

At a meeting of the HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in Committee Room 1 of the CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on TUESDAY, 31 JANUARY, 2023 at 5:30pm.

Present:-

Councillor Butler in the Chair

Councillors Ayre, Bond, Heron, McDonough, Speding, D. Trueman, and Usher

Also in attendance:-

Mr. Nigel Cummings – Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council

Ms. Andrea Hetherington - Director of Corporate Affairs and Legal, South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust

Ms. Gillian Robinson - Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members' Support Coordinator

Mr. Graham Scanlon – Assistant Director of Housing and Communities, Sunderland City Council

Ms. Joanne Stewart – Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

Ms. Gerry Taylor – Executive Director Health, Housing and Communities, Sunderland City Council

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were given on behalf of Councillors Chisnall, Mann and M. Walker.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 3rd January, 2023

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee held on 3rd January, 2023 (copies circulated) be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

Councillor Butler made an open declaration as he may have a professional interest in items on the agenda as an employee of North Cumbria Integrated Care Services.

North East Ambulance Service – Performance Update 2023

The Chairman advised that following discussions with Officers and the Vice-Chairman, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the item be deferred to the next meeting of the Committee.

Housing Conditions and Standards and the Impact on Health and Wellbeing

The Assistant Director of Housing and Communities submitted a report which provided the Committee with an overview of the importance of housing conditions and standards on the health and wellbeing of residents.

(for copy report - see original minutes)

Mr. Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing and Communities took Members through his presentation providing more detail on a number of topics, including:-

- English Housing Survey;
- A Fairer Private Rented Sector – White Paper;
- Sunderland Testbed;
- Mould and Damp Home – Sunderland Response; and
- Wider Initiatives and Programmes in Sunderland.

(for copy presentation – see original minutes)

The Chairman thanked Mr. Scanlon for his informative presentation and opened the questions and comments by referring to complaints that were received by Councillors regarding the poor housing standards of some properties; and how residents referred to it as 'Council' housing where in reality it was Gentoo housing a lot of the time and asked if the difference could be clarified. Mr. Scanlon advised that Gentoo had taken on the transfer of the housing stock in the city over twenty years ago and that they were registered with the regulator in their own right and therefore had to perform to a certain level as a landlord. Should there be failure to provide the relevant services to tenants as required then this could be assessed under consumer standards. He advised that in relation to responsibility for maintaining the standards of housing, this lay with the landlord.

Mr. Scanlon went on to advise that Gentoo had responded to the Council in relation to the conditions of their properties; particularly around mould and damp, and they had identified a significant number of properties that had some minor to major problems which they had put a range of measures in place to deal with them. The Council would continue to monitor and check on progress and it was Gentoo's responsibility to report those issues to the regulator. The Council would be asking Gentoo to help them understand from a health and wellbeing point of view so that they were comfortable that residents of the city were safe and well.

The Committee were advised that the Council now had ninety-five of their own tenants and they would have the same regulatory requirements for those properties and operate in the same way.

The Chairman asked where the accountability lay for issues that were reported by Councillors on behalf of residents and nothing was done by Gentoo and Mr. Scanlon advised that if Gentoo did not perform then there would need to be a complaint made under their complaints procedure and if that failed to be dealt with in the right way then it could be progressed to the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman had an agreement with the regulator of social housing that if they found maladministration or failure they would report that and the regulator would carry out their own reviews and checks.

Councillor Usher commented that he had been dealing with Gentoo on an almost daily basis for the previous year on behalf of residents and despite having meetings with operations staff and believing works would be carried out, in reality it didn't happen. He referred to properties in his ward where you could see damp on the gable ends of houses and stated that it would be better to have a more proactive approach than reactive and asked if inspectors were going round as a matter of course or due to complaints. Mr. Scanlon advised that he could not comment on behalf of Gentoo but in terms of good practice there would usually be stock condition data and clear asset management plans to refer to that would direct their works.

Mr. Scanlon advised that as a sector one of the biggest failings in recent years, in his view, had been the emphasis from Government on the numbers of new housing builds; which was needed; but had seen the diversion of funding which may have been better suited to address their asset management programmes. Sometimes there was the need to focus more on what matters; which was existing tenants, the quality of homes and getting works done.

The Chairman referred to the recent resignation of the CEO at Gentoo and asked if Councillor's had any right to know the reasons for this and Mr. Scanlon commented that would fall to Gentoo and their Board to make that decision but normally through HR practices it would not usually have to be shared.

Councillor Heron referred to streets in her ward where there were a number of empty properties left to go into disrepair and how it wasn't fair for other tenants in the area. She also had to agree with other Members regarding the frustrations that tenants of Gentoo had in relation to getting works carried out and how there was a constant need to complain over and over again before anything was done by them.

In response to further comments from Councillor Heron regarding the list of private landlords in the city set out within the presentation, Mr. Scanlon advised that a number of them had merged and renamed themselves and understood how it could be confusing if Councillors were not kept aware of the changes as they happened.

The Chairman asked if Mr. Scanlon could help Members to lobby Gentoo into requesting a single point of contact to report issues and set out those two way conversations. He had suggested this to Gentoo previously and understood that it could take some work to set up but it would be invaluable. Mr. Scanlon agreed to speak with Gentoo on the issue and advised Members that Gentoo were due to attend a meeting of the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee in February and it may be beneficial for Members of this Committee to construct some questions to be asked at that meeting or attend with the agreement of that Chairman. Mr. Cummings advised he would circulate an invitation to Members with details for the meeting.

In response to a query from Councillor McDonough as to what the Council were doing to ensure that homes were up to specifications, Mr. Scanlon advised that enforcement was important and if there were any issues the Environmental Health Team had the regulatory enforcement powers under building standards so there were a series of checks that could be applied and that they had the expertise and background. The regulator underpins the regulatory standards for the registered providers (RP's) and in terms of their properties they carried that responsibility. He also advised that throughout new build developments, building standards should be vigorously applied and signed off by Development Control at each stage of the build as part of the development process.

With regards to housing stock in Sunderland, Mr. Scanlon advised that they had found that there was a large number of solid wall properties which could prove to be a real challenge in meeting future Government targets for rented properties to have an Energy Performance Certificates (EPC) rating of C or above by 2025.

Councillor McDonough commented that it appeared as though services were responsive rather than proactive and asked if it may be beneficial to have an independent body that were actively inspecting housing stock and identifying problems. Mr. Scanlon commented that the Environmental Health Team could only undertake so much with the resource they had so a lot of their work was in response to issues that were reported. In terms of the housing associations, they should have their stock condition data, asset management programmes and repair and maintenance data which should inform them where problems and hotspots were evident, and it was more about how they then responded proactively to their data evidence sets in a way that dealt with those problems.

Councillor Speding referred to the Council signing up to the UK Healthy Cities in 2010 and referred to the Marmot Review report, which had been welcomed, and had addressed the importance of housing in relation to the health and wellbeing of residents.

With regard to the housing stock transfer to Gentoo, Councillor Speding commented that there had been in the region of 35,000 properties that had been transferred; with 5,000 of those being demolished, and plans drawn up for each ward across the city. Some estates still suffered from issues they had when the properties were first transferred and he commented that areas had been let down by not being able to regenerate areas which should have been due to the changes they had made to their original plans.

In relation to the Coalfields area of the city, Councillor Speding advised that one of the biggest problems in the area was housing purchased by private landlords, absent landlords and limited investments and shared pictures with the Committee of the problems that were being experienced in that area, due to empty properties and homes in disrepair. He commented that he had thought that Environmental Health and Public Health would have an interest in trying to improve these issues for residents to have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing.

In closing, Councillor Speding commented that he had found it impossible to rectify issues due to red tape and he felt that in the present day they should be a long way better than what they were.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Speding for the photographs and commented that they would look to collate evidence from other Members and present it to the social landlords responsible.

In response to a query from Councillor Potts regarding a licensing or registration scheme for private landlords, Mr. Scanlon commented that there was no formal, selective licensing arrangement in Sunderland and it would cost landlords to be involved in one. He explained that some good landlords could be aggrieved at having to sign up to an arrangement when they were already doing the right thing by their tenants. The Committee were also informed that they would need a

compliment of Environmental Health Officers to deliver and administer the scheme and he did not feel that there were enough professionals available in the field.

Councillor Speding raised the Accredited Landlord Scheme that the city had and Mr. Scanlon explained this was still in place, with 500 landlords signed up to it, but it was not mandatory whereas the Selective Licensing Scheme would be.

Councillor McDonough asked if there was any way the Committee could call in Gentoo to the Committee to specifically answer questions in relation to health-related matters. The Chairman commented that he did not feel it was appropriate to call in the new CEO at this time but Members could attend the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee in February and look to invite her to a future meeting of this Committee following that.

Councillor Bond referred to the comment regarding good landlords not wanting to sign up to a Selective Licensing Scheme and felt that private landlords would prefer to be associated with one and be more in favour of the scheme. Mr. Scanlon commented that Environmental Health may be best placed to comment but he understood that it was the fees that they had to pay to be involved that put them off.

The Chairman thanked Mr. Scanlon for his attendance, and it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the content of the report and presentation be received and noted.

Sunderland City Council Draft Alcohol Strategy

The Executive Director of Health, Housing and Communities submitted a report which sought endorsement from the Committee on the Sunderland City Council Alcohol Strategy : Calling Time : It's Time to Rethink Drink; including the strategy objectives and the next steps within the report.

Ms. Julie Parker-Walton, Public Health Consultant took Members through the report, and attached draft strategy, advising that alcohol was a complex issue within Sunderland and caused significant harm to communities. The majority of Sunderland's alcohol-related harm outcomes remained higher than the England average and had some which were in the worst top ten in the country. The strategy had been developed via the Sunderland Drug and Alcohol Harm Reduction Group and key partners and had been to various boards for consultation across the city.

The Chairman thanked Ms. Parker-Walton for their informative report and noted that there had been a wide range of consultee's and events as part of the consultation; he asked if any alcohol dependants had been consulted and was informed that the service provider; CGL, who ran Wear Recovery, had a service user involvement group so their voice was included.

Councillor Ayre referred to responsible alcohol sales and asked if there was still an issue with under-age sales? Ms. Parker-Walton advised that Trading Standards monitored the issue and from her knowledge they had invested in that area so they could continue with the scheme whereby they test retailers using young people.

In response to a further query from Councillor Ayre as to the definition of cheap alcohol, the Committee were informed that it was those drinks that constituted the

cheapest alcohol you could purchase for the greatest strength; such as the Frosty Jack and White Lightning brands.

Ms. Parker-Walton, in response to a request from Councillor McDonough, advised that additional funding had been provided through the treatment and recovery grant which had targets attached, one of which was to increase treatment capacity by 20%; meaning that by 2025 treatment capacity within the service would increase by approximately 400 people per year.

When asked if this figure would meet demand, the Committee were informed that the baseline that been submitted was approx. 1,900 people, and they currently had that number in treatments. The Harm to Hope strategy was also about supporting other services; such as those leaving prison with an addiction, and working with the alcohol care team in the hospital so they had seamless pathways and the capacity within the service to support them whilst also reaching out to meet the hidden demand that they may not have addressed before.

Councillor Speding commented that it would be beneficial to visit off-licences and investigate what they had on sale and how it was being sold and Ms. Parker-Walton commented that they had undertaken a survey a number of years ago to see where the cheapest unit of alcohol could be purchased in the North East and at that time Sunderland had been the highest. She advised that they were working with regulatory services on responsible retailing schemes so that retailers could be supported and how often conversations with a retailer could change their approach to alcohol sales.

In closing, the Chairman commented that the Committee would be interested in a future report being submitted to map some of the progress and changes that had taken place, and having thanked Ms. Parker-Walton for her informative report, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the content of the report and presentation be received and noted.

Work Programme 2022/2023

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members' Support Coordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which attached the current work programme for the year and also provided an update on a number of potential topics, as raised by Members, for the Committee's consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr. Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report advising that the report included a number of potential topics to consider along with a draft Scrutiny Work Programme for 2022/23. He informed the Committee that the work programme was a 'living' document and could continue to incorporate emerging issues as and when they arose throughout the forthcoming year.

In response to an earlier comment from Councillor McDonough, Mr. Cummings advised that the Committee could look to include a review of housing standards in the city in relation to the health and wellbeing of residents as a topic for a future

review and advised that this could form part of the discussion at the Scrutiny Workshop which was held at the beginning of each municipal year.

Members having considered the report and update, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the work programme, including amendments, and the update on topics for review during 2022/23, be received and noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Strategic Director of People, Communications and Partnerships 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 4 January 2023.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, having advised that if any further Members wished to receive further information on any of the items contained in the notice they should contact him directly, 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 participation.

(Signed) M. BUTLER,
Chairman.