

## **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, 26 October 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

#### **PRESENT**

Councillor M. Mather  
(Vice-Chair, in the Chair)

#### **MEMBERS**

Carr, D.	Dale, A.
Cartie, E.	Dodd, R.R.
Castle, G.	Morphet, N.

#### **CABINET MEMBER**

Watson, J.	Healthy Lives
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#### **OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE**

P. Metcalfe	Director of Operations, Active Northumberland
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
M. Taylor	Interim Executive Director - Communities and Business Development
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
M. Warnes	Chief Executive, Active Northumberland

1 member of the press.

#### **21. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Gallacher, Lang and Reid and Nigel Walsh, Head of Cultural Services.

#### **22. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS**

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (November 2022 to January 2023). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that the Leisure Services Review would be considered by the committee at the next meeting on 7 December 2022.

**RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

Ch.'s Initials.....

## 23. OVERVIEW

### 23.1 Active Northumberland Annual Outcome Report 2021-22 including Service Plan Successes 2021-22

The Committee received the Active Northumberland Annual Outcome Report 2021-22 which also contained a review on how the Active Northumberland Service Plan had been delivered for the previous year. (A copy of the report and presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Mark Warnes, Chief Executive of Active Northumberland shared a powerpoint presentation which included:

- Active Northumberland, a registered charity was formed in 2014 following the merger of 5 leisure service providers. It currently had 670 employees across 9 leisure centres, 2 sports and welfare centres, the Dave Stephens Centre and Blyth Beach Huts. Some Sporting Club facilities at Cramlington, Prudhoe Bedlington Cramlington and the Pegasus Riding School had transferred to other operators.
- Their vision was to be the best community leisure and wellness provider in the UK. The strategy was to get more people being active, more often, for longer.
- The national context – average customer return rates were 70-80% when compared to pre-covid levels.
- Financial Performance for 2021-22
- Increases in
  - membership numbers, particularly at centres where there had been recent investment, new junior membership. Establishment of Membership Experience Advisors.
  - Learn to swim lessons.
  - Spa membership. Three recent hair/beauty awards. Industry
  - The exception was the over 65 age category which had not returned to pre-Covid levels of exercise. This was the subject of additional focus and engagement.
- Usage data for gym, general swim, fitness class attendance.
- Health programs and availability at the different centres.
- Details of workforce numbers, apprenticeships, external learning and employee training. The industry was experiencing a lack of qualified staff and was a problem across the country.
- An update on the investment at Berwick, Concordia, Blyth, Newbiggin, Ponteland, Morpeth.
- Digital launch of new Transformation Strategy.

He thanked NCC and members for the support that had been given over the past few years as it had been an extremely tumultuous time for the business.

Comments from members included:

- Congratulations to the officers on the recovery made by Active Northumberland following a difficult period.
- Difficulties experienced booking swim sessions via the app.
- The economy and increasing energy prices continued to make operating difficult for Active Northumberland and others.
- Active Northumberland and staff had made a significant contribution during the pandemic with facilities made available as hubs and vaccination centres.
- Many older residents in rural areas were participating in Zumba and other classes run by private organisations.

The following information was provided in response to questions:

- All staff were paid the National Living Wage.
- There had been reports of anti-social behaviour in the vicinity of Ponteland Leisure Centre, but not within the centre itself. Junior membership was extremely high at Ponteland.
- Users could turn up and use facilities without pre-booking if sessions were available. Membership at Ponteland had increased threefold with the new centre being extremely well used. If there were no sessions at a particular location, the app was able to show if there was availability elsewhere.
- A 65+ Steering Group had been established to see how they could engage better with the those in the older age bracket and work with some of the groups.
- A successful trial of junior memberships at Ponteland had not had a negative impact on adult users and therefore had been extended across the organisation. Members could choose to attend specific adult only time slots.
- The 9 main Active Northumberland leisure centres were participating in the warm spaces and places scheme which could be utilised by residents throughout the winter to stay warm and charge equipment. It was hoped that on seeing the facilities some might start using the centres.
- Officers worked closely with the NCC Sports Development Team and comments regarding affordability and reestablishment of fitness sessions at community facilities would be referred to them.
- Whilst they aspired to implement cheaper swim sessions at less popular times, shortages of qualified staff meant that this was unlikely at present.
- Generally, 15% of the population were gym members. Analysis of market share had been assessed at each of the centre locations with Active Northumberland having significant percentage when compared with other facilities in the area. The information would be provided after the meeting to Councillor Watson, Portfolio Holder.
- A copy of the presentation would be circulated to all committee members.
- Prudhoe had been identified as a location where improvements were needed and would be undertaken when resources were available. The remedial budget was required to be able to respond to emergencies. Investment in the café area and soft play equipment was planned at Wentworth Leisure Centre, Hexham.
- It wouldn't be possible to provide online access by providing computer access for the public at Active Centres.

- Prices had increased in 2022/23 for the first time in 4 years. Active Northumberland had a range of membership types with discounted prices for junior and senior members as well as concessionary membership.
- The statistics previously discussed did not indicate that participation was impacted in more deprived areas. They were competitively priced with a 5\* product. Membership numbers continued to grow and outpaced cancellations. However, the weather in October had been mild and maintaining membership levels could be more challenging during the winter period.
- A revised environmental plan was in the process of being implemented to manage utility costs. Following the relaxation of Covid guidelines recirculation of warm air was now happening at sites where this was possible. Retrofitting waste recovery systems was likely to be expensive and cost prohibitive. Other measures included the reduction of water temperature in swimming pools, up to 1.5c at some centres, but within national operational guidance.
- Cabinet had approved capital expenditure for the installation of ground source heat pumps at Willowburn Leisure Centre, Alnwick. The project had been approved as it would be beneficial to the environment and the costs of the scheme would break even within a set period of time. Although there had been technical issues which had increased the cost and payback period, this was balanced against increasing energy costs. Other green measures included the installation of solar panels on the roof of the new building at Berwick.
- Fitness membership had increased by 14% when compared with pre-pandemic levels.
- Improvements to changing areas included redecoration and provision of soap etc to improve standards so they were more in line with the high-quality modernised spa areas.
- DFC, an external company, had previously collected electronic payments. This was now carried out in-house.
- The Membership Experience Advisers had been created to assist members using equipment who were less confident or had disabilities to maximise their experience with bespoke programs. Decisions were also undertaken on an individual basis to enable participation, such as looking after an assistance dog to enable a member to swim. Recent investment also ensured that buildings were able to be used by individuals with a variety of disabilities, including pool hoists, accessibility through turnstiles and changing room facilities. They were also exploring use of personal trainers.
- The Leisure Service Review had considered accessibility, health inequalities, inclusion, locations and other factors given the significant investment and need to maximise use. The report would be considered at the next meeting of the committee. Use of community facilities may be considered to see how else the service could be delivered as part of leisure development.
- They were working with an increased number of schools regarding PE provision. They had continued to work with schools during the pandemic and deliver activities as they used qualified teachers. Participating schools also benefitted from discounts on activities at the leisure centres.

- An event held under the Commonwealth Games legacy programme had been held out at The Alnwick Gardens with several hundred participants.
- Information of the locations of where wellbeing walk leaders were needed and Active Northumberland's recycling programme was to be provided to Councillor Morphet outside of the meeting.

The officers were thanked for the report and presentation which had been found informative.

**RESOLVED** that that Active Northumberland's Annual Outcomes Report 2021-22, be received.

## 24. 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 provided an update on items to be considered at meetings for the remainder of the year. He had received confirmation from officers that the Tree and Woodland Strategy, due to be considered on 11 January 2023, would incorporate Ash Dieback.

Members enquired if when the aforementioned strategy was considered, if officers could explain how Members accessed expert advice on tree safety as it was understood that internal resources were no longer available to them.

In answer to queries, he stated that:

- A report on bus services and subsidies would be included in the work programme in the near future.
- A report /presentation would be requested on Woodhorn Museum Charitable Trust.

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

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

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