

At a meeting of the SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on TUESDAY, 15TH MARCH, 2011 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor S. Watson in the Chair

Councillors M. Dixon, Errington, Kay, McClennan, Rolph and A. Wilson.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Essl, Foster, Maddison and I Richardson.

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee held on 15th February, 2011

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15th February, 2011 be confirmed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

Item 4 – 'Role of Culture in Supporting Sustainable Communities'

Councillor Rolph declared a personal interest in the item as an employee of Durham County Records Office.

Role of Culture in Supporting Sustainable Communities – Policy Review 2010/11 – Living History North East

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which introduced a presentation from Janette Hilton of Living History North East on the Work of the Group in recording the history and heritage of local communities in the City.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Hilton provided Members with a comprehensive presentation on the history of the organisation and its current areas of work, the key points highlighted included:-

- the Centre was established in 1995 and was dedicated to recording the living memory on audio/video tape;

- it employed a creative use of Oral History to engage the whole community;
- it aimed to raise the profile of the region's cultural heritage;
- the Centre was a volunteer led initiative, with a strong community emphasis;
- it was established as the first regional centre in 2007;
- the Centre was a nationally recognised flagship project.

Partners and networks using the Centre's facilities included Youth Projects, Schools, Heritage Projects, Care/Residential/Sheltered Facilities, Universities, Councils, Museums, Libraries and Archives.

The Oral History Centre was a multi-faceted community resource which provided a regional centre of excellence, was a heritage site/visitor centre with an award winning Victorian Garden. It provided an educational resource for all ages providing both a museum like facility and a training centre.

Ms. Hilton then proceeded to address questions and comments from Members regarding the Centre's work.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor McClennan, Ms. Hilton advised that her salary had been funded by Northern Rock for a five year period. The organisation received no core funding and accrued financial resources through contract work and fees for services provided. The organisation would be looking for financial support for its next conference from the Council's Area Committees.

Councillor Rolph stated that the truest comment Ms. Hilton had made in her presentation was of the importance of heritage to local people, however the term 'heritage' was not one that many people recognised. She referred to plans of the current Government to encourage Arts organisations to seek funding from wealthy philanthropists and asked if this was a route that Living History would look to follow. She also asked what were the organisation's relationships with other Arts Bodies like and whether there was a degree of competition.

Ms. Hilton replied that although people often didn't recognise the term 'heritage' they understood about how they felt regarding the City's history and had a pride in their identity. With regard to competitiveness, Ms. Hilton did not believe that it was an issue. Organisations tended to have their own niches and specialisms. With Living History North East they were the only regional history centre in the region and prided itself on offering a complete educational programme for clients.

Councillor Rolph hoped that competition would not be a problem, however she feared that in the future there would be a more competitive edge particularly in the sourcing of resources.

In response to a further question from Councillor Rolph, Ms. Hilton believed that the demise of the Museums and Archives Council would not have a detrimental effect on the organisation as it had a very specialist market.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Errington, Ms. Hilton confirmed that the Centre did take part in the Heritage open days and were meeting with Jane Hall of the City Council to investigate the possible development of a Strategic Heritage Partnership.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dixon, Ms. Hilton advised that the talks based on the Centre usually attracted around 40 people.

Councillor McClennan having stressed the importance of preserving the oral history of the City's Bangladeshi Community and the need to reconnect the East End to the City, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the presentation be received and noted.

Role of Culture in Supporting Sustainable Communities – Draft Report

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which appended for Members' comments, a copy of the draft report of the Committee's policy review into the role of culture in supporting sustainable communities in Sunderland.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Rolph stated that she would like to see reference to a desire to break down barriers between organisations and departments. She believed that a lot of people continued to work in silos being blinkered and focused on processes rather than seeing the link with other services. She confirmed that she would feed in any additional comments directly to Mr. Diamond.

Trina Murray, Service Development Manager, advised that as an example of partnership working, Culture and Tourism had been working extremely closely with Keith Lowes and his planning team in respect of the development of the Wearmouth Jarrow World Heritage bid.

Julie Gray, Head of Community Services, highlighted that there was a recognition in the review of the value of the voluntary sector in developing and delivering the wide and diverse cultural offer in the City.

Councillors Kay, Rolph and McClennan believed that the review was light in respect of the role of ethnic diversity and the part played by the BME community in supporting sustainable communities through culture. Councillor McClennan confirmed that the BME network would be more than happy to engage in the review process. Mr. Diamond confirmed that he could include a recommendation to this effect in the report and it was something the Committee could pick up as part of next year's Work Programme.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- (i) the draft recommendations, together with Members' comments and amendments, be included in the final review report of local studies by the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee;
- (ii) the final review report be presented to the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee at its April 2011 meeting prior to its submission to Cabinet.

Housing Financial Assistance (FAP) 2011-2014

The Executive Director of Health, Housing and Adult Services, submitted a report (copy circulated) presenting a copy of the Council's Housing Financial Assistance Policy (FAP) 2011-2014 which had been approved by Cabinet at its meeting held on 9th March, 2011.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Alan Caddick, Head of Housing, was in attendance to present the report and address any questions or comments from Members.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor McClennan, Mr. Caddick advised that the renewal areas referred to in paragraph 4.7 of the report were in Castletown, Hendon and Hetton Downs. Councillor McClennan described the report as fabulous but one which also begged the question, how was it to be publicised? She believed that the long streets together with properties in Millfield and Hendon would make ideal starter homes and suggested that the strategy was publicised in those areas. Mr. Caddick replied that as part of the restructure of his service there would be an increased area focus based on the boundaries of the Council's five Area Committees. Each area would have its own area team, including an Empty Properties Officer and Housing Case Officer. Advice and guidance would also be focused locally.

Councillor Kay referred to the FAP items referenced as an appendix to the report. He stated that some would be easy and painless to address and some would be moderately or very challenging. He asked where was it felt that the greatest challenge would be presented. Mr. Caddick replied that the greatest challenge would come from certain client groups. A major problem was that people often left it too late to seek help. There was a need to encourage people to engage as early as possible in the process. People often failed to do so for both cultural and personal reasons. Helping people to overcome this reticence was the major challenge. The service would endeavour to facilitate and enable clients to access advice however there would be occasions when they may need to speak to someone else.

Councillor Rolph acknowledged that the report had been written in a very flexible fashion in order to cover a wide range of circumstances and welcomed that a degree of lateral thinking had gone into its drafting. She referred to the policy aims as detailed on page 24 of the agenda and asked if Sunderland would look to grant green loans to improve insulation. Mr. Caddick replied that it was something that his service would look to grow and it was probable that the Government Green Deal Scheme would change the current operating environment. This had been referenced in the report and it was something the service would look to increase the

profile of. The service would also be developing a Low Carbon Homes Plan and be looking at ways to access loans to help retro-fit existing stock.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Rolph regarding the difficulties and expense involved in making improvements to listed buildings and those in conservation areas, Mr. Caddick advised that each case would be taken on its own merits. The real focus was ensuring that homes were decent. If a home in a conservation area or a listed building was not to a decent standard then it would be considered under the same criteria as any other.

Councillor Rolph referred to the Policy and asked if it could be used by residents to access loans to improve unadopted streets to an appropriate standard. Mr. Caddick replied that he would never say never, however what was needed was a more fundamental approach and a need to think about scale. An option appraisal would be required for each area and any solution would need to be sustainable.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dixon regarding Council mortgages, Mr. Caddick advised that to date, 7 mortgages had been approved at a total value of £827,000.

Councillor Dixon asked if Gentoo were the Registered Provider of Social Housing referred to in paragraph 4.11 of the report. Mr. Caddick advised that ISOS was the provider referred to and that the Government had indicated that the Mortgage Rescue Scheme was likely to continue. Councillor Dixon referred to the importance of the scheme and asked who fixed the market rent. Mr. Caddick replied that ISOS was a Registered Social Landlord. Different types of properties would have different levels of rent however all would be set within the range of the fair rent scheme.

Councillor Kay expressed surprise that the average property price for those properties concerned with the scheme was £165,000 as he had assumed they would be in the £50,000 - £90,000 range. Mr. Caddick advised that this was because the majority of the mortgages were on newer properties.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dixon, Mr. Caddick advised that some property surveys were carried out by the Council and some by other agencies. Council personnel who carried out the surveys were all Chartered Surveyors, there was no conflict of interest. In response to enquiries from the Chairman, Mr. Caddick advised that other agencies were aware of the Council's housing policies as they were all public documents. The Council's scheme differed from High Street lenders in that it would lend at 90% of the property price rather than the usual 70%.

The Chairman having thanked Mr. Caddick for his report, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Draft Annual Report of the Committee

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which presented the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee Annual Report for approval as part of the overall Scrutiny Annual Report 2010/11 for submission to Council.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Rolph having suggested the inclusion of reference that the document had been strengthened through the use of pre Cabinet Scrutiny and that the Committee had welcomed and embraced this opportunity, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that approval be given to the Annual Report for inclusion in the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2010/2011.

Forward Plan – key Decisions for the Period 1st March, 2011 – 30th June, 2011

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 1st March to 30th June, 2011 which related to the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members having expressed concern that they had not had the opportunity to look at the Internal Waste Plan prior to its submission to Cabinet, it was:-

6. RESOLVED that the contents of the Forward Plan be noted.

Work Programme 2010-11

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which attached for Members' information the current Work Programme for the Committee's work during the 2010-11 council year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Members having noted that they would receive a general report in the next municipal year's Work Programme on energy consumption in schools and the effect of budget cuts on this, it was:-

7. RESOLVED that the Committee's Work Programme for 2010-11 be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked everyone for their attendance and wishing them a safe journey home.

(Signed) S. WATSON,
Chairman.