The Streetcare, Infrastructure and Culture (Rural) Working Group met on 14 May 2014 and 9 July 2014 and discussed the following main issues. Members’ attention is particularly drawn to any specific recommendations.

1. Rail Issues and Public Transport

The working group received a detailed summary of the provision of bus and rail services in Northumberland with emphasis on the rural areas in the West and North. Contracts for bus services in the West had been due to expire, but had been extended to allow for further consultation with communities where services did not deliver value for money. Communities were being asked to consider ways of increasing passenger numbers or whether they could contribute to the cost of services.

Key Issues considered by members included:

- The impact of the higher than inflation increases in bus industry costs which would be felt when contracts were up for renewal.
- The notice period required to be given by operators when changing timetables or withdrawing services not subsidised. Insufficient notice meant that residents were unaware and unable to travel to work.
- The impact on the Berwick town bus service when the section 106 monies ended in September 2014.
- A request that the bus subsidy criteria set in 2012 be reviewed. Continued support had been given to some services which exceeded the maximum subsidy following community opposition to withdrawal. Members preferred approach to the allocation of subsidy was that of need, rather than cost, and suggested that the matter needed to be referred back to the Chairmen’s Group to decide which body should review the matter.
- Consideration be given to alternative sustainable transport schemes such as ‘Get Going’.
- The aspiration to reintroduce rail services to Ashington, Blyth and Tyne. It was confirmed that existing services were funded by the government whereas the costs of the new line would be borne by the Council.
- Retention of long distance high speed trains calling at Northumberland Stations was preferred to the uncertainty offered by extending the new ScotRail franchise into Northumberland or Newcastle.
- Concessionary passes were not available for rail services as they would need to be funded by the Council.

It was recommended that:
1. The contents of the report be noted.

2. The consideration of the bus subsidy criteria be referred back to the Chairmen’s Group to determine which body should consider the matter further.

(It has been agreed that bus subsidy criteria be included in the themed scrutiny on Public Transport).

2. Local Flood Risk Strategy

The report explained the background regarding the requirement for and the programme to develop Northumberland’s Local Flood Risk Strategy. The report included an overview of the duties placed on the Council as Lead Local Flood Authority, the requirements, process and timetable for the development of the strategy.

The following issues were raised by Members:

- Investigations of the 2012 floods had identified 8 areas where flood risk studies were in the process of being undertaken.
- The Community Engagement Officer was available to provide guidance and assistance to communities to develop their own community flood agreement plans.
- It was suggested that the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Team should be added to the list of consultees for ‘major’ applications.
- Concern regarding Environment Agency flood zones which were sometimes in conflict with local knowledge.

It was recommended that:

1. The plans for the development of the Local Flood Risk Strategy be noted.

2. It be suggested to the Area Chairs Group that presentations on Community Engagement be made to the Area Committees. (These have been scheduled for the meetings in November 2014).

3. The Head of Development Services be requested to include the Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management Team as a consultee for ‘major’ planning applications. (Update awaited).

3. Landslips

The Working Group received an update on the current status of all landslip issues in Northumberland. There had been 11 new landslips as a result of the extended period of wet weather since 2011, of which 10 had been repaired as part of the 2013/14 Local Transport Plan maintenance programme.

It was noted that
The repairs to the Cragend landslip in Rothbury had been delayed due to extensive ground investigation work. Construction was expected to commence in the near future following completion of the design phase for a retaining wall.

Regular monitoring was extremely important to ensure public safety in areas at risk of landslips.

Contingency plans were essential to keep the road networks open should there be a landslide on a strategic route.

4. Northumberland Cycling Plan

The Working Group received the first draft of the Northumberland Cycling Plan in advance of the public consultation exercise commencing in September 2014. The Plan recognised the benefits of cycling, establishment of a Northumberland Cycling Board steering group, identification of objectives and cycling policies to deliver the practical elements of the objectives.

Key Issues considered by members:

- There were insufficient facilities within towns for cycle parking. This would be addressed by cycle audits and funding within the Local Transport Plan.
- The importance of working with other organisations such as Northumberland Tourism to promote the county for cycling holidays.
- Incorporation of cycle lanes and cycles related facilities within neighbourhood plans, the Local Transport Plan and Local Development Framework when planning and designing new roads, housing developments, offices and schools etc.
- The importance of evaluating benchmark data to assess whether the plan was achieving its objective of increasing cycle use and the most appropriate source for obtaining data.

It was recommended that:

1. The contents of the report and the draft Northumberland Cycling Plan, be noted.
2. A further report be submitted to the working group after the consultation and that this be added to the work programme.

COUNCILLOR CASTLE
CHAIR