

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 5TH MARCH 2024 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor Burrell in the Chair

Councillors Dixon, Foster, Leonard and Watson.

Also in attendance: -

James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, SCC

Paul Wood, Principal Democratic Services Officer, SCC

Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing and Communities, SCC

Justin Collins, Housing Options Manager, SCC

Mark Wilson, Future Infrastructure Manager, SCC

Members of the Press

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Fagan and Scanlan

Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Committee held on 6th February, 2024

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting held on 6th February 2024 were submitted.

(For copy reports – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting held on 6th February 2024 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Housing Update

The Assistant Director of Housing and Communities submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide an update on the issue of homelessness in the city and the measures being taken to tackle the problem.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing and Communities and Justin Collins, Housing Options Manager were in attendance to present the report along with a PowerPoint presentation.

Councillor Dixon referred to the opening hours of Oasis, commenting that he had visited this accommodation and he was glad to hear that the hours were to be extended. Mr Scanlon advised that as part of the funding received they were able to bring in an additional officer so can now open till 5pm which would then tie in with their out of hours service and they hoped to have this in place from April.

In response to Councillor Dixons query, Mr Scanlon advised that ideally they would love the service to extend into weekends and was something they needed to consider going forward.

Councillor Dixon referred to past meetings where they had received specific charts detailing the reasons for homelessness and enquired if the trends were still the same now as then or if there had been any changes. Mr Scanlon advised that those charts were used to form their monitoring data returns and overall the trends had been the same albeit the order in which they are ranked may change slightly.

Councillor Dixon enquired as to an increase in mental health issues and if this was a trend that could be explained. Mr Collins informed that these were mostly linked to substance misuse and that mental health cases took up the majority of their time to resolve.

Councillor Dixon advised of a recent case he had been involved with regarding a couple having been evicted and sleeping in a Church Courtyard and enquired what Officers would do when they've reached the end of the road and what would happen to the people. Mr Collins advised that the particular couple referred to wouldn't take any advice from officers and if the legislation had been followed they would now be sleeping rough, however they had been able to work under a Duty rather than a power and got them into support and to try and address their issues. Councillor Dixon wished to comment that Officers had gone above and beyond the call of duty in that particular case which was commendable.

Councillor Watson enquired as to any powers available to the Council to stop landlords from increasing rents. Mr Scanlon advised that there were no such powers and the likes of Gentoo etc had to follow the Rent Act. Private sectors were increasing theirs a lot higher.

In response to the query over how many rough sleepers we had in Sunderland, Mr Collins advised that officially this was zero and that generally they may go out and find a sleeper in Mowbray Park but despite already having a sizeable amount of money in their bank account they didn't want any accommodation. Outreach workers were in touch with this individual but they preferred to sleep rough than have accommodation.

With regards to Councillor Fosters queries, Mr Scanlon advised that the Governments intention to remove the options of serving Sections 21 notices was now not being considered and that in terms of the accredited landlords scheme and if those putting up rent prices too high would be removed from the scheme, Mr Scanlon informed that the scheme was great but not mandatory and those that were on the scheme were generally the good ones and therefore their properties were always full.

Councillor Foster referred to the number of Nigerians that came into the area in 2006 and took up a lot of the properties available and enquired if this had had any impact. Mr Scanlon commented that they had little input with the Universities on this. The City did need to have a proactive plan around student accommodation. The Regeneration of the City does have plans for this but the University was so successful in attracting students that it was the increase in demand they were facing.

Councillor Foster commented that they weren't always taking student accommodation and some were residential which was great as they were improving the area in his opinion but it was taking away more properties for use.

In response to Councillor Leonards query over how they worked together within the Partner Group, Mr Scanlon informed that they worked really well in general. Councillor Leonard also referred to the mental health issues and if Officers received cooperation from NHS Services.

Mr Collins informed that there was a great demand on services and they received cooperation where they could but people were generally getting appointments for weeks/months time and there was not the resources to help immediately which was the need. Mr Scanlon added that he was presenting to the Place Committee who were reporting quarterly and they recognised it was a significant risk to them in hospitals so it was high on the agenda with homelessness seen as a key priority.

Councillor Leonard enquired if the Homelessness Strategy could dovetail with the Empty Homes Team and if there were any joint working on this. Mr Scanlon advised that there was not any joint working in terms of proactively identifying these homes for the homelessness as they would need to see a change in Policy on how to deal with landlords not willing to deal with their empty properties. Mr Scanlon added that there was a need to look at selective licensing at the Council.

The Chairman enquired if any of the Home Office changes had led to an increase in homelessness. Mr Scanlan commented that it was mainly due to the quantum of people coming through the system for assessments that they had to work through and it tended to be the bigger cities which had the biggest issues.

The Chairman enquired if the Afghan and Ukrainian schemes had any bearing on the figures also. Mr Scanlon advised that they did not as they were based on families volunteering to host those so we shouldn't be seeing any impact upon the figures in that case.

In response to Councillor Dixons query, Mr Scanlon advised that in meetings with equivalent Officers from other authorities it was found that all local authorities were facing a similar situation so we were not an outlier with these problems.

There being no further questions, The Chairman thanked Mr Scanlon and Mr Collins for their attendance. it was then:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Cycling Infrastructure Development Update

The Executive Director of City Development submitted a report (copy circulated) to update the Committee on the progress being made regarding the development of city's cycling infrastructure.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mark Wilson, Future Infrastructure Manager was in attendance to present the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and to answer any Members queries.

Councillor Foster referred to a recent news item aired on local TV in relation to a similar scheme to that on Whitburn Road where people were tripping on the step from the crossing area due to the colouring and hiding the different gradients, which was leading to injuries and enquired if Officers were aware of this.

Mr Wilson advised that he had not seen the news item but was aware of the issue, all the schemes had been designed for pedestrian crossings so there should be no trip hazards but would be something they would need to keep an eye on.

Councillor Dixon informed the Committee that he had been involved in the similar scheme at Tunstall Road and commented that the consultation at that time had not been very good and that the cycle lane had not been wanted by residents and was not used very much subsequently, therefore he would like to know what the criteria was for deciding where these schemes were placed. At the time they had been told if the money wasn't spent on this particular route the funding would have to be returned to Government.

Mr Wilson acknowledged that these were good points and he could understand why advice was given that if the money was not used it would be returned to Government as this was usually ringfenced purely to be spent on cycling. In terms of routes, they identify routes using the infrastructure plan which was evidence based and they audit the network using traffic counting technology and look at origins/destinations of the public.

Mr Wilson advised that they also use DfT tools such as the propensity to cycle and how these routes link up with schools and access to local shops etc. Officers would go through a data analysis of the network to see where these proposals would be most helpful and helps triage where they would have the most likely impact. Safety was usually the biggest factor in why people wouldn't cycle.

Mr Wilson acknowledged that in terms of consultation, in the past this could be a very dry process and they had realised that this was not good enough which was why they had worked with the democratic society on best practice for consultation and they had introduced this new way of working for the Dame Dorothy consultations.

Councillor Dixon commented that there were definitely lessons to be learned from the past procedures and that he didn't particularly like the previous one and suggested the possibility of having reserve schemes in addition so that if the public didn't wish for a proposed scheme in a certain area that the money could still be used without having to return the funding.

Mr Wilson advised that this was possible going forward and they could come up with multiple alternative options as it wasn't always an officer led decision and it was right that we needed more options for such a scenario.

The Chairman referred to a scheme at A690 Houghton Cut and commented that the consultation that was carried out didn't end up looking as proposed in practice and felt that there was a need for clarity where the routes would be and also what they would look like in terms of colourings on the roads etc. Mr Wilson commented that this was a fair point and advised that the pictures included in the consultation should be a realistic reflection of what would be implemented.

Councillor Leonard informed that she cycled with her children and was concerned when cycle ways stop for junctions which then became national speed limits so these schemes were very good for steps to make this safer. Councillor Leonard also enquired if there were any plans for secure parking of the bikes along the route near Bungalow Café.

Mr Wilson advised that there would be secure parking for bikes and they were looking at funding for CCTV there as well as looking to secure funding for more parking along the routes.

Councillor Leonard referred to the link road of Ryhope Village to Doxford which had only opened and now needed to be retrofitted for a cycle lane and enquired if they were looking at liaising with the Planning departments on joined up working in order to get these done on implementation.

Mr Wilson confirmed that they were looking to do these as part of Section 106 agreements by liaising with Planning Policy and it was a good opportunity to get the private sector to fund and contribute towards these schemes.

The Chairman enquired if the maintenance of the cycle lanes would be passed to Highways colleagues once implemented. Mr Wilson confirmed that they would become part of the wider network and therefore part of Highways maintenance regime.

In response to the Chairmans query over the cancellation of HS2 and if any more funding had been allocated as a consequence, Mr Wilson informed that the current government had said there would be a settlement coming from HS2 money and also the Towns Fund had been used from HS2 monies.

There being no further questions the Chairman thanked Mr Wilson for his attendance and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Annual Work Programme 2023-24

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), which set out the current work programme for the Committee for the municipal year 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Member's information and possible discussion.

4. RESOLVED that the Committee received and noted the report

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report providing Members with an opportunity to consider the items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 14th February, 2024 (copies circulated).

(For copy report and notice – see original minutes).

Mr Diamond reminded Members to get in touch if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

In response to Councillor Dixon's query, Mr Diamond advised that he would chase the update on 240122/873 – To receive an update on Sunnyside Regeneration Activity and to approve the Sunnyside Place Strategy.

5. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting.

(Signed) M. BURRELL,
Chairman.