

**At a meeting of the MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY, 15<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER, 2011 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Tate in the Chair

Councillors Anderson, G. Miller, Oliver, Walker, S. Watson, Wilson and Wood.

**Welcome and Introductions**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting. Members and Officers introduced themselves to Mr. Gavin Barker, Engagement Lead and Senior Audit Manager, Audit Commission.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mordey, Rolph and Stewart.

**Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Committee held on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2011**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2011 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

**Declarations of Interest**

There were no interests declared.

**Audit Commission Annual Audit Letter 2010/2011**

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report attaching a copy of the report considered by the Cabinet at its meeting held on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2011 (copies circulated) providing details of the Audit Commission Annual Audit Letter covering the year 2010/2011.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Malcolm Page, Executive Director of Commercial and Corporate Services commented that the Annual Audit Letter was extremely positive and provided a strong endorsement of the financial management and planning and governance arrangements in place across the Council. The report provided an unqualified opinion on the financial statements and an unqualified Value for Money conclusion. The report confirmed that the Council had robust arrangements in place to ensure its financial resilience and had prepared for the economic challenges facing public services through the Sunderland Way of Working.

Mr. Gavin Barker, Engagement Lead and Senior Audit Manager, Audit Commission proceeded to address the Committee. He advised that he was representing Steve Nicklin, the District Auditor who was unable to attend that evening.

Mr. Barker advised that the District Auditor had issued an unqualified opinion on the financial statements on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2011. He highlighted the challenges and key issues for the Council detailed in the letter and the ways in which the Council was addressing these issues.

Mr. Barker briefed Members on the Value for Money criteria and key messages. He highlighted that the key challenges for the Council were to closely monitor the 2011/12 budget and take early action if budget savings were not being delivered and closely monitor the impact of the SWITCH (Staff Working in Transition and Change) programme and take action to mitigate any shortfall in order to achieve a positive outturn.

Mr. Barker commented that it was important that the Council remained open to considering difficult decisions. Its service assessment approach had delivered a range of new approaches to service provision and it was actively developing a range of alternative forms of service delivery and new and innovative ways of working.

Mr. Barker thanked the Committee for the opportunity of presenting the report to them and the Council's Officers for the work they had done with the Audit Commission.

Mr. Barker then proceeded to brief the Committee on the proposed audit arrangements for the future following the changes being made with respect to the Audit Commission.

Councillor G. Miller commented that he was delighted that the Council's accounts for 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10 had now been signed off and there had been a resolution of the objections.

The Chairman congratulated the Council's Officers and the Cabinet on the magnificent result they had achieved in getting such an extremely positive Annual Audit Letter and the Audit Commission for the work they had carried out with the Council. He added that the District Audit Team had always worked well with the Authority over the years to achieve the best for the Council for the benefit of people of the City.

Councillor G. Miller suggested that a letter of congratulations to the Officers involved and the Cabinet be sent on behalf of the Committee for the work they had done.

In response to Members discussion concerning the future audit arrangements, Mr. Barker advised that although the audit practice was to be outsourced, one of the roles the Audit Commission would have would be to maintain consistency of approach. The Audit Commission would be setting the standards and monitoring the service provided to Councils.

2. RESOLVED that the City Council's Annual Audit Letter for 2010/2011 and the information brought out during the discussion be received and noted.

### **Variation of Agenda**

The Chairman proposed, and it was agreed, that item 7 of the agenda, a report on 'LGC The Future of Overview and Scrutiny Conference – Feedback', be considered following the Audit Commission Annual Audit Letter 2010/2011, as the Head of Scrutiny and Localism needed to leave the meeting following consideration of the item.

### **LGC The Future of Overview and Scrutiny Conference – Feedback**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) on the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) Conference which was held on 8<sup>th</sup> November, 2011.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Chairman and Head of Scrutiny and Localism having both attended the Conference proceeded to provide verbal feedback.

The Committee was advised that the morning session had concentrated on the Localism Act and updates had been provided on the health reforms and police reforms. The afternoon session had concentrated on sharing good practice, looking at the approach to engagement and examples of where Authorities had shown to be good value. The work the 12 North East Councils had undertaken together on the regional review of the health of the ex Service community had been highlighted as an example of good practice.

Ms. Charlotte Burnham, Head of Scrutiny and Localism added that Scrutiny at the Council as always was shown to be well delivered in comparison to other Councils and the event had served to raise Sunderland City Council's profile. Ms. Burnham advised that she would make available any papers provided at the Conference for Members information in the Scrutiny Room.

3. RESOLVED that the report and the verbal feedback from the Conference delegates be received and noted.

## **Policy Development and Review 2011/12: Progress on Reviews**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members with an update on the progress in relation to the two policy reviews being undertaken by the Management Scrutiny Committee into Self Regulation and Illegal Money Lending.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer briefed the Committee on the report and advised that a focus group in relation to the 'At What Cost?' Policy Review into Illegal Money Lenders and High Cost Credit Providers' had been held earlier that day and had been well attended. The final two workshops on Self Regulation would be arranged for January/February 2012.

Councillor G. Miller commented that last month's Management Scrutiny Committee meeting which Tony Quigley the Head of the Illegal Money Lending Team (IMLT) in England, had attended and provided a presentation on the work of the IMLT had been excellent. He stated that he had subsequently noticed the National Campaign warning the public about Illegal Money Lenders and promoting the advice and support the Team could provide and commented that he hoped residents were taking notice.

Mr. Cummings advised that publicity material and business cards had been supplied to him by the IMLT and asked Members to let him know if they required a supply.

Councillor Anderson commented that having cards which provided details of the IMLT available for people to pick up was a discreet way in which to help them find alternatives to going to an illegal money lender.

4. RESOLVED that the information in the report be received and noted.

## **Performance Report Quarter 2 (April 2011 – September 2011)**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with a performance update relating to the period April to September 2011. This quarter the report included a summary of:-

- changes to the national performance management arrangements;
- key performance issues for the first six months of 2011/12 reported to each Scrutiny Committee;
- progress in relation to a range of 'Corporate Health' indicators relevant to Management Scrutiny.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Mike Lowe, Head of Performance Improvement briefed the Committee on the report and the performance issues arising from the other six Scrutiny Committees as follows:-

### **Children, Young People and Learning**

Members of the Committee were interested in receiving trend data in relation to the PI's listed below:

NI059 - % of initial assessments for children's social care carried out within 7 working days of referral;

NI062 - % of children looked after at 31<sup>st</sup> March with 3 or more placements during the year; and

LP1049 – pupils eligible for FSM progressing 2 levels in Maths KS1-KS2.

### **Community and Safer City**

Questions were asked and more detail requested on the level of young people re-offending and questions were also raised about what level of support was in place to help these young people.

Members noted that the overall crime figures were positive and the Police were praised for their work. However concern was raised in relation to the potential effect of cuts and the potential impact on the improvements made.

The Neighbourhood Police Teams across the City were commended for their work and for having a visible impact on the street. However concerns were raised over current Police cuts and the impact that these may have. It was hoped that the visible appearance of the Neighbourhood Police Teams wouldn't slip as a result of pending cuts.

### **Environment and Attractive City**

The main issues raised at the Committee were as follows:-

Street Lighting and the seven day target;  
Lack of house building and demolition of derelict properties;  
The position on recycling garden/waste bins.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

The Committee welcomed the format of this report which was readable with accessible information.

The Committee was interested in future arrangements for self-regulation and how this would be robust and include views of the public.

The Committee was concerned that overall there were too many targets not achieved or declining.

## **Prosperity and Economic Development**

Just two issues were raised from the Committee as follows:-

Performance indicators were being developed that better reflect and measure performance on the priorities of the Council e.g. progress on the Economic Masterplan.

The level and trend of unemployment remained a major concern. It was hoped that the recent announcement on the new Wear Bridge and the award of an Enterprise Zone would help levels of unemployment in the City.

## **Sustainable Communities**

The following issues were discussed:-

Falling numbers of leisure centre/swimming pool users/sport and leisure generally.

Housing supply.

Empty properties were not actually listed on the report, Members felt it should be in the 'basket' and were keen on getting information around this and developing it as a performance indicator.

Councillor Oliver commented that the level of early retirements from the Council was low and enquired what was being put in place to increase the number.

Mr. Lowe responded that he would ask the Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development to provide Members with a written response in this respect.

Councillor Wood referred to paragraph 4.1.4 concerning the statement that 'whilst the majority of residents in Sunderland feel safe in their local neighbourhood, fewer believe Sunderland as a whole is safe compared to the force average.' He enquired whether this was an issue common to all cities or whether it was an issue just in Sunderland.

Mr. Lowe undertook to get a response to Councillor Wood's enquiry.

Councillor Anderson commented that this related to the fear of crime and not feeling safe when you were out of your own neighbourhood was something that could restrict people's lives.

Councillor G. Miller commented that Sunderland was the safest city in the North of England and did not know what more there could be done to make residents realise this as the message had been given out several times but people simply chose not to believe it. He added that the way the city was sometimes portrayed in the media did not help to convince people as stories were not included in the local press about how unlikely it was that you were going to be assaulted.

Councillor Oliver advised that he had raised this issue with the Editor of the Sunderland Echo. He commented however this was not the kind of story that sold newspapers. Councillor Oliver added that older people often found groups of young people menacing when they were on their own, this was down to their perception of the situation as they were feeling vulnerable.

Councillor Walker referred to the performance indicator around processing new housing benefit claims. He expressed concern that caseloads had increased and this added to the reduction in resource to process the claims had resulted in a decline in performance and that this may result in people losing their homes. He added that the situation was only going to get worse due to the economic situation the country was facing.

The Chairman suggested that an appropriate officer from the Housing Benefits Team be asked to attend a future meeting of the Committee to inform Members of what measures would be taken to streamline the processing functions in order to improve performance and process housing benefits claims more quickly.

Mr. Lowe advised that the impact of the Welfare Reforms was a huge and significant challenge and Ms. Fiona Brown, Head of Transactional Services was leading a corporate project on this. There would be an opportunity for the Management Scrutiny Committee to engage with this project and invite Ms. Brown to attend a future meeting.

5. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the findings within the report, including areas of good progress made by the Council and those areas that need further improvement highlighted in the report, be noted;
- (ii) responses to Members' questions as detailed above be obtained and circulated; and
- (iii) an appropriate officer be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee with regards to the issue raised concerning the processing of housing benefit claims.

### **Scrutiny Work Programmes for 2011/12**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for information the variations to the Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2011/12 and providing the opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2011/12.

(For copy reports – see original minutes).

6. RESOLVED that the variations to the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2011/12 and to the Management Scrutiny Committee's own work programme be noted.

### **Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the Period 1<sup>st</sup> December, 2011 – 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2012**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items in the Executive's Forward Plan for the period 1<sup>st</sup> December, 2011 – 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2012 which relate to the Management Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

A copy of the latest version of the Forward Plan for the period 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2012 to 30<sup>th</sup> April, 2012 was tabled at the meeting.

Councillor Oliver referred to entry 01555 concerning the decision to agree the procurement by tender of three replacement operational vehicles for Streetscene to the value of £350k to be considered by the Cabinet at its meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2012. Councillor Oliver asked that further information be provided as to the cost of the vehicles.

7. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) a note be provided to all Members of the Committee concerning the cost of the three replacement operational vehicles for Streetscene as detailed above; and
- (ii) the Executive's Forward Plan for the above period be received and noted.

The Chairman wished everyone the compliments of the Season and closed the meeting.

(Signed) R.D. TATE,  
Chairman.