

**At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 8<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2022 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor D.E. Snowden in the Chair

Councillors Bond, Butler, Curtis, Doyle, Edgeworth, Hartnack, Mullen, H. Trueman and Watson.

Also in attendance:-

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Ms Beverley Poulter, Corporate Strategy Manager

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mason-Gage, P. Smith and Thornton.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2022**

Councillor Edgeworth referred to the penultimate paragraph on page 3 and stated that he was not aware that his request that details of SAIL were circulated to all Members of the Council for their information had been actioned.

Councillor Curtis referred to the final paragraph on page 3 and advised that he had met with 'Sunderland Youth Council' not 'Sunderland Youth Parliament'.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the penultimate paragraph on page 4 and stated that in addition to Fulwell he had also mentioned South Bents and Seaburn.

Councillor Mullen referred to his comments on paragraph 2 of page 6 and advised that he specifically highlighted the action of the PCC in declining invitations received from Conservative Councillors.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2022 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to the above amendments.

## **Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)**

### **Item 6 – Notice of Key Decisions**

Councillor Doyle made an open declaration in respect of item number 220621/720 (To approve funding options in respect of development at Nile and Villiers Street Sunnyside) due to the involvement of his employer in relation to the matter on the notice regarding the development.

### **Reference from Cabinet – 8 December 2022 Capital Programme Planning 2023/2024 to 2026/2027**

The Assistant Director of Finance presented a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on a report considered by Cabinet on 8 December 2022 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 2023/2024 to 2026/2027 to be reported to Cabinet in February 2023.

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

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Assistant Director of Finance and Mr Paul Dixon, Chief Accountant, addressed questions and comments from Members in relation to:-

- The availability of grant support and the Council's relative success in securing such support.
- The possibility of detailing comparative data in future reports on Sunderland's performance in securing grant funding against the performance of other local authorities.
- An assessment of the impact of the loss of EU funding.
- The increase in the cost of materials and its impact on highways projects funded by the Area Committees
- The availability of warranties on major infrastructure projects such as the Aspire bridge.

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

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

'The Scrutiny Coordinating Committee noted the report and the additional proposals outlined within. The Committee will continue to monitor the capital programme through these regular updates and has no further comment to make at this time.'

**Reference from Cabinet – 8 December 2022**  
**Budget Planning Framework and Medium Term Financial Plan 2023/2024 – 2026/2027**

The Assistant Director of Finance presented a report (copy circulated) which sought the views of the Committee on a report considered by Cabinet on 8 December 2022 which:

- Provided an update, since the Budget Planning Framework and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) report to Cabinet in October 2022, 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 2023/2024 to 2026/2027;
- Set out provisional budget savings proposals for 2023/2024 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 2023/2024; and
- Set out the consultation / communication strategy for the budget 2023/2024.

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

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Assistant 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 and revised gap of £61m over the 4-year period 2023/2024 to 2026/2027. Members were informed that the spending assumptions were unchanged from 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 Local Government Financial settlement was scheduled to be announced during the week commencing 19<sup>th</sup> December, although it was feared the announcement could come as late as the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Councillor Butler referred to the harrowing prospect outlined in the initial report of having to find savings of £5.3m in respect of Adult Social Care. In reply Mr Wilson explained the process whereby services areas were invited to submit proposals as part of the budgetary process which were discussed and developed in consultation with lead Members. At the start of this process there were often a lot of uncertainties in respect of funding available including the extent of grant funding, the shape of the local government financial settlement and the government plans in relation to Business rate retention and the fair cost of care review.

Councillor Butler welcomed the reduction in the savings being sought in respect of adult social care to £2m and asked if there was a chance that it could rise again come the final drafting of the budget proposals. He also commented that Christmas was not a good time to consult on anything let alone the budget. Mr Wilson replied that he was confident that the figure would remain around £2m. With regard to the timing of the consultation, he acknowledged that the run up to Christmas was not a

good time but advised there was no practical alternative given there was only a limited window of opportunity. Any later would be too late given the budgetary setting timetable and any sooner would be meaningless given the degree of uncertainty the proposals would be based on.

Councillor Edgeworth referred to the Corporate Affairs and Communications proposal to reduce the frequency of the residents' printed newsletter and suggested that it should be scrapped altogether along with the residents' survey. Councillors Mullen and Hartnack agreed with the suggestion to scrap the newsletter and Councillor Hartnack suggested that it would also help with the Council's Carbon reduction targets. Councillor Butler stated that whilst acknowledging we lived in a digital age with a variety of means of communication available, there was still a need to cater for residents without access to the internet. In conclusion, Councillor Edgeworth acknowledged the difficult financial situation facing the Council but asked if Cabinet could be asked to consider limiting any proposed rises in council tax given the current financial climate and the impact this would have on residents.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Doyle regarding the impact of any appeals in relation to the new April 2023 business rateable values on the rate of collection, Mr Wilson advised that he believed the effect would be neutral with a decrease in income received from retail businesses balanced by an increase from that received from the manufacturing sector.

Councillor Mullen referred to last year's corresponding meeting where he had raised with Jon Ritchie his belief that the question in the residents' Budget Consultation regarding raising council tax was loaded to achieve a particular response. He stated that Mr Ritchie had agreed to take this point on board and feed it back to the Communications Team in time for this year's consultation. In response, Mr Wilson read out this year's question to the Committee. Councillor Mullen replied that it sounded like the question had been revised. In conclusion Councillor Mullen informed the Committee that the Conservative Party members would take up the offer from Mr Wilson for advice in preparing alternative budgetary proposals.

Councillor Hartnack noted the difficulties in trying to reduce complex budgetary issues into the format of an easily understandable committee report but believed it suffered from a lack of context. For example, he struggled to understand what the savings proposals actually meant in relation to overall departmental budgets and suggested that if they were accompanied by percentage figures it would help place them in context.

Councillor Bond referred to the Social Care cost pressures and stated that the biggest log jam in relation to social care was the inability of providers to recruit care staff because of the low wage levels in the sector. He questioned the ability of Local Authorities to make further savings given this situation.

Councillor Curtis referred to conversations he had undertaken with the Housing Options Team regarding the increasing levels of homelessness and asked if all councillors could receive details of how the homeless could access support which could then be shared with residents seeking help.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Trueman, Mr Wilson confirmed that if local schools sought to go down the route of establishing as a trust and provide their own

support services this would result in the downsizing of the Council's schools support services team.

In conclusion Councillor Edgeworth referred to the on-line residents' budget consultation and expressed the view that some of the terminology was not very user friendly. For example, he believed that asking a resident to select their 'Area' or 'Ward' would be meaningless to some.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Mr Wilson and Mr Dixon for their attendance and Members for the healthy nature of the debate.

Consideration having been given to the Committee's response to Cabinet, it was :-

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

'The Scrutiny Coordinating Committee acknowledges the information contained in the detailed report as well as noting a number of uncertainties that remain around funding and the local government settlement which would be resolved in due course.

The Committee would also recommend that serious consideration is given to limiting any rises in council tax given the current financial climate and the impact this will have on residents of the City and the services they need to access.

The Committee would also recommend that consideration is given to the way we communicate with residents in the future and if a printed newsletter is needed.

The Scrutiny Coordinating Committee would also like to acknowledge the hard work of officers and members in the preparation of the budget and the medium-term financial plan.

The Committee will continue to monitor the budget through these reports and has no further comment to make at this time.'

### **Performance Management Update – Quarter 2 Of 2022/23**

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for Quarter 2 of 2022/23.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Beverley Poulter, Corporate Strategy Manager presented the report and advised that the Council's Corporate Performance Management Framework was aligned to the Sunderland City Plan 2019 – 2030 and to the three key themes of the City Plan, Dynamic Smart City, Healthy Smart City and Vibrant Smart City, as well as including the organisational health indicators, productive & innovative working, financial management and a council ready for the future. The report set out the progress made to the end of Quarter 1 of 2022/23, against a City Plan that commenced in 2019 and spanned an eleven-year period through to 2030.

The Committee was informed that following the City Plan's publication in 2019, the first review was undertaken following the conclusion of performance for 2019/20. The

refreshed plan was adopted from 1st April 2021. The report before members was aligned to the refreshed plan. A review and assurance process would be undertaken each year, to ensure that delivery remains focused on achieving the plan commitments.

Ms Poulter took the Committee through the summary for the three key themes of Dynamic City, Healthy City and Vibrant City of the Sunderland City Plan, highlighting commitments, achievements and progress made for each key theme, as well as performance against each of the five aspirations for each theme and against the additional Council indicators for good organisational health, productive and innovative working, strong financial management and a Council ready for the future.

With regard to Dynamic Smart City, Councillor Doyle enquired whether the opening of the Yard Business Hub was on track as it appeared to be running a little behind schedule and what were the anticipated timescales for its completion? In addition, he asked how performance in respect of the delivery of affordable homes was reported and also how many affordable homes had actually been built given developers were allowed to make a contribution in lieu of provision. Ms Poulter advised that she would investigate and report back.

Councillor Mullen referred to the interactive version of the City Plan and asked if funding streams for projects could be built into it. Ms Poulter replied that the ultimate aim would be to provide a version that would allow a person to click on an action or project and delve deeper from there. It was something that she was going to seek members views on during the City Plan Workshop scheduled for the 19<sup>th</sup> December.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Curtis, Ms Poulter confirmed that as discussed in a previous meeting, the decline in the figure for the percentage of properties with ultrafast broadband as reported in the Q1 report reflected a data error. There had been no physical change in the number of properties with ultrafast broadband rather that the initial number on which the figures were based was inaccurate. She was confident that the position statement in the report before members was correct.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the increased turnover at the Port as detailed on page 43 of the agenda papers and asked for further detail as to whether this reflected an operating profit or loss.

Councillor David Snowdon indicated his surprise that City Hall had been named "Best of the Best" in office workspaces at the British Council for Offices Awards. He expressed his annoyance that issues in respect of the acoustics in the Council Chamber and the broken Audio Visual System in Committee Room 1 had still not been satisfactorily addressed. The building had been open for a year and it had gone beyond teething troubles and snagging issues. It was something that would not be tolerated by the purchaser of a newly built home.

With regard to Healthy Smart City, the Chairman referred to the review of signage on Wearmouth Bridge as part of measures to prevent suicides and drew Ms Poulter's attention to the fact that this had been the subject of a previous notice of motion at Council. Councillor Doyle noted that the motion had been debated in 2019 and expressed disappointment at the time taken to address it.

Councillor Doyle referred to the development of the North-East Community Forest and welcomed Catherine Auld taking time to attend the Area Committees' Neighbourhood Boards to assist in identifying potential tree planting sites.

Councillor Trueman welcomed the tree planting initiatives across the city but mourned the overall loss of green space. He cited various examples of the development of green space for housing, reservoirs and solar farms and expressed concern that brownfield sites were being ignored. He believed Planners should be given the teeth to ensure that the reverse was the case.

Councillor Mullen noted that the opening the hours of the Everyone Active centres had still not returned to those of the pre Covid pandemic levels and asked if a conversation could be had to encourage them to do so.

Councillor Mullen also referred to the issue of side waste and stated that a much tougher enforcement regime was required as the current one was not working. If this didn't happen, residents would continue to put out side waste in the belief that no enforcement action taken and whilst it may not be collected with the bins, someone would come along eventually to remove it as flytipping. Councillor Edgeworth referred to the introduction of the No Side Waste Policy from January 2023 and stated that Members would need to receive the bin day statistics in order to assess the effectiveness of the Policy. Councillor Bond advised that he had previously asked that the Committee received comparative data in respect of household waste collection.

Councillor Edgeworth also referred to the figures regarding Alcohol detailed on page 48 paragraph 3 and asked if those in relation to hospital admissions included repeat visits from the same person?

Councillor Butler stated that the figures in relation to a healthy life expectancy made depressing reading and there was no doubt that this was directly linked to poverty. He advised that in Southwick, Councillors tried to ensure that services were delivered from the bottom up and he believed that funds should be provided at that level rather than top down.

With regard to Vibrant Smart City, Councillor Mullen stated that the experience in St Peter's with regard to the Triathlon had been disappointing citing for example, that assurances given to local business regarding unhindered public access to their premises had not been kept. With regard to the Airshow, he asked if an environmental impact assessment had been carried out and that if this was a genuine reason for its cancellation, how would this impact on future events?

Councillor Hartnack welcomed the increase in visitor numbers but stated that there was still work to be done in encouraging them to stay and spent in the city. Anecdotal evidence continued to indicate that visitors from outside the region attending events in Sunderland tended to stay in either Newcastle or Durham.

With regard to Organisational Health, and in particular to Cyber Security Resilience, Councillor Doyle asked to receive an update in respect of the current position in relation to the exceptions list.

With regard to the Customer Services Network, Councillor Edgeworth advised that some residents had reported difficulties in trying to book slots at the recycling centre if they did not have access to the internet.

Councillor David Snowdon advised that he had previously asked for a position statement regarding the use of Social Prescribing but did not appear to have received it.

There being no further questions or comments for Ms Poulter, the Chairman thanked her for her report and it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

### **Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2022/23**

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2022/23 and which provided an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2022/23.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings presented the report, updating Members on the current position regarding the Work Programmes of the Scrutiny Committees.

In response to a request from Councillor Mullen that the Council's Risk Register was added as a standing item on the Committee's Work Programme for consideration once or twice a year, Mr Cummings advised that there was possibly scope to include it on the agenda for the Committee's next meeting in January.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Edgeworth regarding the possibility of looking at the Council's Corporate Parenting Board, Ms Robinson advised that the matter most likely fell within the remit of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee.

5. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2022/23 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 9<sup>th</sup> November 2022.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Consideration having been given to the report, 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 and offering her best wishes for a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

(Signed) D. E. SNOWDON,  
Chairman.