

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL

CABINET

At a meeting of the **Cabinet** held in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Morpeth on Tuesday 12 March 2019 at 10.00am.

PRESENT

Councillor P. Jackson
(Leader of the Council, in the Chair)

CABINET MEMBERS

Daley, W.
Homer, C.
Jones, V.
Oliver, N.

Riddle, J.
Sanderson, H.G.H.
Wearmouth, R.

OTHER MEMBERS

Dodd, R.
Flux, B.
Grimshaw, L.

Renner-Thompson, G.
Swinburn, M.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Angus, K.
Bird, M.
Bradley, N.
Bridges, A.
Elsdon, A.
Henry, L.
Johnson, P.
Lally, D.
Roll, J.
Smith, S.

Executive Director HR/OD and
Deputy Chief Executive
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Service Director: Strategic
Commissioning and Finance
Head of Communications
Service Director: Finance
Legal Services Manager
Interim Executive Director of Place
Chief Executive
Democratic Services Manager
Digital Design and Delivery
Manager

Two members of the press public in attendance.

Ch.'s Initials.....

88. MINUTES

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 12 February 2019, as circulated, be confirmed as a true record and signed by the Chair.

89. REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HR AND DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Superfast Broadband Voucher Scheme

The report recommended approval to develop and launch a superfast voucher scheme to enable alternative suppliers to Openreach to access public funding in order to roll out superfast broadband services to residents and businesses in Northumberland not currently covered by existing plans (report enclosed with the official minutes as Appendix A).

Councillor Oliver introduced the report, referring to how the delivery of broadband in rural areas was one of the administration's key priorities but challenging due to Northumberland's mostly rural nature. The current delivery rate of 93.8% was below the national average but compared similarly with other rural areas. £13m had been invested in Broadband delivery, with a further £2.2m put in the previous year. The contract with BT would end in December 2019, which was due to take the level of access up to 96%.

Reference was made to the features of the Better Broadband Scheme and Gigabit Voucher Scheme. This type of voucher scheme was used by a small number of local authorities to support broadband provision in hard to reach areas. The fibre to the premises option was aspired to for some areas but not possible in certain locations. This new scheme would enable the Council to also work with other providers and extend the voucher scheme up to a maximum of £1m to help people who were not currently connected.

The Leader expressed concern about the service provided by BT Openreach as smaller isolated communities had not been served well, whereas this innovative voucher scheme would give equal access across the county.

Councillor Sanderson welcomed the scheme, which showed leadership. It had been frustrating as progress made had also been accompanied by setbacks. The scheme would help residents, who had been very patient. The scheme should be well communicated to residents.

Councillor Jones agreed with points raised and referred to frustration amongst communities with Openreach's service, especially as some areas with poor access were only 10 miles from Newcastle.

Councillor Oliver further explained that the £1m pot was not subject to a

competitive bidding process. Significant work was taking place with the government about how to deliver access to the remaining rural areas. There had been significant contact with the local two MPs representing rural areas and the Prime Minister had been lobbied. Previously costs had been prohibitive but this scheme would provide the opportunity to connect with communities. Significant work was taking place with BT to enable the delivery of the service as soon as possible for residents. The Council also aspired in future to providing hyperfast broadband.

RESOLVED that

- (1) a £200,000 allocation be allocated via a voucher scheme rather than via a single procurement, or series of small scale procurements, as per the report; and
- (2) if the scheme experiences high demand and the initial £200,000 is utilised, further funds be made available from an existing budget through the iNorthumberland programme to extend the scheme up to a total maximum value of £1m.

90. REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC COMMISSIONING AND FINANCE

Summary of New Capital Proposals considered by the Officer Capital Strategy Group

The report summarised proposed amendments to the Capital Programme considered by the officer Capital Strategy Group at its meetings held on 11 January 2019 and 8 February 2019 (report enclosed with the official minutes as Appendix A).

The Leader introduced the report. It was proposed to put funding into community led housing; some communities did not have enough housing for local people at rents that they could afford. Bidding to central government had been successful and hopefully more funding could be received once the Council established a record of delivering the housing.

Councillor Riddle added that Community Action Northumberland were commissioned to meet communities and lead on arrangements. Examples of schemes at Wooler and Stocksfield were provided. It was important to get a real mix of housing. The housing would be permanently for rent and controlled by local organisations.

Councillor Oliver explained that Corbridge Parish Council were developing a proposal for which agreement had been accepted in principle. The housing would remain exempt from right to buy provisions; the scheme was very commendable.

The Leader then referred to the proposal for Blyth Sports Centre. Detailed proposals would be developed for the capital allocations already agreed. Blyth Sports Centre had suffered from a lack of investment; it was structurally acceptable but needed a makeover to address a significant backlog of maintenance issues. Active Northumberland were providing a full business case for the work. The refurbished facilities would cost £13.8m less to run over a 27 year term - this was an invest to save approach. It was an important facility for one of the county's major towns and the work would benefit communities.

Councillor Homer added that a significant backlog of repairs had been inherited in 2017 which were not minor fixes. If no action was taken, it would require the management of decline, and Active Northumberland could not be expected to be manage such facilities. The proposal provided a great opportunity for Blyth.

Councillor Sanderson referred to criticism received about the Local Transport Plan supposedly mostly benefitting rural areas, but this was not true; several big schemes were planned for Blyth for example. Blyth deserved as much as anywhere else in the county.

Councillor Daley raised how the administration had strongly supported Active Northumberland. They had undertaken a transformative and holistic look at how to deliver such services and work with Active Northumberland. He referred to planned benefits from the scheme including opportunities for co-location and the occupational therapy kitchen, which would bring benefits to people with special educational needs and older residents. This funding would be well spent for public benefit; both rural and urban areas were supported.

Councillor Wearmouth stated that this was the latest good news for Blyth in addition to developments at Sleekburn and Battleship Wharf. Consultation was taking place about the proposed Blyth relief road. Blyth was also due to benefit from Future High Street Fund support. A joined up approach was being taken that made the best use of the funding.

RESOLVED that the following amendments to the Capital Programme be agreed:

(1) Community Housing Fund:

- recommend County Council to accept the Community Housing Fund grant award;
- recommend County Council to approve a new budget allocation of £1,000,000 within the Council's Medium Term Capital Programme; and

- authorise bids against other phases of MHCLG’s Community Housing Fund, where the opportunity arises.

(2) Blyth Sports Centre Refurbishment:

Approve the proposal and overall indicative budget requirement of £5,000,000 – to be funded from a re-profiling of the Active Northumberland Facilities Improvements provision within the Medium Term Capital Programme, as outlined on page 7 of the report.

CHAIR.....

DATE.....

Ch.’s Initials.....
Cabinet, 12 March 2019