

At a meeting of the ENVIRONMENT AND ATTRACTIVE CITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on MONDAY, 14TH FEBRUARY, 2011 at 6.00 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Miller in the Chair

Councillors Ball, E. Gibson, Kelly, Padgett, Tye, Wakefield, L. Walton, Wood and A. Wright

Also Present:-

Councillor Tate - Chair of Management Scrutiny Committee

Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee held on 17th January, 2011

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 17th January, 2011 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Sunderland 'the Place' Policy Review 2010/11: Progress Report

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which informed Members of the progress made on the Committee's Policy Review for 2010/11 into Sunderland 'the Place'.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Helen Lancaster, Acting Scrutiny Officer, presented the report and updated Members on the progress made to date. Ms Lancaster also advised that the meeting with Sharon Hodgson MP would now be taking place on 25th February, 2011 and that Councillor D. Wilson had asked to attend the March meeting of the Committee to provide his view on Sunderland 'the Place' as the Portfolio Holder for Safer City and Culture.

Councillor Kelly thanked the Scrutiny Team for their hard work in gathering evidence for the Policy Review.

The Chairman thanked Ms Lancaster for her report and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the progress to date be received and noted.

Sunderland 'the Place' Policy Review 2010/11: The World Cup 2018 Bid: Host City DVD

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which informed Members of the DVD which was produced for the World Cup 2018 Bid where Sunderland was awarded Host City Status. The report also provided Members with an opportunity to view the DVD.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

The Chairman advised that the item had been withdrawn from the agenda.

Green Infrastructure Strategy Framework

The Deputy Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which informed Members of the preparation of the Green Infrastructure Strategy Framework.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Neil Cole, Planning Policy Manager, presented the report and advised Members that the framework would also be presented to Planning and Highways Committee before being referred to Cabinet. The Cabinet would be advised of any comments made by the Committee.

Mr Cole advised the Committee of the proposed principles and main strands of work which made up the framework and stated that some of the strands, such as the steering group, were already progressing. The Green Infrastructure was the network of open spaces and countryside that surrounded the City and permeated through the built areas. Parks, pedestrian routes and cycle paths all made up parts of the green infrastructure and helped to improve the environment within the city.

The Chairman commented that the report seemed to be overly complex and the priorities identified were competing with each other.

Mr Cole agreed to look at the format of the report. There had been work done on developing the priorities and further work was to be undertaken.

Councillor Tye queried whether the reference to South Sunderland was correct as there was no longer a South Area Regeneration Framework, with the areas previously covered by this Framework now being included in the East and West areas.

Mr Cole advised that the Area Regeneration Frameworks had not been used; instead the areas, known as districts, identified for the strategy framework were North, South, Central, Coalfield and Washington.

With regard to the district green infrastructure corridors Councillor Tye asked for clarification of whether the Ryhope to Silksworth route would be to Silksworth Recreation Park or Silksworth Sports Centre; and queried how feasible the Claxheugh to Silksworth route was.

Mr Cole agreed to look into this and provide Councillor Tye with the information.

The Chairman referred to the suggestion that Section 106 Planning Agreement monies be used for the green infrastructure; he did not think that Members would be agreeable to this use of Section 106 money. There were regularly criticisms that the Section 106 monies were not spent appropriately.

Mr Cole advised that the intention was not to use Section 106 funding for this framework but to fund schemes that were in progress.

Councillor Kelly added that the Section 106 funding needed to be accounted for; ward councillors needed to have an input in how the funds were spent. There were often issues raised at the Area Committees as the Section 106 money sometimes seemed to disappear.

The Chairman then queried how new open space could be created in the City Centre and asked whether this was linked in with the future plans for the development of the City Centre.

Mr Cole advised that there could be the opportunity to include open space within the future redevelopment of the Groves Cranes and Vaux sites.

The Chairman expressed his surprise at the city having a low level of tree cover; there were a large number of trees within the city, especially in Washington.

Mr Cole advised that the information was taken from historic data and that there was currently a green space audit being undertaken.

The Chairman then referred to the references to Washington 'New Town' querying whether this title was still in use.

Councillor Kelly advised that Washington was no longer considered a New Town and added that a lot of the green space within Washington was not owned by the Council.

Mr Cole agreed to update the report to reflect the fact that Washington was no longer considered to be a New Town.

The Chairman then commented on the Steering Group which had been set up; he felt that the membership of 68, with 34 being Council Officers, was too large to be able to effectively steer the project. He felt there was a requirement to reduce the size of the group.

Mr Cole advised that the group was that large as there was a need for representatives of different departments to be on the steering group. At the meetings of the group there was normally between 15 and 20 attendees.

In closing the Chairman stated that he was supportive of the strategy but was disappointed by the document. He thanked Mr Cole for his attendance.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a. The Green Infrastructure Strategy Framework be endorsed as the basis for the production of a Green Infrastructure Strategy, and
- b. The Committee's comments be reported to Cabinet for consideration.

Public Conveniences

The Executive Director of City Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which advised Members of the current provision of public toilets in the City and how the scale and method of provision may need to adapt in response to the changing financial and other circumstances since the last report to the Committee in April 2010.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Les Clark, Head of Street Scene, presented the report and advised that there was a national decline in the number of public conveniences.

Mr Clark advised that the need for public conveniences within Houghton town centre had been identified by a Task and Finish Working Group which had been set up by the Coalfield Area Committee. However there was not the budget available to provide a new public convenience within Houghton and as

such there had been a need to look at alternative methods of provision, including a community toilet scheme similar to those which had been operating in other authority areas including Richmond-upon-Thames.

Mr Clark drew Members attention to the plan which had been circulated to Members showing the locations of businesses with toilets which could be used as part of a community toilets scheme for the centre of Houghton Le Spring. If a scheme were to be implemented there would be signposting to direct members of the public to the participating businesses and there would be potential benefits to businesses as a result of increased foot fall. The scheme in Richmond had provided businesses with a contribution from the council to cover the additional expenses as a result of the increased usage of the facilities.

Councillor Kelly welcomed the proposals to introduce public toilets into Houghton however he expressed concerns over how the proposed scheme would work. He also referred to the poor condition of the facilities at the beach resorts; the Council was trying to encourage people to attend events at the sea front and there was a requirement for there to be the infrastructure to support tourism.

Councillor Tye queried where the budget would be found to implement the scheme, if funding was provided by the Area Committees it would only be short term. He also queried why the Library and Sports Centre shown on the map were not used for public conveniences as both of these would be council owned.

Mr Clark advised that some of the facilities were not up to standard and would require investment if they were to be used as public conveniences. The toilets at Houghton Library for example would require upgrades if they were to be used as they would not be able to cope with being used by large numbers of people; some businesses such as cafés had better quality facilities than those the Council could provide. It was not expected that there would be high costs involved in the operation of the scheme, other authorities paid businesses between £200 and £600 per year, and it was hoped that the costs would be able to be covered by the existing budget.

Councillor Wakefield expressed his disappointment that since the lack of public conveniences in Houghton had first been raised in 2003 the only progress made had been the production of a map showing the location of businesses in the area. Some of the businesses identified were not suitable for use in the scheme, the gym had its toilets upstairs and Broadway House was a government building and it was unlikely they would want members of the public to be accessing the building. Public Houses were also unlikely to be suitable as most shoppers would not want to go into a pub to use the toilet facilities. Some of the premises listed were also closed during the day. It was his opinion that the only real solution would be for the Council to provide a proper public convenience within Houghton town centre.

Councillor Wood commented that this was an interesting report; he stated that there was the assumption that there was a requirement for the provision of a network of public conveniences and queried whether there was any evidence that the network would be used. He did not see a problem with the use of private provision however it would need to be supplementary to the public conveniences. He expressed surprise and concern over the lack of budget provision for maintenance and refurbishment and asked how much budget was needed. He also commented that there was a requirement for there to be public conveniences at the Central Train Station, although this was beyond the control of the Council.

Mr Clark agreed to provide information regarding usage and costs.

The Chairman added that it would be useful to know the costs of building and maintaining public conveniences.

Councillor Kelly commented that the use of mainstream funding to build new conveniences would prevent the refurbishment of others. He also queried the £100,000 estimated cost of building a public convenience as this seemed to be a lot of money to build a toilet. There were 15 main shopping areas within Sunderland and each of these should have public conveniences.

Mr Clark advised that the cost of building a public convenience was based around full Disability Discrimination Act compliance; the full refurbishment of existing facilities could be cost effective.

Councillor Kelly queried whether the effectiveness of allowing private companies to operate public conveniences had been investigated as there may be companies who would be willing to operate them.

Mr Clark advised that in the mid 1980's there had been licenses to operate public conveniences given to private companies. Generally these facilities had been underused and had not been successful.

Councillor Padgett commented that the gents at Park Lane were closed and there was no signage directing people to the conveniences. There was a need to look into the opening and signing of existing public conveniences.

The Chairman advised that the Legible City project was meant to have improved this situation.

Mr Clark stated that there was no denying that the existing provision was deteriorating.

The Chairman expressed concerns over the level of general dissatisfaction with the public toilet provision. He was looking forward to receiving a further, more detailed report and was pleased to see a potential solution to the ongoing problems with lack of provision in Houghton. There was a need for the Council to provide facilities for residents and tourists and while there was no legal duty to provide public toilets there was a moral duty. It was

disappointing to see that public conveniences had been removed from the corporate Facilities Management Review and that there were no plans to review the provision of public conveniences.

The Chairman thanked Mr Clark for his report and accordingly it was:-

4. RESOLVED that:-
 - a. A further report be received on the outcome of the Community Toilets Pilot in Houghton Le Spring, and
 - b. The Committee receive a further report on the usage of existing public conveniences.

Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the Period 1 February 2011 – 31 May 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 1 February 2011 – 31 May 2011 which related to the Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Helen Lancaster, Acting Scrutiny Officer, presented the Forward Plan.

The Chairman having thanked Ms. Lancaster for her report it was:

5. 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).

Helen Lancaster, Acting Scrutiny Officer, presented the work programme.

6. RESOLVED that the contents of the report be received and noted.

The Chairman thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting.

(Signed) G. MILLER,
Chairman.