

## **DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL**

At a Special Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham on **Monday 16 December 2019 at 11.30 am**

**Present:**

**Councillor E Adam (Chair)**

**Members of the Committee:**

Councillors A Batey, D Bell, L Brown, B Coult, R Crute, S Dunn, I Jewell, L Maddison and M Wilson

**Co-opted Members:**

Mr T Bolton and Mrs P Holding

### **1 Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors O Milburn, A Gardner, K Hawley, J Higgins, R Manchester, I McLean, A Simpson and P Sexton.

### **2 Substitute Members**

Councillor I Jewell was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor R Manchester.

### **3 Declarations of Interest**

Mr T Bolton declared an interest in Agenda Item No. 5 as a parish clerk.

Councillor L Brown declared an interest in Agenda Item No. 5 as a Member of City of Durham Parish Council.

### **4 Any Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties**

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

## **5 Overview and Scrutiny Review of Durham County Council's Proposed Allotment Policy**

The Committee received a report from the Corporate Director of Resources that presented the review report focusing on Durham County Council's proposed allotment policy (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Mrs D Close and Mrs A Whitton, Overview and Scrutiny Officer's were in attendance to present the report.

The scrutiny officers reminded members that the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee was asked by the then Cabinet Portfolio Holder to consider Durham County Council's proposed allotment policy, tenancy agreement and transition rules which had been developed by the ReaL service grouping. A review group was established consisting of 10 members from the Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the review starting in October 2017. The review group held several meetings including a meeting with Town and Parish Councils together with visits to a number of allotment sites in the county some managed directly by Durham County Council and others by allotment associations. The review was paused to allow the service to develop the consultation arrangements with the consultation held from 4 February 2019 to the 31 March 2019.

As part of the review process the review group considered feedback from the consultation process at a meeting on the 10 June. The review then formulated the key findings which are summarised on pages 2-5 of the report and relate to:

- The keeping of large animals on Durham County Council allotment sites and ensuring that animals housed on Durham County Council allotment plots have the necessary welfare documentation.
- Ensuring that Durham County Council allotment sites are managed by one service team.
- Undertaking a review of allotment sites currently in the allotment portfolio, where the majority of plots are not currently used for the proper purposes of an allotment and where conversion back would be both difficult and costly.
- Creating further opportunities for devolved management via area allotment associations.
- Continuing engagement with Town and Parish Councils regarding the opportunity to take over management of allotment sites should they wish to do so.
- Publicising the need for co-workers to register and reconsider the process for the allocation of plots recognising the previous commitment of co-workers.
- Consider the feasibility of providing smaller sized allotment plots where appropriate.

- Consider a review of allotment rents.

As a result of the key findings the review group had made 8 recommendations which were detailed on pages 6 and 7 of the review report. It was confirmed that the report would be going to Cabinet for consideration at the meeting on 15 January 2020.

At the same Cabinet meeting a report from the Real Service Grouping detailing their response to the recommendations in the scrutiny report would also be considered together with the proposed allotment policy, tenancy agreement and transition arrangements.

Members were asked to comment on the report that would be considered by Cabinet at the meeting on 15 January 2020 and a future meeting of the County Durham Environment Partnership Board.

Mr T Bolton, who served as a member of the review group indicated that following the review, members had increased knowledge and understanding of allotments. Two of the issues that were clarified for him was the role and responsibility of Durham County Council in relation to allotments and what animals are permitted on Durham County Council allotment sites and what animals are currently housed on sites.

Mrs P Holding asked if there was an increased demand for allotments.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer responded that the Council were making use of social media to promote any vacant allotment sites and that demand across the county was mixed with some areas having greater demand than others however the Council was proactive in promoting vacant plots and the associated benefits of having an allotment.

The Chair indicated that Durham County Council had 167 allotment sites, however Town and Parish Councils were also responsible for the management of a significant number of allotment sites in the county. The Scrutiny review was looking at Durham County Council allotment sites.

Councillor Dunn welcomed the report that provided considerable clarity in relation to Durham County Council's role in managing allotment sites in the county. He commented that he had experience of some of the issues in managing allotments and that his parish had leased their allotments to an allotment association. The association claims back the rent to make improvements with improvements seen on the site on a year on year basis. In addition, there was better co-operation between tenants. Councillor Dunn concluded by highlighting that he was encouraged to see that the Council was considering further devolved management to associations.

The Chair indicated that allotment associations had been considered as part of the review, but an allotment association was not always possible as they were too few plots on some sites to form an association. One of the recommendations was for the establishment of area allotment associations where appropriate to take over the day to day management and control. Where there were too few allotment holders to form as an area allotment association consideration should be given to them joining together to form an area association, however there was still a lot of work to be done.

Councillor Brown referred to the recommendation suggesting that a rent review was undertaken and commented that, amenities such as the availability of running water was an issue and indicated that such amenities should be in place before any rent increases. Structures on allotments were also a concern and she referred to a planning application that she was aware of that had recently been submitted for an extension to a building that was on an allotment site.

The Chair responded that as part of the review they had looked at sites that were no longer being used as allotments and a separate Durham County Council review team would be looking at these sites. In relation to the provision of water on allotment sites this was not considered directly as part of the review process however when undertaking visits the review group did see plots that had running water provided, but it was expensive to install running water onto sites and there were several issues with the management of water on sites including monitoring water usage.

Councillor Coult indicated that in her area the allotments were managed by the parish council and were run by an allotment association which had been a success with the association applying for various funding. The sites had fencing and running water and she would encourage more sites to be run by an association.

The Chair commented that allotment associations have access to funding that Durham County Council cannot access.

**Resolved:** (i) That the report be noted.

(ii) That the report be submitted for consideration by Cabinet at the meeting on 15 January 2020 and to a future meeting of the County Durham Environment Partnership Board.