

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, 7 December 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

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

CABINET MEMBER

Watson, J.	Healthy Lives
Wearmouth, R.	Deputy Leader/Corporate Services

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

M. Baker	Service Director – Improvement and Innovation Service
J. Dennitts	Corporate Complaints Manager
M. Donnelly	Service Director – Wellbeing-Adult Services
P. Jones	Service Director – Local Services
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
M. Taylor	Interim Executive Director - Communities and Business Development
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
N. Walsh	Head of Cultural Services

25. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Cartie, Castle and Riddle.

26. MINUTES

It was noted that Councillor Gallacher had given his apologies for the meeting on 26 October 2022 due to another committee meeting being arranged at the same time.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings of the Communities and Place OSC, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair:

- a) 5 October 2022
- b) 26 October 2022

27. 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 an item on the 'Produced in Northumberland' Scheme was due to be considered by Cabinet on 14 February 2023. It was agreed that it would be added to the committees work programme.

In answer to a question, he confirmed that all scrutiny members had been sent an email inviting them to the meeting of the Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC in January when the Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan and 30 Year Business Plan for the Housing Revenue Account would be considered.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

28. OVERVIEW

28.1 Electric Vehicle Charging Tariff Setting Methodology

The report outlined the methodology and process by which the Electric Vehicle Charging tariff was set to cover capital costs, maintenance and repairs and adjusted in line with changes in electricity charges.

Matt Baker, Service Director – Improvement and Innovation Service, briefly summarised the report and methodology adopted. He explained that they worked with colleagues in Finance to track the charges of market leaders whilst setting the Council's tariff at the lowest possible point below the market rate, to ensure that all of the Council's costs were covered but where it would also encourage use of electric vehicles. This was in line with the Council's Climate Change Strategy and target to reduce emissions and achieve net zero by 2030.

Officers in the Climate Team also worked in partnership with colleagues in Local Services. The former led on the strategy and project management whilst the latter were responsible for installation of chargers and running of the back office and income collection.

Comments from members included:

- Whether changes were required to the Local Plan to allow use of solar panels in rural areas which would enable residents to use power generated for EVs.
- Use of DVLA data on EV car registration be cross referenced against demographic data for locations and property types. Officers agreed that this suggestion would be useful and would be taken into consideration when determining future locations.
- Whether alternative solutions could be used to allow residents with no off-street parking access across pavements to charge their vehicles if parked on-street outside their properties.

The following information was provided in response to questions:

- Information gained from the solar farm car port project at County Hall would be used to inform other schemes on the minimum viable scale required.
- Battery technology of vehicles coming to the market was improving.
- A significant increase in demand for electricity in rural areas could impact on the national grid and require investment in more sub stations, so locally generated renewable capacity would be positive.
- EV chargers were supplied with electricity from the national grid, which was greening its own supply, in line with the Government's policy.
- EV chargers were located where there were high levels of demand, e.g. in town centre car parks. More recently locations were being identified to enable EV use where residents did not have off-street parking. The latter required analysis of locations and property types. Initially this was focused on car parks near residential areas and in areas where requests had been received from residents. It was hoped that technological advancements in the future would assist the identification of locations when this became more challenging.
- Locations of EV chargers were being spread across the county to provide the best coverage.
- More information on the process to identify EV charger locations could be provided to interested members.
- The Council had a rolling programme to install 75 new EV chargers per year.
- 2035 was the target for the national grid to be decarbonised.
- Reference was made to value for money principles for projects as a whole when decisions were made as the Council wanted to give all residents fair access and avoid rural EV charger blackspots.
- Different tariffs were applied to the different types of chargers. Faster chargers were more costly as they were more convenient and popular. Usage data was available, if required.
- Letters would be sent to all Councillors in the near future to seek suggestions for the location of EV chargers in their local communities. Their responses would be used to inform future funding bids and determination of locations along with other data.

- Once vehicles were fully charged, they should be moved to allow others access to the facility. Some EVCP operators set up their chargers so that users incurred financial penalties if connected for more than the allowed period. NCC does not do this currently and in the case of on-street chargers has only placed enforceable restrictions on time limits at Rapid Chargers through use of Traffic Regulation Orders.
- As demand and level of use increased for on-street chargers, a decision would need to be taken whether Traffic Regulation Orders needed to be implemented to restrict use of bays to EVs only, parking time limitations or introduction of penalty charges within tariffs if the time was overstayed. The technology would be monitored as the Council developed its approach.
- The tariff had been set to cover the Council's capital contribution and excluded grants received by the Council.
- The Council used a prepayment system. Councillor Mather agreed to provide officers with details to allow officers to investigate alternative fuel cards/apps which advertised discounted prices.
- The EV Tariff Working Group was comprised of officers from Local Services and the Climate Change Team.
- Local Services were responsible for the collection of digital payments.
- The Council applied the same rate irrespective of location or demand. Implementation of different rates would be considered but was potentially problematic.

The Chair and several members expressed their gratitude to the officers for the clarity of the report. They were also strongly of the opinion that EV tariffs and facilities should not be subsidised by Council Taxpayers.

Officers confirmed that strategically it had been agreed that the EV charging scheme should break even, although some parts of the system subsidised elements elsewhere. Consideration would be given in the future as to whether tourism locations should be charged higher or lower rates. A member suggested that lower rates could be used to promote the county as a destination.

RESOLVED that that the report be received.

28.2 Corporate Feedback Performance 2021/2022

The purpose of the report was to review the operation of the complaints process between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022, to keep Members informed about the effectiveness of current arrangements for handling customer complaints.

Julie-Dennitts, Corporate Complaints Manager, summarised the report which included:

- Investigation of corporate complaints where there was not a formal or regulatory process in place. This therefore excluded complaints regarding:
 - Adults, Social Care or Children's Act matters.

- Members Code of Conduct issues.
- Any formal appeals (including planning, parking tickets, legal cases, HR matters).
- They also investigated Executive enquiries, members enquiries and service requests, the latter being dealt with by the Customer Services Team.
- Data was provided on the number of informal resolutions, stage one and stage 2 complaints for the previous year and comparison of some data with 2019-20 and 2020-21.
- An update on the newly procured case management system which would make data retrieval and analysis of trends easier in the future once fully implemented.
- Feedback on cases investigated by the Local Government Ombudsman.
- The development of benchmarking data with regional and national colleagues.

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

- The new case management system would enable more detailed analysis of complaints with real time data available for officers given access. The system was used by other Local Authorities and should address issues raised by members. The system would also be utilised by Information Governance.
- It was important that the number of complaints were not looked at in isolation but consideration was also given to whether complaints were upheld or not upheld, if improved communication was needed or if there were processes which could be done better. A review of all of Council information including Customer Service, compliments etc was used to identify any trends.
- Identification of support available for residents and staff would improve transparency and communication between all parties. It would also reassure individuals that complaints had been looked at properly under the appropriate process, which made it easier for responses to be accepted.
- Information received by the Contact Centre via telephone calls were forwarded to the Complaints mailbox and triaged as appropriate. Other methods were also available for complaints to be made. Emails would be integrated within the new case management system which would improve accessibility and provide updated links to register complaints.
- The website was in the process of being reviewed and updated as part of the Customer Experience Strategy Review.
- Analysis of corporate performance, key performance indicators, freedom of information requests along with data on complaints would enable analysis of performance by section.
- Complaints were valuable and seen as a positive tool which provided free feedback for the Council.
- Elected members complaints were dealt with by the Monitoring Officer which were outside of the corporate complaints process.
- There had been a large increase in the number of complaints received by all Local Authorities which had been discussed at a recent meeting of the National Complaints Managers Group. The increase could be due to

- variety of reasons including the difficult last few years, changes to customers expectations, improvements in accessibility etc
- Suggestions for an agreed list of categories were being considered by the National Complaints Board to enable benchmarking.
 - Stage 2 template letters ensured that individuals were provided with information on the function and independence of the Local Government Ombudsman and contact details if they remained unsatisfied with the Council's decision on their complaint.

Members thanked the Corporate Complaints Manager for the report which had been informative. They also expressed their gratitude to all the staff who worked in the complaint section as it was an increasingly challenging area of work. It was hoped that existing methods of making complaints would continue for those residents who did not have access to laptops and emails.

The Scrutiny Co-Ordinator agreed to schedule the next annual report when most appropriate with perhaps a demonstration of the new system.

RESOLVED that the report be received.

29. 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 reported that the Chair and Vice had received a request for deferral of the Tree and Woodland Strategy which had been scheduled for the meeting in January 2023. However they had requested that the officer be asked to attend the meeting as scheduled to discuss the main issues for consideration for the updated Strategy and to enable members to set out their own priority areas for inclusion. The final draft could then be presented to the Committee in March 2023.

Issues raised by Members included:

- A report on the recent pesticide free weed control trial.
- Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

30. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED:

- (a) That under Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items on the agenda as they involve the likely disclosure

of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the 1972 Act, and

- (b) That the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure for the following reasons-

Agenda Item	Paragraph of Part I of Schedule 12A
9	3 -Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding the information).
AND	The public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the interest in disclosure because disclosure could adversely affect the business reputation or confidence in the person / organisation; and could adversely affect commercial revenue.

31. SCRUTINY

31.1 Leisure Review - Findings of the Review of NCC Supported Leisure Provision and Consideration of Future Management and Procurement Arrangements

Following completion of an extensive review of Council funded leisure provision, the report provided an overview of key findings and outlined a proposed course of action to maximise both the health and wellbeing potential, and value, of future investment (copy attached to the signed minutes, coloured pink and marked Not for Publication).

The recommendations had been agreed by Cabinet when it had considered the report on 17 November 2022. In answer to a question, it was confirmed that the sensitive data gathered as part of the review needed to remain confidential ahead of the procurement exercise which would commence in the near future.

Councillor Watson commented on the complexity of the process and decisions being made by nearby Local Authorities to close some facilities. He referred to the significant investment in facilities by the Council in recent years and the excellent provision by Active Northumberland. However, given the size of the county, it would not be possible to increase access for those residents which were beyond 15 minutes' walk or drive of a leisure site

Marianne Donnelly, Service Director - Wellbeing-Adult Services, explained that some elements of the review had been undertaken in collaboration with Public Health to address inequalities within Northumberland, including preventative ill-health. It would also provide an opportunity to focus future investment based on evident need and delivery of a place-based offer.

In response to questions, it was confirmed that:

- Active Northumberland had been granted extensions to their current contract until 31 March 2024.

- The management fee paid to Active Northumberland had reduced in recent years. However, supplementary support to assist with increasing energy costs had continued.
- Measures were required to reduce reliance on public subsidies.
- The procurement exercise would not solely focus on value for money as other aspects would be factored in.

Members made the following comments when discussing the report:

- Improvements were required to improve the active travel infrastructure in the county to enable residents to use alternative methods of transport to access leisure centres.
- There were many private leisure facilities in the county therefore not all residents used Council facilities.
- The Council had a responsibility for the health and well-being of residents which included opportunities to address loneliness and social isolation.
- Discussions were being held with communities regarding use of local facilities in locations which did not have one of the 9 larger leisure centres.

Councillor Watson thanked the officers for undertaking what had been an extremely complex exercise. The Head of Cultural Services commented that Marianne Donnelly had taken the lead on the review.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____