

# COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OSC

## REPORT TO COUNCIL

17 JANUARY 2024

### INTERIM SCRUTINY REPORT

The Committee has so far met on five occasions this year. As part of the new way of working in scrutiny since the review and redraft of the Council's Constitution at the Council AGM, members have set about identifying areas for examination that reflect our own priorities, but also working closely with portfolio holders and senior officers, exploring how and when we can assist them in formulating policy in the coming months and beyond.

Copies of all the reports and the minutes of our meetings are available on the Council's website:

<https://northumberland.moderngov.co.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?Committeeld=144>

#### 1. Work Programme

At those meetings I specifically invited the following Cabinet Members to discuss with us forthcoming issues within their respective portfolios: John Riddle – Improving Our Roads and Highways; Colin Horncastle – Looking After Our Environment; Gordon Stewart - Looking After Our Communities, and Jeff Watson – Promoting Healthy Lives. It became clear during those discussions that some of the issues that we identified for inclusion on the work programme may not emerge until 2024/25, but agreed to list the following:

##### 1.1 Improving Our Roads and Highways

- 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

##### 1.2 Looking After Our Environment

- Social Housing Regulation Bill
- Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Action Plan
- New Section 106 system
- Green/Open Spaces Review
- Local Nature Reserve Strategy
- Planning Performance including information on application numbers, resourcing and enforcing (including the legal process)

### 1.3 Looking After Our Communities

- Stronger Local Resilience Forum pilot and COMAH (Control of Major Accidents Hazards) exercise
- Fire and Rescue Services Annual Performance

### 1.4 Promoting Healthy Lives

- Annual Review by Active Northumberland
- Presentation by future leisure services provider
- Destination Management Plan and Destination Development Partnership

We will continue to add to that list as further issues emerge.

## 2. Firefighter's Decontamination

In May, the Committee considered the risk of contaminants from fires and the measures that could be put in place to reduce the danger of these impacting on the health and safety of firefighters.

We were particularly concerned to learn that firefighters were 7 times more likely to have cancer than the general public and were diagnosed earlier in their 40s and 50s. This was due to a cocktail of chemicals including carcinogenic materials which were produced by fires. Personal protective equipment (PPE) protected firefighters' skin and respiratory systems, but wind conditions could also mean that those outside burning buildings were also impacted by smoke and air borne fibres, which may or may not be visible or easily wiped off. They caused both acute toxicity and/or chronic toxicity which impacted on the body's internal organs.

Following an extensive discussion and a demonstration of PPE including new breathing apparatus, helmet and coat, and comparison made with a dirty helmet which had been sealed in a protective bag, the Committee formulated the following recommendation which was approved by Cabinet in June:

*that financial support for the recommendations made by the fire and rescue service be provided to ensure that Northumberland was leading to reduce the risk of contamination and supporting fire and rescue personnel.*

## 3. Food Waste Recycling Pilot

The Committee continues to monitor the implementation of the Food Waste Recycling Pilot which has been rolled out in four areas: Morpeth/Longhirst/Hebron/Ulgham, Morpeth Stobhill, Bedlington and Pegswood.

In May, we were advised that the key findings to date were:

- Overall set out rate of 47.2%
- Average weight of 2.84 kg collected per week from actively participating households
- Average weight of 1.4 kg collected per week for all households in trial area issued with a bin
- Very low levels of contamination
- Negligible missed collections and reliable replacement caddy liners (bags)
- Positive feedback is being received from residents participating in the service – overall user satisfaction levels are still to be determined via customer survey activity later this year

We were pleased with the progress made in developing this scheme and will continue to monitor this and other recycling initiatives in the future.

#### **4. Development of a Tree Management Strategy**

As set out in the Committee's Annual Report last year, the OSC has played an active role in the development of the Tree Management Strategy and was content to support the draft Strategy when it was presented to us in July.

However, Members continued to raise their concerns regarding the affect that Ash Die-back was having on a significant number of the tree population in the county, particularly where there was danger to residents in public spaces and to the highway. We were advised that inspections were being carried out at key sites such as streets near schools and key paths in parks, and that 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. There would then be an assessment of the scope of the works required on those routes before making rough calculations for the remainder of the county's arterial routes. The Committee will continue to monitor this situation and support all efforts to identify areas where improvements can be made.

#### **5. Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy for Northumberland 2022 -26 Progress Against Action Plan**

When the Strategy was approved by Cabinet in March 2023, the OSC agreed to monitor progress against the action plan, which we did in October.

Members highlighted a number of issues arising from the report, including:

- arrangements for asylum seekers;
- improving void turnarounds;
- challenges around assessing those individuals recently released from prison;

- provision to assist those in the armed forces or veterans 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;
- 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, and
- the 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' project placed rough sleepers somewhere safe overnight and provided assistance finding accommodation.

We thanked officers for the work undertaken by the housing team, but felt 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, and
- families experiencing difficulties with mortgage payments or rent created a difficult environment for children to be brought up in.

## **6. Fix My Street**

Around five months after the introduction of the Fix My Street public realm reporting system, the Committee looked at how the scheme was being implemented. John Riddle, the Portfolio Holder, advised us that although there had been a few minor teething issues, information was now available to officers much quicker and more easily accessible than previously; the system was enabling processes to be streamlined and consequently, was making the workforce more efficient, and members/public reporting issues to the Council were receiving timely updates.

Members felt that the system was working well and was relatively easy to use both for elected members and the public and we welcomed the automatic updates that were generated as issues were resolved. We acknowledged that further tweaks would be needed following feedback from users and noted that some improvements were already planned.

## **7. Planning Services Performance**

The Committee has considered an overview of the performance monitoring and assurance arrangements currently in place for the Local Planning Authority function of the Council. We also received an update on the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act 2023 which had been given Royal Assent in October 2023 which intended to facilitate growth in all parts of the country.

The presentations provoked a lengthy discussion in the meeting, as set out in the detailed minutes, however members were pleased to note that for many of the key performance indicators, the Council was in the top 25% of authorities (of 470 local authorities) and top 1% for some indicators.

Overall, the Committee was supportive of the Planning service, but was also concerned at the increasing workload for officers who were already performing a very challenging role. The Committee has therefore made the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. to consider investment in the enforcement team and the addition of a rolling fighting fund to support this work, and
2. to consider additional support for the Planning Department to deal with the increase in the number of planning applications and enquiries received.

**COUNCILLOR NICK OLIVER**

**CHAIRMAN**