

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL
CRAMLINGTON, BEDLINGTON AND SEATON VALLEY LOCAL AREA
COMMITTEE

At the meeting of the **Cramlington, Bedlington and Seaton Valley Local Area Committee** held at East Hartford Community Centre, Institute Buildings, Scott Street, East Hartford, Cramlington on Wednesday 24 January 2024 at 5:00 pm.
5.00 pm

PRESENT

M Swinburn (Chair)

MEMBERS

L Bowman
E Chicken
W Daley
C Dunbar

P Ezhilchelvan
S Lee
M Robinson

MEMBERS ALSO PRESENT

R Wearmouth

OFFICERS

H Bowers
R Murfin
K Westerby

Democratic Services Officer
Director of Housing and Planning
Highways Delivery Manager

50. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ferguson, Flux, Taylor and Wilczek.

51. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Cramlington, Bedlington & Seaton Valley Local Area Committee held on Wednesday, 22 November 2023 as circulated, be confirmed as a true record, and be signed by the Chair.

It was suggested that the notes of the Bedlington Residents' meeting in December should have been added as an addendum. As the notes were not official Council notes, these would be circulated to those who were in attendance.

52. PETITIONS

No petitions had been received; there were no reports or updates to consider.

53. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

Joe Coyne, East Hartford referred to lack of demarcation lines in the East Hartford area.

Kris Westerby, Highways Delivery Manager stated that roads were inspected and prioritised. He would take back as an action and check if any work was planned for the area.

54. FIX MY STREET

Kris Westerby, Highways Delivery Manager, gave a presentation on the new web-based reporting system, Fix My Street (FMS), which had been launched in May 2023. (A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

The presentation outlined:

- The limits of previous systems used by Local Services and other departments with minimal integration of back-office systems and lack of feedback to customers.
- The benefits of FMS which included asset based reporting, use of photographic evidence, accuracy of locations, integration with other systems, ability to produce reports for users and respond to FOI / EIR information.
- The implementation timetable.
- The benefits for users and staff with slides which demonstrated views of the web and mobile apps and ability to monitor reports made.
- Data on reports logged using FMS from May to September 2023 and comparison with issues logged for the same period in 2022 (there had been an increase of 143%).
- The ability to monitor trends by ward or postcode and obtain a detailed breakdown by category.
- The top 5 reporting categories were:
 - i. Roads – potholes
 - ii. Flytipping
 - iii. Hedges / Overgrown vegetation
 - iv. Blocked gullies
 - v. Grass cutting

- Next steps including ongoing enhancements such as inclusion of grit heaps and bins, developments to aid defence of insurance claims, improvements to consistency and feedback to users, increased front end automation of responses with reference to policies, use by more departments such as housing etc.
- The demonstration included a brief overview of the system as viewed by officers, how the system interacted with Alloy (the system used by Highways Maintenance) and how reports could be reassigned between users and departments.
- Users were able see whether the same issue had already been reported.
- Residents could continue to report issues by telephoning the Contact Centre who would enter the details on Fix My Street.

Following the presentation, members raised the following questions/comments:

- Several reports of dead trees had not been actioned. The Trees and Woodland Team were overstretched, and the budget should be increased for the service.
- Fix My Street should be promoted more to the public so they could take ownership and report an issue.
- Data should drive performance to drive investment
- It would be a better way to inform residents, but staff training was required in some areas.
- The reported grit bin at North Ridge had never been replaced.
- Potholes next to the old Swan Pub in Choppington need repairing for a second time.
- The reporting system worked well, but some jobs were not carried out fully.
- Any action needed a timescale.
- The team was thanked for their quick response to a reported path issue.
- Further investment was required into the road infrastructure.
- Policies for different areas was not a one size fits all
- Members generally agreed that Fix My Street was a good way of reporting issues.
- The way of reporting issues required more information, eg forwarding to a third party to resolve or the use of Power BI.

Mr Westerby gave the following responses:

- The reporting of the trees would be referred back to Leon Savage, Tree and Woodlands Team Leader for response.
- If an issue was closed, there would be a category for closure.
- The reporting of bins left on the street was a grey area and the full waste system was not yet on the App but discussion was taking with the company who integrated the system for that to be added.
- With reference to the potholes, the Council had a responsibility to make the road network safe. A patch repair took 7 hours to carry out whereas a full repair required 7 days' notice beforehand and then up to 28 days to repair.
- Any repairs that were not carried out correctly, should be reported.

- Any actions that were not completed on time would be triggered by contacting the Contact Centre and investigated.
- The replacement of road surface was being tackled differently, trying to find alternative solutions for old roads.
- Mr Westerby stated that the service already used PowerBI and member training would be required to facilitate this. In addition, future issues could be reported through Placecube which was replacing the current Lagan system.

Mr Westerby was thanked for his presentation.

RESOLVED that the presentation be received.

55. PARISH/TOWN CLERK DISCUSSION

This item was to ask how the LAC could look to improve communication and relationship where possible between NCC and the town and parish council.

Bob Baker, Clerk of Cramlington Town Council was in attendance and made the following comments:

- There was difficulty understanding the role of the format of local area committees.
- One of the key issues was local area committees did not have devolved powers and limited impact of influence.
- The Terms of Reference referred to “regular liaison with town and parish councils”.
- There should be a regular arrangement with Clerks/Chairs to identify common problems.
- Town and Parish Councils had a number of issues which could not be presented to the County Council and they should be consulted on budget priorities.
- Local area committees should be able to scrutinise service standards and certain functions.
- Previously, there had been one Senior Officer assigned to identify issues the local area committees covered and could put forward an independent view. This could be something considering and assigning a person at Assistant Director level to champion the needs of the committee.
- A strategic view should be taken as to how the local area committees can influence the Executive and ensure service standards were maintained.

Rob Murfin, Director of Housing and Planning stated that as part of the LAC review, working with NALC, a survey had been carried out with parish and town councils, which had asked questions about the relationship. From the results of the NALC survey, there had been no consensus. Some of the smaller parish and town councils had wanted to be communicated via the local area committees.

The Review report would be circulated to Parish and Town Clerks.

An area of interest to the public was that if Local Area Committees had a more strategic local role, eg Neighbourhood Planning, Affordable Housing. But the role for each local area committee, eg rural areas would not work here.

Members raised the following:

- As services had been reduced, there was no Senior Officer role and most issues raised could be done by email. The best way forward would be by Championing.
- It was not a one size fits all as each Local Area Committee would have different issues
- The Terms of Reference gave the ability to shape and theme what the Local Area Committee did.
- The Local Area meetings were not what they should be and should include validity.
- The LAC was not the best forum to discuss how to improve communication (with Town and Parish Councils) and workshops would be a better format.

(Councillor Chicken left the meeting at 6.47 pm).

Mr Murfin stated that he would raise the suggestion of assigning officer support with the Executive. However, there was no single approach as different areas would have different issues, eg, Leasehold issues in Cramlington and Holiday Homes in Berwick.

With regard to legal issues, the main issue was Parish and Town Councils were 3rd party. Local Area Committees were not statutory consultees in licensing matters but could give their views.

The Local Transport Programme which came to the LAC would change because of the way Highways Services were changing.

(Councillor Bowman left the meeting at 6.49 pm).

The LAC boundaries would be changed slightly. If boundaries were too big or too small, it would be easier to attach some powers, but without it becoming distant from Parish and Town Councils and where they fitted.

The Chair would raise the issues at the next LAC Chairs meeting.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

56. BUDGET 2024-25 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN

Councillor Wearmouth, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services gave a presentation to outline the approach being taken to

set the budget for the next financial year with focus on its key priorities including achieving value for money, tackling inequalities and driving economic growth as well as working towards net zero.

He outlined the consultation process taking place between 12 December 2023 and 26 January 2024 which included presentations at all 5 of the Local Area Committees, an online questionnaire, policy conference, briefings for the political groups and individual meetings, and an online Question and Answer session by the Leader on 31 January 2024. The detail regarding initiatives and schemes would be presented at a meeting of the Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee which all members would be invited to. (A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Members were referred to 3 important documents which provided relevant information to the budget consultation:

- Budget Engagement 2024/25
- Agenda papers for the meeting of Cabinet on 16 January 2024
- Capital Programme

The presentation outlined:

- The sources of revenue funding:
- Council Tax;
- Government grants;
- Business Rates; and
- Fees and charges for services
- Options for achieving a balanced budget.
- Background to the Council's finances.
- Proposals for all the service areas including details of current budget pressures, investments planned and proposals for what could be done differently (the details were contained within the online Budget Engagement documentation):
- Enabling Services – savings proposed of £2.854 million.
- Adults – a budget £235 million which included support to vulnerable adults to live independently, a real living wage for adults.
- Children, Young People and Education – budget £269.2 million; savings proposed of £2.084 million.
- Public Health, Inequalities and Stronger Communities – budget £32.8 million; savings proposed of £0.7 million. A new provider Places for People Leisure Management would take over Active Northumberland next year.
- Place and Regeneration – budget £131.7 million; with a budget of £26 million for the LTP and £26.9 million for cycling and walking.

Many areas of the Council were experiencing:

- Increasing costs for supplies and services including energy.
- Increasing demands on Children's and Education budgets.

- Increasing demand for care and support to vulnerable adults and older people.
- Interest rates had also increased leading to a review of the Capital Programme. The programme was funded by borrowing; for every £1 million borrowed, the cost to the revenue budget was approximately £0.088 million.

The following comments were made in response to members questions:-

- The Authority’s allocation for the social care budget would be £3million. He was unsure whether that money would be used to reduce that part of the precept and would find out if the funds being made available by the Government would be ringfenced.
- Councillor Jeff Watson should be contacted regarding the Innovative Library query.
- With reference to the cycling network being neglected in Cramlington and the use of cycling routes for health and wellbeing . The cycling and walking provision in Cramlington would be made available through the LTP and other funding.
- A case would need to be made to increase the Local Transport Programme.
- The Council had used MORI in the past for user research.
- There were already descriptors to explain what the pie chart was on the Council Tax bills.
- The discretionary spend would be mainly used for public health and children.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

57. WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

58. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 20 February 2024.

59. URGENT BUSINESS

Councillor Daley raised the issue of fallen trees in Cramlington and residents’ concerns over safety and requested that an audit of trees be taken.

The Chair would raise this at the LAC Chairs meeting.

CHAIR

DATE