reporting system would be of great assistance. Defects that were reported appeared to be actioned more rapidly.
- Some members had differing experiences with some Inspectors and faults being missed.
- Fallen signs since the winter storms continued to be a major hazard in some areas, particularly when there were strong winds.
- Opportunities should be taken where possible to do more work in-house as it was normally done to a higher standard than work carried out by some external contractors.
- The facility at Powburn should be promoted.
- Some members would prefer to receive less information and only emails about road closures in their local towns.

The following information was provided in answer to questions:

- The same defects were often reported multiple times and therefore it was hoped that the interactive system would eliminate this as users would be able to check if an issue had already been reported.
- A single revenue budget was available in each of the areas for repair of highway defects. Within the capital budget, separate allocations were made

for footways and other asset classes. With greater emphasis on walking and cycling and sustainable travel, there was potentially a case to do more with these assets.

- Funding had been allocated in 2022/23 to complete the 20mph school programme.
- Officers were reviewing processes to see if improvements could be made to ensure schemes were progressed as quickly as possible, however timescales were due to the volume of work and therefore they were also looking at increasing resource.
- The Council did its best responding to concerns raised by members of the public, particularly where these were genuine issues.
- The inspection frequency, agreed by the scrutiny committee in 2018, was believed to strike the right balance and enabled a sensible use of the resources available.
- It was important when dealing with insurance companies that the highways inspectors were trained and accredited to the LANTRA national standard. The Council aspired to higher standard and had developed the maintenance manual to ensure that a consistent approach was adopted across the county.
- Resources were used to fix the most serious actionable defects according to the established criteria. If the gangs attempted to fix all minor defects on a stretch of road, serious defects on the rest of the network would not be repaired within the timescales required.
- It was recognised that the ability to provide automated feedback to residents would be a massive benefit when individuals have taken the time to report an issue. A presentation had recently been given to the Council's Digital Strategy Board and it was hoped that this could be progressed.
- 12-month warranties were standard, however a new surfacing framework required work be guaranteed for 18 months. Contracts for micro surfacing utilised the North East Procurement Organisation (NEPO) which adopted a 12 month warranty across the region. Return rates for work undertaken by the Council's DLO were lower. New contracts for quarry materials required companies to pay all costs to make repairs if the material failed any laboratory test, regardless of the category.
- Updates would be given to Councillors on 20mph schemes at Belsay, Lowick and Norham following the meeting.
- The functional hierarchy of footways was similar to roads with locations in town centres or near schools with high footfall ranked higher than estate roads.
- Paving flags were being replaced with flexible material in many areas where flags which had been damaged by vehicular use as bitumous material was more capable of vehicular incursion. Pallets of undamaged flags were stored at Powburn and Jewsons in Cramlington. They were used by the Council and utility companies, as some size flags were no longer produced and broke when lifted for work to be undertaken.
- Performance and monitoring of the footways had only recently commenced and therefore once more data had been collected, an assessment would be able to be undertaken to see whether the condition was deteriorating or improving with the current rate of investment. Only a proportion of footways

were surveyed each year and from the information gathered over the last couple of years, the 4% deterioration had been calculated. As resurfacing and improvements were carried out, the condition of footways would be monitored to assess whether the rate of deterioration was worsening or improving.

- 100% of tar bound planings removed from road surfaces were recycled. Approximately 60,000 tonne of virgin material had been sourced from quarries in the previous year with 10,000 tonne of recycled material equating to approximately 15% of the material required. Core samples were taken and tested at a laboratory to assess the depth of tar material before any design work commenced. This enabled the road to be profile planed to the right depth with hazardous material being removed, taken to the recycling facilities at Powburn to be processed before being reused. These were believed to be one of the only local authority DLO facilities and had recently been visited by colleagues from other north east Councils.
- The percentage of warm temperature asphalt was limited by the quarries who were willing and able to provide the material. Tarmac had agreed to produce it at their Barrasford quarry. Whilst staff found it more difficult to work with, it was feasible during warmer months between April and October.
- In recent years, there had been more emphasis on ad-hoc gully emptying in areas deemed to be of concern, but this was less efficient. It was hoped that in future, the gully vehicles observed their routes on 4 days with ad hoc visits only taking place on the fifth day. The mapping and data capture software was being installed on the new vehicles so they could monitor and improve productivity. Another team would be sent to resolve issues if a gully was found to be in a particularly poor condition to enable the gully emptying machines to concentrate on routes to be completed. Problems should be reported to Area Managers so they could make a decision as to when and how an issue be resolved. Councillors who had reported flooding problems on main roads had found the flexibility of great assistance.
- It was agreed that there needed to be a press release regarding landowner responsibilities for removing fallen trees and Local Services would work with Communications on this.
- Further work was required on replacing damaged and fallen signs. The Council had its own sign shop at Stakeford which was sector scheme approved and accredited, and they could be produced and replaced relatively quickly when brought to their attention.
- The LTP programme had been signed off and was in the process of being published on the Council's website. Officers would also arrange for it to be circulated to members. They were looking at how updates on areas and schemes could be more easily provided to members.
- Officers should be clear and realistic when giving timescales for work to be undertaken. If this was not the case, this would be addressed with those concerned.
- The department appreciated the investment in plant and equipment and expansion of facilities including the sign shop.

*Councillors Cartie and Richardson left the meeting at 4.07 p.m.*

Councillor Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Local Services, was very proud of the teams and managers who did a fantastic job. He commented on the investment in equipment which included gulley suckers and jettors, gritters and hot boxes and other vehicles. He agreed that more permanent repairs would be better, but they did their best to deliver the best service with the resources available.

**RESOLVED** that the presentation be received.

## **61. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR**

### **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report**

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2021/22 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator requested members consider and contact him with proposals for the work programme for 2022/23. He referred to a previous discussion earlier in the year regarding the number of agenda items being limited to two at each meeting. It was agreed that this should continue to allow sufficient time for discussion.

**RESOLVED** that the work programme be noted.

**CHAIR** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE** \_\_\_\_\_