

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 7th DECEMBER, 2023 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Mason-Gage in the Chair.

Councillors Burrell, Dodds, Guy, Hartnack, Jones, Leonard, Mullen, P. Smith, Thornton, Usher and Walton.

Also in attendance:-

Martin Bewick, Senior Housing Manager, Health Housing and Communities Directorate
Anthony Crabb, Development Director (Commercial)
Richard Cullen, School Improvement Services Lead, TfC
Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate
Claire Emmerson, Assistant Director of Finance, Finance Directorate
Neil Guthrie, Development Director (Residential)
Simon Marshall, Director of Education, TfC
Marc Morley, Director of Environmental Services
David Noon, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate
Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Directorate
Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services, Health Housing and Communities Directorate
Paul Wilson, Director of Finance

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Morrissey.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 9th November 2023

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 9th November, 2023 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

Item 6 Performance Management Update – Quarter 2 of 2023/24

Councillor Mullen made an open declaration regarding section i) Dynamic Smart City in respect of work he was undertaking with the School of Education at the University of Exeter.

Reference from Cabinet – 9 November 2023
Capital Programme Planning 2024/2025 to 2027/2028

The Director of Finance presented a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on a report considered by Cabinet on 9 November 2023 which detailed:

- an update to Cabinet on the level of capital resources and commitments for the forthcoming financial year within the current approved capital programme; and
- additional capital new start project proposals for inclusion in the Capital Programme 2024/2025 to 2027/2028 to be reported to Cabinet in February 2024.

Members' views were requested in accordance with the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance together with Officers from the Directorates concerned, addressed questions and comments from Members in relation to:-

- The importance of retaining a cinema within the options for Sunnyside leisure,
- The impact of the current condition of the former Joplings building given its importance as a gateway to Sunnyside,
- The operation of the Barnes Park Café,
- Funding of the Wear Footbridge
- Funding of the replacement Houghton Depot

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Mr Wilson for his report and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that it be reported to Cabinet that:-

'The Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of the report including the overall capital commitments for the coming financial year, as well as the additional capital new start projects. The Committee has nothing further to add at this time.'

Reference from Cabinet – 7 December 2023
Budget Planning Framework and Medium Term Financial Plan 2024/2025 – 2027/2028

The Assistant Director of Finance presented a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on a report considered by Cabinet on 7 December 2023 which:

- Provided an update, since the Budget Planning Framework and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) report to Cabinet in October 2023, on the key factors influencing the development of the Council's financial plans into the medium term;
- Set out the updated headlines and context for the MTFP 2024/2025 to 2027/2028;
- Set out provisional budget savings proposals for 2024/2025 to assist in meeting the current budget gap, as a basis for budget consultation, prior to the receipt of the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2024/2025; and
- Set out the consultation / communication strategy for the budget 2024/2025.

Members' views were requested in accordance with the Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance briefed the Committee on the report highlighting paragraph 3.4 concerning Central Government Funding for Local Government, the Medium Term Financial Plan detailed at paragraph 3.5 of the Cabinet report. There was a revised budget gap of £1.3m in 2024/25 and a figure of £42m over the period 2025/2026 to 2027/2028.

Members were informed of the updated spending pressures (as detailed in paragraph 3.6) following those reported to the Committee in October. There were no details yet regarding Sunderland's likely share of the funding provided by Central Government. The Chancellor had delivered the Autumn Statement to Parliament on 22nd November 2023, a week later than in 2022, meaning that the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement was highly unlikely to be announced any earlier than last year (19th December). Cabinet was due to meet again on 18th January 2024.

Mr Wilson then addressed questions and comments from Members in relation to:-

- Public Health and Social Care funding,
- The sustainability of Sunderland City Council going forward based on current funding allocations, shortfalls and use of reserves,
- Potential workforce planning implications arising from the budget planning process.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Mr Wilson for his report and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that it be reported to Cabinet that:-

- i) The Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of the report including the medium-term financial and budget planning framework and acknowledges the budget saving proposals as well as the remaining overall budget gap, and
- ii) The Committee recognises the difficult financial situation that the Council continues to operate within and remains focused on monitoring the budget position

through updates provided at this Committee and has no further comments to make at this time.

Performance Management Update – Quarter 2 of 2023/24

The Senior Manager, Corporate Strategy, submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for Quarter 2 of 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

The Committee was informed that during the work programme development sessions, Members had requested that they were able to take a deep dive into one of the key themes of the report each time it appeared as an agenda item. The Key Theme for this evening's meeting was Dynamic and Smart City. During the presentation of the Quarter 1 report, the Committee had expressed concern at the exam performance of Sunderland pupils (particularly in relation to Maths and English) and the implications around this. Concern was also expressed regarding school attendance rates, the growth of elective home education and the levels of unauthorised absence. Consequently, Mr. Simon Marshall, Director of Education and Mr. Richard Cullen, School Improvement Services Lead had been invited to attend the meeting to address questions from Members in relation to those issues.

Members were informed that following the City Plan's publication in 2019, an annual review and assurance process had been undertaken each year, to ensure that delivery remained focused on achieving the plan's vision & commitments, whilst taking account of any change in context. The latest assurance, developed in consultation with the committee, recognised the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and a need to focus on resilience within the plan. It also recognised the significant achievements that had been made on the delivery of the plan through the completion of the plan's Timeline Activity, and therefore the planned activity was substantially refreshed to deliver outcomes to 2035.

The refreshed plan was adopted from 1st April 2023 with the charts and tables within the performance report revised accordingly to reflect the refreshed plan.

i) Dynamic Smart City

Mr Marshall and Mr Cullen briefed the Committee, placing the GCSE exam performance within the broader context of the current challenging education environment, outlined the improvement programme which was attempting to boost levels of attainment and addressed questions and comments from Members.

Councillor Walton welcomed the improved performance of Sunderland schools in respect of their Ofsted inspections and asked if this was reflected in improved exam results. Mr Marshall replied that it was. In terms of Ofsted for a school to be deemed to be improving it had to demonstrate that its improvement work was providing positive outcomes for its pupils.

Councillor Hartnack believed that the performance report should also include a figure as to the number of pupils in Sunderland who went on to take A levels compared to

those in other areas. He believed this was important as A level qualifications were the gateway to securing the best jobs. Mr Marshall replied that he would check the feasibility of providing the data and would get back to the Committee. It was no longer straight forward as there were now a number of alternatives to A Levels and he would need to check how the different qualifications equated to each other.

Councillor Thornton expressed her concern at the growing number of young people who were not doing well at school, noting that there had been a large increase in non school attendance, exclusions and elective home education. Mr Marshall acknowledged the issues and stated that all of the categories mentioned by Councillor Thornton ultimately became an issue for him. Whilst it was true to say that Sunderland had some excellent provision for excluded children, such as the Link School, all three issues provided a massive challenge.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Thornton regarding the provision of vocational training for year 10 pupils who did not want to go down the academic route, Mr Marshall stated that schools were facing a challenge to raise performance in this regard. In addition to funding cuts and the consequences of the pandemic, there were difficulties in terms of the recruitment and retention of staff to teach the sometimes highly specialised aspects of vocational courses. His personal view was that it would require an improvement in the perceived value of the vocational qualifications and that this would require a joined-up approach both in terms of thinking and pathways.

Councillor Mullen referred to the position of the North-East as having the worst record of unauthorised absences at secondary school level and queried whether this impacted the level of attainment in examinations. Mr Marshall confirmed the position in relation to the number of unauthorised absences and believed that this could best be addressed through early help provision. Was there access to SEND support? Is the curriculum the right one for the respective pupils? How can the Local Authority intervene to support schools with alternative pathways? There needed to be good intelligence at an early stage to spot issues developing. Hope Springs was an excellent organisation, but the challenge remained regarding the ability to scale it up given the limited resources available. With regard to whether there was a link between unauthorised absences and exam attainment, the answer was that this was probable.

Councillor Hartnack, in his position as school governor, paid tribute to the services to schools provided by TfC, both in terms of the availability and approachability of officers and the very high standard of advice given. Councillor Leonard echoed Councillor Hartnack's comments with particular reference to the work of the School Improvement Team.

Councillor Guy stated that there was a conversation to be had regarding the underperformance of boys at GCSE level and asked what the academy trusts in the City were doing to address this. Mr Cullen replied that it would vary from trust to trust, but he would check and report back to the Committee.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Mullen regarding the Crowtree site, Mr Guthrie advised that discussions had been held with a number of interested parties all of whom had wanted to provide a new build which would have required additional land. Because of this and current construction costs, proposals in relation to a

new build were on hold. Options were now being explored in relation to utilising the existing Crowtree building. It couldn't be guaranteed that this would result in the provision of an arena but there would be a 'Plan B'.

In response to a further question from Councillor Mullen, Mr Crabb advised that the Council did not have details of the lettings in respect of the L and G buildings. The market for office accommodation nationally was not strong. There was also a lot of movement between cities with many companies looking at their options and internal ways of working following the impact of Covid. Sunderland as a city was in the position of being able to offer high quality office space at competitive rates within a high quality public realm. In response to an enquiry from Councillor Hartnack, the Committee was advised that the Council did not carry any risk in terms of the lettings and that this remained with L and G.

Councillor Dodds referred to the reference on page 51 of the agenda regarding the '146 privately rented properties inspected for hazards' and asked what were the nature of those hazards? The Committee was advised that the question would be referred to Marion Dixon to provide a written answer.

ii) Healthy Smart City

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Mullen, Mr Morley confirmed that glyphosate was used by the Council as a weed killer. The trial to understand the impact of alternative weed control options in different environments, originally scheduled to conclude at the end of October had been extended for a further month as the usually warm autumn weather and seen continued weed growth throughout November. The results of the trial would be shared with the Committee in due course.

At this juncture Mr Cummings advised that the 3 three written questions submitted by Councillor Jones under the Healthy Smart City topic had been forwarded to the appropriate officers and responses would be circulated to the Committee as soon as they were available.

iii) Vibrant Smart City

No questions

iv) Organisational Health

No questions.

The Chair having thanked Officers for their attendance, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee

work programmes for 2023/24 and which provided an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings having presented the report, updating Members on the current position regarding the Work Programmes of the Scrutiny Committees, it was :-

5. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2023/24 and the variations to these work programmes be noted, together with the current scrutiny budget position.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator 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 8th November, 2023.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Consideration was given to the report and it was:-

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

The Chairman then closed the meeting, having thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) K. MASON-GAGE,
Chairman.