

At a meeting of the ENVIRONMENTAL AND PLANNING REVIEW COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on MONDAY, 19TH JUNE, 2006 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Blackburn in the Chair

Councillors C. Anderson, Dixon, Fletcher, MacKnight, Paul Maddison, L. Scott and Wood.

Also Present:-

Councillor Lawson - Portfolio Holder for Planning and Transportation

Councillors Porthouse, Richardson and Tate.

At this juncture the Chairman thanked the previous Chairman, Councillor Tate, for his even handed stewardship of the meeting as declared in the minutes and welcomed Councillors Fletcher, Dixon and MacKnight to their first meeting of this Committee.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Higgins, Rolph, Wares and Whalen.

Minutes of the Last Meeting

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 24th April, 2006 (copy circulated) be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (Including Whipping Declarations)

Item 5 - Policy Development and Review 2006/07 : Topics for Consideration

Councillor Wood declared a personal interest in the above item as a Member of the Passenger Transport Authority (PTA).

Item 9 - Hetton Downs Area Action Plan : Report on Options and Issues for Public Consultation

Councillor Blackburn declared a personal interest in the above item as a Council appointed representative on the Sunderland Housing Group.

Variation in the Order of Business

At this juncture, the Chairman proposed that Items 12 (Decriminalised Parking Enforcement – Action Plan Update) and 13 (Inclusion of Item on the Agenda – Councillor P. Wood) be considered after Item 3 (Declarations of Interest).

2. RESOLVED that the agenda be varied as outlined above.

Decriminalised Parking Enforcement – Action Plan Update

The Director of Development and Regeneration and the City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) informing the Committee of the progress made with regard to the action plan developed from the post implementation review of the Council's Decriminalised Parking Enforcement (DPE) Regime.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Phil Barrett advised that the post implementation review of the DPE regime had made 24 recommendations, which had been prepared as the action plan to ensure improvements are made in the systems, procedures and communications. He continued to take the Committee through the 24 actions within the action plan, advising of progress made.

In response to a query from Councillor Wood the Committee were informed that it would be difficult to say when the section would be fully staffed. Temporary skilled staff had been brought in to fill some vacancies and were getting used to Sunderland's procedures. He advised that an Interim Head of Service had been appointed to work alongside the current Head until he leaves the Council.

Councillor Wood asked if the Officers were satisfied that all Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) were now in place and correct and was informed by Mr Barrett that there was a constant need to supervise and maintain traffic signs and line markings but that at present everything had been done to ensure they were correct.

Councillor MacKnight sought clarification on how the information was stored on spreadsheet and was informed that it was all part of the overall parking management software package.

Mr. Barrett agreed with Councillor Anderson's comment on appointing an external body to verify that the services were working well and providing a high quality. He agreed to explore further the idea of a quality management inspection.

In response to a question from Councillor Anderson, Mr. Barrett informed him that the Council do train their own staff with a view to being able to fill vacancies but unfortunately some staff do move on to other Local Authorities and private firms following this, creating a high turnover of staff.

Upon consideration of the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Inclusion of Item on the Agenda – Councillor P. Wood

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) requesting the Committee to consider a request from Councillor P. Wood for the inclusion of an item on the agenda of the Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Wood informed the Committee that he had requested an explanation as to the reasons behind the six week delay to the inquiry into the City of Sunderland Unitary Development Plan (Alteration No. 2) and if this had resulted in any additional costs or repercussions to the Council.

Mr. Bob Rayner, City Solicitor, advised the Committee on how the delay had occurred and what had been done to rectify the situation. He informed the Committee that as a consequence the timetable for the UDP inquiry had been compressed from the original estimate of 10 days from 6th – 16th June, to 4 days starting from 21st July which would create savings in costs. No parties involved had objected to the revised timetable and some had welcomed the additional preparation time.

The adjournment would not delay the inspector's reports which were still expected in late autumn, nor had it led to extra cost to the Council or any other adverse consequences. Mr. Rayner advised that Officers had put a lot of hard work and effort into preparing the Council's evidence for the inquiry and this was an unfortunate slip which would not happen again and for which he apologised on behalf of those involved.

The Chairman gave a short statement outlining the sequence of events which had followed the adjournment of the inquiry on 6th June and raised concerns over the effect that press articles on the matter may have on staff morale following all their hard work and on the Council's reputation.

Councillor Scott reported that he was pleased that the problem had been discussed at the Committee and was satisfied with the explanation from the City Solicitor.

Following consideration and discussion of this report, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Priorities and Key Issues for the Year Ahead

The City Solicitor, Director of Development and Regeneration and Director of Community and Cultural Services submitted a joint report (copy circulated) which provided Members with an outline of the key issues and priorities for the year ahead for services contained within the remit of the Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Keith Lowes, Head of Planning and Environment, Graham Carr, Manager – Highway Maintenance and Peter High, Head of Environmental Services each gave a verbal presentation to the Committee advising of the key priorities and challenges facing services for the year ahead.

In response to queries from Councillor Anderson, Mr. Lowes advised that the Port Strategy had been taken through a process by ALCRO and that now a business plan was being produced.

In relation to recruitment and retention Mr. Lowes reported that some experienced staff had left the Authority and that there were a lot of inexperienced staff being trained in-house.

Councillor Wood asked when it was expected that the resident parking zones pilot areas would be in place and operational and how long after they had been in place a review would be undertaken to rate its success. Mr. Carr advised that the schemes would be running in approximately 6 months time, with the situation being monitored to judge whether to roll the scheme out to other areas in the City.

Councillor Wood asked Mr. High if any progress had been made with regard to the recycling of plastics and was informed that unfortunately it had not. Mr. High could advise the Committee that some progress had been made with the kerb it scheme, as within the next 3-6 months collections would begin to be made from high storey flats.

Councillor MacKnight reported that a vocational training unit, based in Washington, was looking for horticulture professionals to spend time training young people and adults and suggested it may be possible to second Council staff to the role and may also give a sense of job enrichment to the staff. Mr. High agreed to investigate the possibilities.

In response to a query from Councillor Paul Maddison, Mr. High advised that a request had not been received to increase garden recycling collections to weekly. He informed the Committee that although people had been quick to use the service, due to the content, i.e. grass cuttings, etc. it would reduce in size and therefore a collection once a fortnight would be sufficient for the foreseeable future.

Following consideration of the report and presentations, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Policy Development and Review 2006/07 : Topics for Consideration

The City Solicitor, Director of Development and Regeneration and Director of Community and Cultural Services submitted a joint report (copy circulated) setting out a number of possible topics for policy development and review as part of the Committee's Work Programme.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Jim Diamond, Review Co-ordinator, advised Members of the three topics submitted for 2006/07, which were Carbon Management, Waste Management and the Quality of Bus Services.

Members supported the topics and agreed that they should be given a hierarchy so that the most relative and important be dealt with first. The Committee felt that the three topics were linked and each was important to the Council in varying ways.

It was felt that Carbon Management was a topic which merits further investigation and that the Quality of the Bus Service would be topical, but could be difficult to guarantee the involvement of local bus operators. Mr. Diamond agreed to contact NEXUS and the local bus companies to invite a representative to a future meeting of the Committee.

On discussion of the report it was:-

6. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the report be received and noted;
- (ii) that Mr. Diamond invite NEXUS and the local bus operators to attend a future meeting of the Committee; and
- (iii) the terms of reference and scope for study into Carbon Management study be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee for consideration.

Draft Annual Work Programme 2006/07

The City Solicitor, Director of Development and Regeneration and Director of Community and Cultural Services submitted a joint report (copy circulated) providing the Draft Work Programme for the Committee for the year 2006/07.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Jim Diamond, Review Co-ordinator, advised that the work programme contained any items raised by Councillors as well as standard reports submitted to the Committee.

Following consideration of the report, it was:-

7. RESOLVED that the work programme for 2006/07 be approved and submitted to the Policy and Co-ordination Review Committee.

Queen Alexandra Bridge Major Maintenance : Contract Update

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with information submitted to Cabinet, on the additional costs and revised completion date for the Queen Alexandra Bridge Major Maintenance contract.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

In relation to paragraph 3.5, Councillor Wood queried the figure at which the Council's contribution was capped. Mr. Carr advised that he would circulate the information to the Committee.

Mr. Carr informed the Committee, in response to a question regarding a possible reference to arbitration, that the Council were looking at the current position with the Contractor and signs showed no indication that they would want to take any further action.

Councillor Scott felt that good progress was being made on the bridge and looked forward to works being completed.

Upon consideration and discussion of the report, it was:-

8. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Residential Design Guide

The Director of Development and Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought comments from the Committee on the revised Residential Design Guide.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Hugh Daghish, Assistant Planner, advised the Committee that the purpose of the Guide was to ensure the delivery of sensitive, appropriately designed and sustainable housing developments. He informed Members that the Guide had been amended and expanded in light of recent publications and research to reflect current best practice guidance and the key principles of good urban design.

In response to a query from Councillor Anderson, Mr. Daghish explained that the Guide reflected Central Government's plans to help improve the quality of design in housing development. He reported that the Guide, once finalised and agreed, would strengthen the Council's ability to choose design options as the Guide would be adopted as a Council policy and then be used in any future negotiations with developers.

Following discussion of the report, it was:-

9. RESOLVED that the Committee received, noted and supported the Residential Design Guide.

Hetton Downs Area Action Plan : Report on Options and Issues for Public Consultation

The Director of Development and Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought comments from the Committee on the Consultants Report on Options and Issues for development in the Hetton Downs area.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Peter Lawson, Principal Planner, advised that Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners were appointed by the City Council in May 2005, to commence the preparation of an Area Action Plan for the Hetton Downs Area. Based on the outcome of initial consultations, 4 development options for the area had been produced to address the identified issues.

Councillor MacKnight gave his congratulations on the work done so far, which was encouraging. He commented that public involvement and consultation was crucial throughout the process to keep residents aware of the issues.

Councillor Wood asked for clarification of the term 'over representation of the private rented sector' quoted in paragraph 2.1 and was advised by Mr. Lawson that it was a comment made by the consultants and most likely referred to the number of different private owners and absentee landlords.

Following consideration of the report, it was:-

10. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Farringdon Row Development Framework

The Director of Development and Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought comments from the Committee on the responses received following consultation on the revised Draft Farringdon Row Development Framework.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Anderson commented that he had no objection in principle to the basic plan for the area but that the design of any development would be of the maximum importance.

Overall, he welcomed the proposals and felt it would be a 'jewel in the crown' for Sunderland.

In response to a concern of Councillor Anderson's regarding increased traffic flow in the area, Mr. Daniel Hattle, Senior Planner, advised that the Council's Highway Section had been consulted and had no serious concerns. Mr. Lowes informed the Committee that in the long term the Sunderland Strategy for the Transport Corridor would ease any immediate effect.

Councillor Anderson informed the Officer that no community groups from the Millfield area had been consulted and offered to provide details for future involvement. Mr. Hattle advised that residents in the neighbouring areas will have been involved in the consultation and informed the Committee of the successful exhibitions which had been undertaken in the Bridges Shopping Centre.

Councillor MacKnight queried if the ground at the site would be checked, prior to disturbance, to see if it was consecrated ground and was informed that archaeological surveys were undertaken and so far the results were satisfactory, with further surveys being carried out in the future.

Upon consideration of the report, it was:-

11. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Overview and Scrutiny in Sunderland – Draft Handbook 2006/07

The City Solicitor submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with the revised and updated version of the Council's Handbook for Overview and Scrutiny prior to publication.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

12. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

The Chair closed the meeting having thanked Members and Officers for their attendance.

(Signed) J. BLACKBURN,
Chairman.