

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the **Communities and Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee** on Wednesday, 2 March 2022 at 2.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor J. Reid
(Chair, in the Chair)

MEMBERS

Cartie, E.	Hardy, C.
Castle, G.	Mather, M.
Dodd, R.R.	Morphet, N.
Gallacher, B.	Richardson, M.

CABINET MEMBERS

Sanderson, G.	Leader of the Council
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OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

M. Baker	Service Director - Climate Change, Business Intelligence and Performance
S. Nicholson	Scrutiny Co-Ordinator
A. Peaden (Virtual)	Libraries Services Manager
N. Turnbull	Democratic Services Officer
N. Walsh	Interim Service Director for Culture, Leisure & Tourism

50. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bridgett.

51. MINUTES

Councillor Gallacher expressed his gratitude to officers who had provided updates and more information following recent meetings.

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

- a) 12 January 2022
- b) 2 February 2022

52. FORWARD PLAN OF CABINET DECISIONS

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of key decisions (February to May 2022). (Schedule enclosed with the signed minutes).

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator reported that it was proposed that the Committee consider the implementation of proposals for the Development of the Potland Burn Biodiversity Net Gain Site, at the meeting in April 2022.

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

53. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REPORT

53.1 Library Service Strategy 2021 – 26

The report provided an update on the development of the Library Service Strategy from 2021 – 26. (A copy of the report is enclosed with the signed minutes.)

Nigel Walsh, Interim Service Director for Culture, Leisure & Tourism and Alison Peaden, Libraries Services Manager, outlined the key findings from the Library Service public consultation which identified priorities from members of the public, staff and stakeholders and had taken place in late 2019 and early 2020 and the three-stage approach to the service redesign:

- Strengthening the core service
- Establishment of library hubs within each locality area
- Extending reach and partnerships.

He provided an overview of the service which was a statutory function under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, gave a brief overview of the consultation and performance data for October – December 2021.

Key improvements to strengthen the core service (phase a), included focus on:

- digital with an improved offer through Borrowbox and Pressreader, online groups and a digital helpline; additional posts including supervisor, library and digital resource assistants and apprenticeship posts,
- resources to assist with the transformation of the service and Covid Outbreak Management funding to assist residents re-engaging with Council services and with their communities.
- and marketing to increase general awareness of the service and street signage, monthly newsletter.
- Select and collect, befriending calls and *more recently, Reading Friends groups.*

Due to the sparse and rural nature of the county and an inability to provide the same scope of service at 30 locations, 5 hub libraries had been established at Blyth, Berwick, Cramlington, Hexham and Morpeth (second phase). This

enabled a specific offer in each of the locality areas for reading, digital, health and culture appropriate to the needs in those areas.

The third phase involved exploration of new partnerships within the council and externally to increase reach, impact and ability to improve quality of lives. They were working closely with Northumberland Communities Together and also local community groups at smaller facilities and reassessing the role of volunteers.

He was extremely proud of the library staff and the way they had adapted new ways of working throughout the pandemic. He also expressed his appreciation to Members for the support given to the service.

The Libraries Service Manager commented that the service was on a programme of redesign and recovery. They had adapted to meet changing needs during the pandemic and hoped to proceed in the future with the best of what had worked previously utilising a hybrid model, which would include participation in events virtually or in person, depending on preference.

She also referred to the establishment of Business and Intellectual Property Centres which had been established during the pandemic at Berwick, Hexham and Morpeth. These had been funded by the British Library and complemented the work of Advance Northumberland which enabled individuals and entrepreneurs to explore if new business ideas or inventions could be put into practice.

Members made the following comments:

- The work of Northumberland Communities Together (NCT) was praised.
- Officers and staff were thanked for their efforts and activities during the pandemic who went above and beyond the roles.
- Be mindful that many residents were not digitally connected.
- To be mindful of possible changes to public transport and facilities such as bus stops.

The following information was provided in response to questions:

- Library staff were not required to have enhanced DBS checks as their policy were very clear in that they were never left alone with a group of children as teachers or parents would also always be in attendance. This was kept under review.
- Library staff had excellent local knowledge of facilities, groups and clubs in their areas, and whilst this might not be formally documented, they would signpost individuals to outside resources, when required.
- The role of NCT Locality Coordinators was to make links with community organisations.
- Community groups were encouraged to talk to library staff to raise awareness of organisations and the assistance and facilities they provided.

- They had digital champions who could assist users in a group setting or on a 1:1 basis so individuals could learn at their own pace and in a way that suited them.
- They were keen to support residents to use their electronic devices to engage with the Council and use their own equipment for a wider range of uses.
- A new design of vehicle was being explored to replace existing vehicles in the mobile library service so they could be multi-functional carrying book stock but also be used for outreach activities.
- The Library Strategy covered the period 2021 – 26
- Borrowbox facilitates the purchase of licences to access eBooks and eAudio material. Customer feedback had preferred this platform to an alternative digital service previously used that had been more difficult to use.

The Interim Service Director for Culture, Leisure and Tourism was extremely confident that the strategy was working well, there was a stable platform going forward to support the core service, the library hubs had been established and work was progressing on the third phase to expand reach and partnerships. There was no final position as they hoped to continue to innovate and understand the needs of communities. It was still challenging to understand residents attitude to reengaging following the pandemic. He thought they were in a good place.

The Chair concluded that the strategy was being delivered and hoped work continued. He looked forward to a further update in the future.

RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

54. SCRUTINY OF CABINET REPORT

The Committee were advised that the following report would be considered by the Cabinet on 8 March 2022. Members were requested to comment on the proposals in the report.

54.1 Climate Change Update

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

Glen Sanderson, Leader of the Council explained that following the declaration of a Climate Change Emergency three years ago, Climate Change had become an integral part of the Council policies including the Northumberland Local Plan. Discussions had been held with various action groups across the county and had resulted a Steering Group and an all-party Member Working Group being established to progress the Climate Change Action Plan. The next stage involved further work with community groups and a £50,000

Community Chest fund had been set up for local environmental improvements. He was very proud of the officers for the progress made to date and grateful to members for their support.

Matt Baker, Service Director for Climate Change, Business Intelligence and Corporate Performance presented the report to the Committee. He stated that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had recently released a 4,200-page report and highly recommended that members read António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, commentary on it.

Whilst the climate change net zero target was important to the Council, other equally important aspects included community engagement, inward investment, tackling fuel poverty, education, stewardship of the county and the largest behavioural change programme in the world.

Key achievements to date and areas of focus in the future included:

- Engagement with 16% of the 152,000 households in the county in the previous 18 months across a range of climate schemes and wards.
- Installation of more electric chargers per head of population than any other local authority. The programme was to be accelerated over the next 3 years to assist residents who would not be able to install them at their own homes.
- Home improvements including heating, insulation and power to improve resilience following extreme weather events. Synthetic fuel was an alternative where an electric system was not suitable.
- Consideration of in-house delivery of initiatives rather than private sector delivery to target delivery.
- 3 million trees planted by the end of the year as part of the Great Northumberland Forest, which comprised pockets of trees, with the right tree in the right place to improve carbon sequestration. Woodland management was also required as part of the storm clean up.
- The target to halve carbon emissions by 2025 had been achieved ahead of schedule as a result of solar generation, replacement heating systems and a reduction in business miles due to the pandemic. Calculations were being undertaken to assess the revised date net zero would be achievable.
- Officers from every service had been involved and had embraced tackling climate change.

Net zero by 2030 would be extremely challenging. It was therefore crucial to:

- Increase engagement with residents and community partnerships.
- Increase emphasis on in-house delivery to ensure that schemes were accessible and affordable for communities.
- Consider the changing scope arising from COP 26 including the impact of methane, green finance etc.

The Service Director for Climate Change, Business Intelligence and Corporate Performance outlined the recommendations and thanked the team for

progressing the climate change agenda, officers who had taken shared responsibility, members for their support and residents who would need to adopt different behaviours.

The Committee had a comprehensive discussion on climate change and raised the following issues:

- It was likely that there would be more storms in the future.
- The political unrest between Ukraine and Russia was expected to lead to increasing costs for fuel and plans should be accelerated for alternative energy.
- Properties in the Green Belt were subject to additional restrictions and controls. Feedback would be given on a Councilors planning application for solar panels.
- Significant work would be required to make good badly damaged woodlands following the recent storms, at a significant cost. Farmers were required to replant trees if granted a licence for removal. Some areas had suffered little damage due to having previously planted shelter and consideration should be given to incorporation of policies within the local plan to plant trees and wildlife corridors adjacent to housing developments.
- Planting the right tree in the right place was welcomed.
- More tree planting was required in urban areas such as Blyth.
- It would be preferable for solar farms to be built on brownfield sites.
- In-house delivery was supported or there should be controls in place if working with partner organisations.
- Planning enforcement should be utilised where appropriate.
- Staff and member training was welcomed.
- Careful wording be used when describing the distribution of free trees which were in reality, seedlings / saplings. It was agreed that communication and language was important to ensure support.
- Many residents did not identify with ward names or divisions, and it was suggested that reference to locations would be more meaningful.
- The location of EV chargers could perhaps have been chosen due to the cost and work required to connect to the grid. Decisions in future should be based on where they would be most effective.
- Proposals for solar car ports were welcomed and should perhaps include plans for biodiversity.
- There should be a survey of neglected woodland which would benefit from being felled, cleared and replanted, for fuel, use in the building industry or amenity use. This was referred to in the report under woodland management which would commence for council owned wood.
- The needs of urban and rural areas were very different.
- Schemes should be open to all residents irrespective of income but perhaps on a sliding scale. This could be considered when schemes were designed, and approval sought from BEIS.

The following information was provided in answer to questions:

- Answers to climate change questions could be obtained by emailing the Service Director or climate@northumberland.gov.uk. Information would also be available under Frequently Asked Questions on the Climate Change page on the Council's website.
- Ideally, they would like all members to undertake the carbon awareness training which comprised 2 half day training sessions.
- The £50,000 Community Chest fund was expected to be live 1 April 2022 in tranches. Applicants would need to demonstrate how the money complied with the Action Plan, how many residents would benefit and provide a timeframe. Grants would likely be available for £500, £1,000 and £3,000 - £4,000 to enable match funding for larger grants. Successful applicants would be required to participate in feedback sessions to encourage others. Members were encouraged to raise awareness of the fund with community groups. The Leader and officers were willing to attend meetings with schools and community groups although recent on-line events had been well attended.
- The Climate Change team were consulted on planning applications with a climate impact and would assess the net zero impact. Officers also met with the Director of Planning on a regular basis and were confident that the next version of the local plan would be congruent with net zero.
- More woodland management was to be carried out in-house as part of the Great Northumberland Forrest team.
- Fuel independence was extremely important and synthetic alternatives were to be considered for housing in the county where properties were not connected to the national gas grid and not suitable for electric based heat pumps. Alternative fuel was to be trialed on some of the Council's HGVs and fire vehicles.
- Local members should be involved in the process regarding the locations of EV chargers.
- Policies to encourage cycling needed to be appropriate for the location as new towns such as Cramlington would have different requirements to older towns, e.g. Ashington and Blyth.
- Implementation of glass and food waste recycling should be accelerated.
- Activities needed to be appropriate and fit for purpose and balanced the views of those that were extremely passionate about the subject and those that were less so.
- The Steering Group comprised representatives from businesses of varying scales around the county and representatives from all services across the council to ensure collective responsibility for decision making and achieving net zero.
- Proposals for the locations of the next phase of EV chargers were to be brought to scrutiny for transparency.
- There were different types of training available, carbon literacy training 2x half-day session and a 1-hour mandatory on-line module training for staff.
- All heat sources required electricity but additional resilience to future storms or power cuts could be obtained from an alternative heat source, such as a wood burning stove. It was acknowledged that incorrect decisions had been made when these had been removed and discussions were being held with colleagues in Housing when planning schemes in the future.

- The Council had not received any feedback on the Climate Emergency UK scoring of the Council's Action Plan. There would be further work to review and include more work on Adaptations in the next version of the plan. Consideration was also to be given to a separate Action Plan on biodiversity. It was hoped that the exercise would be repeated annually in order that the poor scoring for diversity and inclusion be addressed and improved.
- The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) provided grant funding.
- Whilst trees contributed to the sequestration of carbon, peat was much more effective. Officers were working with the national parks to complete a peat audit to provide baseline data.
- District heating was a key element to achieving net zero if done successfully, avoiding high-cost inoperable systems. Officers were working closely with the North East Local Enterprise Partnership to benefit from their expertise to ensure that models were created that worked for residents and balanced the risk of in-house, partnerships or external provision.
- Whilst solar panels on roofs might be preferred before installation of solar farms on the ground, it was suggested that this perhaps be restricted to appropriate south facing roofs. Some difficult decisions would need to be made when attempting to become more self-sufficient and secure in power supply; decisions should therefore be made on a case-by-case basis.
- Consideration be given as to how residents could be assisted with acquiring solar panels as it was a complex issue as well as assistance to those on lower incomes with grants. Community schemes such as that provided in Suffolk, obtained a better price point.
- Funding had been obtained from Defra to understand and ensure that the right tree was planted in the right place and detailed mapping work had been carried out.
- It would be beneficial for the committee to receive an update on the Great Northumberland Forest from the Programme Manager, Mark Child. The plans for the forest did not include compulsory purchase, it was a voluntary community led initiative which should involve many groups and encourage access and enjoyment; the forest was not necessarily connected geographically.

Councillors Cartie and Richardson left the meeting at 3.52 p.m.

It was agreed that the Woodland and Tree Strategy should be separate to the update on the Great Northumberland Forest.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that the Climate Change Update report had already been issued to Cabinet members and that he would provide a separate report which detailed the Committee's suggested changes to the recommendations. These included:

- Members receive details of how they can raise issues with and seek advice from the Climate Change team.

- All members should undertake the carbon literacy training therefore recommendation 3 in the report be amended to:

“Executive Directors and all cabinet members should complete carbon literacy training in 2022/23, carbon literacy training be made available to all elected members, noting that depending on take up additional resources may be required to deliver this training in 2022/23”.

- An additional recommendation be considered:

“The process for dealing with planning applications include positive consideration of the delivery of low carbon solutions or other solutions that support the delivery of net zero by 2030, be included in the review of the Local Plan and completed jointly by the Planning team and the Climate Change team. This work be completed alongside the Climate Change service continuing to be a consulted party on all planning applications that impact (positively or negatively) the commitment to deliver net zero by 2030 for the county.”

RESOLVED that the Cabinet be advised that the Committee supports the recommendations in the report, subject to the amendments set out above.

55. 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 requested members consider proposals for work programme for 2022/23. He also reported the following changes to the work programme:

April 2022

Presentation on Great Northumberland Forest (if preparation time permitted).
Development of the Potland Burn Biodiversity Net Gain Site

May 2022

Bus Service Improvement Plan
Concessionary Travel Reimbursement

RESOLVED that the work programme be noted.

CHAIR _____

DATE _____