

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 July 2023 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor N. Oliver
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Carr, D.	Gallacher, B.
Cartie, E.	Lang, J.
Castle, G.	Morphet, N.
Dale, A.	Reid, J.

CABINET MEMBERS

C. Horncastle	Looking After Our Environment
J. Riddle	Improving Our Roads and Highways
G. Sanderson	Leader of the Council

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

G. Gavin	Head of Neighbourhood Services
P Jones	Director of Environment and Transport
R. Murfin	Director of Housing and Planning
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

7. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Mather.

8. MINUTES

In answer to a question, the Leader stated that there were a number of areas which the Administration were looking to expand and increase budgets which would be part of the budget setting process. Members who wished to suggest areas, such as pest control, would need to highlight them during the consultation.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC, held on 31 May 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

9. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the schedule of decisions made by Cabinet since the last meeting with the latest Forward Plan of key items (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Chair reported that Cabinet had approved the committee's recommendation with regard to financial support to reduce the risk of contamination for fire and rescue personnel.

RESOLVED that the schedule of decisions made by Cabinet and the Forward Plan of key items be noted.

10. OVERVIEW

The Chair commented that the following presentations by officers and portfolio holders were to inform the committee of key works streams and projects that would be taking place in the areas within the next 6-12 months.

It was not intended therefore that the individual issues be discussed in detail but to gain an understanding and identify areas which should be scrutinised. The timing of when items should be included would be discussed after the meeting between officers and the Scrutiny Co-ordinator.

10.1 Presentation by the Portfolio Holder for Improving Our Roads and Highways

Councillor John Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Improving Our Roads and Highways commented on the improvements being achieved by the highways improvement programme. Progress was being made through the additional funds provided by the Council in addition to the standard Government funding. He was particularly delighted with the Fix My Streets and Alloy systems.

Paul Jones, Director of Environment and Transport, gave a presentation which outlined the following areas which were within the remit of the committee and potential items which could be reviewed:

- Service improvement activity
- Review and updating of strategy and policy documents
- Post project review of major capital projects and programmes which spanned multiple years, whether schemes had been delivered against the intentions identified at the outset in terms of time, cost, quality etc.

(A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Issues raised by members included:

- The increased transparency and simplicity of Fix My Street was praised although several councillors queried the feedback to residents and terminology being used when items were 'closed'. It was noted that this was an evolving process to identify what could be improved including training for staff and updating the automated responses.
 - Requests for member training.
 - Dangerous / urgent items continued to be fixed promptly when reported by other means, eg email.
 - Whether information could be provided in response regarding road hierarchy and prioritisation of major roads over minor roads and the different response times. Responses should include information regarding the normal service standard for the category of repair. The amount of details in responses needed to be balanced and not deter individuals submitting reports. The initial large volume of requests following the launch and issues such as flooding could have had an impact on response times.
 - Observations on the system could be sent to the Director or portfolio holder.
 - Positive feedback had been received by councillors and residents with some items being actioned the same or following day.
 - The team involved in the implementation and use of the system be congratulated.
- Ensuring Northumberland received a fair share of funds via the North East Transport Plan.
- The route of the Blyth to Bebside Cycle Corridor. It would be desirable if the route avoided Cowpen Road, due to the noise and air pollution on the busy road, and linked with the Riverside route. The criteria for route selection normally required shortest most direct route. An update would be provided.
- Whether parking charges were to be introduced in coastal car parks. The Leader confirmed that this was not proposed.
- Those involved in the Electric Vehicle Installation Programme be congratulated for the success of the programme with very few problems.
- A maintenance programme for cycle routes including vegetation and condition of path surfaces was essential.
- Northumberland Road Safety Strategy, particularly cost of streetworks and whether these were comparable with other local authorities.
- Strengthening Northumberland Network Management Plan.
- Northumberland Rights of Way Improvement Plan
- Local Cycling Walking Investment Plans (LCWIPs) – scrutiny of routes not yet finalised (following receipt of government guidance on rural LCWIPs).

The Chair reminded members that the purpose of the presentations was to identify areas to be identified for inclusion in the work programme and not to discuss any workstreams or projects in detail.

RESOLVED that the items listed below be included within the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny work programme, following discussion

between the Scrutiny Co-ordinator and officers, to determine their inclusion at the most appropriate time to enable an effective contribution:

- Fix My Street (with links to Network Management Plan / road hierarchy)
- North East Transport Plan
- Local Cycling Walking Investment Plans – development of the programme
- Northumberland Road Safety Strategy – use of members scheme funds and costings.
- Northumberland Rights of Way Improvement Plan

10.2 Presentation by the Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Environment

Councillor Colin Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Environment explained that Councillor Glen Sanderson, Leader of the Council, was also in attendance as there was some overlap between their portfolios as Climate Change came under the Leader's portfolio. He praised the Executive Director for Place and Regeneration, Director of Environment and Transport, Director of Housing and Planning and Head of Neighbourhood Services for their knowledge and assistance.

The Leader reported that the environment was to be prioritised within mainstream work for the Council with the work of the Climate Change team being linked to the new environment first priorities. New policies and strategies were to be developed. Participation by all parties would contribute to the impact on the environment in the county and make the job easier for the Council as an enabler. They wanted to protect species and work with others, including farmers, to ensure rewards for environmental improvement were aligned as well as recognising food security.

Rob Murfin, Director of Planning and Housing and Paul Jones, Director of Environment and Transport, outlined the 4 different types of activity and key areas of work which could be scrutinised by the committee during 2023/24, under the following headings:

1. Social Housing Regulation Bill
2. Biodiversity Net Gain
3. Local Nature Recovery Strategy
4. Design and Maintenance of Places
5. New approach to Section 106 schemes
6. Waste Management and Recycling
7. Coast and River Protection

A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.

Members raised the following points:

- Clarification regarding the purpose of section 106 monies. These were to be used to alleviate the impact of a development. Whereas a tariff based

system would see communities benefitting from growth. The current model proposed that all developments would contribute to a central pot. All Town and Parish Council's would receive 15% of funds from development in their area or 25% if they had a made neighbourhood plan with identified actions which would be funded from the developer contributions. This could be scrutinised when the legislation and guidance was released.

- Maintenance of grass verges and large open spaces and use of planting in parks and open spaces. Whilst views varied, use of herbaceous plants in borders would require less maintenance. The committee could have input in the policy formulation as part of the review of grounds maintenance standards, regimes and where they were applied. The Head of Neighbourhood Services confirmed that the draft project plan proposed consultation with public, county councillors and town and parish councils and involvement by scrutiny. The Leader confirmed that there would be no changes to current practice until new policies were agreed.
- Investment in the South beach area. This had been included in the capital programme and was due to be carried out in Spring 2024. It was hoped that D-Day commemorations could be held at that location although planning was in the very early stages.
- Maintenance of trees and shrubs including liaison with external agencies and private landowners. More resource was needed. It was noted that Fix My Street could be used to report and monitor overhanging vegetation and the issue would also come within the review of Open Spaces. A decision to be made at a later date if further scrutiny was required. Reference was made to the exploration of an Environmental Enforcement Board within the 4th key area and possible involvement of members and member / community prioritisation to tackle untidy land.
- It was hoped that the provision of containers in the Hirst ward would reduce the amount of fly tipping in that area. The Head of Neighbourhood Services reported that the location and delivery of containers should be completed within the next 6-7 weeks. Phase 1 had been very successful, but residents were concerned that there could be loss of car parking spaces in phase 2 and officers were asked to liaise with wards councillors. It was suggested that cameras be used to monitor the areas during the initial period following installation.
- Whether the coastal mitigation levy included rivers and, if so, whether the levy should be applied across the whole of the county. The levy applied where it could be justified and went significantly inland and was based on evidence of visitors to the coast, but not the whole of the county. Some members felt that this was unfair and that it should be applied countywide. Current arrangements had been agreed with Natural England and enabled planning permissions to be granted in coastal areas with special designation to protect important breeding seabirds. It negated the need for all developers to demonstrate how they would mitigate the impact of their development individually with Natural England. The scheme had been in place for 3 years and was being replicated elsewhere. It was suggested there could be merit in an update report and review of progress. The Chair suggested that this was more appropriately reviewed by planning policy, the portfolio holder and members of the coastal communities.

- Review of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and information about the pilot undertaken 3 years ago.
- The Leader awaited confirmation the NCC would be leading on rurality and the environment on behalf of the new combined authority. Part of south-east Northumberland was also rural.

The Leader suggested that it would be beneficial to have the committee's input, perhaps via a task and finish group, on policy around the environment and items to be included within the action plan by mid-September to identify recommendations for inclusion in the budget process.

RESOLVED that the items listed below be included within the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny work programme, following discussion between the Scrutiny Co-ordinator and officers, to determine their inclusion at the most appropriate time to enable an effective contribution :

- Social Housing Regulation Bill – update expected in October 2023
- New Section 106 system
- Green / Open spaces review
- Local Nature Reserve Strategy
- A task and finish group on the environment

11. UPDATE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TREE MANAGEMENT POLICY

The Committee received an update on the development of a Tree Management policy for the Council. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Greg Gavin, Head of Neighbourhood Services, thanked members for the suggestions that had been made at the meeting in January 2023 which had been incorporated within the framework. He outlined the draft structure of the Tree Management Policy, which it was hoped had taken a balanced approach to manage the risks presented by trees within the Council's ownership and also those that were dangerous and in private ownership.

An accurate spatial digital record of the location of trees of 3 metres or more was being mapped to enable an inspection regime to be designed. Officers had liaised with colleagues at the neighbouring authority where there had been a tragic death of a school child from a fallen tree and the subsequent Health and Safety Executive investigation, to identify areas where improvements could be made, particularly around inspections. The committee were reminded that inspections at high-risk sites had commenced in 2021.

Responsibility for the maintenance of Council trees fell across a number of departments including neighbourhood services, highways, transport, property services, planning and housing as well as individual schools and this structure was to be reviewed. A decision on whether current resources for inspection and proactive maintenance were adequate could not be assessed until all options had been quantified and the survey completed.

The policy would also need to address how ad hoc requests from councillors and members of the public were responded to, following the setting of service standards to better manage expectations.

The following issues were raised by members:

- Concern was expressed regarding the scale and progression of Ash die back and the danger that these trees posed. It was suggested that some may have been identified by the highway's inspection vehicles with camera technology and should be dealt with before the survey of the county was completed.
- The scale of the task was massive but needed to be undertaken.
- Trees suffering from Ash die back needed to be prioritised. It was confirmed that inspections were being carried out at key sites such as streets near schools and key paths in parks and reference was made to a recent felling licence application for Plessey Woods. Sample checks were being carried out on key arterial routes to obtain a sense of the scale of the problem including the A69, A189, A68, A689 and the B road between Belsay and Morpeth and assess the scope of the works required on those routes before making rough calculations for the remainder of the county's arterial routes.
- Trees within or overhanging hedgerows would be surveyed, and a sensible approach would be adopted, although the exact distance had not been set.
- Whether a chapter would be included to reflect the Council's ambitions on climate change and the need to combat the ecological emergency. It was proposed that this would be included within the wider Tree and Woodland Strategy which was being developed with colleagues from the Great Northumberland Forest, the Climate Change team and other departments.
- Clarification was requested of the timescales of works identified as priority 1 or 2. Anything likely to fail imminently was categorised as priority 1 whereas priority 2 works would be required within the next 12 or so months, these were not at imminent risk of failure. No timescale could be assigned to priority 3 works.
- Trimming of tree branches was required around streetlights.
- There were some very large trees on housing estates which were encroaching on people's properties and impacted negatively on their perception of the tree which they had to live with every day. Whilst they might prefer for the tree to be removed entirely, other residents enjoyed them and wanted them to be retained. It was suggested that there needed to be a middle ground when some branches were trimmed or removed, particularly in urban environments. The policy needed to address the issue. It was confirmed that resources would be allocated to address any dangerous trees.

Members thanked the officers involved in the development of the Tree Management Policy.

RESOLVED that:

Ch.'s Initials.....

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- 1) The progress made on developing the Tree Management Policy be noted.
- 2) The draft structure of the Tree Management Policy was supported with comments made as above.

12. Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2023/24 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that he would liaise with the officers to ensure that the items identified within the presentations by the Portfolio Holders earlier in the meeting to ensure they were scheduled at the correct time for scrutiny to have an effective contribution to the final outcome. As a consequence, he cautioned that some of the items that had already been programmed might need to be reprioritised.

The Chair suggested that some items which had previously been considered at an earlier meeting with an update requested in 6 or 12 months, could perhaps be dealt with by way of a written report, rather than being rescrutinised.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator referred to the leader's suggestion for an environment task and finish group and explained that the Committee would normally consider and agree a scoping report. However, given the timescale mentioned, it would not be possible for this to be done on a formal basis. He suggested that he liaise with officers to determine the terms of reference, which would be as per the discussion, to establish the task and finish group, and then contact all members for volunteers to participate.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____