NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

AREA COMMITTEE - NORTH

At a meeting of the Area Committee - North held at William Elder Building, 56 - 58 Castlegate, BERWICK-UPON-TWEED, TD15 1JT on Monday, 9 February 2015 at 6.00pm.

PRESENT
SC Bridgett (Chair), GR Arkless, GW Jones, AH Murray, A Sambrook, HGH Sanderson, TN Thorne, RJD Watkin, J Woodman

OFFICERS
K Bartlett – Locality Officer, Local Services
M Bird – Team Leader (Scrutiny/Regulatory), Democratic Services
N Easton – Policy Officer (Inclusion), Planning, Economy and Housing
B Hodgson - Area Neighbourhood Manager (North), Neighbourhood Services
D Lally – Executive Director of Well-being and Community Health
D Laux – Head of Technical Services

ALSO PRESENT
Public (20)
T Gates – Chief Executive, Northumberland National Park Authority

PART I

71. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Armstrong, Bawn, H Cairns, K Cairns, Castle, Dickinson, Hunter, Lindley, Smith, Tebbutt and Watson.

72. Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting held on 12 January 2015, as circulated, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to being amended to show that Councillor Smith was also present at the meeting.

73. Public Question Time

Mary Fowler, TD15 1ET raised how she had written to the Council about the party wall agreement regarding the proposed coach parking on Chapel Street but not received a response yet, and queried why two established trees on the site were not on the plan. Members were advised that ongoing issues regarding the site were being looked into, and a written reply would be organised.

Brian Darling, TD15 2EW firstly expressed concern about the time of day in which a recent Pop Up Parliament session had taken place in Berwick and felt it would have been preferable to have taken place over the busier lunchtime period. He
asked if further discussions could take place about the regulations for any future filming in the High Street to get a better backdrop. Secondly, Mr Darling also asked if the One North East stipulations still applied to Berwick, as if not why was the former Kwik Save building contravening it? Thirdly, Mr Darling asked if a representative of the North East Ambulance Service could attend a public meeting in Berwick to discuss the service’s current position, how it had been reached, and where the service was going. He referred to how he had raised concerns with Berwick Town Council about problems and referred to a fatal accident in the area a week earlier. The Chair advised that Public Protection would have to look into his first query. Secondly, One North East had been replaced by the LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership), and the regeneration team would be asked about the current position. Thirdly, this committee could not take responsibility for inviting a North East Ambulance Service representative, but Mr Darling’s request would be raised at the Policy Board/Area Chairs Working Group meeting on 18 February.

Councillor Georgina Hill, Berwick Town Council stated that Arch, the arms-length regeneration company wholly owned by Northumberland County Council had investments plans for Blyth and Ashington totalling £170m. She asked for the precise figures for how much investment was planned and the money to be spent by Arch in the area which this committee represented, also broken down in to the individual towns/areas and spend per person. Ms Hill also asked what this committee was doing to ensure that the northern area got its fair share of the pot as she felt that a bias was being shown to the southern parts of the county. Councillor Hill’s request would be raised with the Leader of the Council at the Policy Board/Area Chairs Working Group on 18 February, and a written response would also be provided.

Jocelyn Lamb, TD15 2BL felt that potential trade for the local area was being overlooked, given how much Berwick had to offer, because it did not have suitable facilities for coaches and their passengers. A member explained that there had been a delay in implementing an approved planning application for a coach park of four spaces due to a party wall dispute, there was temporary parking available on Walkergate, and developments on Church Street were awaited. The Chair replied that this would be raised with the Policy Board member and senior officer responsible; the legal issue with the party wall would also be looked into.

David Blackburn, TD15 1NA referred to how three local sites had been considered for coach parking and had copies of correspondence from people involved in the studies. He said the Chapel Street location had been supported by the Council as a possible site and should be progressed, but expressed concern that it was not going ahead due to local opposition. Mr Blackburn also asked when the decision was made to delegate the Kwik Save site for office use, as it was a large site ideal for parking, which the Chamber of Commerce supported. Mr Blackburn asked who in and when the County Council permitted it, as to date he had only been referred to Arch, which was 100% County Council owned, and he was awaiting an answer and wanted it investigated if he received no response. The Chair suggested that parking in Berwick would be a regular item for the committee’s agendas and an agenda item about this issue would be included for the next meeting. It was also suggested that any questions about the issue should be emailed to Mr Bird in Democratic Services to follow up.
Mr WS Robson, TDF15 2SD expressed concern about the churchyard at Duddo being sold when the public still needed it; no consultation had taken place and he asked who was responsible for selling it. Concern was also expressed about residents being restricted from visiting graves. The clerk of Duddo Parish Council provided an update about the current position, including how the owner had erected a sign restricting people to visiting on certain days, and added that the issue would be put on the agenda of the next Duddo Parish Council meeting for discussion. The contact details for the Diocesan Secretary, who could help, were provided at the meeting. It was also agreed that the relevant officer at County Hall would be contacted about the concerns raised.

Mr A Riddell, TD15 2LR referred to his difficulty acquiring a site for his haulage company at the Ramparts Business Park. He did have a place accepted, but could not get a change of use agreed for it. Members were advised that was not a planning matter but instead concerned a legal covenant on the land in question. This would be followed up with officers and the respective Policy Board member.

Colin Wakeling, TD15 2PP asked if the Council would delay consideration of changes to its planning procedures to permit time for a realistic and meaningful consultation on them. He felt that the Council was being undemocratic by trying to rush through radical changes to the planning system which would substantially reduce local input, and referred to the next steps for considering through the democratic process ending with County Council consideration on 1 April. He expressed particular concern about any reduction in the role of town/parish councils, abolishing local planning committees, having more delegated decisions and any reduction in committee site visits and concerns about using amateur videos in their place. He stated that these issues were worthy of detailed scrutiny that had to be undertaken with any detailed consultation process, and the planning system needed accountability and transparency in order for people to have faith in it.

Discussion followed and the Chair would raise this issue at the Policy Board/Area Chairs Working Group meeting on 18 February. During the discussion reference was made to related questions submitted prior to the meeting from Morpeth Town Council, for which copies of a written response had been circulated at the meeting. It was made clear that no decision had been taken; a report had been to the Audit Committee, then would next go to scrutiny, Policy Board and Council. Town/parish councils had been written to asking for their views. It was not a done deal and it raised much to talk about. Reference was also made to how town/parish councils could currently call in applications and put a hold on them. Sometimes, including at the previous week’s North Planning Committee meeting, town/parish council representatives had not then turned up to speak on them when they were discussed despite having called them in. It was important to listen to what people said, but planning committees had to take account of planning laws. The proposals were not suggesting that town/parish councils should no longer be consultees. During the process it would be helpful to assess best practice from elsewhere.

Councillor Gordon McLean, Berwick Town Council expressed concern that a light had gone off on the Royal Border Bridge in January 2014, and this had since increased to six now. The Chair reported that the issue would be looked into and a response provided in time for the committee’s next meeting.
74. Petitions

It was noted that there were no updates or reports to be considered on petitions.

DISCUSSION ITEMS - CORPORATE

75. Northumberland National Parks Authority – Update

A detailed presentation about the position of the Northumberland National Parks Authority and what the Authority planned for the future was provided by Tony Gates, Chief Executive (full copy of presentation attached to the official minutes of the meeting). Key details included the Authority’s size, population, land ownership statistics, staff, budget, aims and three key priorities of land management/rural development, engaging young people. Details were provided about the recently approved application to build The Sill (National Landscape Discovery Centre), the achievement of International Dark Skies Park status and the benefits it brought, and issues for the future including reducing government budgets, alternative funding sources, rural development, tourism and growth; and close working with Northumberland County Council.

Members raised issues including a request for the Council to implement a Dark Skies policy as the issue regularly came up at planning committee meetings. Thanks were expressed for Mr Gates and his staff for their achievements in both looking after the National Park and also bringing in visitors, given the financial pressures faced. Mr Gates was thanked for his presentation and it was:

RESOLVED that the presentation be noted.

76. 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 provided an update on highway condition and the programmes of highway maintenance investment being carried out in 2014-15. Key details included 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.

Members raised a number of issues including:
- concerns about a section of the road surface at Powburn which had no tarmac left
- a concerning pothole between Longhorsley and Longframlington that needed fixing
- the need for a high standard of pothole fixing
• concerns about the condition of a stretch of the road between Wooler and Doddington
• the success of the interactive crossing signs at Holy Island and the importance of keeping them going
• whether RAG maps (showing the state of roads as either red/green/amber) for the whole county could be published on the Council website for both transparency and enabling people to track when repairs were due and their progress
• thanks were expressed for repair work to a U Road at Duddo, although its technical quality varied and it was queried if a post work inspection had been carried out. It was confirmed that such works were inspected but not necessarily immediately after the work was done.

The issues raised would be looked into, Mr Laux was thanked for his attendance and it was:

RESOLVED that the report be noted.

77. Review of Supported Bus Services

Neil Easton, Policy Officer (Inclusion) within the Economic and Inclusion Policy Team, gave an overview of the exercise that had commenced to review the funding of subsidised bus services in Northumberland (full copy of presentation attached to the official minutes of the meeting). Mr Easton explained the proposal to prioritise the services that were supported using a hierarchy of service provision and adoption of three 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. Councillors and members of the public were encouraged to participate in the engagement exercise and complete the survey available through a number of sources including the Council’s website and libraries.

Members discussed the issue, of which the key points were:
• whether the consultation timescale could be extended; did it allow time for contracts to be renegotiated?
• it was welcomed that tourism and seasonal services were being considered as factors
• the importance of people expressing their views which increased the chance of their service being maintained, with reference to a service from Kelso to Newcastle being retained due to the support expressed for keeping it
• the significance of cross-border links
• the importance of providing provision for passengers with disabilities
• the use of best practice from other local authorities
• the need for widespread publicity about the consultation, including press releases, and providing papers versions of consultation documents.

Mr Easton replied to questions of which the key points included:
• the consultation would run until 26 March 2015, after which the County Council would analyse priorities, apply to routes and see where the required
£200,000 saving could be achieved from. Consultation would then take place with communities for which services were proposed to change, to look at alternatives

- existing contracts would be negotiated when they ended
- the increased services operational during the summer season were being taken into account
- some best practice had been used, and work had taken place to map routes
- views from visitors were also welcome
- much work was taking place to publicise the consultations and get the word out to communities and town/parish councils. The cost of paper copy consultation forms had increased considerably so less were now produced, but copies were still available and placed in regularly visited public buildings such as libraries and post offices.

Mr Easton was thanked for his presentation and it was:

RESOLVED that the information be noted and views submitted into the consultation process.

INFORMATION ITEMS

78. Future Meetings

It was noted that dates/venues for future meetings would be: 9 March – Morpeth Town Hall / 13 April – St. Cuthbert’s Centre, Holy Island.

CHAIR

DATE