

At a meeting of the SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on TUESDAY, 19th JANUARY, 2010 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Errington in the Chair

Councillors M. Dixon, Ellis, Foster, Rolph, J. Scott, L. Walton, Wares and A. Wilson

Also Present:-

Councillor Tate – Chairman of the Management Scrutiny Committee

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Chamberlin and S. Watson.

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 15th December, 2009

- i) Minutes of the meeting held on 17th November, 2009

Councillor Rolph corrected the minutes by reporting that, she had commented on the need for "first aiders especially at junior matches and the possibility of officials helping to provide it" and not "the possibility of incorporating juniors to help provide it" as stated in the minutes.

- ii) Apologies for Absence

Councillor Foster stated that a blanket apology had been submitted for this period and his apologies had not been recorded for the December meeting.

- iii) Access to Housing Policy Review 2009/10 Progress Report

- a) Councillor Rolph drew attention to the following typographical errors:-

Page 2 "Homeless Team" – corrected to "Homelessness Team";
Page 3 "Local Services Strategy" corrected to "Local Studies Strategy".

- b) Councillor Rolph queried the meaning of the following phrase detailed on page 2: "The Council are keen to ensure they look at the whole trajectory of housing schemes available....." This was corrected to "the whole range" of housing schemes available....."

Consideration having been given to the points raised above it was:-

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 15th December, 2009 be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to the above amendments.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

Access to Housing Policy Review 2009/10 Progress Report

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with progress on its policy review around access to housing in Sunderland and also an opportunity for Members to discuss the theme of sub-regional Choice Based Lettings with the Tyne and Wear Housing Partnership and Shelter.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, introduced the report. He advised that Stephen Rudge from Coventry City Council would be visiting Sunderland on Thursday, 28th January and a programme for the visit would be circulated to Members in order to ensure the Committee and the Council get the maximum benefit from this.

The Committee agreed that the invitation to attend and the programme be circulated to all Members of the Council.

The Chairman invited Mr. Barry Lowther from the Tyne and Wear Housing Partnership to address the Committee.

Mr. Lowther proceeded to provide a presentation to Members on sub-regional Choice Based Lettings (CBL). The presentation looked at the development and benefits of a sub-regional CBL scheme as well as the progress so far, options and next steps in the process. Mr. Lowther advised that Option 4 which meant one application process, one housing register, one selection process but allowing for retention of local priorities except where good practice and existing similarities have been identified and one web site, was the preferred option for a sub-regional CBL scheme. He stated that one of the advantages would be that the customer would find it easier to understand and they would be clear as to where they were on the list of bid opportunities.

Councillor A. Wilson queried whether people would find it acceptable for someone outside of Sunderland to get a certain property when there were Sunderland residents registered and waiting.

Mr. Lowther explained the idea behind pooling resources was to increase opportunities and make properties from different registered Social Landlords available to all areas. However, properties could be restricted to people of a certain area if this was what was wanted by specifying this on the advert. Mr. Lowther advised that some discussions had taken place with private landlords about joining the scheme, however, he assured Members that only those with accredited properties would be encouraged to participate.

In response to Councillor M. Dixon, Mr. Lowther advised that research showed a 10% migration of people and that the majority only moved within a few miles. The risk areas were those where people lived on the boundary to another Authority.

Councillor Rolph welcomed the sub-regional CBL especially if it was to be a needs based system. She commented that wherever the boundaries were drawn there would be problems. She pointed out that most of the City's migration would be to Durham which was not included in the scheme. Councillor Rolph pointed out that Sunderland did not have any local authority housing, only Registered Social Landlords. She enquired whether private landlords would feel part of the scheme as they would be on a level playing field as regards tenants.

Mr. Lowther stated that people did move across local authority boundaries and that he appreciated Durham was very much on the border. However, a similar situation existed with Northumberland and North Tyneside and one of the things they had looked at was the procurement exercise. Northumberland and Durham used the same ICT and they were looking at bringing together a mutual exchange scheme. There were no plans to definitely work with those two areas but there was potential. For the moment work was being concentrated on the Tyne and Wear region. Gentoo Sunderland was very much the main provider of housing in Sunderland and it wanted to develop and join in the scheme; a memorandum of understanding had been drawn up. The smaller RSLs had not committed yet and were keen to see how things developed. Talks had not taken place with the Private Landlords Association as yet but they were looking to give the organisation the information and see how it would like to see the scheme operated and bring them on board. The Private Landlords Association would use the same application and the process could result in getting better tenants. Mr. Lowther confirmed that Gentoo was a member of the Steering Group and had supported the bid and was currently working with them. Although it was not strictly a local authority, Gentoo was party to the mutual exchange scheme.

In response to Councillor Foster's enquiry regarding managed moves, Mr. Lowther advised that under Option 4, although the authorities would adopt a common assessment process, they could still operate their own housing policy.

Councillor A. Wilson enquired about the meeting planned on the policy review timeline for November/December 2009 to meet with tenants and people on the waiting list.

Mr. Cummings advised that this had not taken place yet, however, arrangements would be made and Members provided with the details.

Ms. Tracy Guy, Service Manager, North East and Ms. Nina Cara-Collins, Regional Children's Co-ordinator (North East/Yorkshire) of Shelter were in attendance at the meeting. They proceeded to provide Members with a comprehensive presentation providing an overview of the work Shelter does across the region, the national research undertaken and in particular that done on CBL and allocations, together with key issues to consider in allocations systems.

Ms. Cara-Collins highlighted Shelter's response – Fair and Flexible to the Government consultation detailed in the presentation slides. She mentioned that there was a myth that asylum seekers were allocated all available housing and in a recent poll 54% of respondents were of this view, whereas in fact 98% was given to local residents.

Ms. Cara-Collins referred Members to the housing waiting lists included in the presentation, pointing out that Sunderland had the shortest waiting list in that it would take 1.17 years to clear.

Finally, Ms. Cara-Collins referred Members to the recommendations forwarded by Shelter in relation to CBL including:-

- to adopt a system which ensures that social housing goes to those in greatest need;
- clear guidance and flexibility on exclusions policies – no blanket policies.

Councillor M. Dixon enquired whether the Government's decision for housing benefit to be paid directly to claimants had caused any issues that have concerned Shelter.

Ms. Cara-Collins advised that research had shown that there was a reluctance to get housing benefit paid direct to landlords instead and this caused vulnerable tenants real problems as they wanted the money to be paid direct to their landlord.

Ms. Cara-Collins agreed to forward the links to the research carried out in relation to housing benefits to Mr. Cummings to circulate to Members of the Committee.

Councillor Dixon commented that the message was not getting through that only a small percentage of asylum seekers were taking housing. He suggested that more community involvement in developing policies and participation of the wider community would enable a better understanding of allocations policies.

Councillor Rolph welcomed the comments in relation to the fair and flexible consultation and commented that the recommendations were very sensible and Elected Members experience was that the same issues were emerging.

Councillor Rolph referred to the notional length of time to clear the housing list and noted that Sunderland's was the shortest. She asked the question whether if housing was being pooled into one scheme was it likely that Sunderland's waiting list would increase in length and therefore time to clear and what protection would there be to prevent this. Councillor Rolph referred to the 4-5% of Shelter's clients who came from Sunderland and to the postcodes quoted in the presentation where residents in Sunderland were coming from. She asked whether Ms. Cara-Collins and Ms. Guy were aware that the Sunderland area also included DH postcodes. Councillor Rolph enquired whether any clients were presenting with domestic violence problems.

Ms. Guy advised that with regards to domestic violence this was not presenting as a main issue as to why people contacted Shelter. There were people from other areas of Sunderland who contacted Shelter and they were aware of the different postcodes within the Sunderland area, however, the postcodes quoted were those of the majority referrals. With a sub-regional CBL, the numbers of people waiting for housing should plateau out. Newcastle had a lot of temporary accommodation, for example, which people could migrate to. The waiting times in Sunderland could increase slightly but a protection policy would eliminate some of these problems.

The Chairman asked whether Shelter representatives worked in Children's Centres.

Ms. Cara-Collins advised that they were planning to make contact with every Surestart Centre and promote the advice line and a meeting would be arranged with the local authority to ensure the staff at the centres were aware of the service. Ms. Cara-Collins added that Shelter was hoping to set up an office in Sunderland in the autumn depending on the contract.

The Chairman thanked Ms. Cara-Collins and Ms. Guy for their attendance and presentation to the meeting and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the information provided be received and noted.

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

The Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, Executive Director City Services and Executive Director Health, Housing and Adult Services submitted a joint report (copy circulated) providing the Scrutiny Committee with the findings from the inaugural Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) and a performance update which includes those areas identified by the Audit Commission (AC) as being the focus of improvement during 2010.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Gillian Robinson, Corporate Performance Monitoring Manager proceeded to brief Members on the report. She stated that performance against priorities had been reported to the Scrutiny Committee throughout 2009 as part of the quarterly performance monitoring arrangements. Ms. Robinson advised that Area Assessments may award green or red flags. Red flags highlight those areas where there were significant concerns by the inspectorate about outcomes or future

prospects and where more or different actions are required. Green flags highlight exceptional performance or outstanding improvement in outcomes through an innovative approach from which others can learn. Ms. Robinson reported that no red or green flags had been identified for Sunderland.

Ms. Robinson pointed out that in relation to Sustainable Communities two issues had been identified in the first year of the CAA area assessment as having potential to become red flags – net additional homes and affordable homes. Recession was a major risk to pace of delivery of plans to deliver new homes. Large numbers were required to meet demand. The AC had recognised that the Council and partners had begun to address this and that plans have been developed through funding from the investment scheme. In terms of performance the Local Area Agreement target had been exceeded for this year in relation to net additional homes, 185 were provided by the end of September, the target being 90. In relation to affordable homes 230 were built in 2008/09 improving on previous years and also comparing favourably with benchmarks. The level for best performing partnerships was 222 homes.

Ms. Robinson referred Members to the range of improvement activity in place detailed in Section 5.2.5 of the report. Ms. Robinson added that the Risk Assessment Matrix would be the primary tool against which Sunderland Partnership will be assessed by the CAA lead and would incorporate those issues identified as having the most potential to become red flags and green flags. She added that progress would be monitored through the Council and the Sunderland Partnership's performance management and reporting arrangements.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to paragraph 4.3 of the report which stated that 'the 2008 Place Survey identified a lack of cohesion across different communities' and he asked why this was the case.

Ms. Sal Buckler, Diversity and Inclusion Manager advised that this was not yet linking into the wider work that was being carried out across the City. Meetings would be taking place with teachers and education officers to increase the work going on in schools relating to community cohesion and she hoped to see a mainstreaming of that work and progress made.

Councillor Dixon referred to the options considered for a development of a local housing company and enquired as to whether there were any builds taking place from Gentoo other than this.

Mr. Dave Smith, Housing Strategy and Operations Manager advised that due to the economic recession Gentoo was undertaking kickstart only schemes at the moment.

Mr. Neil Cole, Manager, Planning Policy added that the credit crunch had had a substantial hit on planning and building and that builders were concentrating on schemes that were already underway. There were, however, still a number of enquiries from lots of volume builders who appeared to be getting things in place for when things improved.

Councillor Dixon stated that he was hoping that the Council and private building companies would come up with some schemes for affordable housing.

Mr. Cole advised that the Council was in the process of bringing an affordable housing policy together.

Mr. Smith referred Members to paragraph 5.2.5 concerning the current developments which included the extra care housing developments and central area developments such as the Stadium Village Masterplan and the Holmeside triangle.

Councillor Rolph reported that 350 homes were to be built on the Lambton Coke Works site and the intention was to make a start later this year. The development would contain some social and affordable housing.

Councillor Rolph expressed her disappointment that Sunderland had not received a green flag and queried what was needed to be done in order to get one as the School Meals Trust for example had described the Council's service as 'inspirational'. Councillor Rolph stated that she was delighted to see how well the Council was doing on the local environment and highlighted that Sunderland was eighth lowest per capita consumption of resources. She enquired how Sunderland compared with other deprived areas in relation to the consumption of resources.

With regard to affordable housing, it was noted that the Scrutiny Committee was undertaking a Policy Review to investigate current practices and policies across the City in relation to the way in which people access housing in Sunderland and suggested ways in which improvements could be made. In addition, it was noted that the Scrutiny Committee could add value to looking at what could be done to reduce the number of private sector vacant dwellings and that Ms. Robinson would liaise with Mr. Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, on the issue as and when appropriate.

At this point, Ms. Robinson corrected the information in the report to read that performance against the local indicator for the number of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished as a direct result of action by the Council was 181 and not 108 as stated.

Ms. Robinson responded that green flags were very difficult to get and there was no definitive criteria. The only two areas of notable practice that had been identified in Sunderland were Wellness and Domestic Violence. With regard to consumption of resources, Ms. Robinson offered to provide comparative information.

Ms. Jim Gillon added that as Sunderland was a deprived area, there was less expenditure on consumables, however, this was only part of the reason and this would be checked as things improved.

Full consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the continued good progress made by the Council and the Sunderland Partnership as described in the CAA reports be noted and those areas requiring further development to ensure that performance is actively managed.

Tackling Climate Change in Sunderland (Report 2)

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) updating the Committee on the Council's work on climate change.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Jim Gillon, Sustainability Co-ordinator, briefed the Committee on the report referring Members to the progress on Sunderland's Climate Change Action Plan detailed in the report to the Cabinet meeting on 13th January, 2010.

Mr. Gillon referred to the Employer Actions detailed in the report and highlighted the Low Carbon City Campaign launched in March 2009 with 20 major employers committing to cut their carbon emissions by 10% or more. Mr. Gillon commented that there was a much greater need to engage employers in the business community. He advised that initiatives to support this were being developed which included using the Economic Masterplan to make sure business was supported to become more low carbon.

Mr. Gillon also drew Members' attention to the initiative in relation to housing where the Council and housing partners would continue efforts to work towards insulating every possible home in Sunderland.

Mr. Gillon advised that Sunderland was continuing to get good recognition for its work around tackling climate change and referred Members to the public commitments detailed in paragraph 2.1 of the report.

Councillor Ellis commented that she was delighted to see that the Council had signed up to the public commitments. However, whether this made a difference to climate change was another matter as the main influence was the sun overhead. She stated that it was incumbent upon everyone to look after the planet.

In response to Members' enquiries as to which organisations were included in the 20 which had made the commitment to cut their carbon emissions, Mr. Gillon advised that this included the Sunderland Primary Care Trust, Sunderland University, the Mental Health Trust, Sunderland College and key private companies.

In response to Councillor Rolph, Mr. Gillon confirmed that there was no way to capture currently individual's efforts to reduce carbon emissions. The figures were only available after two years when this information would be extrapolated and an estimate made.

Councillor Rolph enquired whether there were any major employees who had not signed up to the Low Carbon City Campaign and what pressure was being brought to bear to make them sign up to the campaign.

Mr. Gillon repeated that 20 businesses had been captured. He added that from April large commercial and public sector organisations would need to sign up to the Carbon Reduction Commitment Energy Efficiency Scheme to reduce carbon emissions.

With regards to the first trials of solid wall insulation for private homes where the greatest potential exists for making carbon savings in Sunderland's existing stock, Mr. Gillon advised that the cost per property was £6,000 whereas the cost of insulation was £99.

4. RESOLVED that the progress on managing the City's carbon emissions be noted.

Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing a background to the roles and functions of both the Strategic Environmental Assessment and the Sustainability Appraisal as tools to deliver the Local Development Framework and setting out how the Council is applying both mechanisms into the land use planning process.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Neil Cole, Manager, Planning Policy was in attendance and briefed Members on the report.

Councillor Rolph enquired whether a Sustainability Appraisal report would be attached as a separate document.

Mr. Cole advised that as the policies were being written, Officers would go through each of the objectives to make sure they were going in the right direction. The core strategy and the Sustainability Appraisal that accompanies it are woven and the links made and how they have arrived at the policy.

In response to Councillor Ellis, Mr. Cole advised that individual planning applications would not have a Strategic Environmental Assessment, but that they were subject to Environmental Impact Assessments which screen the development looking at the effects and how to mitigate them.

5. RESOLVED that the issues outlined in the report be noted.

Review of Local Studies – Setting the Scene

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing an introduction to the presentation to Members around the review of local studies within Sunderland.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Vicki Medhurst, Principal Librarian – Library Development and Information, and Ms. Janet Robinson, Cultural Co-ordinator – Libraries, Heritage and Information, were in attendance and proceeded to give a presentation to the Committee on the Local Studies Provision at Sunderland Public Libraries including details of the resources available and staffing, together with areas for further development.

Mr. Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, advised that arrangements were being made to visit the Council's local studies provision and that of Newcastle City Council's and details of the proposed dates would be forwarded to Members in due course.

Councillor Rolph made the following enquiries:-

- where the conservation advice work came from?
- when digitising the photographs were checks being carried out as to copyright?
- was there a Friends Group?
- had any thought been given to having an ex member as a local history champion?

In response, Ms. Medhurst stated that they used the Tyne and Wear Archives Service for the conservation advice work. With regards to digitisation, they were making sure they had the necessary documentation otherwise they would not be able to digitise those photographs. They did not have a friends group but thought would be given to having one and in relation to a member local history champion.

Councillor M. Dixon commended the service. However he commented on the lack of space and enquired whether there were any rooms they could move to.

Ms. Medhurst stated that if ever there was the potential for growth, it was recognised that local studies would benefit.

Councillor Ellis thanked the Officers for their work which she stated was very important to ordinary people. She felt that it was a good idea to expand into other areas and relieve pressure on services.

Ms. Medhurst stated that she would pass on Members' comments to frontline staff.

6. RESOLVED that the information contained in the presentation be noted.

Bowes Railway Museum

The Executive Director of City Services submitted a report (copy circulated) updating Members on the current position with regard to Bowes Railway Museum, as requested by the Members of the Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Vicki Medhurst, Principal Librarian – Library Development and Information advised Members that Gateshead Council had confirmed in correspondence dated November 2009 that they had withdrawn from funding the Railway but would continue to provide Officer time and support.

7. RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted and that further updates on the future with regard to the progress of the Railway continue to be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee.

Strategic Planning Process 2010/2011

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) apprising the Committee of the proposals for the Strategic Planning Process 2010/2011 and the role of the Committee in the process.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Stuart Cuthbertson, Policy Officer presented the report to the Committee. He highlighted the proposed publication of a new form of the Corporate Improvement Plan (CIP), the involvement of the Scrutiny Committees as part of the preparation of the Service Improvement Plans during the Strategic Planning Process 2010/2011 and their monitoring and review during the course of 2010/2011 as detailed in paragraph 6 of the report.

Councillor Rolph stated that she was delighted at the change of format of the CIP and suggested that if the jargon was cut out and things were expressed in plain English there would be greater engagement with Members. She added that certain issues such as heritage were not covered by one service and it was important to get rid of the silo mentality.

The Chairman concurred with Councillor Rolph that it was important to cut down on the professional jargon so everyone could start to engage in the process.

Mr. Jon Beaney, Policy Manager advised the Committee that the current CIP, which was a seven hundred page document, had been held up as best practice by the Audit Commission. However the format of the CIP was being revised in order to meet the requirements of the Council's real audience. Officers were putting a number of methodologies in place to ensure cross cutting issues were picked up and asking Heads of Service to inform them of cross cutting issues and with whom in order they were reflected appropriately.

8. RESOLVED that the contents of the report and the key issues identified by the self-assessments undertaken in respect of services of relevance to the Committee be noted.

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) seeking 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).

Mr. Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, referred Members to paragraph 3.5 detailing further revisions to the initial proposals in relation to the Councillor Call for Action mechanism. He advised that all the Scrutiny Committees were being consulted. Mr. Cummings referred Members to the proposed criteria detailed in paragraph 3.2 to assist in the determination of the appropriateness of undertaking an investigation triggered either by the non-mandatory/CCfA referral route. Mr. Cummings informed Members that the comments of the Scrutiny Committee would be referred to the Management Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

Councillor Foster commented that it was an excellent document and easy to understand.

Councillor Ellis enquired whether the two existing Councillor Call for Action referrals would have to be resubmitted and follow the revised mechanism.

Mr. Cummings advised that it was up to Members to decide if they would prefer the Calls for Action to be resubmitted or continue as they were.

Councillor Ellis stated that she would like the CCfA referrals to continue as she did not want to lose the nine months that it had taken so far to process them and that she would welcome anything which speeded up the process.

9. RESOLVED that the comments of the Scrutiny Committee as detailed above be submitted to the next meeting of the Management Scrutiny Committee and that it be noted that the Committee was in agreement that the two existing CCfAs should not be subject to the revised procedure but continue to be processed with a view to reaching an early conclusion.

Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the Period 1st February 2010 – 31st May, 2010

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive's Forward Plan for the period 1st January, 2010 – 30th April, 2010 which relate to the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Helen Lancaster, Assistant Scrutiny Officer, introduced the report and advised that an updated version of the Forward Plan published on 14th January had been tabled for Members' attention.

10. RESOLVED that the Forward Plan be received and noted.

Work Programme 2009-10

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information the current Work Programme for the Committee's work during the 2009-10 Council year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Helen Lancaster, Assistant Scrutiny Officer, invited the Committee to note the work programme.

Councillor Rolph asked that a report on built heritage and the report to Cabinet on the Sustainability Policy be added to the work programme for the Committee.

Mr. Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, having advised that this would be done, it was:-

11. RESOLVED that the work programme be received and noted and the additional reports as detailed above be scheduled accordingly.

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

(Signed) D. ERRINGTON,
Chairman.