

**At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 14<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2023 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Dodds in the Chair.

Councillors Burrell, Curtis, Guy, Hartnack, Jones, Leonard, Morrissey, Mullen, Thornton and Walton.

**Also in attendance:-**

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Ms Gillian Hunter, Specialist Lead People Management, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Mr David Noon, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Mrs Beverley Poulter, Senior Manager Corporate Strategy, Strategy and Corporate Affairs

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Directorate

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mason-Gage and P. Smith.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2023**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 13<sup>th</sup> July 2023 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

**Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)**

There were no declarations of interest.

**Performance Management Update – Quarter 1 of 2023/24**

Mrs Beverley Poulter, Senior Manager Corporate Strategy, submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for Quarter 1 of 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Poulter advised that during the work programme development sessions, Members had requested that they were able to take a deep dive into one of the key themes of the report each time it appeared as an agenda item. The Key Theme for this evening's meeting was Organisational Health and Ms Gillian Hunter and Mr Paul Wilson had been invited to attend the meeting to address questions from Members in relation to that theme.

Members were informed that following the City Plan's publication in 2019, an annual review and assurance process had been undertaken each year, to ensure that delivery remained focused on achieving the plan's vision & commitments, whilst taking account of any change in context. The latest assurance, developed in consultation with the committee, recognised the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and a need to focus on resilience within the plan. It also recognised the significant achievements that have made on the delivery of the plan through the completion of the plan's Timeline Activity, and therefore the planned activity was substantially refreshed to deliver outcomes to 2035.

The refreshed plan was adopted from 1st April 2023 and Ms Poulter advised that the report would appear slightly different to previous reports with the charts and tables revised accordingly to reflect the refreshed plan.

#### Dynamic and Smart City

Councillor Mullen referred to his concerns raised at the last meeting regarding the worryingly low percentage of young people in Sunderland achieving successful examination results in Maths and English given they were the foundation points of all learning. He noted that coupled to this, school attendance rates were dropping and asked if future reports could detail the levels of authorised and unauthorised absence in Sunderland's Schools against those nationally.

Ms Poulter advised that it may be possible to ask a Headteacher to address the Committee however all of Sunderland's secondary schools were run by academy trusts and would have a range of different approaches to the issue. It might be more appropriate to invite Simon Marshall, Director of Education who could probably provide a broader perspective. Councillor Thornton suggested that perhaps the Executive Head of one of the larger Trusts covering a number of schools could be invited.

Ms Gillian Robinson advised that this issue had also been raised as a concern by members of the Children Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee who had asked that a report on the matter was scheduled into their work programme. She would forward a copy of the report to this Committee once it was available.

Councillor Hartnack confirmed the difficulties in obtaining secondary school data following academisation.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the figure of 13 empty properties brought back into use and asked if there was some sort of context for the figure such as a target that was being worked towards. Ms Poulter advised that she believed that there was a target and that she would investigate and report back.

Councillor Leonard advised that the Economic and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee had recently undertaken a piece of work in respect of empty properties and that there was a lot of data available.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Guy, Ms Poulter advised that the City's aim in respect of carbon neutrality remained on track.

Councillor Walton referred to the figure for the number of completed affordable homes at the foot of page 12 and also the reference on page 17 stating that he was interested in the reasons for the decline together with a definition of affordable homes and how the figures were measured. Ms Poulter replied that she would get back to the committee with the definition and a further explanation.

Councillor Jones referred to the 'More and Better Jobs' section detailed on page 15 of the agenda papers and requested more information on the property search tool including how it was used and how many hits it had attracted. Councillor Jones also referred to the section on Community Local Led Development (CLLD) detailed on page 16 and asked for details of the lessons learned. In reply, Ms Poulter confirmed that she would provide the Committee with further information regarding the property search tool and advised that with regards to the later question, a useful report in respect of the CLLD programme had been produced detailing the 32 projects supported, breaking them down into outcomes and impacts together with the role of the Council and the Partnership set up. She would circulate a copy for the Committee's information.

In response to enquiries from Councillor Guy, Mr Wilson advised that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund was still very much in its infancy. Some projects had been granted funding however it was too soon to undertake any meaningful analysis in terms of impact. An annual summary report would be produced in due course, and he would be happy to circulate that to the Committee. He was not specifically aware of any feedback from projects in terms of the application process.

Councillor Curtis asked that the Committee received latter stage updates in relation to the development of the Wifi Messaging Platform / City App.

### Healthy Smart City

Councillor Jones asked to receive further information in respect of the Change for Life Programme and Omega Eating and also how schools were selected. Ms Poulter advised that Change for Life Programme was open to all schools and it was up to individual schools to opt in. The level of engagement with elements of the programme would vary from school to school with schools selecting modules that would best suit their needs. A list of schools involved had been circulated as part of Mr Cummings' update following the last Committee and she would include a revised list as part of the next update.

Councillor Hartnack referred to his request at the last meeting for a breakdown of the 2,146 place enforcement activities completed in Q4 and advised that he had not received the information. He referred to the hot weather over the previous weekend and the cleanliness of the seafront. He stated that he had contacted environmental services regarding enforcement activity over that weekend and was advised that 3 enforcement actions had been undertaken on the Saturday morning and 3 in the afternoon. The figures were identical for the Sunday, however none of the weekend

enforcement activity had included the issue of tickets for littering. He questioned whether officers were reluctant to engage in this regard.

Ms Poulter advised that she believed the information requested by Councillor Hartnack had been circulated as part of Mr Cummings' update following the last Committee. Mr Cummings confirmed that this was the case and advised of the date on which the email had been circulated. Ms Poulter added that the Q1 details of enforcement activity were outlined on page 26 of the agenda papers. She cautioned however that while the overall figure was correct, there appeared to be an issue with the breakdown figures. She would circulate the correct data following the meeting.

Councillor Mullen stated that the cleansing team did an excellent job however they were invariably sent out immediately prior to the teams emptying the bins. He believed that it would make more sense if the operations were carried out the other way round. With regard to the issue of waste collection, Councillor Mullen asked that at a future meeting the Committee were briefed on the implementation of the side waste policy as he believed there were some inconsistencies in the way it was being implemented. Ms Poulter replied that Marc Morley would be happy to attend the Committee, however the deep dive scheduled as part of the Q2 performance report was due to be on the theme of Vibrant Smart City.

#### Vibrant Smart City

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Hartnack Ms Poulter confirmed that she would circulate details of the sample sizes in relation to the Residents Survey and the survey to ascertain the proportion of residents proud to live in Sunderland.

Councillor Jones referred to the fact that 39.1% of refuge referrals in cases of domestic abuse were accommodated and asked what happened to the remaining 60.9%. Ms Poulter replied that the Council's service was provided by Wearside Women in Need, (WWIN) however there were certain cases in which it would be unable to provide support eg drug or alcohol dependency or where the needs of clients / survivors could be best served by a partner agency. Other cases could be the result of no available bed space, that the survivor did not wish to accept the offer of support, or cases where there were safeguarding concerns.

Councillor Guy referred to the figure in relation to 'Residents Feelings of Safety' and asked if the survey questioned residents about what made them feel safe. He believed that the answer to this question may help Northumbria Police to better identify where it needed to direct resources. Ms Poulter replied that she would ask colleagues in the Safer Sunderland Partnership to clarify and that she would also circulate a copy of the survey for the Committee's information.

Councillor Leonard referred to the provision of temporary accommodation for the homeless / rough sleepers and asked if the service was Council or Partner provided? Ms Poulter replied that she would seek a breakdown and circulate it to the Committee.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Burrell regarding the figure for the proportion of households considered to be fuel poor, Ms Poulter agreed that the current figure was likely to be much higher. It was an example of a government statistic that was collected on an annual basis and often not published until a year later. She advised that she would check to see if there was any interim data available.

Councillor Jones highlighted the data on pages 27-31 which showed that whilst footfall had fallen compared to 2019, there had been an increase in overall spend in the city. Ms Poulter replied that the major reason for the increase in spend was an increase in the number of local day visitors and in the number of overnight stays. In response to an enquiry from Councillor Hartnack as to how the calculation was made, Ms Poulter advised that the figures were provided through the use of an economic impact modelling tool called STEAM (Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor).

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Leonard, Ms Poulter advised that she would investigate how the 2022 figure of £510m overall spend of visitors to the city compared to the pre pandemic figure.

### Organisational Health

Councillor Hartnack acknowledged that there had been slight decrease in the monthly sickness absence rate compared to the same period in the previous year (1.11 in June 2022, 1.06 in June 2030) however this still equated to 12.27 days per year, compared to 7.9 in the public sector generally and was twice the national average.

Ms Hunter replied that finding a comparator was difficult given the different terms and conditions that operated not only between the public and private sectors but also between different public sector organisations. It was best to try and compare similar organisations to obtain comparative data. To this end a regional benchmarking exercise was currently being undertaken in relation to sickness absence levels across the seven North East Local Authorities and the LGA were working nationally to get to a stage where local authorities could compare like with like.

Currently Sunderland had a figure of 12.21 days. The figure for North Tyneside was higher and at South Tyneside it was slightly lower. Liz St Louis was aware of the issue and a huge piece of work had been undertaken in Sunderland which was almost complete. Over 4,000 records had been data cleansed. Following the reorganisation of the Council's structures, revised management information had been prepared and the HR Team had invested a great deal of time with managers advising on their responsibilities in terms of absence management. Training was ongoing in this regard.

Councillor Hartnack stated that Ms Hunter had 'hit the nail on the head' regarding ensuring that the data was correct, focusing on systems and analysing both internal and comparative data. He believed that it was something that the task and finish group should look into. He added that whilst the softer issues were important one of the biggest factors behind the issue was the failure of managers to comply with procedures.

Ms Hunter confirmed that the capture of the correct data was fundamental to the process. Training had been and would continue to be given to managers in terms of absence management and what was expected of them. To ensure that managers were complying with procedures, HR Business Partners were challenging managers with regard to the sickness data for their Sections / Departments.

Councillor Hartnack welcomed this process and stated that it would be interesting to see the departmental comparators.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Walton, Ms Hunter confirmed that the support offered to staff would dovetail with the reasons for sickness. An employee benefits portal had recently been introduced onto the Council's internal Hub page. The highest factor in terms of reasons for absence was mental health. Although stress was cited as the reason, in a lot of cases it was not work-related stress. In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Walton, Ms Hunter confirmed that support for staff in public facing roles was very important. Appraisal processes had recently been reviewed to include regular one to ones where open conversations were encouraged.

Councillor Mullen referred to the challenges in recording data and the problems that working from home must cause in this regard. Previously when staff worked from an office it was obvious whether they were there or not. Ms Hunter confirmed that working from home was difficult to monitor. Whilst she did not think there was an issue, (presenteeism was perhaps a greater issue), managers were reminded that just because staff were out of sight they should not be out of mind.

Councillor Burrell asked what was the corporate target in relation to sickness? Ms Hunter replied that the targets varied between departments and she would circulate details following the meeting.

Councillor Mullen asked if it had been confirmed that once the free after 3 scheme ended, staff would receive free parking. He believed that staff working long hours shouldn't be faced with parking charges. Mr Wilson advised that there had not been a conversation around that. Staff did not enjoy free parking. At the former Civic Centre car park staff had paid for a monthly pass which allowed them to park there. Ms Hunter advised that the next JCC was due to be held the following week and she would check to see if the issue was raised there.

There being no further questions for Ms Poulter, Ms Hunter and Mr Wilson, the Chair thanked Mrs Poulter for her attendance, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Task and Finish Working Group: The Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce**

Mr Cummings presented a report in respect of the above, which set out the context to the issue, the overall aim of the Working Group and its proposed terms of reference, the scope of the review, the evidence gathering process and the timescales involved.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Debate ensued on the scope of the review and the evidence gathering process. Councillor Mullen believed the scope should be expanded to include the 'bespoke issues' raised during the Work Programme development session at the beginning of the year, such as the health implications of the new building (he was aware of a Councillor who suffered with agoraphobia and struggled to work from City Hall).

Councillor Mullen suggested that the Working Group could commission an independent piece of research funded by the Scrutiny Committee budget to look at these bespoke issues. Councillor Guy spoke against the use of the budget for this purpose. Ms Hunter advised that there was a section in the employee survey which focused on the working environment, and she would look to share that information if possible. She asked the Committee, that if they were aware of any members of staff who were struggling with working from City Hall to please let her know as they could be relocated to other Council buildings.

Ms Robinson advised that perhaps information provided via the Equalities Framework could be looked at as part of the evidence gathering process. The Chair confirmed that she would feel more comfortable with adopting that approach.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- i) the title of the review be agreed as 'The Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce',
- ii) approval be given to the terms of reference for the task and finish working group as detailed in paragraph 6 of the report,
- iii) evidence gathered through the Equalities Framework be added to the sources as detailed in paragraph 7.1 of the report,
- iv) the membership of the Working Group be agreed as Councillors Dodds, Hartnack, Jones, Mason-Gage and Mullen, subject to the invitation being also extended to Councillors Usher and P. Smith (who had been unable to attend this evening's meeting),
- v) the appointment of Chair for the working group to be determined by the Group.

### **Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24**

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2023/24 and which provided an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings having presented the report, updating Members on the current position regarding the Work Programmes of the Scrutiny Committees, it was :-

4. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2023/24 and the variations to these work programmes be noted, together with the current scrutiny budget position.

### **Notice of Key Decisions**

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 9<sup>th</sup> August 2023.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Consideration was given to the report.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Walton regarding item ref 230622/821 (Decision on the variation to the provision of Domestic Abuse Support Service – Funded via the New Burdens Grant (DLUHC)), Mr Wilson advised that he believed it concerned an update and consolidation of new Health funding into the contract. There was no change in the provider.

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

The Chairman then closed the meeting, having thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) T. DODDS,  
Chairman.