NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

AREA COMMITTEE - WEST

At a meeting of the Area Committee – West held in Stocksfield Community Centre, Mount View Terrace, Stocksfield, Northumberland NE43 7HL on Tuesday, 10 February 2015 at 6.00 p.m.

PRESENT

Councillor RR Dodd (Chair, in the Chair)

Councillors E Burt, A Dale, R Gibson, C Homer, C Horncastle, I Hutchinson, P Jackson, P Kelly, T. Reid, A Sharp.

OFFICERS

N Easton  Policy Officer (Inclusion)
D Laux  Head of Technical Services
R Powell  Locality Officer
B Rowland  Executive Director – Local Services
S Rudman  Team Manager Bridges
N Turnbull  Democratic Services Officer
R Wealleans  Area Manager (West)
K Westerby  Area Highways Manager (West)

ALSO PRESENT

6 members of the public
1 member of the press

86. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors E. Armstrong, C Cessford, J Fearon, V Jones, JR Riddle and T Robson.

87. Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Area Committee - West held on Tuesday, 13 January, 2015 as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

88. Public Question Time

A question was asked as follows:

Ian Hepple, NE46 1JD queried why the recently published Peer Review report had not been included on the agenda for the meeting and also what action the Council
was going to take to address the issues raised, particularly with regard to Councillors working together for the benefit of the county.

The Executive Director of Local Services confirmed that consideration would be given to inclusion of the report on a future agenda. The final report had only recently been published and had been discussed at the meeting of the Policy Board earlier that day. Whilst some press articles had focussed only on areas where improvements could be made, reference was made to the many positive aspects of the report, including the innovative arrangements within the Council, and with partners, to deliver services to the residents of the county. It was confirmed that an action plan had been drawn up and was in the process of being implemented. This included establishing regular meetings between the leaders of the political groups and these had already commenced.

89. Petitions

This item was to:

a) Receive any new petitions:

There were none to consider.

b) To consider reports on petitions previously received:

There were none to consider.

c) To consider updates on petitions:
   i) U5040 and U5049 Tarset –

A report would be prepared for a future meeting to allow more time to investigate the points raised.

DISCUSSION ITEMS - CORPORATE

90. Highways Update

David Laux, Head of Technical Services introduced himself to the Committee following his recent appointment and explained the remit of the Technical Services section which mainly related to highways and transport issues, with some exceptions. He outlined the report which commented on: difficulties of maintaining the road network over a wide and challenging geographic area, the survey and inspection work carried out on the different classification of roads to aid prioritisation of future maintenance, the investment in new technology and more effective methods to increase efficiency, the allocation of significant investment in the highway maintenance programme and additional grant funding from central government to assist with potholes and key projects, the changes to the future allocation of funding by the Department of Transport. (Copy of the report attached to the minutes as Appendix A).
Members acknowledged the contribution of the cold and wet weather to the increase in the number of pot holes appearing in the winter months and the hindrance of the same weather conditions to successful repairs. They welcomed the recent focus on drainage work and additional information was provided on the work that had been carried out in the west area.

In discussing the report Members expressed their appreciation to the teams for the highway work that had been undertaken and also made the following comments:

- Reference to distances be given in both kilometres and miles in future reports.
- Clarification was sought regarding use and payment of contractors as concern was expressed regarding the standard and duration of some work. It was confirmed that payments were made per hour and that officers were looking to do more work in-house in the future. Members with concerns regarding work being carried out were requested to report them to officers. Information on the procurement process and approved tender list was available and could be shared with local contractors.
- Whilst the length of time to carry out all identified improvements to the highway was not inconsiderable at 60-70 years, this figure had been significant reduced following significant investment in recent years. The result of the scanner surveys indicated that the condition of roads had remained unchanged although this position was dependent on the climate and continued investment.

The Head of Technical Services explained that the Council would be bidding for funding from the Government in tranche 1 of the new funding arrangements amounting to £150 million for two schemes, for repairs to the rural road network and also masonry arch bridges.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

91. **Review of Supported Bus Services**

Neil Easton, Policy Officer within the Economic and Inclusion Policy Team, gave an overview of the exercise that had commenced to review the future funding of subsidised bus services in Northumberland. He explained the proposal to prioritise the services that were supported using a hierarchy of service provision and adoption of 3 key priorities relating to economic activity, social activity and enabling children to travel to the nearest school or college. The process applied sustainability criteria which considered cost per passenger and passenger need/benefit and allowed for a higher level of subsidy on rural routes compared to urban routes.

Additional issues also being considered were described and included introduction: of a development phase for new routes, exploration of partnership opportunities, review of existing full or part subsidised routes to determine whether there was any overlap with commercial routes to ensure that resources were directed where need was greatest.

Councillors and Members of the public were encouraged to participate in the engagement exercise and complete the survey which was available through a number of sources including the Council’s website, libraries and mobile libraries.
The following issues were raised:

- Reference was made to discussions at recent meetings regarding the withdrawal of bus subsidies by a neighbouring authority and the impact on rural locations. Residents in rural locations were anxious about further changes and being forced to leave their homes due to lack of transport in those areas.
- It was not cost effective use of resources to pay large amounts for little used services.
- The opportunity to review bus routes and demand by users was welcomed. Everyone had an opportunity to have input into the delivery of bus services and participation was encouraged.
- The unexpected cost of public transport in respect of relatively short journeys. Officers commented on the availability of funding and the difficult choices to be made by using subsidies to reduce the cost to passengers to encourage use of public transport, which would reduce the opportunities to support rural routes.

The Executive Director of Local Services acknowledged that the proposed savings of £200,000 whilst substantial were much less drastic than the proposals being considered by other councils. He commented that the cost per passenger method had not been effective, as it had not taken into account journey length, and reference was made to the work carried out by the former Transport Support Manager to maintain support for essential bus services in recent years not meeting subsidy criteria. It was believed that the proposals increased the support available for rural communities.

A representative from Go North East queried the accuracy of data within the proposal document. The Executive Director of Local Services apologised if there were any errors and suggested that, given his position, his comments would be addressed by officers outside the meeting.

The Chair invited the Policy Officer to a future meeting following completion of the engagement exercise, to inform the Committee of the results.

**RESOLVED** that the presentation be noted.

**DISCUSSION ITEMS – LOCAL**

92. **Highways Issues**

In answer to a question, it was confirmed that following the recent reduction in the price of oil, officers were reviewing and renegotiating prices of affected materials, such as asphalt and bitumen.

Whilst there had not been a requirement for significant snow clearing during the winter, to date, it was reported that the cold temperatures had necessitated regular gritting. It was anticipated that savings would be achieved within the service during the current financial year and would be combined with savings and overspends elsewhere.
RESOLVED that the comments be noted.

a. Ovingham Bridge

The Committee received an update on the progress of the refurbishment works at Ovingham Tyne Bridge. (Copy of the report attached to the minutes as Appendix B).

Concern was expressed regarding the impact of the delays on businesses in the area. Simon Rudman, Bridges Team Manager explained that the contract provided an opportunity for damages to be imposed on the contractor if key dates were missed. There was no mechanism for businesses to claim compensation for delays; however, they would be able to apply to the Valuation Officer for business rate relief. It was hoped that there was an opportunity to mitigate the delay and limit possible damages by the contractor working over weekends to catch up.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

b. Wark Tyne Bridge

The Committee received a report which updated Members on the background of the project and provided an explanation on the difference between the expected scheme out-turn costs compared to budget allowances. (Copy of the report attached to the minutes as Appendix C).

The Bridges Team Manager outlined the report which provided information on the different options that had been considered. The works had also been phased over a number of years to reduce the strain on the LTP programme and the cost was broadly in line with the original budget, given the effects of construction inflation since 2010 and unexpected additional works.

Members discussed the impact of the restrictions of the refurbished bridge, particularly on agricultural vehicles.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

INFORMATION ITEMS

93. Working Groups

There was nothing to report.

94. Future Meetings

It was noted that future meetings would be held as follows:

- Tuesday, 10 March 2015 at 6pm at Humshaugh Village Hall
- Tuesday, 14 April 2015 at 6pm at Bellingham Town Hall
Members were requested to contact the Democratic Services Officer with suggestions for venues for the forthcoming year, to enable meetings to be held in locations not recently or previously visited.

CHAIR

DATE