

At a meeting of the ENVIRONMENT AND ATTRACTIVE CITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on MONDAY, 18th JANUARY, 2010 at 6.00 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Miller in the Chair

Councillors E. Gibson, Howe, Tye, Vardy, Wakefield, Whalen and Wood

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Kelly and Stephenson

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee held on 14th December, 2009

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the previous meeting were agreed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Chairman's Welcome

The Chairman advised Members that there were young people present who were taking part in the councillor shadowing scheme and were attending the meeting in order to gain experience of Council Committee meetings. He welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) Reports and Performance Update (April – September)

The Chief Executive and Executive Director of City Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided Members with the findings from the Comprehensive Area Assessment and provided a performance update which

included the areas identified by the Audit Commission as being the focus for improvement during 2010.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mike Lowe, Assistant Head of Performance Improvement, presented the report and advised Members of the findings from the assessment.

The area assessment was not scored and did not carry a star rating; it was a narrative report which provided an overview of progress against key priorities for the area as well as the overall successes and challenges. Green and Red flags could be awarded for exceptional performance or areas where there were significant concerns, there had not been any flags identified for Sunderland.

Councillor Wood commented on NI 195c the Improved street and environmental cleanliness (graffiti) not being on target. He asked Mr Lowe to explain what the percentages meant. He then asked for an explanation of why not applicable was the most appropriate update for some of the indicators.

Mr Lowe advised that the percentages were based on the number of failing streets and the lower the actual figure the better. Indicators were marked as not applicable where the information was not collected quarterly, this information would be provided by the end of the municipal year.

Councillor Wood then went on to ask whether it would be possible to reduce the length of time taken to rectify non-operational street lighting.

Mr Lowe agreed to provide the information to Councillor Wood in advance of the next meeting of the committee.

Councillor Tye asked whether there was a date set for the plan of recommended sites for the implementation of 20mph zones to be presented to the committee.

Mr Lowe agreed to liaise with City Services and provide this information.

Councillor Howe expressed concerns that it seemed that it had been suggested that some of the priorities were not important.

Mr Lowe advised that the assessment covered the whole Council. There had been a small number of priorities identified as these were key issues.

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and that consideration be given to the areas requiring further development and the progress be noted.

Strategic Planning Process 2010/2011

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which informed and sought the views of Members on the proposals for the Strategic Planning Process for 2010/2011 and the role of the Committee in the process.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Jon Beaney, Policy Manager, presented the report. There would be a new Corporate Improvement Plan produced which would be integrated with the Sunderland Strategy 2008-2025. The Scrutiny Committees would be engaged as part of the process and this report was the first stage of the engagement process.

The Chairman welcomed the report. He felt that it was long overdue and it was essential that there was engagement with the Scrutiny Committees.

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Wastes Management and Recycling – Update

The Executive Director of City Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which advised the Committee of the bidders shortlisted to submit tenders in respect of the PFI supported contract for the provision of a strategic residual waste treatment facility.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Peter High, Strategic Waste Project Director, presented the report and advised that the amount of municipal waste handled by the council had reduced by 13 thousand tonnes between 2004/5 and 2008/9. The reductions had continued into 2009/10. These reductions had come about as a result of reduced household spending due to the current economic climate and an increase in the amount of recycling taking place.

Mr High advised the Members of the proposals for the new recycling scheme which would see households provided with a blue bin the same size as the existing wheeled bins which would contain a caddy to separately store paper. The new system would see plastic bottles and card added to the materials able to be collected. There were also recycling facilities provided throughout the city and there had recently been new facilities provided.

Mr High advised of the amount of good food that was wasted by households and the financial implications of this waste. There was a 'Love Food, Hate Waste' campaign promoted by the Waste Resources Action Programme which had operated nationwide and involved road shows at supermarkets and encouraged people to submit recipes for leftover food.

Mr High advised the Members of the five submissions received for the green waste contract and stated that the contract award was expected to be confirmed in mid January 2010. The invitation to tender had been issued to 10 companies for the Waste management contract and it was expected that the contract would be awarded in February 2010. He also informed Members of the progress made regarding the procurement of the PFI for the residual waste facility.

Councillor Tye praised the officers for the work carried out. He was pleased to see that this programme was progressing quickly and advised that there was a need to ensure that everything was implemented.

Councillor Wood stated that it was good to see a reduction in the amount of waste however the reason behind the reduction was not so welcome. It was disappointing that there was such a poor level of participation in recycling; he hoped that the new blue bins would increase participation. He asked why Washington and the Coalfield area had been chosen as the pilot areas for the new recycling scheme.

Mr High advised that the recession had changed spending habits which had resulted in the reduction of waste. There were other reasons such as online news which had reduced the amount of newspapers distributed. The Coalfield and Washington areas had been chosen as they were discrete areas which could have a line drawn around them. Once the area had been dealt with there would be no need to return. The participation levels were not what had been hoped to have seen and it was hoped that the issues raised by people would be addressed by the new system. There would be an assisted collection service available for people who needed it.

Councillor Wood then asked Mr High how long it would be before the city benefited from the new contracts.

Mr High advised that it was hoped that the contracts would be completed by the end of the financial year.

Councillor E. Gibson stated that it was good that the report had highlighted how much food was wasted. It was important to teach people how to shop more sensibly.

Mr High advised that most people had started to shop more sensibly however there had been an increase in the amount of food wasted over the Christmas period.

The Chairman stated that he supported the work carried out by the Waste Resources Action Programme to reduce food waste. He had seen the campaign running in the summer and felt that it was good that the campaign was targeting such an important issue. He asked whether the Council would be carrying out a similar campaign in the future.

Mr High advised that the Council was looking to secure funding from the Waste Resources Action Programme to assist with the rollout of the recycling scheme.

Councillor Wakefield asked whether the storage of bins had been taken into account when developing the scheme and whether people could refuse to accept the bins.

Mr High advised that the public had asked for the blue bins. Consultation had been ongoing since the black boxes were introduced and the bins addressed the concerns. The bin would take up no more floor space than the black boxes. People would be encouraged not to refuse to accept the bins as everyone had a part to play in recycling.

Councillor Wakefield then asked how frequently the bins would be emptied and asked about breakout points in the PFI contract; it was likely that the levels of waste produced would reduce over the 25 years.

Mr High advised that the bins would be emptied on the same basis as the black boxes. The PFI contract did not have any breakout points built into it however the contracts were still being discussed and the maximum and minimum tonnage forecasts would be examined.

Councillor Tye asked whether it was intended for the Council to take the black boxes back and asked who would be responsible for green waste.

Mr High advised that he was currently unable to confirm who would be responsible for green waste. The black boxes would be taken back if people did not want them; this was the same strategy as was used when the wheeled bins were originally introduced to replace the old waste bins.

Councillor Vardy asked whether recycling points at supermarkets were a factor in the reduction in the amount of recycling collected.

Mr High advised that there was anecdotal evidence that there had been an increase in recycling at bottle banks due to the increase in alcohol consumption at home however there was no evidence to support this.

Councillor Vardy then asked whether there would be two different bin sizes available, as there was with the existing wheelie bins and would the new bins require the collection wagons to be replaced.

Mr High advised that there would be 140 litre and 240 litre bins available, the same sizes as the existing refuse bins. The households with the larger refuse bins would receive a larger recycling bin. The current wagons were designed for sorting at the kerbside; the move to bins would see the wagons replaced with bin lorry type wagons with a split body to separate paper and other recycling. The existing wagons were seven years old and were approaching the end of their expected life.

Councillor Vardy then asked whether these new wagons would provide a cost benefit over the existing wagons.

Mr High advised that the new wagons would cost more to buy however maintenance would be cheaper as they would be similar to the vehicles used for waste collection. These wagons were essential for the provision of the service as wheeled bins needed to be emptied using a rear loading wagon.

Councillor Wakefield congratulated the staff at Beach Street for their excellent work. Now that the site was managed by the Council the site was much cleaner and easier to use.

Mr High agreed to pass on Councillor Wakefield's compliment.

The Chairman advised that the recycling sites around the city were often very full. Residents looked at these sites as important and they needed to be emptied regularly. The sites in Washington were full.

Mr High advised that the Christmas before last there had been problems and it was disappointing to hear that the problems had returned.

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Marine Walk Masterplan and Seafront Regeneration Strategy

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which advised the Committee of the responses received following public consultation on the draft Marine Walk Masterplan and the draft Seafront Regeneration Strategy and sought the Committee's comments on the revised Masterplan and Strategy.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Keith Lowes, Head of Planning and Environment, presented the report and advised the Members of the outcome of the consultation sessions.

Councillor Howe welcomed the report; it had taken a number of years to get to this stage. There were comparisons with South Shields; he felt that the City should not just follow others. The funding of £1.5million was only a small amount considering the works to be done however it was a good starting point. There had been consultation although it seemed that the public had been ignored; there had been a swimming pool requested but the response had been that there was the Aquatic Centre and people could use this. There was a need for facilities at the sea front. There was a need to provide facilities for use in poor weather conditions.

Councillor E. Gibson also welcomed the report and stated that the Air Show attracted visitors from outside of the area. If there were enhanced facilities it could encourage these visitors to return.

The Chairman echoed Councillor Howe's comments. This report was the first step towards developing an Ocean Park for the city. He asked the young people present for their views on what facilities should be provided.

The young people stated that they thought that there needed to be leisure facilities such as a swimming pool and ice rink. The illuminations should be reinstated as in the past they had attracted large numbers of visitors.

5. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and the Committee's comments be referred to Cabinet for consideration.

Flood Planning – Implications for the Scrutiny Function

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which informed Members of the implications of the Pitt Review on the scrutiny function and asked that Members agree to include flood planning as part of the remit of the Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Barry Frost, Security and Emergency Planning Manager, presented the report and advised Members that the Pitt Review had come about as a result of the floods of summer 2007 and was published in June 2008.

Councillor Wakefield asked whether this was a significant part of what the Environment Agency was responsible for.

Mr Frost advised that the Environment Agency was a major partner.

The Chairman advised that he had sat on the flood defence committee as a substitute for Councillor Blackburn; there was a lot of work going on with the partnership. Sunderland had a limited flood risk compared with other areas. He welcomed the move to introduce flood planning into the remit of the committee.

Councillor Tye commented that there was a lot of extra responsibility being given to Mr Frost as a result of this review. He advised that in paragraph 4.1 of the report the wording should have stated that the committee was responsible for scrutiny of flood planning rather than flood planning itself.

Councillor Howe asked what involvement Northumbria Water would have with dealing with inadequacies of drains.

Mr Frost advised that Northumbria Water was not a major partner of the Council however they were a partner of the Environment Agency. Recently there had been a survey of surface water drainage issues. Problems had been identified and £350,000 had been made available to improve drainage at

400 locations. This funding had been spent and further funding was being sought.

6. RESOLVED that:
 - a. The report be received and noted
 - b. The remit of the committee be amended to include Flood Planning
 - c. A further report be submitted to the committee detailing the measures to be taken to scrutinise flood planning as part of the work programme for 2010/11

Silksworth Hall Conservation Area: Character Appraisal and Management Strategy

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which advised Members of the responses received following consultation on the draft version of the Character Appraisal and Management Strategy and sought the Committee's comments on the revised document.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mark Taylor, Senior Conservation Officer, presented the report and advised that this was the tenth in a series of studies that would address all fourteen conservation areas in the City.

Councillor Gibson expressed concerns over the deterioration of Doxford House, this was an important building.

Mr Taylor stated that Doxford House had been closely looked at and was on the register of buildings at risk. The building had recently been put up for auction and there had been an enquiry from a developer who intended to use the building for a hotel and fitness centre.

The Chairman commented that he liked to see historic areas being given support.

7. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and the comments made be included in the final document.

Review of Councillor Call for Action Mechanism and Introduction of a Selection Criteria for Dealing with Issues of Local Concern – Further Revisions to Initial Proposals

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on the proposed revision of the current Councillor Call for Action mechanism and proposed introduction of a Selection Criteria for dealing with non-mandatory referrals for use by the Sunderland Partnership,

Scrutiny Committees and Area Committees to address issues of local concern.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report and advised that there had been two local issues raised using the Councillor Call for Action mechanism in Sunderland and it was as a result of these that it became apparent that there was a requirement to review the current procedures. He welcomed comments or questions from Members.

Councillor Wood drew attention to an erroneous reference to Scrutiny Committees in the Area Committee branch of the procedure. Mr Diamond noted the error and agreed to ensure that the procedure was amended accordingly.

Councillor Wakefield advised that he had submitted one of the Councillor Calls for Action and he was disappointed that these changes to the mechanism were being looked at rather than the issues being addressed. The Call for Action had been submitted on 2nd April 2009 and there had been very little progress made since then. He was opposed to any change to the mechanism if it resulted in the existing calls for action being started again from the beginning.

Councillor Tye suggested that the new mechanisms be implemented only for new Calls for Action and that they were not applied retrospectively.

The Members agreed with this suggestion and agreed that it should be fed back to the Management Scrutiny Committee.

8. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and that the Management Scrutiny committee be advised that the Committee feel that the new procedures should not be applied retrospectively.

Request for Inclusion of an Item on the Agenda

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed Members to consider a request from Councillor Vardy to include an item on a future Committee agenda as follows “I wish to have the subject of gritting of roads and pavements on the agenda of the next scrutiny committee. I feel this is of such immediate concern to the City and its residents that it must be on the next agenda.”

(For copy report – see original minutes)

The Chairman invited Councillor Vardy to advise the Committee of what item he wanted including on the agenda and the reasons for his wanting the item to be included.

Councillor Vardy advised that following the recent spell of unprecedented snowy weather there were a number of questions and issues which needed to be given consideration. These included:

- Questions regarding the types of grit used.
- The government scheme requiring authorities to share grit and whether there was adequate compensation for this.
- The criteria used for deciding on the sites of grit boxes, there were four main points and it was felt that these needed to be examined again.
- The short time taken for the grit bins to empty after being filled.
- The number of grit bins in place and whether there was the possibility of more being installed.
- Drivers not giving way to gritter vehicles resulting in further traffic problems.
- The phasing of priorities when grit supplies run low and the lack of information provided to the emergency services regarding which routes would be gritted.
- There was a problem with people stealing grit boxes; they were apparently used for keeping pigeons.

The Chairman advised that Les Clark, Head of Street Scene, was in attendance and invited Mr Clark to address the issues raised.

Mr Clark advised that there would be a review of the programme in March and this would provide an opportunity to examine the full details of the programme. He also advised that:

- There were 15000 tonnes of salt stored in two locations, last year there had been 9000 tonnes used over the whole winter. This year the staff had been working 24 hours and there had been 13000 tonnes of salt used.
- A further 9000 tonnes had been ordered however there had been government intervention which had limited the replenishment to 6-7000 tonnes.
- There had been a 25percent reduction in grit spreading in the first week of January, this had been achieved by mixing the salt with road chippings to fill the grit bins and treat the non-priority routes. There were 1200km of roads in Sunderland and 630km had been covered by the winter maintenance programme.
- When there was changes in weather there needed to be real time changes to the programme. The treated roads were shown on the internet and there were plans to change the website to show the information graphically.
- There were 400 grit bins in the city and there had been a similar number of requests for additional bins. There was a need to balance resources. Additional grit bins would result in increased pressure on resources as there would be more staff needed to fill the bins and there would be more grit used to fill the bins.
- There was a need for the programme to be proportionate and this weather was an isolated event.

Mr Clark welcomed the opportunity to come back to the committee after winter. February was historically the worst month and it was hoped that the grit stocks would be replenished by then.

Councillor Wakefield thanked the gritting staff for their work in Newbottle, there were a lot of steep banks in Newbottle and the gritting had been excellent. He had concerns over people stealing grit, there was a bin near to his house situated at a traffic light controlled junction and people were loading vans with the grit from this bin. He asked that signs be displayed on the bins advising that this was theft.

Councillor Tye commented that it seemed that Councillor Vardy had requested something different to what he had spoken about.

Councillor E. Gibson advised that she had received requests for more grit bins. She agreed that if there were more grit bins there would be more resources needed to maintain them and this should be looked at as part of the review.

Councillor Whalen congratulated the staff for their hard work. He had called the gritters twice and both times they had arrived within the hour. An empty grit bin had been filled within 30 minutes.

Councillor Wood endorsed the support and praise for the staff for working 24 hours a day in difficult conditions. He felt that it was important that this report was presented to a future meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Howe advised that he had contacted the South Hylton depot on behalf of residents to get a steep bank gritted and he was told that it was not a priority route but he could go to the depot to buy grit. At the North Sunderland Area Committee this issue had been raised and there had been another Councillor who had phoned and had grit delivered within the hour. This seemed like preferential treatment and there was a senior officer looking into this.

Councillor Vardy commented that people were concerned over the potential for damage to their cars. He asked how much grit cost in winter compared with summer.

The Chairman queried the necessity for this to be discussed by the Committee, he felt that Mr Clark could provide the information directly to Councillor Vardy and did not see why there was an immediate need for this to be discussed. However he felt that it could be appropriate for the Committee to look at the provision of grit boxes and the increase in costs if more grit bins were to be provided.

Councillor Tye agreed with the Chairman's comments.

Councillor E. Gibson stated that the review should be looked at by the committee.

Councillor Wakefield suggested that a report be submitted to the Committee in March or later, once the bad weather had passed.

Councillor Howe expressed his support for a report to come to the Committee. He commented that if there was an increase in the number of gritters then there would be an increase in the number of people able to get to work.

The Chairman asked the Members to agree to receive a report to a future meeting. He also stated that this was not the request that had originally been made and in future the request brought to the committee is what would be discussed.

9. RESOLVED that there be a report submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the Period 1st January, 2010 – 30th April, 2010

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which enabled the Members to consider the Executive's Forward Plan for the period 1st January, 2010 to 30th April, 2010.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

The Chairman advised that since the agenda had been published an updated version of the plan covering the period 1st February – 31st May, 2010 had been published and the extract of relevant items had been circulated to Members.

Councillor Wood queried what Members would see and when they would receive information regarding the Highways Maintenance Programme.

The Chairman stated that this was an important item; he had spoken to Graham Carr who had advised that there had been a large number of potholes reported.

10. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and consideration be given to the Forward Plan.

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

(Signed) G. MILLER,
Chairman.