

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held at County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 1 June 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Carr, D.	Gallacher, B.
Castle, G.	Lang, J.
Dale, A.	Mather, M.
Dodd, R.R.	Morphet, N.

CABINET MEMBERS

Horncastle, C	Community Services
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OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

D. Feige (virtual)	Environment and Design Team Manager & County Ecologist
R. Murfin	Interim Executive Director of Planning & Local Services
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

Councillor Hardy was also in attendance.

1. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Membership and Terms of Reference, as agreed by Council at the meeting on 4 May 2022, had been circulated for information.

The Chair welcomed new Members to the meeting.

RESOLVED that the Communities & Place OSC's membership and terms of reference, as agreed by Council on 4 May 2022, be noted.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Cartie.

3. MINUTES

Ch.'s Initials.....

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC held on 6 April 2022, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

4. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (June to September). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

Members agreed that they would like to include the 'Northumberland Waste Management Strategy – Proposed Food Waste Recycling Pilot Schemes' within the work programme for the committee.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

5. SCRUTINY REPORT

5.1 Development of the Potland Burn Biodiversity Net Gain Site

The report sought approval from Cabinet for the capital and revenue expenditure that would be incurred in the development of the first phase of the Potland Burn biodiversity net gain site, amendment of capital and revenue budgets and potential for further habitat creation to meet the biodiversity net gain requirements for future strategic inward investment. (A copy of the report and presentation are enclosed with the signed minutes).

David Feige, Environment and Design Team Manager and County Ecologist, explained that it had been necessary to identify a suitable site to meet net gain requirements of the Britishvolt planning application, prior to them becoming a mandatory element of the planning application system in 2023.

He described the process which assigned a numerical value to the site following an assessment of the ecological value of the proposed development site and habitats to be created. An area of land, which was of low ecological value and capable of being enhanced, had been required. The progress to date and next steps were also outlined.

Potland Burn had been identified as a suitable site where a significant uplift in ecological value could be gained from the former surface mine which was in the early stages of aftercare. Although only 67ha was required for the Britishvolt application, further investment in the county would also likely require offsite biodiversity net gain, and therefore the remaining 33ha would be available for other employment sites.

In order to meet the timeframe required to attract Britishvolt and their financing arrangements, the land needed to be in the ownership of the Council or capable of being secured by legal agreement within a very short timescale.

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

- Planning applications determined after the date the Environment Act came into force would need to assess biodiversity net gain. The date was yet undetermined but expected in autumn 2023.
- The assessment had been used prior to it becoming mandatory, in line with practice at other local authorities. The metric had become available, and it was considered to be the most robust and transparent method to compensate for the loss of the significant ecological features at the Britishvolt coal stocking yard site.
- It was necessary to prepare for the additional inward investment that would be attracted to the south east of the county by the Britishvolt development, plans for possible expansion and the potential of attracting other firms in Britishvolt's supply chain. Ensuring provision was in place for environmental requirements would future proof the council's economic strategy and ensure that the county was in a favourable position when compared with other areas, which did not have provision in place.
- It had become an important part of the Council's economic inward investment and ecological strategies and information was being shared with other local authorities.
- Natural regrowth and improvement of the soil would take a considerable time as the material had been stored during the period that surface mining had taken place. Whilst it would eventually become more diverse, it would be delayed given that the majority was from arable land and therefore, did not have a good seed source and also due to the recent mining activity on the site. Section 106 money from Britishvolt provided an opportunity for acceleration to replace the ecological features at the coal stocking yard at Potland Burn. The work would also benefit climate change through pond creation which was very good at carbon sequestration. There would also be low intensity grazing which would assist meat production and food security, enhanced rights of way would be created for local residents which was important to their wellbeing. It was therefore considered that investment in the site would produce a broader range of benefits than abandonment.
- The sum of money had been calculated using the Defra impact assessment and costs for habitat creation and land as contained within the Environment Bill.
- The Government had introduced the biodiversity net gain requirements due to the degradation in ecological quality in recent generations. The damage was reaching a crisis point which had to be arrested. Therefore, ecological issues needed to be addressed when considering planning applications as was the case for highways, drainage and flood risk issues etc.
- The costs included establishment, maintenance and aftercare costs for a 30-year period.

- The Britishvolt scheme would construct one of the largest buildings in the world, and therefore the scale of the ecological offsetting required that a major step be taken. It was not representative of the typical planning applications considered each year which would require much smaller net gain or a cumulative pot approach.
- When the Britishvolt planning application had been determined, the Potland Burn site had been in the ownership of Advance Northumberland. They had therefore been party to the Section 106 agreement to allow the Council or a subsequent owner to manage the land for the purposes of habitat creation and management of biodiversity net gain. The land had been valued and a fair price for the transfer had been agreed. A review was being undertaken on the structure of Advance Northumberland and a final decision would be made on whether the land was transferred to the Council or some other vehicle.
- Only sites of low ecological value which were capable of being enhanced and at least 67 ha could be considered. Speed had been a key factor in ensuring that Britishvolt had come to Northumberland. It had been fortunate that the Potland Burn site had been available, as negotiations with other landowners would have taken valuable time within the period available. A couple of other sites had been considered which had been in the ownership of large institutional organisations in the area. However, there had been some technical issues as to whether those sites would have delivered the ecological enhancements and also if they could have been made available for the required 30-year period.
- The site at Potland Burn had more capacity than was required by the Britishvolt application. The extra land could be used to deliver biodiversity net gain for the next few major investment schemes.
- Biodiversity net gain would apply to almost all development in the county and there would need to be further opportunities across Northumberland. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy, which was considering places which would benefit from enhanced ecological value and looked at smaller sites which would be of benefit to communities. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy also looked at the different methods of delivering ecology including abandonment or 'rewilding'.
- Abandonment often resulted in domination by a small range of species and therefore delivered disappointing ecological results, unless they were 'disturbed' by other forces of nature, such as wild animals, which brought variety. However, extensive grazing by cattle could inject diversity combining nature conservation with food production.
- Parcels of land designated for biodiversity and solar farms connected by corridors would enable species to travel and provide routes for walking and cycling.
- Grid connectivity was often a barrier for large scale solar farms.
- Although not expected to be required, provision for redundancy was required by the finance section for employees for any new project with ring-fenced funding.

Some concern was expressed regarding the amount of money to be invested in the site, given the current rising costs of living when some improvement would happen naturally. Designation as farm land would make a contribution to food and grain supplies, as opposed to being a drain on resources.

Other members welcomed the investment by Britishvolt and the potential for attracting other businesses. It was hoped that the local community and Ashington Town Council and Pegswood Parish Council could be involved. Whilst Members acknowledged that a rapid response had been required to secure the Britishvolt scheme, it was suggested that investment was also required around Sleekburn site and the nearby dunes.

The Chair disclosed that he was a Director of Advance Northumberland but had not been involved in any of the discussions regarding the arrangements for the Britishvolt site.

RESOLVED that the Committee:

1. Supported the recommendations in the report.
2. The report and presentation be recommended for inclusion within the work programme for the Ashington and Blyth Local Area Council with an invitation to Ashington Town Council and Pegswood Parish Council to involve them in the discussion.

6. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2022/23 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator stated that following the discussion earlier in the meeting, the 'Northumberland Waste Management Strategy – Proposed Food Waste Recycling Pilot Schemes' would be considered at the next meeting on 29 June 2022. Discussions were also to be held regarding an update on the Great Northumberland Forest.

In answer to a question, he confirmed that the Tree and Woodland Strategy was due for renewal in 2023 and needed to be programmed at the right stage in the consultation process, a report was therefore likely to be scheduled in the programme before the end of 2022.

Members who wished to suggest items for inclusion in the work programme were requested to contact the Chair or the Scrutiny Co-ordinator.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____