

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 April 2023 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor N. Oliver
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Cartie, E.	Lang, J.
Dale, A.	Morphet, N.
Gallacher, B.	Reid, J.

CABINET MEMBER

Riddle, J.	Local Services
Watson, J.	Healthy Lives

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

N Easton	Public Transport Manager
K. Lounton	Interim Head of Service
K. Marynissen	Public Health Trainee
S. Nielson	Executive Director – Place and Regeneration
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
S. Ogle	Housing Operations Manager
A. Peaden	Library services Manager
J. Rose	Interim Director of Regeneration
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

ALSO PRESENT

1 member of the press.

49. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from N Walsh and Councillors Carr, Castle, Mather and Horncastle.

50. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (May to August 2023). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

Ch.'s Initials.....

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

51. REVIEW OF THE USE, OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF OPEN LAND HELD WITHIN THE HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

Susan Ogle, Housing operations Manager, explained that agreement was sought to establish a Task and Finish Group to examine current issues associated with “open land”, to contribute to the development of a policy to guide future decision making on the use, ownership disposal of such land and enforcement, when development is undertaken without consent. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Members were in agreement that this would be useful, as ownership of land was confusing with previous stock transfers and uncertainty regarding the formalisation of arrangements with some areas of green space which were not well maintained.

Officers from Housing Services, Strategic Estates, Legal Services and Neighbourhood Services would be asked to participate. It was suggested that three or four meetings would be held over the next few months prior to submission of a report to Cabinet, hopefully in November.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that an Open Land Task and Finish Group be established.
- b) The Task and Finish Group be Chaired by Councillor Mather with Councillors Dale, Lang and Reid being nominated.

SCRUTINY

52.1 North East Bus Service Improvement Plan

The Committee received a report which outlined the implications of the Bus Service Improvement Plan for Northumberland bus services and infrastructure. (A copy of the report and presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Councillor John Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Local Services was delighted to report that the 7 North East Councils had been awarded £163 million from the Department of Transport’s (DfT) Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding. This had been the largest award in the country. The money would in part be used to improve rural bus services and double the current allocation of £2.2 million for supported bus in Northumberland.

Neil Easton, Public Transport Manager, gave a PowerPoint presentation which:

- Explained the strategic importance of buses in the region.
- Displayed maps which depicted fully commercial bus services in Northumberland and those that were partly or fully subsidised by the Council.
- Outlined the requirements for the BSIP Funding which was split between £73.5 million for capital schemes and £90 million for revenue schemes.
- A £6.8 million indicative allocation to improve services in Northumberland by supporting the existing network including changes to frequencies and hours, reinstatement of services, provision of new services and fares initiatives.
- Establishment of a Local Bus Board to oversee implementation of proposals with representation from the five Local Area Councils, NALC, VCS and the bus operators.

It was noted that initially the funding had been expected in 2022 but had been delayed due to a Cabinet Office review of ministerial budgets. Officers were therefore lobbying for the period in which the money should be spent over three years, the original period, which would enable service enhancements to become established and commercially viable.

He expected that bus operators were likely to propose further changes to services following the cessation of DfT funding at the end of June 2023. This funding had allowed bus operators to claim the difference in revenue shortfall as there currently had only been an 84% return of patronage when compared with pre-pandemic levels.

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

- At the present time, it was unknown the extent of unprofitable services in Northumberland and what changes might be proposed by the bus operators. It was not anticipated that these would be extreme in Northumberland, however, no decisions could be made until receipt of registration documents.
- Bus operators would be required to supply patronage numbers and costing data to provide evidence that a route was loss making. This had been previously provided voluntarily but was now a requirement of the Enhanced Bus Partnership.
- Bus services were subject to a competitive tendering process. If a price for a service was not believed to be fair, the market would be tested.
- 25% of the funding could be used for de minimus awards with 75% awarded following a procurement process.
- The capital funding would primarily be used in Tyne and Wear to alleviate pinch points and delays in the highway network. Residents in Northumberland travelling to Newcastle would benefit from improvements places such as Gosforth. A number of smaller schemes were planned in Northumberland for intelligent traffic light systems, road widening schemes in Blyth and Cramlington, and some infrastructure such as bus shelters and improvements to transport interchanges.

- A further report could be brought to the committee when details of capital schemes were finalised.
- The available technology did not currently support long distance electric bus journeys. However, minimum vehicle specifications in the tender documentation required a Euro 6 standard vehicle with reduced diesel emissions.
- Separate funding had been secured to purchase 60 electric vehicles, some of which would be based at the Arriva depot in Blyth. The funding would also be used to pay for infrastructure upgrades which would assist the commercial case for investment by the bus operators. Exploration of opportunity charging at interchanges would enable the use of electric vehicles on longer routes although the increasing cost of electricity was also an influencing factor.
- As the period in which the funding could be utilised had been reduced from 3 to 2 years, it was hoped that the commissioning of the service before the end of 2024/25 would allowed the benefits of the funding to be extended into a third year. Supporting services for a longer period, would be desirable, particularly given that the commercial position regarding existing bus services would not be known before June 2023.
- 2 of 4 Adapt services were operated without support by the Council. Members of the public had been encouraged to 'use it or lose it'. Councillors asked to be kept updated so they could help promote use of services.
- The Council reimbursed bus companies a proportion of an adult fare of journeys made by elderly or disabled passengers who used a concessionary or free bus pass.
- Fewer journeys were being made by older residents, when compared with pre-Covid levels. Older residents generally used daytime services. It was recognised that this would need to be addressed with some specific promotion and marketing to encourage use of the bus network.
- Continuation of services at the end of the 2-year period would depend on whether the costs of services were covered.
- The 'take the kids for free' school holiday initiative had been extended to being accompanied by an adult this year, whereas it had been a fare paying adult previously.
- The impact of the pandemic would have had a small impact on the figures in Appendix 1 for the period at the end of 2019/20 and potentially the reduction in numbers could be worse. However, this would be offset by contraction of the network on services and frequency as network mileage was at 90% pre-Covid as a result of operators seeking efficiencies.
- Further information would be sought on the use of bio-gas busses for journeys where electric busses were not currently suitable.
- Bicycles could be used on vehicles in the same space utilised by disabled users or passengers with prams, on a first come first served basis. Rear bike racks had been trialed in the past along some of the tourist routes.
- Officers did not have figures for the number of applications for free bus passes annually. Whilst take-up was excellent, they were aware that only 50% of free bus passes were used each year.

- Officers could provide boarding data on the use of concessionary fares at specific bus stops. Any requests were to be emailed to the officer after the meeting. Generally, commuters and young people tended to use the service at the start of the day and teatime with senior residents using services mid-day. They hoped to increase use by all throughout the day.
- It would be more difficult for the Government to refuse a request to extend the funding period, if this was evidenced by a substantial rise in patronage.
- The reluctance to use services post pandemic could potentially be an opportunity for further research.
- Devolution deals elsewhere in the country had found it useful to mix funds on projects for the benefits of communities and residents, such as improved vehicles and connections between Northumberland and Newcastle.
- Discussions would be held with Town or Parish Councils regarding taking over responsibility for new or replacement infrastructure, such as bus shelters.

Members welcomed the additional funding and were particularly pleased with proposals to increase the age of reduced fares for young people. They also commented that:

- It would be beneficial for the revenue money to be spent wisely and not rushed.
- Communities in the southeast of the county could also be classed as rural and had reduced services in some areas.
- Whether car ownership data could be broken down across rural and urban areas.
- There were few residents in some rural areas which could use bus services to access employment.
- More funding was required to support a viable and sustainable bus network, given that the funding was much higher per head of population in London.
- There should be exploration of how bicycles were accommodated on busses in other parts of the country to enable multi modal journeys.
- The older generation were also not participating in community projects, compared to pre-pandemic levels. It was believed that there was still a fear factor and that they had found different ways to live.
- Reference was made to a situation where a parish council had invested in new bus shelters, which had been a significant investment for a small body, with the later cessation of the service on that route. It was hoped that following investment infrastructure this would not be repeated.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The recommendations in the report be supported.
- b) Cabinet be recommended to consider
 - i) Supporting the Council's efforts in lobbying the Government to extend the funding period beyond 2024/25.
 - ii) Including reference to the relevant portfolio holder within the delegated authority, in recommendation 2.

- iii) The representation from the Local Area Councils should reflect the political balance of the Council in the composition of the Northumberland Local Bus Board, in recommendation 3.
- iv) Encouraging service providers to create additional space on vehicles to carry bicycles.

OVERVIEW

53.1 Update on Library Service Redesign and Development

The Committee received an update on the status of the agreed Library Service redesign programme and the continued development of the Service. (A copy of the report and presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Councillor Jeff Watson, Portfolio Holder for Healthy Lives, introduced the item. He was extremely proud of the Library Services and the services that Northumberland provided, particularly following discussions at a recent Local Government Association conference. The service included 30 libraries, a mobile library service, school library service and prison library. He referred to the development of the Hub libraries and the partnership working with Northumberland Communities Together. He confirmed the Council's commitment that no libraries would be closed and made reference to new facilities at Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, Ponteland and Morpeth and the re-opening of the library at Blyth South Beach.

Karen Lounton, Interim Head of Service and Alison Peaden, Library Service Manager, gave a PowerPoint presentation which outlined:

- The journey of the Library Services which had been transferred to a charitable leisure trust in 2015 before being returned to the Council's control in 2016 and commencement of a transformation programme.
- Establishment of the following priorities following a resident's survey in 2020:
 - Strengthening the core service.
 - Establishment of hub libraries within each locality area.
 - Extending reach and partnerships.
- Links to the Corporate Plan.
- The progress to date.
- Service user feedback and testimonials.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport Library Service Strategy.
- Service Priorities for 2023/24.
 - Developing the role of the established hubs.
 - Outreach and partnership working

It was stressed that libraries were the original community hubs since the Public Libraries Act 1850 and provided warm hubs in the cost-of-living crisis, social networks, provided opportunities for learning and advice guidance companionship and support.

The success of the Reading for Wellbeing programme was highlighted which was alleviating social isolation post Covid. It provided an alternative route to wellbeing and health via social prescribing and connection to reading companionship groups hosted in libraries across the county. Reference was also made to partnership work with other bodies such as Hexham Town Council which had welcomed Ukrainian refugees with English classes in the library.

In answer to questions, it was explained that:

- Quarter 3 data for 2021 on page 24 of the agenda papers would likely have been impacted by the pandemic lockdown and opening restrictions, in categories such as footfall and in person activities, although digital events would likely be positively affected. It was agreed that information for Quarter 3 2019 would be shared with Members after the meeting to give a clearer comparison.
- Resources were to be deployed as efficiently as possible and they did not wish to compete with existing voluntary networks. Their aim was to provide complimentary or contrasting events or services.
- They hoped to attend future meetings of the Local Area Councils to consult with members on the local area prospectus development and implementation.
- The service had provided support to apprentices to alleviate financial pressures if this was required.
- The service offered information and signposting to the warm spaces initiative, with all library users being made welcome.
- They worked with JobCentre Plus who directed claimants without facilities at home to undertake job searches on the public access IT equipment within libraries. Individuals who were not confident with information technology were offered 1 to 1 support.
- Councillors were encouraged to share the Library Service monthly newsletter as widely as possible. Local members were also often asked to help promote events in their wards.
- The library services was used as a source for information. A pilot scheme was being held at Hexham Library to see how library staff and customer service colleagues could support each other in their roles to grow knowledge and skills, this had recently included blue badge and bus pass renewals. More complex and confidential queries, such as housing benefit or planning issues, could be dealt with by speaking on the telephone to the contact centre in a private space.
- Some of the libraries had absorbed the local tourist information centres and they worked with tourism colleagues in Visit Northumberland. Staff were trained to be able to provide tourist information.
- They were working with interested groups in a number of communities including Corbridge, Wylam and Wooler to see how services could be provided or extended. It was reported that Allen Valleys Local History Society were helping supplement Saturday opening in Allendale Library.
- The use of digital pens was being investigated as they were portable and could be more easily moved between locations than traditional 3D printers

which would require substantial funding to provide equipment in multiple locations. Users could then be signposted to other locations within their local community where further digital opportunities were available.

The Chair and members thanked officers for the informative presentation and raised the following issues:

- Whether details of proposals for South Beach Library could be sent to the local member who worked in the community sector. She strongly believed that provision did not overlap with other facilities in the same ward which might impact on funding.
- Apprenticeship posts were supported, particularly if these led to permanent positions within the service. It was suggested that consideration be given to assisting apprentices with transport, given their low wages whilst in training.
- It was hoped that library service staff had access to contact information for County Councillors to refer residents to them, if required.
- An excellent example of a one stop shop was available in Prudhoe Library with Prudhoe Partnership.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The contents of the report be noted.
- b) The progress and achievements supporting the three phases of the service redesign, be noted.
- c) The service priorities for 2023/24, including the development of a new Library Strategy in the context of new Government guidance, be noted.

54. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed the monitoring report for the 2022/23 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that the work programme for 2023/24 was in the process of being developed and was already quite busy, however, if members identified any matters, these should be emailed to him / the Chair / the Vice-Chair.

In response to a query, he agreed to check whether a report from the Social Care Ombudsman on Post 16 Transport was to be considered by the Families and Children's Services OSC.

The Chair expressed his gratitude to Councillor Reid for his work as the former Chair of the Committee and the Scrutiny Co-ordinator and Democratic Services Officer for their support.

RESOLVED that the monitoring report be noted.

55. URGENT BUSINESS

Several Councillors expressed their concern that the minutes from the meeting held on 5 April 2023 had not been included with the agenda papers for this meeting. They were aware that 2 meetings had been held close together and enquired whether any additional support was available. Some members believed the next meeting should not be held, if the minutes were not available as it was better transparency if they were included. A Councillor had wanted to check whether her comments and opposition to changes regarding the scrutiny arrangements had been minuted.

The Chair commented that generally the Committee considered different subject matters at meetings, and he therefore believed that it was not therefore essential that the minutes from the last meeting be considered at the next meeting as they would likely be debating different issues.

It was noted that the minutes from scrutiny meetings were no longer included with the agenda papers for County Council meetings. Also, all members had received regular emails and had been invited to meetings when discussions of the new scrutiny arrangements had been discussed. The matter would also be debated by all members in full at the Annual meeting of Council before a decision was taken.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator explained that any recommendations made by the Committee to Cabinet were circulated with papers for Cabinet. They were also available to all on the Council's website. Meetings were also recorded and available via YouTube.

The Chair agreed to speak to the Business Chair and Head of Democratic Services.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that the proposed timetable for 2023/24 would not have 2 meetings so close together.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____