

At a meeting of the COMMUNITY AND SAFER CITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on TUESDAY, 18th OCTOBER, 2011 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Anderson in the Chair

Councillors Copeland, Curran, Essl, T. Martin, Thompson, D. Trueman and Wiper

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Emerson and Scaplehorn.

Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 6th September, 2011

Councillor Thompson referred to the Performance Report and stated that he had referred to drug drivers rather than the recorded drunk drivers.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 6th September, 2011 be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of the above amendment.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Community Cohesion Policy Review 2011/12: Evidence Gathering

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed Members to receive evidence in relation to the Committee's Policy Review for 2011/12 into Community Cohesion. As part of this evidence gathering the Committee would be receiving presentations relating to Benefits Reform, Gentoo's approach to Community Cohesion; and the range of initiatives and approaches being undertaken in the East and Coalfield Areas.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Fiona Brown, Head of Transactional Services, delivered a presentation relating to Benefit Reform and the impact this would have on communities within the city. These

changes were the biggest change to the welfare system in 60 years. Within Sunderland there were a quarter of households were in receipt of Housing Benefit while a third of households received Council Tax Benefit; this benefit totalled £140million per annum. The changes would not affect pensioners who were to be protected. People of working age would be affected by the changes as there would be the removal of the 'top up' payment of up to £15 per week for claimants who had negotiated a rent cheaper than the maximum benefit they were entitled to. The housing benefit would also be capped at the 4-bedroom rate which would see families receiving benefit for 5 bedroom houses having their benefit cut. The housing benefit would be cut from 50th percentile of rent levels to 30th percentile; this would affect 80 percent of claimants. Single claimants up to 35 would only be entitled to housing benefit to cover a single room in a shared house rather than a 1 bedroom flat, the current cut off age was 25.

There was to be a Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) of £88,000 awarded to the authority by central government and the council was looking into innovative ways of using this relatively small amount of funding.

These changes would have a serious impact on the city as the shortfall in rent would increase rent arrears and could lead to increased levels of eviction and homelessness. There would also be an effect on landlord confidence and there could be an increase in the number of houses of multiple occupation (HMO). These changes could lead to an effect on community cohesion and community resilience; there would be work done with the planning department to ensure that the impact of HMOs was minimised as much as possible.

There would be changes for the Council on the way the Council Tax benefit was administered. Currently the Council paid the benefit on behalf of the Government and received a grant in order to do this. From 2013 there would be a Council designed local scheme which would be implemented and paid by the Council and there would be funding received from the Government of 90 percent of the cost of the scheme.

It was planned that the range of benefits would eventually be replaced by a single 'Universal Credit' which would be paid to claimants monthly, they would then need to pay the landlord and budget so that the benefit would last them the month. There were concerns over the risk that landlords might not receive their rent from tenants. There were also to be changes to the way crisis loans were issued; they would no longer be operated by the Job Centre but by the Council instead. The Council were looking at ways in which there could be changes made; for example the loaning of white goods or furniture rather than the issuing of money.

Councillor Copeland advised that there was Sunderland Community Furniture Service; they could be used to assist with the loaning of white goods and furniture. Ms Brown advised that there was a need to look at what facilities were available prior to implementing any schemes.

The Chairman thanked Ms Brown for her presentation and stated that she was horrified by the proposals; people were worried about what may happen and whether they would lose their homes. She also queried how many bedrooms a single

claimant over 35 would be entitled to. Ms Brown advised that they would be entitled to enough benefits to provide a 1 bedroom property.

The Chairman then queried what would happen if a single claimant was to have the tenancy from a social rented property handed down to them from their parents. Ms Brown advised that they would not be entitled to sufficient benefits to pay the rent and as such there would be a shortfall in the benefit; a single person in a 2 bedroom property was classed as under occupying the property.

Councillor T. Martin expressed concerns for people who had learning difficulties; when the universal payment came in it could cause issues for them as they may not be capable of budgeting and could end up in arrears or in debt. He asked what would be done to help these people.

Ms Brown advised that there would be work done with the support officers, who for example may be social workers or carers, to give the maximum amount of support possible to the individuals. The statutory legislation for the proposals would not be presented to parliament until 2012 and nothing would be known for certain until then.

Councillor Copeland stated that single people who were living in what had been their parent's houses would be affected negatively by this. She also stated that there was a shortage of one bedroom flats as gentoo had demolished a large number of undesirable flats over recent years.

Ms Brown stated that the proposals were meant to be an incentive for people to move into employment. There had been discussions with Job Centre Plus around the changes which would be implemented in January which would see under 35s only being eligible for benefits for a single room. There was a desire for the city to be growing economically and in order to do this there was a need to work with the job centre to get people into work. Landlords would sometimes be willing to reduce rents to keep a good tenant so it was possible that people would be able to continue living in their current houses despite receiving a smaller amount of housing benefit which would hopefully alleviate any shortages of smaller properties. The changes were also proposed in order to reduce rent levels to more affordable levels.

Ian Porter, gentoo, advised that there was a lot of evaluation work being undertaken and reallocation policies were being developed to try to fully populate houses. If a family had two children of the same sex then they would be expected to share a bedroom meaning that a family with 2 children would be able to be accommodated in a 2 bedroom house, leaving the larger properties free for larger families. There were currently a large number of single occupants living in 2 bedroom flats.

The Chairman expressed concerns over the use of the term affordable and was advised by Ms Brown that affordable was what the government deemed to be affordable as they believed that rents were too high. The 4 bedroom cap would have more of an effect in the south, especially in London, than it would in Sunderland.

Councillor Essl queried whether it was known how many people would be affected by the changes and was informed by Ms Brown that when the analysis had taken place there were 800 people who were currently receiving the single room rate and

there were approximately 23,500 people who would be impacted by the under occupancy changes.

In response to a query from Councillor Curran regarding HMOs Ms Brown advised that there was a lot of work needed to be done. HMOs had an effect on communities and there was a need to mitigate against this; especially considering that it was possible that more landlords would decide to convert properties to HMOs following the changes.

Councillor Copeland referred to the shortage of properties and stated that in Southwick there were a large number of empty properties. There were government initiatives to try to bring empty properties back into use.

Ms Brown stated that there was a need to have an understanding of the city's housing stock. There were a number of strategies related to housing and these needed to be brought together and examined to see whether there needed to be any changes made following the changes to the benefit system. There was a need to look at the way the city's population was changing as there was a need to know how many pensioners there would be in the coming years. There had been discussions around the possibility of having different local authorities working together however this could lead to issues due to the differences in populations; as a proportion of the population Northumberland had 11 percent more pensioners than Sunderland and as such it was likely that the schemes would need to work differently.

The Chairman stated that she believed that the way out of poverty was through employment, she did however acknowledge that currently it was very difficult for people to be able to find work. She anticipated the Welfare Rights service seeing an increase in the amount of people using the service in the future. Within communities there was fear as people were scared that they may lose their homes.

The Chairman then thanked Ms Brown for her presentation and welcomed Ian Porter who was representing gentoo and would be delivering a presentation detailing the work gentoo was doing around the development of community cohesion.

Mr Porter delivered his presentation and advised the committee that gentoo had taken over the management of properties in the Middle Hendon area which were owned by Back on the Map. Gentoo owned properties in 98 different neighbourhoods and each of these areas had different, often difficult, needs which needed to be carefully addressed, each neighbourhood had its own Neighbourhood Plan which detailed the issues in the area and how they could be tackled. He advised that gentoo had 29,500 houses in Sunderland and 70,000 customers. The company employed 850 people across various areas including housing management; neighbourhood safety; grounds and estate maintenance; and repairs and maintenance. There were a number of schemes in place to help improve community cohesion which involved working with the different groups of people who were residents of the estates including young people; old people; the unemployed; and those with drug, alcohol or mental health issues.

The Chairman commented that the estates were quite large and there were a wide range of tenures, from those renting from gentoo to tenants of private landlords and

owner occupiers; she queried whether gentoo linked all of the residents together or whether they were only interested in their own tenants. Mr Porter responded that there were residents' panels which had representatives from all aspects of the local community, not just gentoo tenants.

Councillor Copeland stated that she had been sceptical of the work of gentoo however the work at Leafields in Southwick had been excellent; there were people who had moved in who previously would have never considered moving to Southwick. There were however still some areas which were a problem. It had been excellent to see gentoo speaking to residents to find out what the residents wanted gentoo to do; Marley Potts had been turned around and had gone from being an area which people did not want to live in to an area where a private developer was happy to invest to build new houses. She thanked gentoo for all of their hard work.

Mr Porter stated that there would always be the issue of problem areas and there was a need to continue working within these areas to deliver improvements. There was a need to solve the problems rather than just move them to other areas.

The Chairman stated that areas could change. In Easington Lane there had been an area which was notorious for problems and the properties in the area had been demolished. There was now a new development on the site and the area had improved greatly. She also reminisced about her childhood growing up on a council estate and the sense of community spirit and belonging which had existed.

Mr Porter advised that the main issue faced was engagement and that the majority of the work which was carried out was people related rather than buildings related. The Chairman added that there had been a change in attitudes; in the past petty criminals were ostracised by the community however now it seemed that antisocial behaviour was expected and almost accepted by people in some communities. Mr Porter responded stating that gentoo had done a lot of work to reduce antisocial behaviour and there had been significant improvements.

In response to a query from Councillor Thompson Mr Porter advised that gentoo were working with Alan Caddick the Council's Head of Housing to deal with the issues which were caused by some of the private landlords and their tenants.

Councillor T. Martin commented that it was pleasing to see the work gentoo had done with Back on the Map to improve the cottages in Hendon, he hoped that this taking over of the cottages would be a success. The people of Middle Hendon were pleased with the scheme and there had been positive feedback from residents in relation to the current works in the Long Streets area. He was a member of the LMAPS group for his area and thanked the gentoo staff for their attendance and contribution at the LMAPS meetings.

Mr Porter stated that the work in Hendon was an excellent example of gentoo working with other organisations. Not only had there been the work with Back on the Map to improve the houses but there had been the partnership working with the Council and Back on the Map to develop the Selective Licensing scheme in Middle Hendon and the Long Streets. Councillor T. Martin added that Selective Licensing would make a big difference to the area.

The Chairman thanked Mr Porter for his attendance and then welcomed to the Meeting the officers from the Sunderland Partnership who would be delivering a presentation to the Committee.

Jessica May, Sunderland Partnership Manager, introduced the presentation and advised that it would be providing Members with an overview of the work that was going on in the East Sunderland and Coalfield Areas of the City. She advised that the East Area had a high proportion BME population which the Coalfield had a lower proportion and was made up of distinct villages. She advised of the Cohesion Networks which had been established to bring together representatives from local organisations, projects and groups to share information on cohesion concerns, possible tensions, inequalities and social welfare issues and to address the issues raised. There were some groups which had been established to look into specific issues; the EARR group had been established specifically to look into the problems around the Eden Vale area.

Dawn Rugman, Senior Partnership Officer, then advised of the focus of the work and the citywide issues. She advised of the School Linking Network which had been successful during its first year, there were plans to expand the network to include links to the college and university and to include young people who were at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). There was an issue with trust in some communities; there were communities where people like the local loan sharks were trusted more than authorities such as the police and this was a major concern.

Sarah Woodhouse, Senior Partnership Officer, advised of the work which was being undertaken in the East and Coalfield areas. The East Area Community Cohesion Group was the first group to be established in the city and was set up in response to escalating racial tensions among young people in the area. The group then widened its remit and the membership increased to deal with the wider cohesion concerns in the area. There was a need to have knowledge of the community and the specific issues it faced to know what services could be put into place to tackle problems.

The Coalfield group had been established following the success of the East group. This group had not formed in response to a specific issue but instead was formed to look at the existing work and how collaborative working could be used to respond to local issues. There was an issue in the Coalfield area with hate crime; there was a relatively small BME population and there were a disproportionately high number of racist incidents, this suggested that there were people who were repeat victims of hate crimes. There was also a lack of youth provision in the area and to combat this the XL Youth Villages had been brought to the area.

In response to a query from Councillor Essl, Ms Woodhouse stated that Young Asian Voices had been working with a small group of young Asian men who had raised concerns around intolerance and a feeling of being persecuted. There was a need to ensure that there were as many ways as possible for young people to be able to voice their concerns.

Councillor Copeland stated that there was a lot of work done to integrate new residents into areas however the existing residents, who had often been living there for a long time, were neglected; there was a need to provide services for the existing residents to ensure that they did not feel isolated. Young people were often not included by any services and this led to them feeling neglected and could lead to tensions in the area. Ms May advised that this was something that there was a need to be aware of and the situation was being monitored through the Sunderland Partnership and the Prevent scheme. Ms Rugman added that there was a need for the medium term consequences to be looked at and there was a need to build resilience into communities.

The Chairman stated that during periods of economic turmoil there were often problems around community cohesion. History had shown that during these periods people often looked for something to attack as a way of relieving their frustrations. There was also an issue around youth unemployment, millions of 16-24 year olds were unemployed and wanted to be able to work however they were not given the opportunities they required.

The Chairman then thanked the officers for their attendance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the information be given consideration as part of the policy review into Community Cohesion.

Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 – Update

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which allowed Members to receive an update on the progress of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 and its implications for the Council.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Stuart Douglass, Policy Lead for Community Safety, presented the report and advised that the Bill had now completed its journey through parliament to become the Act, much of the detail surrounding the act would be included in the secondary legislative guidance, while this report provided a briefing for Members on the key points and final changes to the Bill as it became enacted. The Commissioner would have responsibility for the whole force area and Chief Constables would need to be retired for 5 years before being eligible to stand for the role of Commissioner. It was not yet known for certain who would be funding the elections. The Police and Crime Panel should be politically balanced and representative of the geographical area covered by the Force wherever possible; it would be up to the local authorities to decide who would make up the panel but if an agreement could not be reached then the Home Office reserved the right to intervene. Mr Douglass then introduced Tom Terrett, Trading Standards and Licensing Manager, who would be advising the Committee on the amendments to the Licensing Act 2003.

Mr Terrett advised that previously there had been a lack of power for licensing authorities to control applications and it had been compulsory for applications to be granted should there be no objections; it was now going to be possible for

applications to be referred to the Licensing Sub-Committee even if there were no objections. Previously the Council could only intervene if 'necessary' and there needed to be a lot of evidence to prove that the action was necessary; this was to be changed so that any action only needed to be appropriate.

There was a lot of work done around combating underage sales and the fine the courts could impose was to be increased from a maximum of £10,000 to a maximum of £20,000.

There was to be the potential for early morning restrictions to be imposed which could be used to force all premises within an area to close by a certain time; there were concerns from the police about this and any proposals would need to be consulted on and any objections heard. There was also the Late night Levy which could be imposed and would require late opening venues to contribute towards the cost of policing and other safety measures such as Taxi Marshalls; it would be possible for there to be exempted sectors so that venues such as theatres could operate without any charges while pubs and clubs would be affected.

Councillor Wiper commented that he was a retired police officer and that he was not convinced by the idea of having elected commissioners. He queried whether any qualifications would be required and what the situation would be with staffing.

Mr Douglass advised that he was not aware of there being any requirement for certain qualifications however it would not be known what restrictions there would be until the final guidance had been produced; it was expected that there would be certain qualifying measures in place such as preventing people with criminal records from holding the post. The role would have a salary attached to it of around £100,000 per annum and the commissioner would have the option of appointing a deputy along with deciding what administration staff they would require. It would be sensible to keep the current administration arrangements for now however there was no requirement for the commissioner to do this.

Councillor Thompson stated that following the recent riots the police forces were struggling. He felt that this was a cynical move and was concerned about who would stand for election and who would fund the elections. The worry was that people with vested interests such as security firms would be funding election campaigns for their own gain.

The Chairman added that it was possible that individuals could stand for election to further their own party political purposes. She was surprised that the proposal to have elected commissioners had actually been passed.

Councillor Copeland agreed that people and companies with vested interests being able to be involved was a concern; she was worried that this would be the beginnings of the privatisation of the police. She did however welcome the proposals for the changes to the Licensing Act, especially the changes which allowed the authority to introduce a late night levy which could then be used to pay for Taxi Marshalls and Street Pastors. She also advised that the committee had previously been on a night out in the city centre to see what work was being done by the police,

Street Pastors and Taxi Marshalls; she felt that it could be useful to have another visit to the city centre to see what changes there had been.

Mr Douglass stated that there was a memorandum of understanding which was currently being drafted and would specify how the Chief Constable would relate to the Commissioner.

Councillor T. Martin referred to the restriction on former Chief Constables and asked whether other police officers would have to wait 5 years after retirement to be able to stand for commissioner. He also queried whether the changes to the Licensing Act would enable the authority to restrict the number of licenses granted within specific areas.

Mr Douglass agreed to find out whether the restriction would only affect Chief Constables or whether other officers would be affected as well. Mr Terrett stated that it was likely that it would be possible to restrict the numbers of licenses granted within certain areas.

3. RESOLVED that the report be noted and further updates be received.

Work Programme 2011-12

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided, for Members information, the current work programme for the Committee's work for the 2011-12 Council year.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

2. RESOLVED that the work programme be received and noted.

Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the period 1 October 2011 – 31 January 2012

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Forward Plan for the period 1 October 2011 – 31 January 2011 which relate to the Community and Safer City Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Chairman advised that there were no items on the current forward plan which fell under the remit of the Committee.

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

(Signed) F. ANDERSON,
Chairman.