

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
on Wednesday, 6 October 2021 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT

Councillor N. Oliver
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Cartie, E.	Morphet, N.
Gallacher, B.	Mather, M.
Hardy, C.	Richardson, M.

CABINET MEMBER

W. Pattison	Adults' Wellbeing
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OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

M. Baker	Service Director - Climate Change, Business Intelligence and Performance
M. Connor	Head of Early Help, Prevention and Support
N. Easton	Public Transport Manager
J. Keepin	Commissioning Manager - Children's Services and Public Health
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-ordinator
R. O'Farrell	Interim Executive Director Regeneration/Accountable Officer Advance
L. Pyle	Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Co-ordinator
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bridgett, Castle, Robinson and Sanderson.

19. MINUTES

Minute No. 11.1 Private Sector Housing Strategy 2021-2023

Councillor Morphet enquired about the contact details for social housing providers which had not yet been received. The Scrutiny Co-ordinator agreed to remind officers that these were required.

Minute No. 16.1 Overview of the Fleet Replacement Programme in 2020/2021

Councillor Morphet commented that he had enquired whether the Council had considered a hydro treated vegetable oil trial and was aware of the pros and cons of alternative fuel sources.

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) 4 August 2021
- b) 25 August 2021

20. DISCLOSURE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Councillor Oliver declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest in item 6.1 Northumberland Climate Change Update as he was a member of the Climate Change Steering Group.

Councillor Gallacher declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest in item 6.1 Northumberland Climate Change Update as he was a member of the Climate Change Steering Group.

21. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (October 2021 to January 2022). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that the Kerbside Glass Collection Trial Update had been deferred to the meeting of Cabinet in November and would therefore be included on the agenda for this Committee on 27 October 2021.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

22. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORT

The Committee were advised that the following report would be considered by the Cabinet on 12 October 2021. Members were requested to comment on the proposals in the report.

22.1 Integrated Domestic Abuse Services for Northumberland – Permission to Tender

The report sought permission to go to the market to commission a range of services to provide an Integrated Domestic Abuse Service for Northumberland

which would allow the Council to meet its statutory duties. The contract length was for 2 years, with an option to extend it for a further 2 years. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes.)

Wendy Pattison, Portfolio Holder for Adults' Wellbeing, with Mary Connor, Head of Early Help, Prevention and Support, Judith Keepin, Commissioning Manager and Lesley Pyle, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Co-ordinator, Children's Services presented the report to the Committee.

The Committee were informed that the Domestic Abuse Act had come into force in April 2021 and placed new duties on Local Authorities including:

- Provision of safe accommodation and support for victims of domestic abuse and their children.
- Establish a local Domestic Abuse Partnership Board which was responsible for preparing and publishing a Domestic Abuse Strategy setting out how services would be commissioned to meet the needs of Northumberland residents and the LAs duties.

New burdens funding of £641,000 had been allocated by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in addition to core Council funding of £207,000.

A Task Group comprising of internal and external stakeholders had undertaken a need assessment regarding domestic abuse in Northumberland to support the Council's commissioning intentions. It was recognised that the bill required longer term commissioning and contracts to provide stability, however funding for years 2 and 3 would not be confirmed until after the annual spending review in the current year.

Key findings from the needs assessment were outlined. Consultation had been carried out with services providers, stakeholders and services users on proposals for:

- An integrated Domestic Abuse Support Service
- Children's Counselling and Therapeutic and Outreach Support
- Perpetrator Service
- Adult Counselling Service
- Domestic Abuse in Rural Northumberland

The following information was provided in response to questions or issues raised by members:

- Contact details for Domestic Abuse Support Service Northumberland (DASSN) were available on the Council's website. These would also be sent to Councillor Cartie following the meeting.
- Provision for access to interpreters for individuals from minority groups would be made explicit within the contract for the Integrated Domestic Abuse service.
- The proposals would increase and build on existing provision which would follow the model introduced in 2018 which introduced a single point of

contact for all levels of risk. Provision and support for children would be included as well as expanding capacity and resources to support more people.

- The ages specified in lots 1 and 3 were derived from definitions from the Home Office and more recently within the Domestic Abuse Act.
- It was recognised that some young people or children also posed a risk. Provision of support to parents and children was included within the proposals. The issue had also been identified as an item for consideration by a sub-group of the Domestic Abuse Partnership Board with multi-agency partners to identify a pathway and response. Staff were trained to provide support to both parents and children with risk assessment tools to identify the level of risk.
- Lot 3 was aimed at changing behaviours of those people identified as perpetrators with accredited programmes.
- Reference was made to male and female victims to be clear that the services did not solely apply to women and that support was available for male victims.
- Whilst a longer contract period would provide more stability, it had been set at 2+2 years as MHCLG funding had only been confirmed for the current year. The Council had to demonstrate its commitment to new duties under the Act in the current year, to access to funding in the remaining years. If the Council set a 3-year contract, there would be a risk, from the LA perspective, if the additional funding was not confirmed as there could be a shortfall which the LA would need to find. The proposal for 2+2 attempted to mitigate that risk.

Members supported the proposals and the work of the service.

RESOLVED that the Cabinet be advised that the Committee supported the recommendations in the report subject to the points set out regarding provision of interpreters for minority groups and consideration of extending the contract to provide more stability.

23. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORTS

23.1 Northumberland Climate Change Update

The report provided an update on progress against the Climate Change Action Plan 2021-23, published in January 2021. (A copy of the report is attached to the signed minutes.)

Matt Baker, Service Director - Climate Change, Business Intelligence and Performance, gave highlighted a number of areas within the report including:

- Grants of £8 million had been received to date to make improvements to the Council's estate and also assist residents earning less than £30,000.
- A 50% reduction in carbon emissions had been achieved ahead of the 2025 target, although a fall in business miles during the Covid 19 pandemic had contributed. The contribution made by colleagues in other departments, particularly Local Services, was acknowledged.

- There had been an 8% reduction in emissions across the county based on 2019 Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) data. This compared favourably to other Local Authorities where the average was 3.5%. It was difficult to assess whether the Council was 'on target' due to the complexity of calculations, but it was making good progress.
- Implementing climate change at the centre of key decisions in policy, planning, procurement and performance:
 - Use of carbon impact assessments and mitigations, if required.
 - Updating the next version of the local plan to align to net zero plan.
 - Assessment of net zero credentials of third parties.
 - Implementation of a robust reporting process for climate change, setting specific targets for each service.
- Involving Members with their contacts with community groups and town and parish councils to create a coherent plan for climate change.
- Regular reporting to the Communities & Place OSC to increase visibility and transparency and improve the county and opportunities for all residents.

The following information was provided in answer to questions from members:

- The Net Zero Investment Strategy set out the approach and framework to assist the region to become net zero. It contained 4 themes:
 - natural resources,
 - generating supply and storing energy
 - changing fabric of homes and communities
 - moving around and through the county.

The impact of the economy, jobs and skills on climate change was to be considered and opportunities where the county could become a leader.
- Net Zero considered the balance between carbon dioxide emissions and natural biodiversity assets which captured carbon. The county benefitted from natural assets such as trees and peat and an audit was being undertaken to calculate sequestration potential of peat.
- Officers were working with planning to update policies which were not climate change friendly. Examples given included the requirement to obtain planning permission where more than one ground source heat pump was required due to the size of a property, and not required in other LA areas, or prevented an EV charging point in a conservation area. The Climate Change Team were now a consultee on all planning applications that could impact on climate change.
- Performance data could be presented every 6 months given the complexities and time required to collect data.
- The opportunity to look at specific aspects of climate change in more detail was welcomed, for example, the net zero investment strategy or sequestration etc.
- A solar car port was to be constructed at County Hall which would generate 800 kwh which provide some of the electricity required by the facility and insulate against energy price increases. Opportunities to replicate this at other locations which could be utilised by members of the public were to be investigated.

- All councils and community groups needed to work together to make plans that worked for all residents. Tree surgeons and ecologists within the county council would be involved in discussions regarding location and type of trees.
- Grants for green energy solutions were available for residents in receipt of universal credit and earning less than £30,000, living in an energy inefficient home and on the edge of fuel poverty. It was hoped that funding from Government would continue for more schemes. Feedback would be given on eligibility criteria and income thresholds to see if adjusting these would bring more people into the scope of the scheme.
- Consideration of schemes which provided environmental credits.
- Options would be explored for an arm's length company if the market failed to meet demand, was too slow or too expensive, particularly in areas where the return on investment could be maximised.
- The carbon cost of the supply chain was included within the county wide figures. To incorporate embodied emissions would be a significant task and could be discussed further by the working group.
- The national approach had been followed regarding the measurement of emissions and did not include individual consumption. Small changes by individuals led to bigger cumulative changes such as a commitment to park further away or reduced use of personal vehicles on a set frequency, with benefits on fuel savings, public health and climate change.
- A schedule on carbon literacy training would be published and shared in the near future.
- Information regarding the location of the surplus free trees would be confirmed, following the meeting.
- A report on the Great Northumberland Forest would be provided to a future meeting.
- More information would be provided after the meeting regarding the connection of off-grid residential dwellings to the national grid.

The following issues were highlighted by Members:

- Working with community groups and climate change champions.
- Continued use of virtual meetings, where possible.
- Inclusion of fruit trees in the free tree scheme and creation of community gardens to enable residents to benefit from free produce which could be expensive for some residents to buy, contributing to sequestration from plants and other social benefits.
- All parties were working to address climate change.
- The right tree in the right place.
- Involve town and parish councils in the identification of preferred locations for trees and EV charging points.
- The Council should encourage, educate and support residents, local groups and the private sector to address climate change.
- The Council had to be reasonable in its planning requirements until the local plan came fully into effect.
- A suggestion that a leaflet on climate change schemes be included with the annual Council Tax bills in addition to recycling information.

Members of the Committee expressed their appreciation to the Climate Change Team for the report and the work that was being done, including those installing the EV charging points around the county.

RESOLVED that:

- a) The governance arrangements and grants of over £8m awarded to date in 2021/22 with a further £6m identified, be noted.
- b) The progress made to date, including achieving the 50% reduction in County Council emissions, ahead of the 2025 target, and the 8% reduction in County emissions, be noted.
- c) The strategic changes implemented to embed Climate Change into everyday ways of working, which may result in recommendations to change or adjust key decisions (Policy, Planning, Procurement, Performance), be noted and supported.
- d) Members pro-actively engage with the Climate Change team to enable even more engagement with residents, communities, and local businesses.
- e) The Communities & Place OSC continue to engage directly with the Climate Change service, to scrutinise and support key decisions, but also to be active in considering the Climate Change impact when providing scrutiny across all areas of the Council.
- f) Performance data be presented on a 6-monthly basis.
- g) A report on the Great Northumberland Forest would be provided to a future meeting.

23.2 NE Bus Service Improvement Plan

The Committee received a presentation from Neil Easton, Public Transport Manager on progress developing the NE Bus Service Improvement Plan. (A copy of the presentation is enclosed with the minutes.)

The powerpoint presentation included information on:

- The strategic importance of buses in the region.
- Maps which demonstrated the fully commercial bus network and also the fully or partly subsidised bus network.
- The impact of Covid-19 on bus services in Northumberland on passenger patronage and revenue.
- Future funding of the bus network: requirement for enhanced partnerships between LAs and providers and production of a Bus Service Improvement Plan to obtain future funding from 1 April 2022 onwards.
- Bid to be submitted by Transport NE (the LA7 authorities) for a share of £3 billion funding.
- Requirements of the Department for Transport (DfT) to bid for additional funding post March 2022.
- Vision for buses, the 'Ten Solutions'.
 - A £1 flat fare for under 19-year-olds.
 - A £5 multi operator flat daily fare.
 - Increased frequency of bus services and extending services in morning and evenings, particularly in rural areas.

- Improvements in information (real time in high footfall areas) and quality of vehicles
- Better lighting and mobile cameras at bus shelters to improve safety and make passengers feel safe.
- Delivering the LA7 Transport Plan commitments.

He explained that the DfT deadline for the submission of the bid had not enabled them to engage with Town and Parish Councils or communities on the proposals and therefore sought members input.

Whilst the proposals included all of the aspirations for Northumberland, there would be uncertainty regarding the prioritisation of schemes if the bid was not fully funded. The case would need to be made to highlight the rural agenda and initiatives that benefitted Northumberland.

Members welcomed the ambitious plans for Northumberland. The following comments were made:

- The introduction of a fixed daily cost was supported.
- Live tracker information used on services in other areas made travelling by bus an easy method. Other advantages included flat fares and wifi. Individual apps for the different bus companies worked well however the bid included a proposal for a combined app. Real time information was also required as some residents did not have the ability to access mobile phone apps.
- Whether the age limit for young person flat fare of £1 could be increased to 21 for those students continuing full-time education. Proposals for a reduced fare were included in the bid for 19–25-year-olds to include college and university students, apprentices and in recognition that many first jobs were not well paid.
- The potential impact of flat fares on the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line. It was acknowledged that this could impact on service frequency in those areas. However, they were currently well served with some having 10-minute intervals. Use of ENCTS passes on the Northumberland line was proposed.
- Future of Blyth bus station. Discussions were being held with Arriva regarding purchase of the facility and relocation of the bus station to the market square and relocation of the depot to another site.
- There were concerns regarding facilities in Berwick which was a gateway to the county, the borders and Scotland. Officers shared concerns regarding the lack of a bus station and that the area was one which would benefit from real time information in the short-term. A strategic review was considering where residents wanted to travel, as bus routes were largely historical, and did not necessarily incorporate new housing developments or industrial estates. Network planning identified initiatives would see improvements to a number of services in that town.
- It would be helpful to see actual figures and costs in future reports rather than percentages.
- There was disappointment regarding some bus providers in Northumberland. Some companies were profit driven which led decisions on routes. Commercial decisions were required but this affected

connectivity and access and disadvantaged some groups. Lobbying by the Council and others had not always been successful. However, future decisions on revenue shortfall funding would require consultation and sign-off by the Council.

- Average wages in some areas made regular bus journeys unaffordable. The flat rate should be considered irrespective of age. The 19–25-year-old fare band incorporated a stepped-up incremental cost increase and other solutions would need to be considered by employers, such as provision of free bus passes for apprentices.
- Consideration be given to the times at which free bus passes could be used, particularly in respect of individuals who needed to travel for early health appointments.
- Comparison was made with the average cost of bus journeys in London and the levelling up agenda.
- Discussions be held with Town and Parish Councils regarding the location of bus shelters, as some had been installed on bus routes which had ceased. The bid incorporated an amount for replacement bus shelters in Northumberland. There would be consultation regarding where these were most needed, if the funding bid was successful and whether Town and Parish Councils were willing to take on responsibility for a modest ongoing cost.
- Enforcement action was required for undesirable behaviour, mainly by young people and young adults. Perceived behaviour was low level anti-social behaviour, not directed at other users. CCTV cameras were fitted on vehicles and unacceptable behaviour was referred to the police or education establishments, as appropriate.
- Connectivity should come before profit, residents in outlying towns were becoming isolated unless they had access to a car or could afford a taxi.
- The £5 flat fare was for multi-operator buses. Discussions were ongoing to include the metro and North-South Shields ferry. Multi modal, including heavy rail, would be more expensive reflecting journey time efficiencies and cost.

Members welcomed the report, the opportunity for scrutiny involvement and the opportunity for significant funds to increase passenger numbers on buses to improve viability. The Committee supported the Transport NE bid although the case for Northumberland needed to be promoted.

RESOLVED that the presentation be noted.

24. 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).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that

- An annual report on the Domestic Abuse Implementation Plan be added.
- The next Climate Change update would incorporate the issues discussed earlier in the meeting.
- The Fire and Rescue report was likely to be postponed to a later meeting to coincide with the Inspection report.
- Information on bulky waste charges be included within the Local Services update with Neighbourhood Services and Highways maintenance.
- A briefing note was to be circulated to committee members on the outcome of Local Nature Recovery Strategy Pilot in the next few weeks.

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____