

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** in County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 30 June 2021 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT

Councillor N. Oliver
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Cartie, E.	Morphet, N.
Castle, G.	Mather, M.
Hardy, C.	Richardson, M.

CABINET MEMBER

Horncastle, C.W.	Community Services
Wearmouth, R.	Deputy Leader (Corporate Services)

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

J. Dennitts-Seal	Corporate Complaints Manager
D. Feige	Environment & Design Team Manager and County Ecologist
R Little	Assistant Democratic Services Officer
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

1. MEMBERSHIP AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Membership and Terms of Reference, as agreed by Council at the meeting on 26 May 2021, had been circulated for information.

The Chair welcomed the new Members and invited all members and officers to introduce themselves.

RESOLVED that the Communities & Place OSC's membership and terms of reference, as agreed by Council on 26 May 2021, be noted.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bridgett, Gallacher, Riddle, and Robinson.

3. MINUTES

Minute No. 83.1 Northumberland Sports Facility Strategy 2019-2031 & Northumberland Playing Pitch Strategy 2019-31

Councillor Horncastle, agreed to investigate a policy to exclude dogs from gated sports areas.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the following meetings of the Communities & Place OSC, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair:

- a) 3 February 2021
- b) 3 March 2021

4. 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).

For the benefit of new Councillors, the Scrutiny Co-ordinator explained that the forward plan enabled members to consider whether they wished to review any of the matters that would be considered by Cabinet. The Chair added that the Committee were not restricted to these issues and could also ask for reports on other matters within the remit of the committee.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

5. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORTS

The Committee were advised that the following reports would be considered by the Cabinet on 13 July 2021. Members were requested to comment on the proposals in the report.

5.1 Funding for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

The report sought approval for 25% funding for the Northumberland Coast AONB of £37,070 and North Pennines AONB of £24,926 for three years from 2021-22. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix B).

David Feige, Environment & Design Team Manager and County Ecologist, reported that contribution to the AONB Staff Units enabled the Council to discharge its obligations in terms of AONB Management Plans and its legal duty to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONBs, a statutory designation and responsibility.

The North Pennines AONB was located across Northumberland, Durham and Cumbria with contributions being received from the 5 local authorities whose areas fell partly within the AONB area.

A 10% increase was proposed as contributions had remained the same since 2007. This had been accepted by the other local authorities. The funding was reviewed every three years. The 25% Council contribution secured 75% funding from Defra, and in addition, the AONB team had been successful in obtaining significant project funding from other sources.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that all of the Northumberland coast was designated for various features of ecological importance, particularly the bird populations. Since 2016/17, section 106 monies obtained for coastal mitigation purposes had been used to fund a warden scheme to counteract recreational disturbance from planning applications adjacent to the coast and visitors to safeguard the most important areas from disturbance.

Councillor Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Community Services, explained that he had been involved with the North Pennines AONB for a number of years and gave brief overview of the valuable work that they carried out which contributed to the Government and Council's green agenda. He was satisfied that the contribution made by the Council provided value for money.

Several of the members commented that a 10% increase was fair and reasonable given that contributions had not increased since 2007, particularly with increasing visitor numbers.

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

5.2 Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Contact Policy

The report sought approval to adopt an updated Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Contact Policy, to enable the Council to operate a fair, effective and efficient complaints process as well as reflecting good practice advocated by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix C).

Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Julie Dennitts-Seal, Corporate Complaints Manager presented the report.

The Corporate Complaints Manager stated that the policy would be replacing the Habitual or Vexatious Complaints Policy which had been adopted in 2010. She highlighted the following:

- The policy would enable members of the public to raise concerns and have them investigated in a timely and sensitive way whilst also protecting staff and enable them to carry out their roles.

- In a small number of cases, when an individual's conduct about their complaint becomes unreasonably persistent or vexatious, it could impede the effective functioning of the complaint procedure.
- A checklist required a number of aspects to be considered, evidence documented and demonstration of rationale against a variety of actions.
- All complaints were treated on a case by case basis. It was hoped that an agreed plan of action could be mutually agreed with individuals. Implementation of proposals would be a last resort.
- Clarification was provided of the complaints process which comprised of 2 stages. If an individual remained dissatisfied, they could refer their complaint to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman who would investigate and decide whether further action was required by the Council.

Councillor Wearmouth commented that the Council welcomed feedback and agreed that issues of incompetence should be investigated. He added that the policy would likely only be applied to a few individuals.

It was noted that:

- Members of the public would not always be happy with the Council's responses to their queries and complaints, but the Committee felt that the revised policy provided the right balance in dealing with them.
- A summary of the complaints dealt with under the Unreasonably Persistent and Vexatious Contact Policy would be included within the annual customer feedback report to the Committee.
- Decisions as to whether a complainant be declared as unreasonably persistent or vexatious be made following consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holder, Leader or Deputy Leader.

RESOLVED that, subject to the comments above, the Cabinet be advised that the Committee supported the recommendations contained in the report.

6. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATOR

Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee Monitoring Report

The Committee reviewed its work programme for the 2021/22 council year. (Report enclosed with the signed minutes as Appendix D).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator explained the process of referrals, the difference between overview and scrutiny and the role of Chairmen's Group. The monitoring report for 2019/21 had also been included so new members were aware of matters considered by the committee in the previous 24 months. Copies of these reports could be provided on request.

He reported that a number of items listed within the work programme had been identified by the previous committee and could be reviewed and removed if no longer required.

It was noted that there were currently 5 items identified for consideration at the next meeting on 4 August 2021. It was suggested that this was too many and whether it would be practical to identify some reports 'for information' or 'read only'.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator agreed to contact report authors to identify items which could be deferred to a later meeting. He explained that normally only a brief synopsis of a Cabinet report was available when the agenda for this committee was issued and therefore decisions were made following discussions with the Chair and Vice-Chair. He agreed to explore whether a schedule of Cabinet decisions could be circulated to members to provide assurance on how matters had been dealt with.

A query was raised regarding public transport subsidy. It was due to be considered by Cabinet at its next meeting and as a strategic transport issue was included within the terms of reference for Corporate Services and Economic Growth OSC. The terms of reference for this committee included Public and Community Transport Network and members from rural wards were particularly interested in the matter. The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that the Chairmen's Group determined the most appropriate body to consider matters where there was an overlap of interest.

The Chair and Vice-Chair encouraged any member to contact themselves or the Scrutiny Co-ordinator with any queries or suggestions.

A member requested a report on:

- A policy to exclude dogs from gated sports areas.

The matter would be referred to the Chairmen's Group.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____