

**TITLE OF REPORT: Chopwell Sustainable Communities Plan**

**REPORT OF: Paul Dowling, Strategic Director, Communities and Environment**

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**Purpose of the Report**

1. Cabinet is asked to consider and note the findings of the recent Chopwell and Blackhall Mill consultation exercise. Cabinet is also asked to agree the key themes and for these being used to develop a high level plan for the area.

**Background**

2. A number of development-led plans for Chopwell have been created over the years to address socio economic issues and support the area to be more sustainable.
3. In 2009 a Masterplan was agreed, which aimed to take forward improvements over a 15-20 year period. While a number of policies were implemented successfully, such as the introduction of landlord licensing within the private rented sector and small scale environmental improvements, progress in some of the longer term initiatives have been met with difficulties. This is due to a number of issues including; the broader economic climate, austerity and impact of regeneration across local authority boundaries.
4. The area faces challenges with low demand for Council owned homes, high levels of vacant properties in specific streets, viability concerns associated with development sites as well as other social economic issues. A new sustainable communities plan would incorporate these elements within a wider socio-economic approach to the area.
5. Cabinet agreed in July 2017 to initiate a project to develop a sustainable communities plan for Chopwell. It further agreed for the Council to begin consultation with residents to inform this plan.

**Consultation**

6. Consultation took place from early October through to 6 November. It comprised a survey, which could be completed in hard copy or on-line, as well as three public engagement meetings. Feedback from the events was very positive with residents supportive of the approach as well as being able ask questions to the senior officers of the Council. The community also asked that the Council meet them again early 2018 with the results of the consultation and to discuss the next steps.
7. Over 100 people attended and participated in the consultation events. 86 people responded to the survey. Both events focused on the same five questions, which has enabled the responses to be analysed as a whole. As the questions were designed to be open, responses differed in terms of breadth, detail and content. In order to manage the analysis and shape the plan development, they have been drawn into themed areas.

## **Emerging themes**

8. The consultation responses highlighted the innate strengths of Chopwell, particularly the rural, countryside location and the strong community spirit. These could be harnessed to make the most of the assets that the local area has. They present an opportunity for the area to help strengthen the economy, attract people to visit or live in the area, increase social responsibility and boost sustainability.
9. The emerging themes were Housing; Environment and Public realm; Economy; Citizenship; Transport and Community safety. The issues ranged from small scale actions such as tackling litter, to long term interventions that would enable the area to be sustainable such as improving the retail offer and general economy.
10. There are key elements that can form the basis of a plan which will need to be short, medium and long term. Within this the community spirit and ethos is essential in developing and implementing this, particularly working with the various community groups.
11. A number of the issues are interrelated such as local economy and poor choice of shops. These need to be explored further with specific actions and timescales for delivery. Shorter term actions could be progressed more rapidly.
12. Resources to deliver the plan are crucial and potential funding sources are being investigated that may support the different themes. Some of the responses were mixed, such as views on housing development. Further consultation would be needed on the findings in order to understand issues and prioritise those activities that would have the biggest impact, in line with the wishes of the community.

## **Proposal**

13. It is proposed that the key themes are used as the basis of a High Level plan for Chopwell and Blackhall Mill. This will set out the issues that matter most to local residents as well as potential actions that could be taken to address these. The actions will represent a plan to be taken forward with the community as it is clear that the community really value their role in the local area, while the Council does not have the level of resource needed to address everything identified in the consultation.
14. The plan will seek to set out short, medium and longer term areas of activity that will be subject to consultation with residents to prioritise and ensure it is focused on the right issues. Ultimately it will aim to address underlying causes of deprivation and viability, but will build on the many strengths identified by local people.
15. It is proposed that the high level plan be brought back to Cabinet for approval before further consultation with local residents. In the meantime some of the shorter term improvements will be looked at to identify an appropriate response.
16. Approval of these proposals would seek to support achievement of Council Plan priorities and contribute to a more sustainable place.

## **Recommendation**

17. It is recommended that Cabinet:-

- (i) Agree the key themes identified from the consultation
- (ii) Agree to receive a report on the High Level Action Plan in February setting out key actions within these themes for the basis of consultation with the community.

For the following reasons:

- (i) To ensure investment is targeted in the most appropriate way and that it is focused on long term outcomes and community needs
- (ii) To support sustainable housing and economic growth
- (iii) To support Council Plan priorities for Prosperous Gateshead, Live love Gateshead, as well as the Council pledges.

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**Policy Context**

1. The proposal supports Vision 2030 by contributing to City of Gateshead, Sustainable Gateshead and Gateshead Volunteers Big Ideas. The proposal supports the Council Plan outcomes for: Prosperous Gateshead by supporting more jobs and people in work; Live Love Gateshead, developing a sense of pride and ownership including sharing responsibility for the environment; and Live Well Gateshead by helping the area to become a destination of choice with a range of affordable housing options.
2. The proposals also support all five pledges made by the Council to make Gateshead a place where everyone thrives. Each of the identified through the consultation contributes toward the pledges.

**Background**

3. Chopwell faces a variety of challenges including low demand for properties, poor retail offer, low economic base and other social economic issues. These issues,, when combined suggest that intervention would be needed to improve the housing and economic offer viability of the area. It is the combination of complex factors and interconnected difficulties (as well as being a rural setting) that indicate more fundamental activity is needed to deliver real and lasting change.
4. In July 2017 Cabinet agreed to initiate a project to develop a sustainable communities plan for Chopwell and Blackhall Mill primarily focusing on economy, housing and the environment. It will also link to children’s services / social care and health. Cabinet agreed to engage the local community as part of the development of the plan. This new sustainable communities plan will incorporate these development led elements within wider socio-economic approach to the village.
5. The Plan would seek to achieve the following high level objectives:
  - Achieve housing development that will increase the range of homes available in Chopwell through looking at land supply and interventions to improve viability and attractiveness of land for development and sale
  - Support economic growth with a stronger more viable business presence building on strengths of Chopwell
  - Continue to work with existing groups and engage other groups to help improve and sustain the attractiveness of the local environment
  - Promote Chopwell making the most of the rural location, history and heritage

**Consultation process**

6. The approach taken to the consultation was one that was very open with residents, asking questions to both bring out the positive aspects of life in Chopwell and Blackhall Mill, as well as identify areas for improvement. The questions also aimed to help prioritise issues for residents. The five questions were:
  - What do you like about where you live?
  - What are the key things that matter to you?
  - What do you think could change for the better where you live?
  - What could you or other local people do to help change happen?

- What could the Council or other organisations do to help make these changes?
7. Hard copy surveys were produced by the Council but were delivered to each home by the local community. The survey was also available on-line. In addition three public meetings were held to enable local people to highlight issues face to face as well as ask questions about the future. These took place at:
    - South Road Methodist Church, Chopwell
    - Chopwell Community Centre
    - Blackhall Mill Community Centre
  8. Councillors and officers attended the events along with officers of the Council. The police were also present in order to respond to community safety issues. The round table discussion format worked well, enabling everyone to have their say.

### **Consultation responses**

9. 86 responses were received to the survey. As the questions were designed to be open, responses differed in terms of breadth, detail and content. In order to manage the analysis and shape the plan development, they have been drawn into some themed areas. Though naturally some interpretation has been used to aid this process, it does represent the overall views of local people emerging from the consultation. Specific details such as locations or particular ideas have also been captured and will be considered as the process moves forward. All of the responses have been collated and are set out in broad themes in the sections below.

### **Housing**

10. Housing was identified as a key area for improvement. There are different elements to this. The first being some concern about the general housing offer. Issues identified were a lack of family homes, the need for more affordable homes and for new homes to be better connected to the community. Alongside this it should also be noted that some people were concerned about development and the green belt in particular.
11. Issues were highlighted with some private rented sector housing. These issues included, rubbish accumulating in back yards, properties in a poor state of repair as well as general issues with anti-social behaviour. It was considered by some respondents that the presence of some landlords could be making it difficult for people to buy homes in the area and that perhaps there was a greater need for Council housing locally.
12. It should be noted that the views of Chopwell as a place to live were overwhelmingly positive, in terms of the rural location, and could be used to help stimulate interest in the area.

### **Environment / public realm**

13. While the rural setting was viewed extremely positively by local people, there were a number of environmental issues identified in the responses. The general look and feel of Chopwell clearly matters to residents. This links closely to the reasons why people like living in Chopwell, though many identified that improvements were needed to the appearance of the village. These included, improving shop / building frontage, tidying up the area and Front Street to make it more welcoming as well as potentially adding flowers, etc.

14. This also linked closely to the heavily valued community spirit and local pride with many reflecting on how people ought to take more responsibility for the area; though recognising that some may require support to do this as well as changing perceptions of Chopwell to others.

### **Economy**

15. The rural location was clearly the main reason people liked living in Chopwell, with this being the top reason both at the events and through the survey. This suggests a strong USP for the area that could be built upon encompassing the views, countryside, peaceful area, green and open spaces, dark skies as well as proximity to Chopwell Woods.
16. Greater support for local businesses to improve the choice and offer as well as creating and sustaining more jobs were also considered as being necessary. This included supporting small businesses e.g hubs, improving broadband connectivity; bringing properties back into use and support for specific work in relation to the Chopwell Hotel. It was recognised that while there was an appetite amongst the community, support and expertise would be needed from the Council.

### **Citizenship**

17. A very strong theme emerging from the consultation was the value placed on the community spirit, social responsibility and ownership of the area. Key points were the strong and helpful community, lovely people, people getting on well and the 'village feel'. There was a lot of support for community facilities as well as suggestions for improvement. There is a momentum of community action through the emerging Chopwell Regeneration Community Interest Company as well as other local groups. Alongside developing civic pride, respondents felt improved enforcement would be complementary to compel change. Some specific issues highlighted included:
- Improve the offer for children and young people. Some thought this to be important to new parents, while others suggested this could help enrich lives but also reduce ASB incidents.
  - Local people taking more responsibility. This relates to local pride, with people being more respectful and mindful so that they keep their own areas clean, which collectively can help to address the general appearance and perception of the area. This could also help reduce demand on services.
  - Better information sharing and communications locally as well as from the Council.
  - Local groups could achieve more with support from the community, the Council and others.
  - Increase enforcement around dog fouling, litter, fly tipping and tackling empty properties to help change behaviour

### **Transport**

18. Although people liked the rural area they also valued the proximity to more urban areas such as the Metro Centre, Newcastle and Consett / Durham. This also linked to having good connections to these areas such as public transport. While there were differing views on public transport most recognised that transportation such as a car was important. Public transport issues included cost, routes, timetables and reliability.

19. Parking was also highlighted as an issue, with many of the streets in the village being narrow and unable to accommodate parking needs. Some suggested more parking with specific areas highlighted for potential additional parking, while others suggested a need for more considerate parking.

### **Community safety**

20. Feeling safe was the most prevalent issue that mattered most to residents, with feeling safe either in their own home or when out and about in the local area being key factors. This came out very strongly in the survey with specific mention of anti-social behaviour as well as perceived alcohol/ drug use being issues of concern. Other issues around this theme included speeding and poor parking, both of which becoming safety concerns.
21. Neighbourhood Watch was mentioned specifically as a positive development, which could also help to address issues around feeling safe, as well as mitigate the desire for an increased police presence.

### **Resources to deliver improvements**

22. The delivery of a plan will require resources. The aim is to develop a fully costed plan based on the results of consultation. Alongside this, two first stage funding bids for activities in Chopwell and Blackhall Mill have been submitted. The outcome of these outline bids are due to be announced in February:
  - Place based social action - a joint £4.5m programme between DCMS and Big Lottery Fund using National Lottery funding. It aims to support collaborative working in local communities to create a shared vision for the future of their place. Up to £0.255m could be available in future years depending on successful progression, although only 20 areas will be taken forward into the phase two and only five to the round after that.
  - European Regional Development Funding - to support the creation of Sustainable Urban Development, a fund of £16m exists to support interventions, with up to 50% match funding available. The Council is exploring an energy-focused community-wide regeneration scheme, based in Chopwell with a total scheme cost of £15m
23. In addition other potential resources will be required to deliver the package of actions through the proposed plan in order to address the longstanding issues in Chopwell and to support greater sustainability. This in turn would help to reduce demand in the longer term.
24. Following development of and consultation on a high level plan a more detailed costed plan will be produced. This will be fully costed and resources to deliver it will need to be identified. The prioritisation of activities set out in the high level plan will be important, given the resource needs, hence the need for an area and asset based approach to ensure the Council and community work together and focus resources on the right issues. This high level plan will be presented to Cabinet for consideration.

### **Plan development**

25. There are key elements that can form the basis of a plan which will need to be short, medium and long term. Within this the community spirit and ethos is crucial and the resulting plan must play to this strength, rather than conflict with it. There are a number of other strengths identified, particularly the location, which could be used as an opportunity for the area to help strengthen the economy, attract people to the area and boost sustainability.

26. A number of the issues are interrelated such as local economy and poor choice of shops. These need to be explored further with specific actions and timescales for delivery. Shorter term actions could include tackling road/ pavement issues, litter and dog fouling through enforcement mechanisms and setting up a Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. At the same time plans for medium and long term actions can also begin development. Alongside this the Council is exploring opportunities to work with Lankelly Chase Foundation on place based systems to improve outcomes and this could have a focus on this area.
27. It is proposed that Cabinet approve the use of the results of the consultation to form an outline plan. This would then be brought back to Cabinet to seek approval to consult with the community in order to develop a more detailed and fully costed plan. The following timescales are suggested for taking this forward:

<b>Action</b>	<b>Date</b>
Development of high level plan	January – February 2018
Cabinet	February 2018
Shorter term actions begin to be implemented	January - March 2018
Consultation with community on high level plan	February - March 2018
Outcomes of Place based Social Action / ERDF round one bids to be announced	February 2018
Fully costed detailed plan development	March – May 2018
Cabinet	May 2018
Implementation	June 2018

### **Consultation**

28. Cabinet members have been consulted as part of the preparation of the report. Chopwell and Rowlands Gill ward councillors have also been consulted and support the proposals.
29. The proposal sets out the key themes emerging from the consultation undertaken with local residents of Chopwell and Blackhall Mill. Further consultation and engagement will take place as part of the development of the plan, though this will be subject to a separate Cabinet decision.

### **Alternative Options**

30. The alternative options would be to either take a lower level approach to intervention in the area or to take no action to intervene. While the former would utilise fewer resources it would be unlikely to make a long lasting impact given the interrelated issues within the area, the latter would leave the area to market forces and current analysis suggests that this is failing to make real or sustainable improvement.
31. Although at an initial stage, it is suggested that the recommended option would offer the best chance in shaping Chopwell for the future and contributing towards longer term sustainability.



## Implications of Recommended Option

### 32. Resources:

- a) **Financial Implications** - The Strategic Director, Corporate Resources confirms that there are no financial implications arising directly from this report. It is likely that there will be financial implications going forward as the work develops, though this would be subject to further reports to Cabinet as appropriate.
- b) **Human Resources Implications** – There are no direct human resource implications arising from this report.
- c) **Property Implications** – There are no direct implications arising from this report.

33. **Risk Management Implication** – There are no direct implications arising from this report though a full risk assessment would be undertaken as part of the project initiation.

34. **Equality and Diversity Implications** – There are no direct implications arising as result of the proposals described in the report, though the resulting plan would identify and assess any implications relating to equality and diversity and protected characteristics, with actions identified to mitigate potential adverse impact.

35. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – The consultation identified community safety issues, which have been highlighted as one of the key themes. The proposal seeks to develop a high level plan that will include activities to address issues raised by local residents.

36. **Health Implications** – There are no direct health implications resulting from this report, though the sustainable communities plan would contribute to healthier communities in the Chopwell area.

37. **Sustainability Implications** – The proposals aim to support the area to be more sustainable including housing and economic growth potential.

38. **Human Rights Implications** - There are no implications arising from this report though further recommendations that have Human Rights implications will be reported to Cabinet.

39. **Area and Ward Implications** – the proposal affects Chopwell and Rowlands Gill ward in the West area.

### 40. Background Information