

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a virtual meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** on Wednesday, 3 March 2021 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Cartie, E.	Gibson, R.
Dunn, E.	Horncastle, C.
Gallacher, B.	Stow, K.

CABINET MEMBER

Riddle, J.R.	Planning, Housing & Resilience
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OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

G. Binning	Deputy Chief Fire Officer
M. Dixon	Contracts Officer
G. Gavin	Head of Neighbourhood Services
P. Jones	Service Director – Local Services
J. McLoughlin	Executive Director of Regeneration, Commercial and Economy
R. O’Farrell	Executive Director of Corporate Resources - Planning & Economy
R. Murfin	Director of Planning
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
A. Peadar	Library Service Manager
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
N. Walsh	Head of Cultural Services
S. Wardle	Neighbourhood Services Divisional Manager

79. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Armstrong, Dunbar and Hepple.

80. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of Communities & Place OSC held on 13 January 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

Ch.'s Initials.....

81. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

The following Councillors disclosed an interest in agenda item 6.3, Review of Summer Grounds Maintenance, due to their position on Town or Parish Councils, who had partnership agreements with the County Council:

Councillor Gallagher – Ashington Town Council – involved with partnership discussions.

Councillor Reid – Blyth Town Council, not involved with partnership discussions.

Councillor Stow – Prudhoe Town Council involved with partnership discussions.

82. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (February to May 2021). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix A).

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

83. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORTS

The Committee were advised that the following reports would be considered by the Cabinet on 9 March 2021. Members were requested to comment on the proposals in the report.

83.1 Northumberland Sports Facility Strategy 2019-2031 & Northumberland Playing Pitch Strategy 2019-2031

The report presented the Northumberland Indoor Sports Facility Strategy (IFS) and Northumberland Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) completed in accordance with the study briefs. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix B).

Nigel Walsh, Head of Cultural Services commented on the importance of physical activity and outlined the vision, key issues and priority investment needs for the future provision of sport and leisure in Northumberland. The recommendations for Cabinet were to:

- Note the completion of the Northumberland Indoor Sports Facility Strategy, and Northumberland Playing Pitch Strategy, in accordance with the agreed study brief.
- Note the Vision and Aims of the Strategies.
- Note the Priority Investment Needs identified from the research informing the Strategies.
- Agree the Principles for future provision of Indoor and Outdoor Sports Facilities across the County.

- Note the Recommendations and Action Plan underpinning delivery of the Strategies.
- Agree that the Strategies provide an evidence base to support the implementation of the Northumberland Local Plan and other local development documents, as a material consideration for the determination of relevant planning applications, and provide an evidence base for use by other Council Services.

The review of existing indoor facilities was very positive with most residents being able to access facilities within 20 minutes' drive, with some exceptions in the North and West, as experienced in other nearby rural counties.

The Playing Pitch Strategy analysed the supply and demand of playing pitches for football, rugby, cricket, hockey, tennis, bowls and athletics to produce an evidence base on which future planning and investment decisions could be made. The assessment had been undertaken following guidance from Sport England and had engaged with national governing bodies, representatives of which sat on the Project Steering Group to review and verify data. It was intended that the Project Steering Group would continue to meet to keep the strategy under review.

The following comments were made by Members:

- Whether dogs could be banned from using fenced in spaces, such as the tennis courts at Ridley Park, in Blyth, as not all owners cleared up after their dogs.
- Whether an annual update could be given as the strategies progressed.
- Further information to be provided on developments with the voluntary sector and opportunities for apprenticeships.
- Whether 'ensure' could be used instead of 'aim'?
- The strategies made no mention of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was reported that work on the documents had finished approximately 11 months ago and the sign off by governing bodies had been delayed by the pandemic and furloughing of staff. Covid audits had been undertaken of new facilities to ensure they were future proofed. It was believed that exercise habits, particularly indoors, had changed and a separate report could be submitted.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet be advised that the Committee supported the recommendations in the report.

83.2 Northumberland Public Library Service Consultation

The report provided members with an overview of the key findings from the Library Service public consultation completed in June 2020. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix C).

The Head of Cultural Services gave a brief overview of the library service which was a statutory function under the Public Libraries and Museums Act

1964. The service had been subject to a number of structural and leadership changes since 2015.

He referred members to the 7 outcomes, highlighted by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) that library services were critical to individuals and communities in their areas. DCLG guidance and case law suggested that consultation was required to ensure that a comprehensive and efficient library service continued to be provided, if significant changes were proposed. A summary of the consultation and engagement activities undertaken during 2020 were detailed on page 3 of the report.

The report also identified the capacity and accessibility improvement measures introduced to the Service during 2020 and outlined a three-stage approach to Service redesign based on evident need.

Alison Peaden, Library Service Manager, gave a detailed overview of changes that had taken place within the Library Service, particularly with regard to digital access of books and magazines through BorrowBox and Press Reader and online activities such as reading groups, creative writing, family history, storytime and craft sessions, which enabled people to participate across the county. It was hoped that these would continue in a hybrid format, when allowed.

Other activities had included a digital helpline, select and collect, befriending calls, desktop refresh, staff restructure, service redesign and relocation of libraries and investment in new stock in Alnwick, Ponteland and Cramlington, involvement in pop up initiatives and summer camps. They intended to continue marketing the service and the offer available.

The Head of Cultural Services referred to the creation of 5 hubs in Berwick, Morpeth, Blyth, Hexham and Cramlington and development of the services based on the needs of each locality and delivery of priorities identified in the consultation. He was very proud of the service and what they had achieved during the pandemic.

Several Members also expressed their thanks to all of the library service staff on the way they had adapted and responded during the crisis. They made the following comments:

- Digital connectivity was an issue in many areas. The model to be adopted prioritised services according to local need and would enable areas with connectivity issues to be identified and addressed.
- The strategy covered the period 2021 – 26 and it was suggested that Members be given a yearly update.
- The hubs had been identified following assessment against criteria. Ashington was a highly valued and well used facility but flexibility and access to space was better in Blyth.
- There had not been a huge response from library users under the age of 16, however 25% of respondents had replied on their use as a family,

work had been undertaken with the Youth Council and all schools had also been invited to participate.

- Concern regarding a reduction in posts. The staffing structure had not resulted in job losses. The number of professional librarian posts had increased and some fixed term posts had been made permanent.
- The mobile library service was highly valued, but following changes implemented during the pandemic, consideration would be given into sustainability along with doorstep delivery, befriending and outreach work with Northumberland Communities Together.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet be advised that the Committee supported the recommendations in the report.

84. OVERVIEW

84.1 Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) Covid-19 Inspection: Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service

The purpose of the report was to provide an overview of the HMICFRS COVID-19 response inspection for Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix D).

John Riddle, Portfolio Folder for Community Services, explained that this had been a thematic inspection to review how fire and rescue services were responding during the Covid-19 pandemic. He reminded members that the service was the smallest brigade in mainland UK and had a large area to cover, a small budget, but dedicated staff. He was pleased to introduce, Graeme Binning who had recently commenced in post as the Deputy Chief Fire Officer.

The Deputy Chief Fire Officer reported that Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service had been inspected in October 2020 and the results were generally very positive; the service had adapted and responded to the pandemic very well, had been effective and had provided support to NCC and the Local Resilience Forum.

Areas of recommendation had been considered carefully with comments at prepublication regarding:

- Protection and prevention activity remained focused on areas of highest risk but, in line with HMI recommendations, they were forward looking and adaptive of improvements that could be made.
- Comments had been accepted and narrative changed regarding speed of response to National Fire Chiefs Council guidance.
- Whole time fire-fighter productivity, comments had been submitted on the reflect to protect the ability to respond to emergency incidents given the lean nature of the Northumberland service.

The report also highlighted areas of notable practice, staff well-being, the active engagement of the CFO and service to discharge statutory functions, the speed at developing new ways of working.

As a new principle officer, he recognised the work, commitment and dedication that had taken place since the HMI inspection in 2019 and the support that the service received from colleagues in Internal Audit, Improvement and Innovation, Communications and Adults and Children's Services.

The Chair thanked Graeme and was pleased that confirmation had been received that the Fire and Rescue Service was well run and that the staff did an excellent job in difficult circumstances.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The contents of the report be noted.
- b) Further reports on progress against the recommendations provided by the HMICFRS be provided in due course.

84.2 Northumberland Infrastructure Funding Statement

The Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS) provided a summary of all financial and non-financial developer contributions, within Northumberland, for the financial year 2019/2020. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix E).

Rob Murfin, the Director of Planning explained that historically the approach adopted with regard to monies from Section 106 agreements and Section 278 (Highway Agreements) had been inconsistent and therefore the process had been reviewed and research undertaken to learn from good practice at other local authorities.

The Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations had introduced a requirement to publish an annual Infrastructure Funding Statement. It was viewed as a positive tool to improve the transparency, accountability and monitoring of developer contributions for both Councillors and members of the public. Further improvements to the Section 106 collection process would also be made with progress on the Northumberland Local Plan.

Members welcomed the report and review of the Section 106 process and made the following comments:

- Inaccurate records and poor monitoring arrangements had meant it likely that insufficient funds had been collected previously.
- Agreements should not be changed, nor amounts reduced, if developers changed their plans, particularly on large schemes.
- Improved enforcement.
- Community Infrastructure Levy system (CIL) was not currently used in Northumberland. Implementation of a tariff-based system would need to

be subject to review to see whether it was viable and could be supported in the county. An examination by the Planning Inspectorate would also be required.

- Inconsistencies had arisen due to the different approaches adopted by the former district councils. The system could be improved from looking at good practice elsewhere and case law.
- It would be beneficial for local councillors to be made aware of Section 106 agreements and involved in the determination of local priorities.

In answer to a question, the Director of Planning expressed caution regarding introduction of CIL in Northumberland as it was based on land values and probably better suited to areas in the South East of England. However, a proper assessment needed to be carried out, although he speculated that under a CIL based system, the total amount of money received would be lower than using Section 106 agreements.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The Northumberland Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS), be received.
- b) The Northumberland IFS be presented to the Communities and Place OSC on an annual basis.

84.3 Review of Summer Grounds Maintenance Programme

The report reviewed the performance of the summer grounds maintenance programme undertaken during 2020/21, in order to seek continuous improvements to service delivery and ensure that the best possible outcomes for our communities were achieved from the resources available. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix F).

Paul Jones, Service Director – Local Services outlined the report which covered:

- The benefits of seasonal working hours for staff and in terms of efficiency savings.
- Core grass cuts had been achieved despite a short suspension at the start of the pandemic to review safe working practices and hire additional vehicles.
- Cramlington Town Council were withdrawing from the environmental partnership on 31 March due to concerns regarding performance.
- Target met for highway verge cutting on strategic and non-strategic rural roads between June and July. Some verges with plants of high conservation value were undertaken later in the season following discussions with ecology and community groups.
- Weed control had been challenging due to warm, wet and windy conditions. It had also been hampered by cars parked in residential streets due to residents working from home.
- Priority 1 urgent tree works were routinely completed within 7 days. A backlog of non-essential, but desirable work remained outstanding and

addressed when permitted. The Tree Strategy was to be reviewed during 2021.

- 14,621 (67.6%) of the free trees had been distributed to residents but the national lockdown had meant that the remaining events had to be cancelled. The undistributed trees were to be planted by NCC at a variety of sites.
- Floral displays by Town and Parish Councils had continued to be supported although the Northumbria in Bloom competition had not taken place.
- Delivery of effective grounds and site maintenance had never been more important to ensure residents could enjoy their local space given national restrictions. The number of parks achieving Green Flag accreditation had increased from 9 to 11, and for the first time included Eastwood Park, Prudhoe.
- Grounds maintenance staff were redeployed to winter service duties in periods of severe winter weather, taking priority over their normal ground's maintenance duties.
- Trials of electric powered hand tools had been well received by staff. These aimed to reduce the carbon footprint and level of hand arm vibration.
- Alternative methods of weed control (hot water, thermal and mechanical removal) were to be trialed during 2021/22 as the license for glyphosate was due to end in December 2022.

The following issues were raised by Councillors:

- Use of wildflower planting be increased on roadside verges, particularly use of flowers that self-seeded. Alternative approaches were adopted when requested by town and parish councils. Different arrangements for maintenance were required in these areas as they needed to be cut, removed and reseeded; it was not a cheaper option to traditional roadside verge maintenance.
- Residents be encouraged to maintain the areas in the immediate vicinity of their properties. Individuals had never been prevented from keeping areas clean and tidy. Volunteers were welcomed and opportunities promoted wherever possible.
- Use of brushes to remove dust and soil would assist with the removal of weeds. Use of road sweepers to remove weeds was effective with use of an alternative wire brush heads which tore and shred vegetation. However, this was resource intensive in a large county.
- Advance notification of activity in urban areas would enable residents' vehicles to be moved to enable the activity to be undertaken more effectively.
- Consideration be given to ensure that the right tree was planted in the right location.
- Use of blue dye be reconsidered when applying herbicides.
- Whether tree surveys continued to be undertaken at school premises following the very sad death of a young school child in Newcastle. A review of arrangements had been undertaken by the Corporate Health and

Safety and Estate Teams, who had responsibility for inspections of school properties and specialist support was brought in when required. Arrangements for tree surveys had also been refined for areas such as public parks to avoid the risk to the public of falling branches.

- The ethics and impact of alternative powered hand tools.
- The importance of nurturing good working relationships with the town and parish councils and the value of the environmental partnerships. This was not financially viable for some of the smaller councils.

Members expressed their appreciation to the front-line teams for the work that had been undertaken during a difficult 12-month period.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The achievement of all core grounds maintenance service standards this year, be noted, during what has been an exceptionally challenging year.
- b) The record number of Green Flag awards achieved this year, be noted.
- c) The comprehensive additional Covid control measures put in place to protect staff and the public, be noted.
- d) The continued high performance of verge cutting, be noted.
- e) The enhanced service standards achieved jointly with Town and Parish Councils that we have partnership agreements with, be noted.
- f) Future developments for the service relating to planned trials for an evaluation of alternative methods of weed control to the current application of chemical herbicide, be noted.
- g) The decision of Cramlington Town Council to withdraw from its partnership with NCC, be noted.

85. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2019/20 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix E).

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____