

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 November 2016 at 10:30 am.

PRESENT

Councillor B Pidcock
(Chair)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

L H Cairns
D Campbell
R R Dodd
JD Foster

K O Graham
L Grimshaw
G W Jones
V Jones

OFFICERS

G Barlow
S Bucknall
G Gavin
D Laux
K Norris

Street Lighting & Modernisation Project Manager
Highways Delivery Manager
Acting Head of Neighbourhood Services
Head of Technical Services
Democratic Services Officer

ALSO PRESENT

ICF Swithenbank Cabinet Member for Local Services

Cllr B Gallacher
Cllr J Lang

31. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Armstrong.

32. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Communities and Local Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 19 October 2016, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

Ch.'s Initials.....

33. FORWARD PLAN OF KEY DECISIONS

Members received the latest Forward Plan of Key Decisions for the period December 2016 to March 2017 (copy attached to the signed minutes as **Appendix A**).

it was noted that the budget would be discussed at the Corporate Resources and Regional Affairs Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 26 January 2017 and members of the Scrutiny Committees would be invited to attend.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

The Chair advised that the agenda would be re-ordered to discuss the following item first.

REPORTS FOR CONSIDERATION BY SCRUTINY

34. REPORT OF THE ACTING HEAD OF NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

Review of Summer Grounds Maintenance Programme

The report provided members with a review of the performance of the summer grounds maintenance programme undertaken during 2016/17 in order to seek continuous improvements to service delivery and ensure that the best possible outcomes were achieved for communities from the resources available within the context of the Council having to meet further on-going budget reductions up to 2020.

Greg Gavin, Acting Head of Neighbourhood Services, briefly summarised the report as he was aware that it had already been discussed at the Area Committees and the Cabinet Advisory Groups. He stated that there were two areas where performance could have been improved, verge maintenance and weed control. Savings made had therefore been reinvested to address those issues, some agricultural contractors had been engaged and quad bikes fitted with weed spraying equipment had been purchased to help achieve the required standards. In respect of grass cutting, targets had been met and where partnership arrangements were in place with Parish/Town Councils extra cuts had been carried out and positive outcomes achieved. Overall the standards of grounds maintenance had been very good that summer which was evident in the results achieved across the County for the Northumbria in Bloom Awards and Green Flag Awards for 10 parks.

Money had been invested in an advanced winter maintenance programme which would include shrub bed maintenance, hedge cutting, edging of footpaths and basic tree work. An extra £275k had been allocated for this which would aid grounds maintenance works in the coming summer season. The Chair thanked Mr Gavin for his report and invited questions from members. In response the following information was provided:

- There had been increased costs of £40k incurred for the use of contractors.
- When the price of cuts was originally negotiated, it was a set price but there were some areas where travelling and/or delivery costs were higher than the income achieved so prices in some parishes would need to be increased.
- There was a roadside programme to look at trees. It was a possibility that an arborist could be engaged and that some wood could be kept so long as work on the highway could be carried out safely.

Members commented as follows:

- The work carried out in Ashington during the summer had been disappointing, however, after collaborating with the Town Council to identify all of the issues and problems, improvements had been made and she congratulated the team for their efforts.
- Now that there was a mix of Council workers and contractors, a farmer's mentality was needed to be flexible and work in line with weather conditions.
- This summer the North East had been the garden of England, it had been wonderful to see and was good for tourism.
- Partnership working between Choppington Parish Council and Northumberland County Council had been brilliant.
- Complaints regarding the Berwick area had been forwarded to officers and the public had been happy with the excellent response they had received.
- All of the awards received were due to the partnership working between Parish/Town Councils and Northumberland County Council - a lot of money had been spent.

In summary the Chair said that precepts had been raised and people were paying for the improvements made, however, they were grateful that their money was being spent wisely.

RESOLVED that

- a) The overall good performance of grounds maintenance activity that summer, as demonstrated by the Northumbrian in Bloom results and Green Flag awards, be noted;
- b) The improvement in verge cutting from 2015/16 to 16/17 be noted and
- c) The implementation of the actions outlined in the report, which aimed to improve performance of weed control in 2017/18 be noted.

35. REPORT OF THE ACTING DIRECTORS OF LOCAL SERVICES AND HOUSING DELIVERY

Street Lighting Modernisation Project - Progress Report

Gavin Barlow, Street Lighting and Modernisation Project Manager introduced the above report which updated members on the progress being made with the above project and provided them with the scope and current position since the last update to the committee in May (a copy of which is filed with the signed minutes as Appendix A).

An overview of slipper column replacement for 5/6m columns, a graph detailing all customer contacts per month 2015-2017 and maps showing location and percentage of work completed were circulated to members for their information (copies filed with the signed minutes).

Mr Barlow summarised the key issues as set out in the report. A complaint had been made at a previous meeting about how information was presented regarding progress so this had been broken down to show more detailed information. It was noted that lantern conversion was currently ahead of column replacement so efforts were being made to bring them in line. A message board system was currently being tested on columns and contact details for Galliford Try were on those boards.

The report provided an overview of the programme which was currently 22 weeks behind but it was expected that by April 2017 it would be in the region of 6-10 weeks behind and any remaining delay would be picked up in the final year of the project.

The contract required recruitment and training and some local people had been employed including a Business Support Manager from Ashington who would work closely with Galliford Try. With regard to the issue concerning apprentices it was noted that positions had been advertised, interviews would take place shortly and it was expected that successful applicants would start their training in December. Apprenticeships would last 18 months, cover all aspects of highway works and if Galliford Try were unable to complete it or offer employment at the end, it was expected apprentices would transfer to the Council to complete their training.

Members were then invited to comment and ask questions:

- It was very pleasing that the three apprentices would be taken on by the Council if Galliford Try was unable to do so.
- In response to comments regarding complaints made in Cramlington, it was acknowledged that the contractor's system had at one stage failed to properly control the number of excavations that were open and action had been taken so there would now be a limited amount of excavations at one time and a system put in place which was being closely monitored.
- It was confirmed that all lanterns would be LED.
- There were some compliance issues with design not being to the required standard in areas of Ashington which had previously been lit. Additional lights for areas which had never been lit were not part of the project and would need to be funded separately but would be at a discounted rate.

- Lessons had been learned from mistakes made in Ashington.
- Not many members had volunteered to pay for additional lighting from their small schemes allocation.
- A Member felt that as Ashington was the first town to get LED lighting so an effort should have been made to ensure that all problems were rectified before winter. This report should have been put forward sooner and the lack of communication was frustrating. Members should be kept informed of how many complaints were received and a date for fitting the new lights. Once they had been installed, officers should inspect them to ensure they were up to standard. In response the Street Lighting and Modernisation Project Manager acknowledged that it had taken a considerable amount of time to get to the current stage and there had been some issues as the contractor was procuring a new sub-contractor to carry out these works. The Head of Technical Services added that officers were also frustrated by the situation and every effort was being made to push the project forward.
- In response to comments regarding inspections, it was stated that inspections were made and not a lot of failure was found.
- In response to concerns about the procurement process which had been raised at the meeting in May, the Chair stated that the procurement process would be a future agenda item for the committee and the Scrutiny Officer confirmed that it was on the work programme.
- A question was raised regarding penalties and Service Level Agreements. A number of things had gone wrong and it was concerning that the apprentices were being employed a year after the contract had started.
- Although it was pleasing that three apprentices from Northumberland would be recruited, it was disappointing that, from a £23m contract, only three apprentices had been taken on. Could it be ensured that the workforce hired by the sub-contractors were also from Northumberland? In response it was stated that the contractor was required to submit a package to the Council to state that employees were trained and suitable but he could not say if they were from Northumberland. He pointed out, however, that Norland Construction who carried out the digging were a Northumberland firm.
- There had been some positive feedback regarding crime reduction which had been reiterated by the Police at the South Area Committee.
- Reassurance was given that slipper columns were sturdy. The base and foundation were the same as that of a traditional replacement column and had the same 25 year guarantee.
- Pre 1980 columns had no additional root protection. In the 1980's galvanised columns with root protection were introduced. Columns had improved dramatically over the last 15 years, they were very robust and had been designed in line with European and British standards.

With the Chair's permission, Councillor Gallacher addressed the committee stating that he had been involved with the project since the outset. The programme was moving forward and was receiving mixed reviews. He was very disappointed that problems in Ashington would not be rectified until January as that would be another winter of long, dark nights to get through.

He therefore emphasised how important it was that the problems in Ashington be rectified before January.

Councillor Gallacher also raised concerns about the tree programme stating that he felt it had been a failure as only a light prune had been carried out and some trees in his ward were still overgrown. He requested that the original style lights be left on roundabouts as the LED lights did not give out enough light in those areas. Feedback had been poor and hard to understand and litter bins on lampposts were not being replaced.

In summary the Chair thanked the Street Lighting & Modernisation Project Manager for his input and acknowledged that the issues raised were being looked at.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

36. REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY OFFICER

Communities and Local Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Members considered the above Work Programme (copy attached to signed minutes as **Appendix D**).

Issues listed in item 2 would be brought to future agendas, dates to be confirmed.

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

37. 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 _____