NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a meeting of the Communities and Local Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Wednesday, 23 September 2015 at 10:30 am.

PRESENT

Councillor B Gallacher
(Chair, in the Chair)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

E Armstrong  
D Campbell  
L Grimshaw  
L H Cairns  
G W Jones  
V Jones

CABINET MEMBERS

I C F Swithenbank (Cabinet Member for Local Services)

OTHER COUNCILLORS

E Simpson (Deputy Business Chair)  
V Tyler (Cabinet Member for Arts, Leisure and Culture)  
J C Woodman

OFFICERS

R Bendell  
H Clear Hill  
T Dixon  
P Jones  
K Norris  
S Nicholson  
Infrastructure Manager  
Sustainability Programme Manager  
Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Manager  
Head of Neighbourhood Services  
Democratic Services Officer  
Scrutiny Officer

20. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Foster, Graham and Horncastle.

21. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Local Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 22 July 2015, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.
22. **FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS**

Members received the latest Forward Plan of Key Decisions for the period September – December 2015 (copy attached to the official minutes as Appendix A). In addition, it was noted that a special meeting of Cabinet would be held on 19 November 2015 to consider proposals for the development of new corporate headquarters to replace County Hall. The issue would also be considered by Economic Growth and Corporate Services OSC on 18 November 2015.

**RESOLVED** – that the information be noted.

**REPORTS PREVIOUSLY CONSIDERED BY CABINET**

23. **REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PUBLIC PROTECTION**

Food and Feed Service Plan 2015/16

The report and comments from this committee were considered by Cabinet on 8 September 2015 and an extract from the minutes was attached for information (Appendix B).

The Chair stated that he had contacted the Legal Services Manager regarding the Declarations of Interest made and he was comfortable that Councillors Grimshaw and G Jones could have remained in the room so long as they did not comment.

**RESOLVED** - That the information be noted.

**REPORTS TO BE CONSIDERED BY CABINET**

24. **REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LOCAL SERVICES**

Adoption of the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy for Northumberland

Trevor Dixon, Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Manager, introduced the above report which presented the final draft of the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy (the Strategy) for Northumberland. Comments made by this Committee would be taken to the Cabinet on 13 October 2015. (Report enclosed with the official Minutes as Appendix C.)

Members were advised that a report had been presented to Communities and Place OSC in November last year where the format and content of the draft Strategy was presented prior to undertaking the formal consultation process. Consultation had taken place and since then officers had been refining and updating the Strategy in order to produce the final document. Response to the consultation had been disappointing, with only 7 formal responses having been received on the Strategy
itself and 2 more with specific emphasis on environmental issues. Those responses had been generally positive and, given the opportunities to comment on the Strategy and lack of any objections, it had been deemed that the Strategy was appropriate for the Council. Officers had worked closely with the Environment Agency and other key stakeholders to develop the plans.

The Cabinet Member for Local Services said it was a very comprehensive report and would need to be kept up to date.

Members asked questions and made comments as follows:

- It was good to see that dialogue had taken place with Planning and Housing Services to provide advice on local flooding matters as set out on page 14 of the report.
- A member stated that she lived in a very small village and residents had chosen not to comment as they felt it was a strategic issue. They had, however, found the dialogue with Aaron McNeill, FCERM Programme Officer (Flood & Coastal Erosion Risk Management), very useful and asked that their thanks be passed on to him.
- In response to queries regarding the consultation, it was stated that there had been a very comprehensive approach, it was published on the website, posted on social media and press notices were issued. In addition all Parish/Town Councils had been approached as well as every elected member and a range of strategic partners.
- In response to concerns regarding the cutting of highway verges, it was stated that discussions were underway regarding the possibility of outsourcing the cutting of verges. There would be an overview of all grounds maintenance work carried out over the summer in order to consider how improvements could be made.
- It was acknowledged that certain gullies were problematic and changes in traffic management guidance made some of the day to day maintenance more difficult.
- With regard to new developments, dialogue should take place through planners and developers to ensure water was displaced correctly. The SuDS Officer had a role in new development to make sure the development would not be subject to flood risk and that it would not increase flood risk elsewhere. Officers worked closely with planners and developers to make sure development schemes were suitable for purpose. It was pointed out that some of the problems were due to increased car ownership as there were more drives which resulted in less soakaway.
- Local knowledge was of major importance and that was not reflected in the report.

The Chair requested that information be circulated to members on how often gullies were cleaned.

RESOLVED – that

(a) The Strategy be recommended for approval and adoption by the Cabinet and full Council.
(b) Information be circulated to members on how often gullies were cleaned.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

25. REPORT OF THE HEAD OF TECHNICAL SERVICES

Northumberland County Council Energy Programme – Progress Report

The purpose of the report was to update the committee on the progress of the Council’s Energy Programme and related activity regarding energy efficiency and alleviation of fuel poverty. (Report enclosed with the official Minutes as Appendix D.)

The Cabinet Member for Local Services congratulated officers on their terrific success in accessing funding from the Central Heating Fund (CHF), an England wide £25 million project supported by the Department of Energy and Climate Change, as detailed in the report.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services referred to recent policy announcements and consultations launched by the Government which indicated there would be significant cuts in supporting the installation of renewable energy. He stated that the consultation had been challenged and meetings arranged with potential contractors to explore options for the proposed Ashington Solar Farm. Whilst funding might affect the business case for the scheme in the short term, officers would continue to monitor the situation to establish the best options for developing the project.

The Sustainability Programme Manager summarised the report providing background information, details of current activity, energy efficiency, energy procurement, renewable energy generation and future plans.

Members commented as follows:

- Members thanked officers for the comprehensive report which was welcomed and officers were congratulated on moving forward.
- It was hoped that the Council would be a net producer of electricity by 2020 as highlighted in the report.
- It was requested that the committee receive further reports to monitor the situation.
- Thanks were conveyed to the Sustainability Programme Manager for energy advice he had given to the elderly.
- In response to comments regarding the Central Heating Fund (CHF) programme, clarification was provided on the criteria for funding. Further information on the CHF programme would be provided to members once some details had been finalised with the Department of Energy and Climate Change. It was emphasised that the funding was not available for making big strategic links to the gas network but CHF may allow new gas heating systems to be installed where short gas connections were supported by other funding.
• With regard to comments regarding storage heaters in Council buildings, it was stated that officers were looking at the Council’s heating systems and energy use to determine what was appropriate.
• Investment was not worthwhile in buildings proposed for sale.

RESOLVED that the information be noted and the committee receive further reports at future meetings.

26. REPORT OF THE HEAD OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

Review of Public Conveniences

The purpose of the report was to provide members with the opportunity to comment upon the proposed changes to the provision of public conveniences following the review of the service as part of the Council’s revenue budget savings for 2015/16. (Report enclosed with the official Minutes as Appendix E.)

The Cabinet Member for Local Services advised members that a great deal of dialogue with Parish/Town Councils had taken place regarding public conveniences located in their area. The Council continued to operate a ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme whereby, for a financial incentive, commercial premises made their toilet facilities available to the public. Discussions had taken place regarding the expansion of the scheme as that could be done at a relatively low cost and facilities were often cleaner and of a higher standard.

It was noted that even if approval was given to the proposed changes, required cost reductions would not be met.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services referred to initial proposed savings of £240 k but said, as the result of discussions with Town and Parish Councils, it had been envisaged to reduce those revenue budget savings to £120 k. It was emphasised that it was not a strategic requirement for the Council to provide public toilets and, because of financial constraints, service levels would have to be reduced. It had been a difficult and challenging process and dialogue was on-going. There would need to be a consistent approach and further meetings with Parish/Town Councils would take place.

Details of options were outlined in the report and discussion took place regarding facilities in particular areas.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services provided an update from the joint meeting of the Local Services (Urban and Rural) Cabinet Advisory Groups which had taken place on 16 September. Feedback would usually have been reflected in the report but that had not been possible due to the meeting having been delayed for the Aviva Tour of Britain cycle race. The Working Group had supported the proposals subject to the outcome of further dialogue with the affected Town/Parish Councils and had recommended that local members be invited to take part in those discussions. The Group had also emphasised that publicity of the ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme and signage to direct people to the nearest toilet provision was very important.

Members commented and asked questions as follows:
• How did officers identify suitable premises for the ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme? In response it was stated that officers had contacted Parish/Town Councils to seek local knowledge to determine if there were suitable alternatives in the area. There was a ‘knock on doors’ approach which would be done in a targeted way and publicity would be increased. Although there were financial incentives, it was not purely cost driven as it was a way for businesses to enhance their footfall.
• Concerns were expressed regarding the proposed closure of the toilets in the Ranch Car Park at Blyth beach.
• Reference was made to the existing lack of toilets in Wansbeck Riverside Park which was a place of natural beauty and it was felt there should be at least temporary toilets for summer months in order to encourage tourism. In response it was stated that the review had concentrated on existing provision and the toilet block at Riverside Park had been closed for several years and had been part of the caravan park which had been transferred to Arch. At that point the Chair stated that the land on which the toilet block was located had not been transferred to Arch, although Arch had initially agreed to take it, it had not happened. The Cabinet Member for Local Services said the issue would be investigated.
• It was acknowledged that there was no statutory obligation for the Council to provide toilets but there was an economic benefit as tourism was a major industry and there were concerns that closures were not driven by usage. In response it was stated that dialogue was on-going with Parish/Town Councils and Active Northumberland to ascertain if there was an alternative solution. Officers fully recognised the wider economic benefits of toilet provision which was why they had agreed to reduce revenue budget savings to £120 k.
• There were concerns regarding toilet provision in Bamburgh during winter months. It was stated that it was not a case of there being no provision, it was about providing alternative provision and it was expected to provide 3 ‘You’re Welcome’ schemes in Bamburgh.
• It was pointed out that Bamburgh had less than 100 homes, the number of tourists dominated the village and winter tourism was encouraged. There was no toilet provision at the Grace Darling museum which was the subject of numerous school trips.
• The final decision regarding closures should be made in conjunction with Northumberland Tourism.
• Toilet provision was very important, particularly for the elderly. The ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme should be in addition to, rather than instead of, toilet blocks.
• Problems in Hexham and Bedlington were discussed as well as venues which were considered to be unsuitable and concern was expressed that suggested venues in other areas may also be unsuitable. In response it was stated that the ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme had been devised in conjunction with colleagues in Health and Well-being and officers were happy to look at other facilities in Hexham. With regard to Bedlington, dialogue was taking place with the Town Council to provide toilet facilities on an event basis. It was suggested that officers contact the G.P. practice about the ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme.
• It was felt by some Councillors that pubs were not suitable alternatives and it was suggested that officers contact Councillors in surrounding areas for their views regarding other alternatives.
• Financial constraints were acknowledged but each area should have at least one strategic toilet block.
• Members of the public should be informed of the reasons for closure.
- Parish/Town Councils should look at provision and increase precepts if necessary.
- There were areas where the number of houses meant the precept was low and it would not be sufficient to increase it.
- When promoting tourism, toilet blocks should not be closed. Areas such as Low Newton had hundreds of visitors and the provision was totally inadequate.
- Reference was made to bowling clubs where members would not allow the public to use the facilities. In response it was stated that officers would look into the legalities and leasing arrangements.
- Reference was made to the dangers of putting people at risk due to the lack of toilet facilities.
- The Chair referred to provision in Ashington and expressed concern at closures in Milburn Road and Station Road as facilities should be provided to encourage visitors to the shopping areas. He agreed that pubs were not always a suitable alternative but said that some were very accessible and friendly. However, he queried if there was a contingency plan as pubs were continuously being closed down. Queries were also raised regarding the financial incentive and damage limitation.
- In response to comments regarding provision in Amble, it was stated there were currently two toilet blocks. One was mainly used by tourists, hence there was a bigger demand in the summer. The Town Council had expressed concern regarding the quayside market in winter so talks had taken place regarding a venue for the ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme. It was intended that the toilets at the harbour would be closed in the winter period but the Harbour Commissioners would be approached to determine if they wished to fund opening for the Sunday market during the winter.
- Consultation and agreement with Northumberland Tourism should take place before any changes were implemented.

The Cabinet Member for Local Services said there were changes in the report that had been agreed and these should be implemented as soon as possible. The changes which had not been agreed would be subject to further dialogue and officers would continue to promote the ‘You’re Welcome’ scheme.

The Chair stated that the issue should be looked at from a strategic, not local, point of view.

A member reiterated his concerns regarding tourism and how it impacted on the economic plan. He asked for a commitment from the Council that Northumberland Tourism would be consulted and involved. Economic development was an important driver within the County and must be taken into account when looking at a cost cutting exercise.

The Chair suggested that an update be provided at October’s meeting.

The Head of Neighbourhood Services stated that if Parish/Town Councils were happy with the proposals, in conjunction with Ward Members, they would be signed off. Where further issues had been raised, further dialogue would take place.

A member asked for clarification that Northumberland Tourism would be consulted. In response the Cabinet Member for Local Services said their comments would be considered.
Further discussion took place regarding what members were being asked to agree. Councillor V Jones asked for it be recorded that she was against the proposals.

**RESOLVED** that

(a) Members support the proposed changes to public conveniences as outlined in the report where they had been accepted by Town and Parish Councils and those which had not been accepted be subject to further dialogue.

(b) A further report to address the issues raised be brought to the meeting of Communities and Local Services OSC on 21 October 2015.

**REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER**

27. **Communities and Local Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme**

Members considered the Communities and Local Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme (enclosed as Appendix F).

As previously agreed, a further report regarding the review of public conveniences would be brought to the meeting on 21 October.

A number of important issues had been raised regarding green energy and these would be progressed for the work programme.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

**INFORMATION REPORT**

28. **POLICY DIGEST**

The report, available on the Council’s website, provided details of policy developments that might be of interest to members.

**RESOLVED** that the information be noted.

**CHAIR**

**DATE**