

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held remotely via Microsoft Teams on **Friday 12 February 2021 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor E Adam (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors O Milburn, B Avery, A Batey, D Bell, L Brown, B Coult, R Crute, S Dunn, J Higgins, C Kay, L Maddison, R Manchester, I McLean, A Simpson and M Wilson

Co-opted Members:

Mr T Bolton and Mrs P Holding

Also Present:

Councillors R Bell, P Crathorne, S Quinn, A Reed, J Robinson, M Simmons, H Smith, T Tucker and M Wilkes

Mrs R Morris – Co-opted Member of Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1 Apologies

There were no apologies for absence.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 November 2020 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Wilkes declared an Interest in Agenda Item No. 6 Fuel Poverty in his capacity as a private landlord and remained in the meeting during consideration thereof.

5 Any Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

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

6 Fuel Poverty

Members of the Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been invited to attend the meeting for this agenda item.

Members considered the joint report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration Economy and Growth and Interim Corporate Director of Resources that provided Members with detail of the projects and schemes available in the County to tackle fuel poverty (for copy of report, see file of minutes)

Cliff Duff, Housing Regeneration Project Manager supported by Adrian Cattle-Jones, Housing Regeneration Project Manager were in attendance to present the report and deliver a presentation (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

The presentation set out who were the fuel poor and explained that the government yesterday launched their new national fuel poverty strategy called 'Sustainable Warmth Protecting Vulnerable Households in England', and had changed their definition to 'The Low Income, Low Energy Efficiency'. The Housing Regeneration Project Manager informed members that feedback from Neighbourhood Energy Action, the national fuel poverty charity predicted that the new definition would see an increase in national levels of fuel poverty. The document would be reviewed, and a briefing update provided to Members on the new strategy.

Members were provided with details of the national and local context and a County Durham Fuel Poverty Map that indicated that the highest levels of fuel poverty were predominantly in the west of the county and the reasons for this were largely due to properties being off the gas grid and reliant on high cost fuels such as oil, electricity and solid fuel; secondly the properties were solid wall making insulation difficult and expensive.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager then provided details of the Delivery and Monitoring and advised Members that fuel poverty is included within the newly adopted Housing Strategy but the principal driver is the County Durham Affordable Warmth Action Plan 2018-2020, there is also a partnership element to fuel poverty and the Energy and Fuel Poverty Partnership enables relevant organisations to

work together to get the message out to residents. The Warm Homes Campaign is the mechanism used to raise awareness and get the message out to residents of various fuel poverty grants. The Housing Regeneration Project Manager advised that engagement was key to their work in raising confidence and credibility. As part of the work was to provide free boilers, discounted boilers and free central heating systems, it is important that residents have confidence to apply and understand the criteria.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager provided a summary of assistance available including the Energy Company Obligation (ECO) which is a national programme available to those on benefits, low incomes or who suffer ill health. Information was given on the Warm and Healthy Homes project which is a local programme that works with Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) predominantly in the former Durham Dales, Easington and Sedgefield (DDES) area where GPs have written out to patients asking them to complete a warm and healthy homes questionnaire. When the service receives the completed questionnaire, they then contact them to offer support and assistance.

Information was given on another local project, Managing Money Better service which provides free and impartial advice on the energy market, including changing suppliers, fuel debt, high bills and fuel poverty. An example was given of residents who received significantly high energy bills who had contacted the service and on investigation the service found the electricity metre was inaccurate. The energy company were contacted and a new metre was installed, the service then asked the energy company to monitor the fuel usage against the previous usage and the fuel debt was written off and the residents were then found to be £1,000 in credit with the energy supplier.

The Chair thanked the Officer for his presentation and update and referred to the national consultations that were taking place due to the changing government policies.

Councillor R Bell advised that he had raised in the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 30 October that the Government were consulting on the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) ratings and referred to rental properties needing to be EPC grade C or higher and indicated that there was a large number of terraced solid wall houses in the county and to meet this target, these properties required solid wall insulation. He was concerned about the cost of this and the effect on the housing stock and had written to the responsible Minister Lord Callanan and had received a technical response citing the minimum energy efficiency standard regulations that he would share with the Chair and the Housing Regeneration Project Manager. Councillor Bell advised the Committee that he was going to raise further queries with the Minister as there was some confusion about energy performance certificates and he did not know if the government were concerned about the cost to tenants or if their concerns related to CO2 emissions. He advised that his particular concern were for rural properties that were off gas

grid, particularly in the Durham Dales where there were lots of solid fuel and oil fuel properties and in being assessed for EPC if a property had oil fuelled central heating then this would increase the EPC banding. The broader issues for the county was that if this did not come with additional extra funding or significant exemptions then a considerable amount of housing stock would become unlettable and asked if the Housing Regeneration Project Manager had views on this.

The Chair asked Councillor R Bell to keep the committee updated on the progress of his investigation as it is of concern to this committee and the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Adults, Wellbeing and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager responded that there were three consultations taking place simultaneously. There was a minimum energy efficiency standard consultation that had concluded with the response currently awaited. There was also a consultation on the national fuel poverty strategy that was published yesterday and a further consultation on the national grant mechanisms, the energy company obligation that was in the third phase and a launch would take place on the fourth phase in 2022. The Housing Regeneration Project Manager advised there could be something included in the new poverty strategy but he had not had time to read it due to it being published yesterday afternoon, but the Fuel Poverty Charity had suggested there may be significant rises in funding available in relation to fuel poverty. The Housing Regeneration Manager asked the Chair if he could come back to committee once he had an opportunity to read the new strategy.

The Chair advised that perhaps the Housing Regeneration Project Manager may want to provide a briefing note to members on his findings from the new strategy.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager referred to the position with landlords and advised that it was a big challenge for landlords to bring their properties up to the necessary EPC ratings and that some would require significant investment. The average EPC rating for rental properties in Durham was below C and a number of landlords would have to contribute a substantial amount bringing their homes up to standard. He referred to the South of the country, where income rental was much greater and property values higher, so it was perhaps easier for landlords to meet these new requirements. In County Durham this was more difficult especially in the coalfield villages where there could be issues in letting properties. The rental values were low in some regeneration areas and had to invest to bring these properties up to a EPC C rating was a big challenge and the government needed to recognise that some further investment was needed in support for areas of multiple deprivation and fuel poverty. He advised Members that the Housing Solutions service had fed into the consultation and raised this point.

Councillor R Bell responded that in his consultation submission and in his letter, he specifically made reference to the difference in the cost of a terraced house in the North of the country compared to the South so the cost proportion of the value of

the property was higher for the county's housing stock and suggested that the committee needs to keep a watchful eye on this situation.

Rosemary Morris asked how they could improve the fuel poverty strategy in the drive for net zero. She referred to paragraphs 19 and 20 of the report and if there was any collaboration with the industry to reduce gas usage.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager referred to current schemes with northern gas networks that were operating two agendas, the new build agenda where new houses after a certain date would not be connected to gas but using alternative heating fuel. However, there were large areas of the country that were already connected to gas. Northern Gas Networks in particular areas were operating a pilot project to bleed in hydrogen into the gas network so that the boilers were operating on a combination of clean fuel and natural gas so industries were moving forward to the gas infrastructure and may eventually become a hydrogen-based infrastructure which would be a substantial step towards the net zero. In response to a follow up question from Mrs Morris regarding insisting on using alternative fuels to achieve net zero the Housing Regeneration Project Manager advised that his service did not insist on this approach this was a strategic decision that would come from the Planning service. His service worked to minimise fuel poverty in existing properties.

The Chair advised that the Council needs to look at this from a planning point of view and there were already consultations out; The County Durham Plan would need to focus on energy efficient buildings and new technologies.

Tom Bolton referred to the fuel poverty map and asked if another layer could be included on the map to show demographics and income. He then referred to the new garden village proposals for Seaham and the district central heating system which is going to use geothermal energy from the Dawdon mine water treatment plant and suggested that this maybe something to go into the committee's next work programme and to visit these locations when it is safe to do so.

The Chair indicated that this could be raised when the committee considers the refresh of the work programme at its next meeting.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager responded that a dialogue was taking place in relation to income, should this be agreed it could be added into the map as it would assist the service with targeting the right people. However, that is a corporate decision, but conversations are taking place. The information could also be used to target those households on low income who would now qualify for a grant.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager updated Members on the decarbonisation of South West Durham moving from gas based fuels, coal and oil to renewable energy. They were proactively delivering on decarbonised project across

the off gas areas installing the latest air source heat pump technology in homes and they could install a heat pump for someone in fuel poverty earning less than £30,000 at no cost to them. The issue was resources as the amount of money available was limited and they were bidding into national funding streams to get small amounts of funding. Installing low technology heating system into someone's home was only half the answer, the total solution was insulation but Durham had 57,000 solid wall properties and it would cost approximately £10,000 to externally insulate a house properly and required a big initiative from the government similar to the 'Decent Homes Programme'. The Housing Regeneration Project Manager advised that successful projects had taken place in Ramshaw, Craghead and South Moor, very good examples of where solid wall properties have been insulated. He advised that there was a need to insulate as well as installing low carbon technology.

The Chair indicated that the team were doing a great job and suggested that it was important to raise these issues within government through MPs and referred to the levelling up agenda that included these issues. He indicated that Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee could perhaps raise these issues.

Councillor Crathorne indicated that she hoped that all private landlords had the homes up to EPC standard as the people who lived in these homes were in poverty. She then referred to the warmer homes campaign and getting the message out via the AAP's and local charities who deal with people on low incomes and in poverty or people who own their homes but couldn't afford to bring up to standard.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager indicated that the Warm Homes Campaign has 900 community venues and that the AAPs are one of the principle drivers and mechanisms used to filter information out to residents, charities and partners, they also produce a leaflet that is distributed to organisations.

Pat Holding referred to inaccurate energy meters and asked if this was being investigated as a serious issue.

The Housing Regeneration Manager responded that if anyone had any concerns regarding their energy meters to contact the service via the Managing Money Better service as they could arrange to have the meter checked for accuracy.

Councillor Coult referred to the promotion of the various schemes and suggested that the council should push these schemes further with the use of social media as previously residents may not have needed such schemes but due to COVID-19, circumstances had changed with many working from home and using more energy resulting in higher fuel bills many now may need the support.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager indicated that they do use social media promotions and there was a rolling programme for this. The service usually used a case study and he would bring to the attention of the COMMS team to have a

further media promotion. He advised that they also use other mechanisms such as the Durham County News.

The Chair asked if members could be notified when the social media campaign was released, it would be useful if Members could also share the information.

Councillor Wilkes referred to the ECO grants where it was easy to make an application but highlighted that that residents wanting work to be done using the Green Homes Grant had found it difficult to find contractors to carry out the work and had contacted him to ask for help. He suggested that the Council could form their own database and work with these companies so that residents can access details of contractors within the various schemes, if more grants became available in the future, they would be able to help residents.

The Chair advised that through social media there was a lot of information out there, but it was difficult for residents to know which were reputable companies.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager indicated that the Green Homes grant was the government's voucher scheme that was a two billion pounds project that had been extended to March 2022, however the Minister has now said that this scheme would not be extended and funding had been reduced to 320 million pounds. Both Housing Regeneration Project Managers had met with the council's procurement service to try and put in place a contractor framework to deliver in house council schemes, and perhaps this could assist residents with contacting registered contractors.

The Housing Regeneration Project Manager advised of 'Trust Mark' which the government has introduced and those working on green homes grant jobs must be 'trust mark' approved. He went on to say that the service was working on a scheme and if all went to plan the information could be forwarded to residents, the scheme would ensure that companies have all the necessary documentation and standards.

The Chair thanked the Housing Regeneration Project Manager and the Housing Regeneration Manager for their presentation and answering members questions.

Resolved: (i) That the report and presentation be noted.

(ii) That a further progress report is included in the future work programme.

(iii) That Members receive an update briefing report in relation to the National Fuel Poverty Strategy.

7 Highways Maintenance

Members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee were invited to attend the meeting for this agenda item.

The Chair wished to convey his thanks to Brian Buckley, Strategic Highways Manager who had very recently retired from the authority. Members of the committee joined him in sending Brian best wishes for a long and happy retirement.

The Committee considered the Joint report of the Interim Corporate Director of Resources and the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change that provided Members with background information in relation to highways asset management service delivery (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

Paul Watson, Interim Strategic Highways Manager supported by Paul Anderson, Highways Inspection and Maintenance Manager were in attendance to present the report and deliver a presentation (for copy of presentation, see file of minutes).

The presentation provided details of the highway Inventory; highway inspections; condition surveys; asset condition; structures condition index; footways and their management and safety inspections; footways capital schemes; maintenance backlog; highways assets performance and innovation.

The Interim Strategic Highways Manager explained that the council had over 1000 kilometres of cycle infrastructure and just under 300 kilometres was highway related this information had been omitted out of the presentation, but the information would be updated and circulated to members.

Members were advised that there are two types of inspection safety and service and that in relation to A, B and C roads there was a fair condition target of 4% and the good condition target was 0%. However, the weather this time of year had an impact on the condition of the assets and their ability to repair defects due to the volume of repairs.

The Interim Strategic Highways Manager advised that in relation to unclassified roads and footways the service would be addressing the backlog of repairs over the next few years using funding from government and Durham County Council. He went on to explain the structure condition indices and highlighted that there was an aim for a good condition target score of 100%, fair condition target scores ranged from 95 – 85%. Where a structure received a score 60 indicated that the structure had lost 40% of its function and would require intervention.

Since 2016 the authority had invested just under 19 million pounds in structures and repaired and maintained over 143 schemes. The purpose of the condition survey around structures is to identify the right treatment at the right time and using the investment over the last five years this is the direction Durham County Council is moving in. Currently there were one or two bridges in catastrophic condition which were being treated.

The Interim Strategic Highways Manager provided comprehensive information relating to footways which had been requested by members. The frequency of footway inspections is determined by location and footfall, defects are rated into categories and repair times were determined by category. Almost 70,000 defects were reported this does not include reports from members and public. Members were informed that the authority had retained the maximum band rating from the Department of Transport and was one of only two local authorities to obtain ISO accreditation and had received an above average public satisfaction. The Interim Strategic Highways Manager explained how Durham County Council had embraced innovative projects such as the use of plastic crumb and the Govtech project.

The Chair indicated that it was interesting to note the miles of roads, footpaths and cycleways and that the public become parochial about their local highways and footways and this must generate lots of reports daily. He then referred to the impact of the weather on the highway and the report showed some improvement in terms of the maintenance on the roadway.

The Chair in relation to structures, specifically to the bridge maintenance and bridge condition and referred to the bridge index and noted that the condition of the bridges was deteriorating although not significantly enough to cause any huge concerns and asked if the service had the resources to improve that index as far as the condition was concerned. He then referred to the condition of the upgrading of footpaths and the use of top surfacing and if this was a short term measure as it was not always cost effective and if they had any plans to remove flagstones from footpaths. He then referred to the use of plastics and if these were used on new footpaths or was it solely for use on road surfaces.

The Interim Strategic Highways Manager responded that bridge maintenance had historically been underfunded. Currently principal inspections were more detailed and identify more areas therefore more defects were being identified. Risk principal inspections that were a more detailed inspection were carried out between six and twelve years or sooner if relating to an identified risk.

The service was constantly applying to the Department for Transport (DfT) and the combined authority for any significant transport and highways related schemes. The service currently had a number of bids with the Department for Transport for various structures which would help address some of the backlog. Due to budget constraints they had to apply the right treatment at the time and the general and principal inspections on the bridges were identifying what those issues were.

If a bridge was in significant danger, then they would apply to the council for additional funding. He referred to the current closure of Elvet Bridge that was funded through the council and the Department for Transport and using existing budgets as the principle inspection identified an immediate need to deliver a programme.

He then referred to flagstones on footpaths and advised that these would only be replaced where there was significant vehicle overrun or damage due to utility trenches and identified that the majority of highway claims were trips on flagstones, where tree roots had lifted flagstones they would look to remove the flagstones and replace with bitmac.

The service was now using plastics on the vast majority of schemes and quantified the amount of plastics and rubber crumb that was used in all their surfacing but this had a cost against carbon. It was emphasised that Durham County Council would always embrace innovation.

The Highways Inspection and Maintenance Manager referred to the inspection frequency and indicated that flagged footpaths gave more likelihood of trips and falls. Their minimum inspection frequency for a flagged footpath was six months. He then referred to the surface treatment in relation to footway specialist treatment that was used to maintain existing footpaths for a period of five to seven years and was a cost effective treatment but footway specialist treatment would not be used if the footpath was degraded to such a point that it would not be cost effective and in these circumstances the service would look to reconstruct the footpath. However, the service was aware of the limitations of footway surface treatment.

Councillor Reed referred to unadopted roads in particular one in the Crook division that was installed by the council but had not had any maintenance work since the 1960's and was in a poor condition and was also used as a footpath and was the only access road to properties on that street. She asked if funding was available and if it was the council's responsibility to repair the road, she was aware that in the past when the council has spare materials they have provided the spare material to residents for residents to spread it themselves rather than the council having to dispose of the material.

The Chair suggested that the detail to this question could be given outside of the meeting.

The Interim Strategic Highway Manager indicated that they would check the ownership of the road and advised that in the past they had used road plainings. If the road was unadopted then there would be no inspection regime and was happy to discuss with Councillor Reed outside the meeting.

The Highway Inspection and Maintenance Manager advised members that they would provide road plaining if available and that members had the opportunity to get up to 50 tons of road plaining free if they had work in the area but the plainings belonged to the contractors and it was at their discretion. There is a small budget for ad-hoc inspections to be carried out.

Tom Bolton referred to adopted highways and footways and asked if they were always shown on the adopted map/record, the road in question was believed to

have been constructed by Durham County Council but did not appear on the adopted map/record. Could the service look at this.

The Interim Strategic Highways Manager responded that this could be an anomaly and more investigation may be required and he would speak to Mr Bolton outside the meeting.

Councillor L Brown referred to the flagstones on footpaths and was disappointed when they were removed as they were a natural habitat for the masonry bee.

The Interim Strategic Highways Manager responded that he would speak to colleagues in the Ecology Team to discuss if there was an alternative habitat that could be provided for the bees and at the request of the Chair would feed back the response to committee officers.

Pat Holding referred to the use of plastics and asked how they compared with conventional surfacing in terms of duration and how difficult was it to dispose of this material.

The Interim Strategic Highways Manager responded that plastics in road surfacing was a new product and detail regarding the durability was not known as yet but there was a lot of research being carried out across the county in terms of innovation. The disposal aspect there was a potential issue as it was plastic within a road surface that could not be recycled again, they had been using the product for the last three or four years and no repairs had been required in that time and it was expected to last at least 20/25 years.

The Highways Inspection and Maintenance Manager referred to the duration of the road surface and the maximum plastic put into the roads at present was six percent as the testing carried out was reporting that it does not affect the durability. In relation to disposal of the material he would speak to the contractors laboratories and other suppliers regarding development and disposal.

The Chair advised that it was an important issue which the committee would want to be updated and suggested that the information on the impact of the plastic surface was having on our roads was included within the Highways Maintenance item that will be included in the committee's 2021/2022 work programme.

The Chair thanked the officers for the presentation and for answering Members questions.

Resolved: (i) That the report and presentation be noted.

(ii) That a progress updated on highways maintenance in the county be included in its future work programme for 2020/21.

8 Quarter Two 2020/21 Budget Forecast

The Committee considered the Joint Report of the Interim Corporate Director of Resources and Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which set out details of the forecast outturn budget position for the service area. The report highlighted and explained any major variances in comparison with the budget. The Finance Manager, Neighbourhoods and Climate Change was in attendance to present the report and gave a presentation (for copy of report and presentation, see file of minutes).

Resolved: That the contents of the report be noted.

9 Quarter Two Performance Management 2020/21

The Committee considered the report of the Interim Corporate Director of Resources that presented the progress towards achieving the key outcomes of the Council's corporate performance framework (for copy of report, see file of minutes).

The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager was in attendance to present the report and explained that the pandemic had affected some areas of performance.

The performance report was structured around the four ambitions contained within the County Durham Vision 2035 and the Council Plan.

The Corporate Strategy and Scrutiny Manager highlighted the performance of the service during this quarter around environmental cleanliness, fly tipping incidents, carbon emissions and waste collection and disposal.

He explained that they were developing an Environment and Climate Change Partnership that would be responsible for the county's Climate Emergency Response Plan and the development of an Ecological Response Plan and this may be something that the committee want to look at in more detail when the plan was developed.

The Chair commented that the report seemed to be shorter than usual and asked if there was a reason for this. The Corporate Scrutiny and Strategy Manager responded by explaining that outturn against some performance indicators is not available quarterly. For instance, performance against some measures is only published annually. When performance against annual measures becomes available then it is included in the next quarterly report to committee and these reports will be longer. The length of performance reports is therefore linked to what performance data is available for the reporting quarter.

Resolved: That the report be noted.