

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
on Wednesday, 4 August 2021 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT

Councillor N. Oliver
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Bridgett, S,	Morphet, N.
Cartie, E.	Mather, M.
Gallacher, B.	Robinson, M.
Hardy, C.	

CABINET MEMBER

Horncastle, C.W.	Community Services
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OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

J. Farrier	Head of Commercial and Resources, Active Northumberland Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
S. Nicholson	
P. Soderquest	Head of Housing and Public Protection
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
N. Walsh	Head of Cultural Services
M. Warnes	Chief Executive, Active Northumberland

8. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Castle, Richardson and Watson.

9. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of Communities & Place OSC held on 30 June 2021, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

10. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Bridgett reported that he would need to disclose an interest if there was any discussion on the Energising Blyth Programme, included within the Forward Plan, as he was a member of the Advance Board who were handling the project. During the meeting he stated that he would also need to disclose a personal interest and would not take part in discussions regarding Advance Northumberland and their properties in the Hirst area.

11. 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).

In answer to a question, the Scrutiny Co-ordinator agreed to check the position regarding the Energising Blyth Programme which was not identified for scrutiny.

It was confirmed that the project was being regularly scrutinised by elected members at Blyth Town Council who were meeting monthly to discuss and receive updates on the project.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

12. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORTS

The Committee were advised that the following report would be considered by the Cabinet on 7 September 2021. Members were requested to comment on the proposals in the report.

12.1 Private Sector Housing Strategy 2021-2023

The report presented the draft Private Sector Housing Strategy 2021-2023, which contained details of the proposed strategic objectives for the Council's Private Sector Housing Service for the following three years. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes as Appendix B.)

Councillor Horncastle, Portfolio Holder for Community Services, introduced the report making reference to the Northumberland Corporate Plan for 2018-21 and principles within the Draft Northumberland Local Plan which identified that having a roof overhead and a decent home was fundamental to the health and well-being of everyone living in Northumberland.

The strategy set out how the Council would work with partners, stakeholders and local communities to deliver services to support good quality housing and management standards within private sector homes in Northumberland and built on the aims and objectives of the previous strategy.

The following priorities were identified:

- Increase access to affordable homes in the private sector through bringing empty homes back into use.
- Ensuring a healthy private rented sector through improving the condition, safety and energy efficiency of private sector housing.
- Provide advice and support and take action where necessary for homeowners, landlords and tenants in the private sector.
- Provide services to assist access to sustainable tenancies in the private rented sector.

The following issues were raised by members:

- Some areas had a high percentage of empty properties and powers were needed to address exterior problems, in addition to internal standards, particularly where landlords were absent, as it impacted on attracting new residents.
- Registration or licensing of private landlords should be compulsory, rather than a voluntary scheme, as current.
- Covid-19 had demonstrated the strength of communities in areas but also the importance of quality housing given the restrictions and time spent at home. Individuals active in communities had been highlighted and should be invited to be involved in discussions in estate regeneration.
- Awareness of enforcement powers and protection available to tenant from legislation be raised.
- The Council needed to demonstrate it cared, was approachable, used enforcement powers to the widest extent when needed and could protect tenants.
- Refurbishing sub-standard properties in the public and private sectors was challenging as well as making properties more energy efficient and contributing to climate change aspirations.
- Up to date contact details be provided for social housing providers.
- It was hoped that implementation of the new Council Tax scheme which progressively increased the charges on empty properties, would act as an incentive to landlords to take action. Circumstances should be looked at on a case-by-case basis.
- Discussion be held with the Climate Change team regarding loan arrangements with Northumberland Community Bank to enable individuals to install otherwise expensive energy improvements and whether something similar could be used for private landlords to bring properties to a better standard, when new windows, doors, roofs were required.
- Fuel poverty was increasing in rural areas where raising standards was generally more expensive due to the construction of older properties, some parts of the county did not have access to mains services, including those in the National Park or part of the Ministry of Defence estate; communities were also impacted by second home ownership.
- Implementation of national aspirations would require commitment by government for the installation of energy efficient measures which were

more expensive to retrofit in older homes and less suitable as they required a well-insulated property. It was hoped that technological advancements would assist.

- Clarification be obtained regarding the Carbon Reduction Implication of the report given the energy efficiencies required in Priority 2.

The Head of Housing and Public Protection and Portfolio Holder for Community Services provided the following information in answer to questions:

- Comprehensive discussions were ongoing with officers and partners about housing issues.
- 83% of properties in Northumberland were privately rented or owned.
- Approximately 3 years ago, the proportion of privately rented properties exceeded social housing nationally.
- They wished to engage with landlords in the private sector to improve management standards and quality of housing in Northumberland. Many already participated in a yearly landlords' forum and they needed to engage with those not already involved. Engagement was a better method than enforcement, particularly with limited resources.
- Tenants and landlords needed to be made aware of their legal responsibilities and entitlement and raise awareness that complaints by tenants to the Council would not lead to eviction.
- Supporting tenants to maintain tenancies reduced impact on the homelessness service.
- Some estates had larger scale voids, higher levels of deprivation and antisocial behaviour. However, strong communities also and they needed to be supported to make them nicer areas to live by addressing the aforementioned issues with partners such as the police and colleagues in Local Services.
- Housing staff were trained in the Housing Health and Safety Rating System to assess the condition of properties and take a range of enforcement action, but only if invited by the tenant or someone on their behalf which could include an elected member. Landlords were informed about visits and given the opportunity to attend.
- Consideration was being given to the introduction of a pilot selective licensing scheme, within a defined geographical area. This would set standards for the condition of properties and tenancy agreement after where evidence demonstrated this was required. It had to be balanced against the potential of properties being left empty to avoid payment of the fee by landlords.
- The Council had no ability to prevent or interfere with housing payments made by government departments.
- Options for estate regeneration were being considered by the Council and Advance Northumberland.
- Homes England administered grants on behalf of Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to increase net housing stock. This could entail some remodeling work which could include retention of some housing stock and demolition of others, to find the right

solution for each area, following an options appraisal to address issues within a locality and engagement with communities.

- The Council worked closely with social housing providers who were not included under the strategy.
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders were an enforcement tool which allowed authorities to take over management of a property, when granted by the Property Tribunal, normally for a 7-year period, before being handed back to the landlord. However, this was not always financially viable if significant capital investment was required. Other similar schemes had been funded through Homes England, including purchase of housing stock; work in default and a trial scheme to purchase and dispose of property.
- Implementation of the Government's Green agenda and ceasing use of the installation of domestic gas boilers required viable alternatives.

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

13. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

13.1 Active Northumberland Annual Outcome Report 2020-2021

13.2 Active Northumberland Annual Service Report April 2020– April 2021

The Committee received Active Northumberland's Annual Outcomes Report 2020-21 and Annual Service Report for 2020-21, as requested by the Committee at the meeting on 13 January 2021. (A copy of the reports are attached to the signed minutes as Appendices C and D.)

Nigel Walsh, Head of Cultural Services explained that he was responsible for the leisure client function and was joined by Mark Warnes, Active Northumberland's Chief Executive and Joanne Farrier, Head of Commercial and Resources. He referred to the 4-year partnership agreement with Active Northumberland to manage the Council's leisure services at 9 leisure centres and a number of additional sites. Partial and full closures during the pandemic had a significant impact on access, participation and revenue generation.

Joanne Farrier presented the Annual Service Report and Annual Outcome Report for 2020-21 and provided a brief background for Active Northumberland, a registered charity formed in 2014 from the merger of 4 different leisure service providers. The presentation set out:

- Background information on the facilities managed, Board members, number of employees.
- Vision
- Enhancement of Website and App to enable online digital booking, online digital exercise classes during lockdowns, outdoor fitness sessions and bootcamps when permitted, use of facilities and staff as test centres.

- Financial highlights: a loss of £1.85 million at 31 March 2021; management of utility consumption and work to mitigate utility tariff increases; comparison of income streams between 2019-20 and 2020-21.
- Participation and performance.
- Pursuance of Quest quality assurance accreditation.
- Future Aims for 'Mams on the Move', group exercise programme, Learn to Swim and working with swimming clubs to develop a performance programme to represent the county nationally.
- Catering Opportunities, rebranding of HIVE cafes and promotion of good nutrition and importance of hydration.
- Service Improvement Aims.
- Capital and remedial works - essential work had been brought forward to minimise the impact on customers when sites reopened; development of spa services to aid mental wellbeing.

The following issues were raised by members:

- Investment in existing or provision of new facilities were required in towns such as Rothbury and Bedlington and should be included in any strategic review. Residents and school children from Rothbury were incurring significant mileage to use facilities and access swimming lessons in Alnwick, contrary to the green agenda. It was suggested that the Councillor raise this issue with the Portfolio Holder and Leader as it was an issue for the Council's Administration and not within the responsibility of Active Northumberland. Opportunities for the site at Rothbury were being investigated. The nature and size of the county meant that there were access issues, particularly for residents in rural areas.
- Consideration be given to opportunities to improve the fitness of residents with long covid, such as a mobile scheme, as travelling from rural areas would be exhausting.
- Provision of equipment and/or specialist staff which could be used by amputees, people with other disabilities or recovering from long covid.
- In areas of deprivation, some families did not have the money to pay for children to use facilities at leisure centres and many others, such as the elderly, were not comfortable using sports centres and gyms. Sports Development teams used to work with community centres and this should be recommenced. Active Northumberland worked closely with NCC Sports Development Team and School Sports Team which had ceased during the pandemic, but they would welcome efforts to get individuals, including the elderly, back into centres.
- It was essential to promote the benefits of exercise at an early age and therefore the development of schools' sports development was critical.
- The role of Active Northumberland was incredibly important to the health of individuals at more risk from the effects of the virus.
- The table on page 36 of the papers be reviewed to include information on performance in addition to outcomes from the previous year and objectives for the current year.

The following information was provided in answer to questions:

Ch.'s Initials.....

Communities and Place OSC, 4 August 2021

- Some adaptations had been implemented at new facilities but Active Northumberland were willing to work collaboratively with the Council to obtain expert advice to better understand demand and requirements of all users.
- Accessibility had been recognised and digital services had been made available free of charge during the recent lockdown periods. It was recognised that this was not suitable for all, but the digital offering would continue to be developed.
- The Council's partnership agreement with Active Northumberland was due to be reviewed and would include: performance, value for money, whether priorities for the Council were the same, public perception, availability of digital offer and potential impact on income generation. Many issues needed to be balanced to maximise the benefits of the investment. Collaboration with the Integrated Health Team, Public Health and Sport Development were essential.
- Active Northumberland's policy on refunds were that payments were non-transferable and non-refundable, although each request was considered on a case-by-case basis. All members had received a refund of during the various lockdowns with thousands of transactions processed by a few staff who had not been furloughed. If an individual was required to isolate and was unable to attend sessions, the money was credited to their online account so they could use the funds to repurchase a session in the future.
- The majority of the loss for 2020-21 had been mainly due to lost revenue although business grants and a successful bid to the national leisure recovery fund had contributed to reduce the amount. Staffing and utility costs were the largest areas of expenditure; utility costs continued whether the centres were open or not. They had been careful how the centres had been run when closed such as turning down lighting, pool temperatures, and plant and machinery although it still been necessary to treat water in pools, run pumps and filtration, given the uncertainty regarding the period of closure. Emptying pools could have incurred problems in the future with a reduction of pressure on pool liners and tiles.
- All premises were open but some of the smaller centres were not open full time due to a dramatic reduction in membership numbers. Outdoor activities had recommenced in March and all activities and clubs had now restarted. The new Ponteland Leisure Centre had opened briefly in October and was being well used. They hoped to reengage with members who had left through marketing, telephone engagement and email campaigns. They were focusing on different memberships including one for junior members and a staff offer for NCC employees, both of which had very popular.
- Work on the transformation programme continued although Covid-19 had forced them to look at the operation of the business and work more effectively and efficiently. Key performance indicators were monitored regularly and fed into the outcomes framework and objectives were provided on a quarterly basis to the Head of Culture.
- Changing priorities included ensuring that staff were safe and use of an online booking system which had assisted in the aim of reducing queues in reception. Extra support had been provided via telephone calls for the exercise referral and weight management programmes and the elderly.

Individuals had found it easier to talk on a 1 to 1 basis. Continuation of smaller groups or virtual sessions had been requested. This would be reviewed to see whether it could be sustained.

The officers were thanked for the report and presentation. The Chair requested that the committee have the opportunity to feed into the review of the partnership agreement prior to the signing of the new agreement on 31 March 2022. Members also thought it important to receive an update which considered the impact on membership numbers and whether the business plan and priorities had changed.

Members were invited to contact officers at Active Northumberland, at the earliest opportunity, if they became aware of issues that had arisen within their wards as it would be beneficial for all to work collaboratively. It was suggested that feedback could also be obtained from Town and Parish Councils.

The Committee expressed their admiration to the team for recently saving a life at Willowburn Sports Centre.

RESOLVED that:

1. Active Northumberland's Annual Outcomes Report 2021-21 and Annual Service Report for 2020-21, be received.
2. Active Northumberland be thanked for their work during the pandemic, including support to communities, schools and health services, which had been incredibly valuable as well as reopening centres quickly when permitted.
3. The Committee were encouraged by the optimism for the future whilst noting the challenges ahead.
4. An update on the development of the partnership agreement, membership numbers, challenges, business plan and priorities be presented to the Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee in early 2022.

14. 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 E).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator provided the following update on reports after the discussion at the previous meeting: -

Climate Change Action Plan – 6 October 2021
NE Public Transport Strategy Update – 6 October 2021 (date to be confirmed).
Active Travel and School Safety – October 2021 (date to be confirmed).
Active Northumberland – January / February 2022 (discussed earlier in the meeting).

Members with any queries or suggestions were asked to contact the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, Chair or Vice-Chair.

Members enquired whether the Communities & Place OSC could receive:

- A presentation on Broadband and Telecoms, particularly the recently announced North of Tyne Combine Authority fund for 5G technologies in rural areas.
- An update on Community Policing from the Police Crime Commissioner and Chief Constable of Northumbria Police.
- Northumberland Fire & Rescue Service on the recent audit and the position on retained firefighter availability.
- Highway maintenance.
- Update on performance from Neighbourhood Services following the summer grass cutting season and impact on the arrangements for enhanced services with Town and Parish Councils.

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

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____