

SCRUTINY COORDINATING COMMITTEE

Chair: Cllr Katherine Mason-Gage

Vice-Chair: Cllr Tracy Dodds

Committee Members: Mark Burrell, Michael Hartnack, Beth Jones, Lindsey Leonard, Ciaran Morrissey, Antony Mullen, Alex Samuels, Pat Smith, Melanie Thornton, John Usher and Peter Walton.

I am pleased to be able to present the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee's annual report that provides a summary of the work of the Committee over the last municipal year. It has been another challenging year with both global and domestic events impacting on everyone's lives. The Committee has looked at a number of issues through its work programme and Members have contributed and engaged throughout the year.

Budget and financial scrutiny remains one of the key remits of the Committee. A range of comprehensive reports are submitted to the Committee over the municipal year including around the Capital Programme, Proposed Council Tax, Revenue Budget and the Budget Planning Framework and Medium-Term Financial Plan. Members of the Committee continue to monitor and challenge the budget as well as continuing to acknowledge the current financial situation for the local government sector.

Performance management is another cornerstone of the Committee's work programme, and we continue to monitor and challenge Council performance, achievements and progress against a range of issues across the key themes of Dynamic Smart City, Health Smart City, Vibrant Smart City and Organisational Development. This year has seen further developments with the presentation of performance information focusing on a different key theme for each quarter and inviting relevant key officers for that area to attend. It is hoped that this provides a greater focus and benefit to the Committee and will be reviewed during work planning sessions for the new municipal year.

The Committee also established a task and finish working group during the year to look at the health and wellbeing of the workforce. The working group has looked at how the council supports the health and wellbeing of the workforce through policy development and key initiatives as well as identifying the challenges and key achievements in employee health and wellbeing. The report and recommendations are aimed at supporting and highlighting the work that is already taking place around this important area of work, as well as recognising some of the key challenges that still exist. The report will be submitted to Cabinet in the new municipal year.

In addition to this piece of work the Committee also received an update on the current position in relation to sickness absence. The Committee were interested in better understanding the sickness absence position within the Council and the measures to support employees to remain healthy at work. This was aligned to the Organisational Health performance measures and the task and finish working group that was also taking place at the time. There was a good level of discussion, and it provided the Committee with an overview of the situation and the various initiatives and support for employees within the Council.

The Committee has continued to monitor the vision and delivery of the Smart City programme, particularly in the context of the impact on City Plan aspirations. Concerns were raised during discussions at the standard of the reinstatement work undertaken by fibre broadband providers following the installation of cabling. Members concerns were to be passed to the relevant officer for further investigation and ensure appropriate rectification. Members also acknowledged the importance of this work in terms of strengthening partnership working, extending ultra-fast broadband across the city, introducing a Sunderland App and enabling digital inclusion.

The cost-of-living crisis continues to make life difficult for people across the UK and is attributable to factors that are beyond the influence or control of local Councils. The Committee took an active interest in the actions being taken across our city to support residents with their financial wellbeing. Members highlighted a number of issues to officers from their own experiences including around foodbank usage, welcome spaces, Household Support Fund, policies on evictions, money advice and interacting with those harder to reach residents. The Committee recognised the positive and supportive work that was being undertaken through the ongoing development of the Links for Life project, the production of a fuel poverty action plan, boiler replacements for those in crisis, identifying the most vulnerable households and supporting emotional health and financial resilience through partnership working with the voluntary and community sector.

The updated City Plan and indicative timeline assurance process were also submitted to the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee for consideration during the year. Members received a comprehensive overview of the updated plan and provided a number of comments and observations including around addressing the decline of the City's retail and leisure offer, greater reference to partner involvement and the terminology used in the plan. These comments were to be reported back to Cabinet and given further consideration with the continued updating and development of the plan in the future.

In finishing this summary of the work of the Committee, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Members for their support, contribution and continued cooperation throughout the year. I would also like, on behalf of all Members of the Committee, to put on record our appreciation to officers and partners for providing their expertise and knowledge to the work of the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee.

Councillor Katherine Mason-Gage
Chair of the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee