Northumberland
County Council

COUNTY COUNCIL

DATE: 17 MAY 2023

REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS & FUNCTION OF LOCAL AREA COUNCILS (committees)

Report of the Leader of the Council: **Cllr Glen Sanderson**

Lead officer Rob Murfin, Interim Executive Director of Planning and Local Services

1. **INTRODUCTION**

   A review, and detailed analysis has been undertaken by the Local Area Councils (LACs: please note: LAC's are formally constituted as Committees of the Council) Chairs and Vice Chairs. This has examined the role, context and operational issues arising in discussions about how to enhance the effectiveness and function of the LACs, with an overarching goal of stimulate greater public engagement.

   Since the functions of LACs were changed in May 2017, there has been varying degrees of success in raising public interest at meetings. Whilst Planning Committees are often well attended with significant community interest, resident attendance at the bi-monthly LAC general meetings is sometimes much more limited.

   There is a genuine desire by the Administration to give meaningful opportunities for public involvement in the setting of local priorities and decisions, in terms of both the activities of the County Council and other stakeholders. This has underpinned the scope of the review.

   This report summarises the recommendations of the review and sets out a suggested series of changes that cover both "business as usual" refinements, as well as some more substantive changes.

   It is also suggested that a Policy Conference on the more wide ranging recommendations, together with further matters suggested may be appropriate when comments are received and considered in relation to the contents of this paper.

   Local Area Councils can exercise both executive and non-executive functions. They are Area Committees under s.9E Local Government Act 2000 in respect of executive functions and exempt from the proportionality rules under the Local Authority and Housing Act 1989.

2. SCOPE AND BACKGROUND OF THE REVIEW

Annex 1 to this Report sets out the scope of the review, Annex 2 gives more detail and background information on the formulation of the options presented below.

2.1 Encouraging Increased Public Involvement

RECOMMENDATION 1: That a survey be undertaken of all Members of the County Council to seek views on the range of options for LAC committee items, areas for LAC roles in decisions and options for budget influence. All Directorates of the County Council be asked to analyse opportunities for LAC input and make this a standard stage during formulation of significant strategic or place-based initiatives and interventions. Thereafter, a "guide to setting LAC business" be prepared and consulted upon with all Members and via NALC before adoption.

2.2 Precise Geographies of the LAC Areas

RECOMMENDATION 2: That the geographic extent of the current LAC area is reviewed to reflect any implications arising from the boundary commission review, the BEST (strategic change) programme, economic geography, population change and related matters.

2.3 Overarching issue - Terminology

RECOMMENDATION 3: For all purposes, the term Local Area Council to be replaced by the term Local Area Committee with immediate effect.

2.4 Town and Parish Council Involvement

RECOMMENDATION 4: On an annual basis, each LAC Chair to invite PCs/TCs and the public to a "Speed Dating" style event where officers of different Services of the County Council will be present to answer questions and discuss current initiatives.

2.5 Choice of venues

RECOMMENDATION 5: A core list of suitable* venues be developed and agreed for each area. These are to be used on a fluid/rotational basis according to the topics on the agenda and geographic public interest. Other local venues be considered where appropriate for use as "one off" or extremely specific geographic requirements. *(*Suitability measures will include capacity, safety, IT provision, parking, location, accessibility etc)*

RECOMMENDATION 5.1: Consideration be given to apportioning a small budget to LAC Chairs for discretionary publicity purposes for promoting specific LAC events/agenda items.

2.6 Timing of Meetings

RECOMMENDATION 6: Planning meetings to be held monthly at 4:00 p.m. and separate from LAC meetings which will be held alternate bi-monthly (i.e., on a separate date) at 6:00 pm. At the Chair's discretion/request, different start times for either meeting be agreed to reflect seasonal/weather issues. All changes in start time will be advertised in a timely manner on all occasions.

2.7 Membership - Chairs and Vice-Chairs

RECOMMENDATION 7: The current chairing arrangement be retained, but discussions to take place to determine whether it is more appropriate for each LAC to have 1 Chair and 1 Vice Chair. It is noted that any implications for Special Responsibility Allowances would need to be considered by the Independent Remuneration Panel and agreed by Council.

2.8 Attendance by Officers

RECOMMENDATION 7: That identified specialist officers attend every other full LAC meeting. Chairs to retain the ability to request that any other appropriate specific officer(s) be present. Other technical officers who may be required to respond to questions to set aside time to be available for contact via Teams or email/phone.

2.9 Provision of Refreshments

RECOMMENDATION 9: that refreshments no longer be provided at LAC/LAC Planning meetings.

2.10 Community Chest

RECOMMENDATION 10: Online information be improved on the operation of the Community Chest, including the amendments below.

RECOMMENDATION 10.1: As under present arrangements, all applications to be evaluated against Community Chest criteria by a LAC Sub Panel selected by the LAC Chair annually. This panel will decide the successful applications and inform the chair, who will require those applicants to attend a subsequent LAC meeting and explain awards. At Chair discretion, successful Community Chest applicants to be invited back to the LAC upon completion of their scheme to update/advise other interested groups.

3. PLANNING MEETINGS

3.1 Delegation Arrangements

RECOMMENDATION 11: The current "Delegated Reports" approach continue to assure transparency in member involvement in planning matters. These reports to be circulated for Chairs and/or Vice Chairs along with Chief Planner (or deputy) for

agreement as to whether the application will be a delegated, or committee-based decision.

RECOMMENDATION 11.1: Additional guidance and training to be provided to all members on suitable grounds for "calling in" applications

3.2 Timescale/duration of meetings

RECOMMENDATION 12: The Agenda be limited to three substantive applications per meeting unless the Chair decides otherwise. This would allow both single-item sessions for matters of high public interest and a larger number of minor schemes to be considered. Relevant specialist officers must attend these meetings.

3.3 "No Business" Cancellations

RECOMMENDATION 13: The cancellation of meetings to be agreed with the Chair/Vice Chair which will allow consideration of possible alternate uses for the time slot including formal/informal training.

3.4 Extension of Public Speaking Arrangements

RECOMMENDATION 14: at the Chair's discretion, objector speaking be extended to 10 minutes total (existing restriction is to 5 minutes), and then for only the most significant of applications or those with clear multiple 3rd party interest positions. No individual will receive more than 5 minutes. A similar extension would be afforded to other parties, including applicants/supporters.

3.5 Questions to Speakers/Applicant from members

RECOMMENDATION 15: questions from Members to speakers and/or applicants in order (only) to clarify a precise point be allowed, through the Chair.

3.6 Use of Mobile Devices and use of internet Access

RECOMMENDATION 16: Use of mobile devices, communication applications and access to the internet during all planning committee meetings will be restricted to personal communication of an emergency nature or accessing formally circulated Agenda material. This restriction will be reflected in the review of the Constitution and Terms of Reference for relevant meetings.

3.7 Enforcement and use of conditions

RECOMMENDATION 17: Direct training on Enforcement and Use of Conditions to initially be provided for Members. This to include scope of the new NCC Local Enforcement Strategy.

3.8 S106 agreements and developer contributions

RECOMMEDATION 18: Now that Local Plan is adopted: Future planning reports have a clearly delineated section on developer contributions and apportionments.

RECOMMENDATION 18.1: Chairs of the Planning LAC and the relevant Ward Member be sighted as early as possible on potential S106 packages.
RECOMMENDATION 18.3 Training be provided on this issue.

3.9 General Training

RECOMMENDATION 19: Twice per year, each LAC receive an update/training session. This would supplement rather than replace the need for wider and mandatory training sessions and could be open to the public and Parish and Town Councils with Chair agreement.

RECOMMENDATION 19.1 Continual training on "management" of planning committees, including chairing, discretion, and options (such as requesting a deferral) to be delivered on an annual basis to each LAC.

3.10 Rights of Way applications

RECOMMENDATION 20: One Rights of Way Committee to cover the whole County and appropriate Ward Members be invited to attend.

3.11 Other Matters

RECOMMENDATION 21.1: LAC Membership and Terms of Reference to be agreed at Annual Council.

RECOMMENDATION 21.2: Any implications for Special Responsibility Allowances to be considered by the Independent Remuneration Panel and agreed by Council.

RECOMMENDATION 21.3: The role/relationship of the County Petitions Committee and the consideration of Petitions by LACs (and the LAC ability to request/require action) to be discussed and considered in light of the recent (2013) Constitution review and redraft.

4. IMPLICATIONS

Policy	
Finance and value for money	
Legal	Area Committees are defined under the following legislation: Local Government (Committees and Political Groups) Regulations 1990/1553 Regulation 16A in respect of non-executive functions and s.9E Local Government act 2000 in respect of executive functions
Procurement	NA
Human Resources	NA

Property	NA
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) N/A	
Risk Assessment	
Crime & Disorder	NA
Customer Consideration	Net positive increased opportunity for public involvement
Carbon reduction	Positive – officer attendance at meetings clarified
Health and Wellbeing	NA
Wards	Strengthen community engagement opportunities

APPENDICES

ANNEX 1: SCOPE OF REVIEW OF THE LOCAL AREA COUNCIL CHAIRS

ANNEX 2: INTERIM REPORT OF THE LOCAL AREA COUNCIL CHAIRS

BACKGROUND PAPERS

N/A

REPORT SIGN OFF

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ANNEX 1

SCOPE OF REVIEW OF THE LOCAL AREA COUNCIL CHAIRS

Introduction

The Local Area Councils ('LACs') were introduced as part of the desire to see localisation, engagement and decision-making of County Council activities at a level close to communities. They have delegated responsibility for a range of functions where decisions are taken by local members, reflecting local circumstances. The new format LACs replaced former arrangements in May 2017.

The current iteration of LACs has wider terms of reference than the previous including a sub area Local Planning Authority statutory role and recommending adjustments to budget priorities on annual Local Transport Plan programmes within their area. Their main aims are unchanged; to empower citizens, strengthen communities, and improve services. They involve councillors for each particular area and their meetings are held in public and move around venues in the sub-area. They are not intended to duplicate or replace any Parish or Town Council roles. NB the current terminology of "Council" is not appropriate (and does not accord with the Local Government Act) and the formal change to "Committee" as recommended, has no other consequences in the Northumberland context.

The five LACs are:

- North Northumberland
- Tynedale
- Castle Morpeth
- Ashington and Blyth
- Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley.

The LACs are currently timetabled to meet bi-monthly and set their own work programmes through a mix of NCC corporate and local issues agreed at Local Area Council Chairs' meetings.

The Local Area Council (Planning) Committees meet monthly to consider specific categories of planning applications as per the delegated scheme. These are normally matters of local, rather than County scale/strategic significance. Planning Committees are separate to the wider LAC meetings but are currently timed to meet concurrently when the bi-monthly dates coincide. In addition, there is a Local Area Council – North Northumberland (Right of Way) Sub-Committee meeting bi-monthly, although on separate days to the LACs.

Purpose and scope of this report

Since the LACs were changed in May 2017, there has been varying degrees of success in stimulating public engagement at meetings. While Planning Committees are often well

attended and stimulate significant public interest, resident attendance at the bi-monthly LAC general meetings is sometimes limited.

There is a genuine desire by the Administration to give meaningful opportunities for public involvement in the setting of local priorities and decisions, in terms of both the activities of the County Council and other stakeholders.

The review below carried out by the LAC chairs has suggested several changes. The recommendations making up the bulk of this report should be considered to be *evolutionary* matters.

A debate about a return to a more "centralised" approach to Planning Committees was also discussed but has not been incorporated into this report as a recommendation. There have also been arguments considered for reducing the five LACs to three (North, SW and SE). While worthy of investigation, this suggestion has also not been pursued.

THE REVIEW

LACs have been successful is providing a stable platform to provide public engagement and elements of localised decision making. During the Pandemic extended lockdown, an opportunity was taken to consider their effectiveness. Feedback has been that whilst some meetings are well attended by public, particularly Ashington and Blyth, some others in the county are not consistently well attended. There are also operational issues which include timetable matters, overrunning of the statutory elements of the Planning meetings and inconsistency of agendas density.

Initial evidence was collected and, together with the initial comments, enabled the work to be scoped, terms of reference agreed and a work plan produced, copies of which are filed with the minutes. Separate discussions were held with Cabinet Members, Planning Chairs and their recommendations have been incorporated.

The current terms of reference of the Northumberland LACs, together with those of the area committees of similar authorities: Cornwall Council, Cumbria County Council, Durham County Council, Shropshire Council, and Wiltshire Council were considered. Although some of these operate exclusively as area planning committees, Cumbria and Wiltshire operate local committees with wider ranging terms of reference and, in the case of Wiltshire, a significantly extended membership to include several local stake holders. Consideration of the terms of reference are part this review and will be revised depending on the recommendations agreed. This review will also consider whether an allocation of a fixed budget may lead to greater local accountability and stakeholder participation.

NB an earlier version of this report was on the Agenda for the Full Council meeting of January 2022, but the meeting was closed before it was considered. This paper is an updated version of that report, and includes further analysis drawn from a retrospective view of pandemic-based arrangements.

Initial Investigations and sense-making

Work was led by Councillor Gordon Castle and comprised of Councillors Grimshaw, Lee, Wilczek, Cessford, Hardy and Swinburn and supported by Jackie Roll, Lesley Little and Rob Murfin. It was agreed that the Local Area Chairs would carry out the initial review themselves.

Members acknowledged that each LAC was different but agreed that a refresh of LACS in general was required. Terms of Reference and Workplan were produced to agree the areas for review, the desired outcomes and how other organisations, stakeholders and officers fitted into the process. These documents are filed with the minutes of the meeting.

A draft version of this report and its recommendations was discussed with LAC Chairs and Vice Chairs in January 2023.

Terms of Reference of the Review

- To investigate the current arrangements for LAC Meetings and highlight any issues of concern or best practice.

- To report and make recommendations to Strategic Leadership Team and Council via Scrutiny

Link to Corporate Plan

The LACs have the potential to play an increased and significant role in delivering Corporate Plan priorities but particularly to the living, enjoying, thriving, and connecting strategic priorities.

The LACs will be involved in a range of decisions which will help to drive forward a range of initiatives focussed on the cross-cutting County objectives of fostering economic growth and tackling inequality.

ANNEX 2

INTERIM REPORT OF THE LOCAL AREA COUNCIL CHAIRS

1. Overarching issue - Terminology

The use of the term "Council" is not appropriate in the LAC context. This does not accord with the Local Government Act and the change to "Committee" has no other consequences in the Northumberland context.

2. Choice of venues

LACs have historically met at various venues across the County. There has been some concern regarding the suitability of a number of the venues, particularly where there is poor IT connectivity, parking or concerns around safety of travel during winter/ inclement weather.

A key element of the review was to seek opportunities to increase public engagement and participation in specific localised or specific community-based issues. It is the case however, that issues with venue quality/location can appear to deter greater attendance.

Where venues are available, they may be too small, have poor or have insufficient seating. The problem is compounded by the unavailability of school premises, as the timing of the cycle of some planning meetings overlap the academic day. Where there is paid parking, there have been issues, At Hexham for example, problems have been encountered where meetings have overrun the time allowed or members arriving late and unable to find a parking space.

Members felt it was important to hold meetings in venues across Northumberland, but these needed to address the issues of concern such as above.

Where agenda items were of concern to specific communities, then a suitable venue in that area was preferred. There needs to be therefore a degree of fluidity depending on agenda topics. It was recognised however that an element of reactive/responsive meeting setting would not always sit well with conflicting requirements for the more regular cycle and requirements of the planning meetings (but see later recommendations).

3. Timing of Meetings

Timing conflict issues occur when the LACs and the LACs (Planning) meet on the same day. There can be occasions when the meetings are scheduled 2-3 hours apart, but problems emerge if one of two scenarios occurs:

(a) The planning meeting finishes relatively quickly; this can result in members/officers/public waiting around for significant periods ahead of the start

of the later meeting which causes complaints or lack of attendance from public. This is not an efficient or effective use of resources. Although scheduling can be amended prior to the despatch of the (Planning) agenda if there are few applications, this can cause some public confusion. It is also the case that there frequently is no direct correlation between the number of planning applications to be consider and the total length of time taken for debate.

(b) Conversely, there is concern around the length of time some applications take to be determined, allowing for public speaking. This had led to some meetings overrunning past the start time of the following LAC meeting. Planning meetings cannot lawfully be "paused" for resumption at later date. There is often little time to set up for the following meeting and confusion and complaints from those waiting for the LAC meeting to start. During the agenda preparation process, consideration is given to how much time should be allotted to the meeting which often necessitates a change to the scheduled start time but again this is an estimate and can be very different on the day.

Whilst agreeing to a 6:00 p.m. start for LAC meetings, concern was voiced about Members and Officers travelling late in the evening in winter months. Whilst this may not pose a problem for the 3 urban LACs, it could be considered so for the North Northumberland and the Tynedale meetings which could be held in often remote venues accessed by minor roads.

The solution that received unanimous support was to separate out the Planning from the non-planning LAC meetings. The only downside identified was that this could reduce public interest/attendance at the non-planning meetings. On balance however, it was concluded that this could not reasonably be an excuse for LACs not setting agendas that resonate with local public interest. LAC Meetings will not see attendance raised unless wider issues are addressed.

4. Membership - Chairs and Vice-Chairs

All of the Members considered whether there was a need to have two Vice-Chairs for each LAC and queried whether there was enough work to justify this. The Review Group were of the opinion that two Members could carry out the work of both LAC and LAC Planning meetings adequately. It was further suggested that under any arrangements Members with special responsibility roles could be more involved in engagement of residents and stakeholders and generating relevant issues for the agenda.

Three options were discussed by the group, with a majority supporting Option #3 below.

Any implications for Special Responsibility Allowance will need to be considered by members and if agreed, considered by the Independent Renumeration Panel and any recommended changes to membership or terms of reference etc would need to be agreed by full Council.

- Option #1: As present 1 Chair and 2x Vice Chair
- Option #2: 1 Chair and 1 Vice Chair
- Option #3: 2x Chairs - one LAC and one LAC(Planning)

5. Attendance by Officers

It was suggested that significant numbers of officers attending the LAC meetings in the off chance that they may be asked a question was not an efficient use of resources, it incurred extra travel costs, was environmental unsustainable and some venues had limited capacity. However, these issues need to be set against the clear need for meetings need to be adequately supported and technical or policy questions responded to. On certain occasions there are specific member requests for specialist officers to be present and the Chair will need to discuss this.

6. Provision of Refreshments

Currently, tea, coffee and biscuits are provided at LAC meetings. This is funded by the Democratic Services budget and staff from Democratic Services transport and arrange the refreshments and wash up afterwards. Again, this is not considered to be an efficient use of resources, both staff and cost.

7. Encouraging Increased Public Involvement

This was an area that the Group spent significant time debating and a range of thematic concepts emerged.

A number of ways of increasing involvement of the public and Town & Parish Councils was discussed. The role of other organisations to update or discuss issues affecting their particular area was also outlined.

It was noted several times that members of the public only attended LACs in large numbers when there were contentious planning applications. While separating to two elements of LACs potentially could "reduce the audience" for the non-Planning LAC sessions, this was not felt to be an argument for keeping the two together.

The importance of the role of proactive Chairs / Vice Chairs was identified as a common theme. From the examples given, it was clear however that that some Vice Chairs approach their roles differently to others. It was accepted that setting agenda should not be a process on relying of "Information dissemination" items, rather more needed to be done to attract communities to become more involved.

Members considered whether a modest allocated budget or the devolution of budget areas would encourage more involvement in local schemes. Issues with the application process for Community Chest applications were highlighted with varying numbers of applications being received in different areas (dealt with below).

Following the publication (but not consideration) of the earlier version of this report further dialogue with NALC took place. Specific questions were subsequently included in a 2022 NALC survey which sought he views of T&P Councils "Survey on the

relationship between Northumberland's Parish, Town and Community Councils and the County Council"

While the results were mixed, some of the key headlines were:

- 64.44% of respondents agreed that the local County Councillor attended meetings of their Parish, Town or Community Council

- 80.43% felt that they had the right degree of contact with their local County Councillors.

A multiple-choice question, with the opportunity for weighting responses, asked

"If the County Council were to revamp their Local Area Councils/Committees to be a conduit for passing information to Parish, Town & Community Councils, which three of the following statements best represent your views of this concept and please rank them in order of significance to you"

The two most supported statements were:

"A welcome idea provided that Parish Town & Community Councillors are allowed to fully participate in the discussion"

and conversely;

"Our Council would be unlikely to attend as we find that direct contact with County Councillors or officers serves our needs"

Members of the Group agreed that the LACs could play a more prominent, consistent role in the delivery of the County Council Corporate Plan, and, in particular, the overarching priorities of economic growth, tackling inequality and value for money services.

To do this, it was also discussed a new approach to LAC working based around themes that would be based upon local commonality on real-world socio-economic attributes and issues. These could include sector opportunities and weaknesses, business start-up rates and community/environmental pressures, such as agricultural change, tourism impacts and infrastructure. Demographics, including working age population and skills all factor into the economic functioning of areas and a LAC could the policy interventions best suited for tackling issues.

This type of approach could allow for detailed monitoring and challenge on progress, programmes and problem issues. These would give an evidenced context for delivering strategic priorities such as regeneration, growth and housing, with a location specific emphasis. The LAC could play a valuable role in this regard by giving oversight and a steer to particular initiatives and programmes.

To do this, the LACs will require data and evidence. This information could straddle a number of NCC initiative areas and would be thematically focussed on elements or subsets expanding existing County-tier "Economic Performance" annual reports. This type of report could be presented to the LACs on an annual basis and, where data is

released more frequently, updated to provide members with an informed position on the local economy.

The below list is not a comprehensive list, but gives a flavour of the type of information available;

Economic Activity

- **Business Counts/ Demography** (NOMIS- via ONS Inter Departmental Business Register)
- **High Growth enterprises** (ONS High Growth enterprises)
- **Employment** (NOMIS- via ONS annual population survey [APS])
- **Employment by Occupation** (NOMIS- via ONS annual population survey)
- **Employment by Industry** (NOMIS- via ONS Business Register and Employment Survey)
- **Unemployment** (NOMIS- via ONS annual population survey)
- **Economic Inactivity** (NOMIS- via ONS annual population survey)
- **Claimant count** (NOMIS)
- **Earnings** (NOMIS- via ONS annual population survey) -**Including sex wage gap**
- **Qualification level** (NOMIS via ONS annual population survey)

Productivity and Growth

- **Skills gap- business needs/ skills deficiencies** (UK Commission for Employment and Skills Employer Skills Surveys)
- **NEET 16/17 year olds** (Department for Education's NEET Scorecards)
- **Further Learning and Higher Education** (Department for Education's Destination Measures)
- **GCSE results/ attainment data** (Department for Education KS4 Performance)
- **Job related training** (ONS annual population survey)
- **GVA (gross value added)/ GVA per head** (ONS)

Spending

- **GDHI (gross disposable household income)**

Socio-demographic linked

- **Population** (ONS Census 2021). mid-year population estimate] -Including Age/Sex data (Also available at NOMIS)
- **Population Predictions** (ONS mid-year 2020 stats)
- **Life expectancy** (ONS)
- **Households** (Census 2021)
- **House Prices** (UKHPI)

Finally, the group considered that there should be a clarification of the role of the LAC chair(s). In addition to the proactive settings of agenda, there should be a standing Agenda Item for them to "report back" on what they had been doing in terms of engagement with community/stakeholder interests

8. **General Service Requests & Enquiries**

Members raised concerns over the lack of timely and consistent feedback arrangements for general service requests/enquiries raised by themselves, Town and Parish Councils and the general public.

The current corporate Customer Relationship Management arrangements and reporting of issues via on-line web-based forms for issues such as potholes, street lighting, grounds maintenance, fly tipping and dog fouling, as currently configured, simply acknowledge receipt and provide a unique reference number but do not support the provision of automated feedback to provide assurance that an issue is being followed up and most importantly what the outcome has been. This lack of feedback often results in Members and Town and Parish Councils becoming frustrated and feeling the need to repeatedly raise issues/seek updates through other channels in order to get an update from staff, including within LAC meetings, creating unnecessary additional workloads for all concerned and distracting from the business and focus of the LAC meetings.

Members receive regular updates from Local Services Area Managers on Highways and Neighbourhood Services work/service activities within their local area as part of the current LAC bi-monthly agenda and value this feedback along with the informal networking opportunities to speak to staff when attending these meetings. However, these updates and informal networking cannot cover all areas of service and Members would prefer to have improved corporate arrangements to provide timely feedback as the norm to resolve their concerns.

It was also agreed that the website could give much more information about relevant criteria, legislation and guidance which may reduce the number of service requests and queries from the public and Members. Case studies and worked examples on the website would give useful information.

9. **Local Transport Plan (LTP), Members Local Improvement Schemes and other highway intervention requests**

A separate paper has been produced which examines the implications of changes to the LTP process, and the benefits of moving to a multi-year programme. This looks at possible changes from a strategic context. The LTP process was also considered as part of the LAC review discussions and can be seen as "customer" perspective on the process.

The staged process for developing the annual Local Transport Plan capital programme was discussed in detail. It was considered that the process felt somewhat prolonged and that the criteria and basis upon which schemes were prioritised for inclusion in the programme was not always clear. It was agreed that the process for developing the LTP programme should be revised, with a clearer policy framework

and prioritisation process for dealing with scheme requests along with improved feedback arrangements to advise Members on the outcome of requests for schemes. This should include timely feedback on those scheme requests that are deemed as not being eligible to be taken further, with clear and transparent reasoning for the decision.

There was also a need to provide progress updates on those schemes which are included in the LTP programme, so that Members and Town and Parish Councils were kept informed as a scheme progressed through the various stages of the process to completion. It was recognised that the requests for use of LTP funding to deliver transport improvement, road safety and highway maintenance schemes far exceeded the actual level of funding available and that expectations needed to be managed. It was also considered that the LACs and local Town and Parish Councils had a key role to play in influencing the LTP decisions within their area.

The Members Local Improvement Scheme (MLIS) was also discussed as members currently receive a quarterly update on the funds they have committed and remaining balance available to spend as part of the LAC reporting arrangements and these funds are very useful in helping Members to make a difference within their wards. This can involve using the MLIS to fund interventions at a local level to resolve issues of concern within a community that may not otherwise be considered to be of sufficient priority to be included within the countywide LTP programme, such as a traffic calming measures and parking restrictions. The use of MLIS funding to support other good causes within the local community, such as purchase of equipment or improvements to facilities within clubs and community centres, also offered an opportunity to raise the profile and level of public engagement at LAC meetings. Members felt that the timeliness and quality of information of the use of MLIS funds should be improved, including a 'progress tracker' approach for those schemes which were being taken forward directly by NCC services.

In addition to the above, communities, individuals, PC/TCs and ward members frequently promote, or are asked to promote, local highway related schemes. This can include the introduction of restrictive measures such as resident-only permit parking schemes. While these requests can be well supported, some transpire to have originated from a sub-group of the local community. This scenario can unfold, that after significant resource use, that when formal consultation takes place on Traffic Regulation Orders etc, that there is a majority of residents who express opposition.

While the promotion of "local up" schemes is important, they can be more effectively delivered if schemes with only limited support are filtered out at an early stage as possible. To this end, some local authorities have been experimenting with an extended front-loading requirement, under these arrangements, the proponents of a scheme, typically the local member, would be required to organise the evidence of support. This process would include, as an example, the following steps;

- When a request is received, officers would give technical advice on a reasonable boundary if the "effected area". This would include not only the locations subject to the proposed interventions, but those logically likely to be affected by displacement or consequential impacts.

- The local representative would arrange activities in the area so as to demonstrate the level of support from residents.
- If the level of identified support exceeded 60% (TBA) then the scheme would progress in its normal way through technical steps, including formal consultation.

While this initiative would offer clear benefits, there are a number of operational issues that would need to be piloted.

10. LAC Budgets

At the start of the discussion process Members were given to understand that it was not within the scope review to delegate specific budgets and that no new budgetary allocation was likely.

Members indicated however, collective agreement that if there was scope for devolved budgetary control to LACs, it would strengthen the role of LACs and public interest.

They considered that it would be worth seeking some form of control over local service budgets. To support this position, it was argued that it was always intended in 2009 when District Councils were abolished, that some form of budget management should devolve/be retained in local areas above the Town/Parish Council tier. The cabinet is therefore asked to specifically consider this request.

Some issues were also identified which potentially ran counter to this suggestion – primarily that this could result in a "list of geographically specific schemes" that would only be of interest to residents in one location within the LAC area. In this context, it is worth also noting the results of the NALC survey discussed above. This appears to evidence a desire from the PC network to clearly delineate roles from those of any reconfigured LAC role.

The group also discussed whether the current Community Chest and Member Small Scheme budgets could be administered differently to allow more flexibility. The Group were informed of the difference between the two schemes and considered a detailed briefing note providing information about the current operation, communication and promotion and application process of the Community Chest Scheme.

The Community Chest budget is a Revenue Budget whereas the MLIS is included in the Council's capital programme and can only be used for where a capital asset is being brought into creation. While it may be a reflection of pressure from residents for minor community environmental/amenity works, the MLIS is focused mainly on Local Services Schemes. A large number of awards in recent times have been given to Village Halls etc for Heating or Window upgrades to their premises. There has been a shift away from the traditional traffic calming schemes they used to fund.

It was reported that the process in Ashington and Blyth did not work as well as they could, and the main criticism was the complexity of the application form. However,

the Community Chest Scheme worked well in the Tynedale area with a 5 Member Panel, and it was suggested this should remain.

In general terms the two schemes co-exist. However, in essence the schemes are seeking to achieve two different things with one in the main supporting the Voluntary and Community sector (Community Chest) and MLIS focussing mainly on Local Services schemes and issues.

There is scope for both to contribute to the same outcome, although this did not happen very often and was highlighted as a potential issue in the 2018 audit. Where MLIS is mentioned in a Community Chest application, members were reminded about excessive generosity from the Council and criticism of 'double funding'.

It was suggested that the only way the two schemes could work together more effectively is if they had a single overview and line management, however this would be difficult because of their orientation: one is very VCS and the other very Local Services and could have a major impact on capacity and resourcing.

It is essential that Members were aware of the Corporate Priorities on an annual basis and consider local priorities accordingly.

11.   **Precise Geographies of the LAC Areas**
The geographic area covered by the individual LACs has remained fixed since their inception. The boundaries of the areas reflect, to different degrees, components of pre LGR District Council administrative arrangements.   Discussions have exposed arguments for amendments to the extents of LAC areas to reflect 1. Changing populations, in particular those arising from housing growth since LGR, and; 2. The better understanding of the relationships between communities, travel to work patterns and economic activity/pressures.

In addition, the County Council is engaged on work arising from the boundary commission review, and it may be sensible to consider the LAC areas within this context. This argues for a modest amendment to the boundaries of the LACs.

In terms of the choosing precise geographies for LACs, there are certain restrictions if it is accepted that the "Planning" elements of the LACs with remain coterminous with the other elements of the LAC functions.

The Local Government Act sets out the provision that a Council can set up area-based committees as it sees fit. The composition of each area committee does not need to follow proportionality of full County formal committees, rather the composition of each area committee is made up of members of the Council whose ward (or part of a ward) in contained within the geographic area of the LAC. The only other restriction is that each LAC shall administer a geographic area that does not exceed two-fifths of the total area of the Council by reference to either population **or** physical area. Statutory Planning functions can be delegated to these areas accordingly.

A more fundamental review of LAC geographies was also discussed, and the operational and strategic arguments for changing the number of LACs. The arguments can be broadly summarised as:

While current LAC boundaries provided a degree of useful continuity, these boundaries may have progressively less relevance as places develop/change and there is now only a very limited reliance on "relic" District era strategies. This can be seen perhaps most significantly in that the new Local Plan now covers all of the County consistently for the first time since LGR.

New larger LACs would make an eventual downward delegation of budgets more pragmatic, as larger geographies would be better aligned to potentially reviewed service delivery areas.

The five-LAC model however have strengths and is supported by an element of the population. While savings would accrue by simply reducing the number of LACs, it cannot be disputed some communities retain a strong identity and affinity with some of the LAC areas such as "the Tynedale Valley".

PLANNING MEETINGS

Outside any consideration of a more fundamental review of the structure of the County Council's Planning Committee structure, it was considered that a number of operational matters required amending or changing.

LAC Planning meetings

Discussions were held with Planning Chairs/Vice Chairs where the following issues were raised.

12. **Frequency/coverage of meetings**
    The LACs, when meeting as area planning councils are also mixed, with some areas considering very few applications.

Planning Applications Considered

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Ashington/Blyth	14	7	10	1	3
Castle Morpeth	34	32	38	12	14
Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley	10	10	5	0	7
North Northumberland	57	68	34	11	28
Tynedale	22	36	40	10	19

These volumes of decisions made by the Committees can be compared against the numbers of relevant applications decided which could reasonably considered for potential "call in"

Area Team	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
North	1330	1374	1322	1443	1589
SE	1761	1674	1622	1853	1733
West	1060	1077	1059	1181	1292

NB these work volumes will be useful to consider as part of any review of potential LAC geographical boundaries.

13. **Delegation Arrangements**

Members agreed that the LACs are an important part of transparent democracy in the planning process, but they should not be used for matters that are uncontroversial or raise no wider issues. Northumberland has the largest geographic area of any County and has the most planning committees. This process is transparent and is useful for addressing any subsequent LGO complaints. Some members suggested that the delegation scheme should allow more applications to be determined locally.

In order to aid the delivery of work programmes/performance and to allow the new Local Plan to guide the majority of decisions, the following recommendations were proposed.

14. **Timescale/duration of meetings**

As reported in an earlier section of this report, often LAC Planning meetings become protracted.

15. **"No Business" Cancellations**

Some Planning LAC meetings have been cancelled due to lack of suitable applications, and it was suggested that the time could be used beneficially such as for training sessions. Members felt they would benefit from a range of information session, for example planning appeals won and lost and the criteria / reasons leading to the decision; any changes to legislation or guidance or any other training aimed at improving their knowledge and experience.

16. **Extension of Public Speaking Arrangements**

Currently, the planning meeting arrangements allow 5 minutes for the supporters, 5 minutes for the objectors and 5 minutes for the local member but at the Chair's discretion agreed in advance, more than 5 minutes can be allowed for public speaking. It was agreed that this needed to be caveated that this was not an opportunity for the same issue to be raised again or concerns to be duplicated. Also, this time needed to be subject to an overall limit, and then only for the more **significant applications**. A similar extension would be offered to all parties in those circumstances.

17. **Questions to Speakers/Applicant from members**
Members agreed that sometimes a simple question can clarify an issue. This should not be an invite to "restate opposition" but to clarify the understanding of the Committee. This should always be through the Chair and used only where there is a clear need to clarify a **precise** question. This can sometimes avoid a refusal if the applicant can provide simple information to clarify an issue or confirm they would accept a new condition.

18. **Use of Mobile Devices and use of internet Access**
Recent years have seen the increasing usage of mobile devices to access the internet and utilise "instant" messaging (via applications such as WhatsApp). There are concerns that Members of formal decision-making committees are, or may perceived to be by third parties, holding parallel discussions to those which are transparent to other Members, officers and the public.

This has the risk of introducing bias into proceedings in the form of predetermination. It is also the case that members of Planning Committees should only consider evidence submitted and evaluated in a transparent and verifiable manner. There should therefore no "googling" the answer to a technical question by members.

Decision must be based solely on the merits of the evidence presented in the Committee meeting, whether this is drawn from the Committee Report or statements made by officers and other speakers.

Information drawn ad-hoc from an internet search needs to be objectively reviewed, and sources/citations checked. If a Member feels that there is insufficiently robust technical evidence available to make a decision during a Committee, he or she should request a deferral of the matter/application until such information can be properly evaluated.

It is accepted that this recommendation may appear to be restrictive. It is the case that in our daily lives we may be used to looking for information on-line and to "Google" something as a matter of routine. This cannot, such in the role of a jury member in a court of law, be utilised as a tool to aid decision making in a formal setting such as a Planning committee. This is because decisions need to be transparent and may need to be the basis of a formal council position during an appeal or judicial review in a court. .

19. **Enforcement and use of conditions**
The Committee requested more direct involvement and training on enforcement matters.

20. **S106 agreements and developer contributions**

Members requested that the future planning reports have a clearly delineated section on developer contributions and apportionments. This was regarded as being particularly significant in terms of the type/size and tenure of affordable housing secured by s106. They also agreed that Chairs of the Planning LAC and the relevant Ward Member should be sighted as early as possible on potential S106 packages. This element can be introduced when the Local Plan is adopted as a new system will need to be implemented.

21. Training

Planning legislation and guidance is faced with almost continual change/turmoil, and there will be a particularly intensive period triggered by changes introduced by the new versions of the NPPF (with its emphasis on significantly improving design), the new Local Plan, the "First Homes" agenda, biodiversity net gain, climate change legislation and the looming Levelling up and Regeneration Bill proposals. It was essential that Members were kept up to date with such changes.

22. Rights of Way applications

Currently, there is a Local Area Council – North Northumberland (Right of Way) Sub-Committee meeting bi-monthly, although on separate days to the LACs.