

## 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, 25 October 2023 at 2.00 p.m.

#### PRESENT

Councillor M. Mather  
(Vice-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

#### OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

D Laux	Head of Highways and Transport
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
J. Stewart	Strategic Housing Manager
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
K Westerby	Highways Delivery Manager

1 member of the press.

#### 19. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Oliver.

#### 20. MINUTES

Minute No 16.2 Presentation by the Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Communities

It was agreed that:

- The following sentence in the first paragraph should be amended to read:  
“All portfolios had regard to inequalities and health.”

- The reference in the third bullet point should refer to e-motorbikes, not e-bikes.

**RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Place OSC, held on 27 September 2023, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair, subject to the above amendments.

## **21. 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).

In response to a query regarding the timing of the Food and Feed, Safety and Standards Service Plan, the Scrutiny Co-Ordinator commented that it was normal for the report to be considered during the year that it related to.

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

## **22. OVERVIEW**

### **22.1 Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2022-2026 Action Plan Progression**

The purpose of the report was to present members with an update of the progression against the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2022-2026 Action Plan following approval by Cabinet and consideration by the committee earlier in the year. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Julie Stewart, Strategic Housing Manager, highlighted:

- There had been a significant increase in the demand for temporary accommodation and would be the subject of focus in the next few months due to the pressure on other services. The reasons for this included:
  - The number of decisions on asylum applications by the Government in recent months and the authority's duty to relieve homelessness if the asylum seekers wished to continue to reside in Northumberland.
  - Demand by residents whose homes were no longer affordable.
  - There were a higher number of individuals in bed and breakfast accommodation.
  - There had been a delay with some social housing providers turning around void properties which meant that clients were stopping in temporary accommodation longer. Priority was being given by the Council's Void's Team Leader where incoming tenants were currently in temporary accommodation to get them moved as quickly as possible into their permanent homes.

- There had not been the anticipated demand by Homes for Ukraine resettlement who continued to reside with hosts or had planned moves to other accommodation.

Councillor Colin Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Looking After Our Environment, commented on the progress that had been made within the previous 6 months, which was a relatively short period of time.

Information provided in response to issues raised by members included:

- Asylum seekers were generally placed in properties in the urban areas or south east of the county in Ashington and Blyth but some were also residing in Widdrington and Haltwhistle. They often preferred to remain in the areas where they first settled. Whilst they should be given 28 days' notice before being made homeless but in some cases, this had been as little as 4 or 5 days, which placed extra demands on the service. Officers were working very closely with the Mears Group, who delivered housing services for asylum seekers on behalf of the Home Office. Many local authorities in the North East were experiencing similar issues. The North East Migration Partnership was collating data to assess the impact and raise the issue with the Home Office.
- Bernicia and Karbon Homes were actively liaising with Council officers and working to improve void turnarounds. They had brought some properties forward more quickly when this had been needed.
- Placing individuals was challenging if they have been in prison as it required risk assessments. Eligibility also depended on the nature of an offence. The Probation Service were developing a programme and acquiring properties to provide accommodation for 84 days for prisoners on their release before they were moved to more settled accommodation. The degree of influence over social housing landlords, such as the Riverside Housing Group, was limited as they had their own criteria although applications would also be assessed banding under the Common Allocation Policy. The Council hosted and provided the administration for the Northumberland Homefinder housing allocation service.
- Further work needed to be carried out with tenants to assess the housing service and what had worked well, could be done differently or improved. Generally past surveys had only been completed by those tenants who had been unsatisfied with the housing service. Discussions were being held with other local authorities to explore how others carried out assessments.
- The provision to assist those in the armed forces or veterans was held in high regard with dedicated armed forces case workers and recent recertification of the Gold award to the Council by the Ministry of Defence's Employer Recognition Scheme.
- Housing worked closely with Children's Services for young people who were aged 17 or 18 years old and were homeless. Advice that they should ring 999 was to be investigated and comparison made with information given by other local authorities.
- The current economic climate was having a noticeable impact on the number of Section 21 notices being served. Many properties were being sold by landlords due to increases in mortgage costs for property owners.

Local authority housing allowance rates did not match rent levels and many tenants could not afford to pay the difference. Officers were in the process of investigating an insurance product for the non-payment of rent or damage. The insurance premium would be paid by the Council to give security to private landlords.

- It appeared that an earlier version of the Action Plan had inadvertently been circulated with the agenda papers. The most up to date version would be circulated by email after the meeting.
- The Private Sector Housing team had good relationships with a core group of landlords, and more were being actively recruited through marketing and information on the Council's website with the offer of accreditation and other incentives. Some referrals were also received via prospective tenants.
- The Homelessness and Housing Options team were undertaking a pilot to collate information and data to assess demand, how data could be better managed, the types of queries, including information around domestic abuse. Information collected under the pilot would also be analysed to ascertain any gaps in service provision.
- The homelessness response service was commissioned through Changing Lives, but funding was limited. The provider had also experienced difficulties recruiting individuals to posts.
- The 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' project placed rough sleepers somewhere safe overnight and provided assistance finding accommodation. This was due to be recommissioned in August 2024 with a procurement exercise and identification of funding. The Gypsy Roma Traveller Liaison Officer provided assistance with unauthorised encampments which could include rough sleepers, if the Homelessness Response Service was unavailable. There were only a few officers who were able to respond, and challenges where individuals could safely be placed. Some individuals preferred to sleep rough and these numbers were increasing slightly, particularly in Tyne Green, Hexham. Regular counts were undertaken. More would be done if grant funding was available and by working with partners.

Councillor Horncastle reported that up to date information would be given to Council on housing voids at its meeting the following week in response to a question. He added that Syrian and Afghan asylum seekers were also located in the southeast of the county to enable easier access to mosques and halal food whereas Ukrainian refugees were more spread out across the county including Hexham and Rothbury. Research into the development of an insurance product had been initiated following discussions to enable Ukrainian refugees to rent in the private sector but was being investigated for all.

Members thanked the officers for the report and the work undertaken by the housing team. They also commented that:

- More social housing was needed.
- The insurance product would help Ukrainians who did not have the required length of employment history.
- Homeless figures were possibly suppressed by families living with relatives.
- Families experiencing difficulties with mortgage payments or rent created a difficult environment for children to be brought up in.

**RESOLVED** that the contents of the report be noted and the updates regarding actions that have been taken to meet the priorities identified to supports our residents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

## **22.2 Update on Implementation of Fix My Street**

The report provided an update to the Committee on the implementation and operation of the Fix My Street public realm reporting system. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes).

Councillor John Riddle, Portfolio Holder for Improving Our Roads and Highways commented that the new software had been launched nearly 5 months previously with only a few minor teething issues. Information was now available to officers much quicker and more easily than previously. The system was enabling processes to be streamlined, was making the workforce more efficient and provided timely updates to the person reporting an issue.

Kris Westerby, Highways Delivery Manager, reported that to date just over 20,000 reports had been made via Fix My Street since it had launched. 17,000 of those have had a response. The next priority would be to look at trends and pressures for the types of issue reported most frequently. These included:

- Roads
- Potholes
- Vegetation
- Parks maintenance
- Gulleys

He explained that:

- They were streamlining processes and making sure that messages were standardised in line with policies to respond consistently to residents across the county. They were also working with partners in Countryside, the National Park Authority and National Highways to refer matters to the appropriate body and respond with accurate information. He explained that whilst the A1 and A69 were under the jurisdiction of National Highways, maintenance activity on the A69 was carried out by the Council but grass and litter on the A1 could also be reported and forwarded to National Highways.
- Other planned improvements included the inclusion of policy information for each category to inform residents of the work that would be prioritised. Improvements had already been made regarding the different categories of problems associated with trees and the Council's responsibilities. They also thought it would be beneficial to share information on how gulleys worked.
- Alloy, a new back office system had also been implemented which allowed integration with Fix My Street and automatic updates following inspection,

improved analysis of data and peaks and where service improvements could be made.

- Out of the 20,000 reports, there had been approximately 20-25 reports which required further investigation and resolution of a significant problem or system change required.
- Use of Fix My Street had worked well in the recent storms allowing connection to road closures and network information. It also provided an audit trail and allowed asset data to be mapped and at the moment this included surveys of yellow grit bins which would allow analysis of how the 2,000 bins were being used. In 2024 they intended to map the areas where grass was cut.

David Laux, Head of Highways and Transport, commented that although the Highways Delivery Manager had led on the project, it also incorporated Neighbourhood Services and Public Protection with grass cutting, litter, flytipping, trees, abandoned vehicles etc. A major benefit of the system was the integration with Alloy and One Network with a number of areas identified for further development. The system was to be embedded corporately within the Council including Customer Services and IT via the BEST programme. The strategic team was also looking at failure demand.

It was intended that by Christmas 2023 that all process for Fix My Street would be finalised with a suite of documents available to explain how the system operated to new employees including where matters should be referred if not the responsibility of the Council.

Several members expressed their appreciation to the Highways Delivery Manager and other officers involved in the implementation of the Fix My Street system and commented on the benefits it provided to officers and members of the public.

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

- Fix My Street Pro allowed integration with 3 back-office systems (Mayrise, Alloy and PlaceCube, a new system to be used by Customer Services).
- Power BI was a Microsoft reporting system which allowed reports to be generated automatically from Fix My Street data. This would enable Area Managers in Highways and Neighbourhood Services to understand the problems and demands within their areas.
- The process for reporting problems to the Council would be improved with the implementation of PlaceCube and the Council's new website.
- Discussions were ongoing regarding the management of queries regarding public conveniences and improvements to be implemented in the system in the near future.
- It was more beneficial for members of the public to create an account so they could receive updates on any issues they reported.
- Any emergencies out of hours, including winter services and storms, should be reported via the Contact Centre to ensure that incidents were passed to on call officers. Those calls would also be logged on the Fix My Street system internally.

- Members could enable settings with an account to see problems logged with their wards or post codes and receive alerts. This could also be embedded into the websites for town and parish councils. Assistance could be provided to anyone requiring help after the meeting.
- Ash die back was a national problem and the Council was aware that it would need to be addressed.
- Residents who did not want to use Fix My Street on the Council's website could continue to report problems by telephoning the Customer Contact Centre. The call handlers would then log the issue via Fix My Street.
- Highways Inspectors would be continuing their schedule of cyclic inspections. When the system was fully embedded, there would be the facility for actionable defects logged by Inspectors to be published and visible to members of the public. This was an option for the future, the Council was not yet in a position to switch this facility on whilst the system was still being developed.
- The categories for reporting issues with trees had been expanded to differentiate between trees next to the highway, parks or countryside to enable more accurate data to be collected on where problems lay. Information had also been added to explain the Council's responsibilities and the work that would be carried out.
- The Highways Delivery Manager would be attending all of the Local Area Committees in November, with the exception of North Northumberland which he had already provided an update at that meeting in September.
- Users had the option to remove some of the pins identifying reported faults to reduce the data on a small mobile screen. Pins would also be removed automatically 10 working days after a report had been fixed or closed.
- Concerns regarding a road surface following works by a utility company could be reported direct to the Streetworks team. The length of the guarantee period varied depending on the depth of excavation. The Streetworks Inspector undertook routine checks and samples of works undertaken by third parties on the network.
- The reference to business readiness process had included interviews with key members of staff in the departments referred to in paragraph 4.4 of the report with 'My Society' to capture and map previous demand for the top 50 items reported to the Council. This had been held to ensure that the correct categories were selected and to manage officers' expectation regarding implementation of the system.
- Automatic updates were provided for highways issues given the integration with the back-office Alloy system. The Alloy system was to be rolled out to other departments, including countryside and street lighting which would then allow automatic updates. Digitisation of records for grass cutting and the rights of way network on one back office system such as Alloy would allow integration and automatic updates for these and other service areas.
- Users were recommended to use the Microsoft Edge browser when using the system to avoid a location being declined. Installation instructions (also available within the Help section for Fix My Street on the Council's website) would be shared by email after the meeting as well as the Highways Inspection Manual which set out the Council's inspection frequency and

response times for the different categories of roads. The latter was to be updated in the near future following implementation of Fix My Street.

- There were separate inspectors for Highways and Streetworks as they undertook different roles. The latter undertook surveys on a random basis to check that work undertaken by utility companies accorded with national specifications. Intelligence gained from Fix My Street and other sources to target the areas where there were known issues. There were 4 inspectors in the Streetworks team. Any reports on Fix My Street which were mis-categorised, could be reassigned.
- The system enabled analysis of issues reported. This was already being seen with different problems being reported in the different geographical areas and also between wards.
- The system allowed reports to be made offline for users with an account, the report would be uploaded when they next received a mobile signal. Some additional work had been carried out following feedback from the Rambler's Association.

Members of the committee made the following comments:

- Data from the system would be useful for the budget setting process.
- It would be helpful to review the terminology used in the automatic response emails when a report was closed without work being undertaken, particularly if the Council was not responsible. This had been addressed with staff training following the launch and the addition of policy information as issues would be investigated before being closed eg, if a pothole did not meet actionable criteria.
- Use of the system by residents enabled more accurate data to be submitted rather than by councillors who were passing information on second hand. It was also reducing the workloads for councillors, enabling residents to log issues themselves. The councillor could also see if an issue had already been logged and could monitor progress.
- The expectations of members of the public needed to be carefully managed, particularly with regard to longstanding complicated issues which required significant investment and public consultation on an optimum solution.
- Whether different colours could be used to depict the different categories of reports, to simplify what was visible on a screen. There was concern that the addition of winter services and grit bins would clog the map further.
- Some Councillors were unable to use Fix My Street on the mobile telephones provided by the Council (but could use it on personal mobiles).
- Further training was welcomed.
- Not all users of the system found it helpful to receive an email / survey asking if a report had been fixed. These were issued by the system automatically.
- Concerns were raised regarding the possible delay in being placed in a queue when trying to report an emergency on the 0345 telephone number. This had been raised with the Customer Services. Others commented on positive experiences during the most recent storm and the speed in which calls had been answered as extra staff had been brought in.



An email received by Councillor Cartie was to be forwarded to the Highways Delivery Manager for investigation and response.

The Chair welcomed the system which enabled communication with members of the public which was positive.

Councillor Riddle thanked scrutiny members for their feedback and particularly the Highways Delivery Manager who had led on the delivery of the system. It was only a few months after the system had been launched which had gone well, although there would be tweaks and further improvements which were planned for the system.

**RESOLVED** that the progress made on the development and implementation of the Fix My Street system be noted.

**23. 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 was liaising with officers to schedule items on the work programme. He also sent email reminders to obtain clarification on matters raised during meetings and recorded in the minutes. These were shared with members as soon as they were obtained, and he tried to do this before the next meeting. This was not always possible due to the nature of some of the information, but this was followed up.

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

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

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