

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on THURSDAY, 13th MARCH, 2014 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Tate in the Chair

Councillors Bonallie, Kay, T. Martin, Shattock, Waller and N. Wright.

Also Present:-

Councillor Williams

Councillor H. Trueman (in respect of item 4 – Sunderland Safer Partnership, Key Achievements).

Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone and thanked Philip Foster, Chief Operating Officer at Sunderland Care and Support and his staff for offering to host the meeting and providing a tour of the facility.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Howe and also from Ms A Blakey.

Minutes of the last Meeting of the Committee held on 13th February, 2014

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 13th February, 2014 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no interests declared.

Safer Sunderland Partnership: Key Achievements 2013/14 and Strategic Priorities 2014/15 and Update on the Work of the Police and Crime Panel

The Lead Policy Officer for Community Safety submitted a report (copy circulated), which highlighted for Members' information, some of the Safer Sunderland Partnership's key achievements in delivering the Safer Sunderland Strategy during the last year, the key strategic priorities for the partnership for the year ahead,

together with the work of the Police and Crime Panel (the statutory scrutiny mechanism in relation to the elected Police and Crime Commissioner).

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor H. Trueman, Deputy Leader, introduced the report advising that The Safer Sunderland Partnership had been informed by the Police and Crime Commissioner for Northumbria (PCC) that there would be no funding for Community Safety Partnerships for 2014/15.

Stuart Douglass, Lead Policy Officer for Community Safety, confirmed that for 2014/15 onwards the Home Office indicated that PCCs would have local discretion on whether to continue to support partnerships from the main police grant. On 17th February the PCC met with partnership Chairs and Lead Officers to confirm that she would not be passporting any funding to the Partnerships. Councillor Trueman, added that perhaps this was an issue that the Scrutiny Committee might like to look at.

With regard to crime in general Mr Douglass advised that for the first time in 10 years Sunderland had seen an increase in overall crime. Nevertheless Sunderland was performing relatively well when compared to the other 33 Police Force areas across England and Wales that had also seen increases in overall rates of crime.

In conclusion Councillor Trueman advised the Committee that a meeting had been arranged with Vera Baird (PCC) on Thursday 5th June, 2014 to which all members of the Council would be invited.

In response to an enquiry from the Chairman, Mr Douglass advised that the Integrated Offender Management Unit brought together a group comprising Police, Probation and Prison Officers together with drug and alcohol abuse personnel to help manage the behaviour of offenders, which would include visits up to 2 to 3 times a week. The loss of the PCC funding would have an impact on the Unit but it was too soon to assess any long term effect. It was also worth noting that the Probation Service was to become a new Trust with regard to the work it carried out in respect of community offending.

Councillor N. Wright referred to discussion on the increase in shoplifting and the circumstantial evidence that to a large extent it was items such as nappies and foodstuffs that were going missing. Councillor Trueman and Mr Douglass advised that there was no evidence that the downturn in the economy and the changes to the benefits system had driven desperate people to steal. It was thought however that 'professional' shoplifters were turning to items like nappies rather than higher end goods because the state of the economy and the benefits changes had created a 'demand' for these essential products.

Councillor Wright reported that the local police Inspector at the last North Sunderland Area Committee had attributed the rise in shoplifting in the area to the recent opening of Tesco and Sainsbury's stores which had perhaps provided greater opportunity for theft. Councillor Wright stated that it was therefore extremely important that members had a formal analysis of the shoplifting figures, including a breakdown of exactly which items were being stolen so that trends could be identified and conclusions drawn based on empirical evidence.

Councillor Shattock concurred with Councillor's Wright's suggestion and advised that she had asked Inspector Carthy to provide a breakdown of what was being stolen. She added that she had attended a governors training session the previous day hosted by Southwick Primary School. During discussions, the issue of the recent sharp increase in male suicides had been raised. Although the Head Teacher wasn't able to provide solid evidence, in her professional opinion, the rise was being driven by debt, pressure from loan sharks, broken relationships alcoholism, cuts in welfare and sheer basic poverty.

Councillor Williams advised that current experience at Next had indicated that greater numbers of children's clothes were being stolen than was previously the case. There were also examples of children walking out of the store dressed in stolen new clothes leaving the old clothes in the changing room.

Councillor Kay stated that he had previously worked within the Probation Service and advised that the changes within that organisation would be seismic. There was to be a new Tier One provider or perhaps two if the region was sub divided into North and South areas. He referred to the performance of the Safer Sunderland Partnership which he believed displayed underlying good trends. The sting in the tail however was the funding cessation which would place in jeopardy a lot of the good work being undertaken at street level. A critical mass would soon be reached where there would be no option but to release funding. He referred to the format of the report which although containing a lot narrative did not provide a level of detail with regard to specific inputs and outputs. This detail would be helpful for members in highlighting trends. With regard to a further enquiry from Councillor Kay, Mr Douglass advised that although the 'Safer Sunderland Partnership Delivery Plan' was not a public document, he could not see a problem in sharing it with members or providing a briefing. With regard to the detailed level of performance data referred to by Councillor Kay, he advised that such data was reported to the Partnership and he could circulate a copy for members information if required.

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Announced Inspection Action Plan – Progress Monitoring Report

The Head of Children's Safeguarding, People Directorate, submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the committee with a further update on the progress of the implementation of the action plan arising from the announced inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services which took place in February / March 2012 and also information on the new Inspection Process introduced by Ofsted in November 2013.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor T. Martin referred to Plan Ref No. G1 regarding the online staff questionnaire issued to gather information on ethnicity and asked if completion was compulsory. Meg Boustead replied that it was not and that members of staff could elect not to do so if they wished.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Williams, Ms Boustead advised that she believed staff levels were appropriate however maternity leave, sickness and

suspension all meant that maintaining these levels was difficult. Councillor Williams referred to the use of part time staff and Ms Boustead confirmed that there were a number of part time staff and a multitude of different flexible working arrangements.

With regard to an enquiry from Councillor Williams regarding timescales in dealing with complaints, Helen Lancaster advised that she would source the information and supply her with a copy.

In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Williams, Ms Boustead advised that there were currently four children being privately fostered in Sunderland.

With regard to the new Ofsted inspection regime, Ms Boustead advised that the format would differ significantly from previous inspections and would be very much geared towards the experiences of children and families. The only local authority in the North East to have undergone the inspection to date was Hartlepool.

The Chairman referred to the previous involvement of the Scrutiny Committee in the inspection process and asked if this was likely to be replicated. Ms Boustead advised that this was unlikely. The process was likely to be much tighter in focus concentrating on the service users and the difference made to their lives rather than elected members and senior officers.

In response to an enquiry from the Chairman, Ms. Boustead advised that weekly preparation meetings were being held in anticipation of an inspection and that the first draft of the self assessment had been completed.

Councillor N. Wright having asked what areas were likely to require improvement, Ms. Boustead stated that this would involve the quality of assessments, the quality of plans and a clear understanding of the required outcomes for the family and the child. In common with the introduction of any new regime, it was often difficult to change established ways of thinking. This was especially the case when people were really busy and under stress, where the natural response was to revert to the default position of doing things the way they had always been done.

Councillor Shattock welcomed the criteria upon which ofsted would judge the Council as detailed in paragraph 4.2 of the report.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Waller, Ms Boustead advised that opportunities as child protection volunteers were available for students coming out of university. Councillor Waller referred to rumours that mental health would face the brunt of funding cuts to be made by the CCG. Ms Boustead replied that as far as she was aware no cuts were imminent with regard to tier 3 services and there were definitely no cuts being made to tier 2 services. Ms Lancaster advised that she and Ms Boustead would investigate the issue on Councillor Waller's behalf and report back to her.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- i) the report be received and noted and;
- ii) given that action plan had now been monitored for a period of two years and that a new inspection regime was forthcoming, the Progress

Monitoring report in respect of this action plan be no longer submitted to the Committee.

Health, Housing and Adult Services Scrutiny Panel Referral: Draft Housing Financial Assistance Policy April 2014 – March 2017

The Lead Scrutiny Member for Health Housing and Adult Services submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Scrutiny Committee with the Health Housing and Adult Services Scrutiny Panel's findings and recommendations in relation to the draft Housing Financial Assistance Policy April 2014 – March 2017.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer presented the report highlighting the conclusions and recommendations arising from the panel's investigations.

Consideration having been given to the report it was:-

4. RESOLVED that approval be given to the following recommendations from the Health, Housing and Adult Services Scrutiny Panel:-

- i) that the Scrutiny Committee supports the Draft Housing Financial Assistance Policy recognising the need to make revisions in light of current housing practice and financial considerations;
- ii) that in agreeing the policy the Scrutiny Committee also acknowledges the significance within the policy of developing information, advice and guidance within local communities, including enabling local communities to gather and manage their own intelligence, to ensure that areas receive advice which is relevant to the needs and demands of that area;
- iii) that recognition is given to the importance of crime reduction measures including specialist advice and guidance within potentially vulnerable areas as a way of increasing an areas resilience against crime; and
- iv) that consideration is given to scoping potential funding options for future Decent Homes work including exploring the use of the value of the loans book within the regulatory framework of the policy.

Children's Services Scrutiny Panel Referral: Children and Young People's Plan Refresh

The Lead Scrutiny Member for Children's Services submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Scrutiny Committee with the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel's findings and recommendations in relation to the refresh of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP).

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer presented the report highlighting the conclusions and recommendations arising from the panel's investigations.

Consideration having been given to the report it was:-

5. RESOLVED that approval be given to the recommendation of the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel that the CYPP Plan refresh makes reference to the work of area committees, People and Place Boards and frontline councillors in communities and acknowledges the potential influence and involvement that these groups can have in delivering on the key objectives of the CYPP Plan

Notice of Key Decisions

The Chief Executive 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 11th February, 2014.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Kay reiterated his previous comments about the lack of detail provided on the notice and asked whether any progress had been made in addressing this. Ms Lancaster advised that investigations were continuing into the most appropriate means of providing more information about the decisions to be made. It was intended that the results would be considered at the next development day as there was only one Scrutiny Committee left in the current municipal year. In the meantime where Members had specific queries they should contact her in advance of the Scrutiny Committee in order that further detail could be provided at the meeting.

Councillor Kay having requested that the minutes continued to reflect the discussions so the issue was not allowed to slip, it was:-

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

Annual Work Programme 2013/14

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work being undertaken during the 2013/14 council year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

7. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme be received and noted.

Lead Scrutiny Member Update

The Lead Scrutiny Members submitted a joint report (copy circulated) providing an update to the Scrutiny Committee regarding the work of each of the six Lead Scrutiny Members and supporting Panels.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Consideration having been given to the report it was:-

8. RESOLVED that the update of the Lead Scrutiny Members be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

(Signed) R.D. TATE,
Chairman.