

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held remotely on TUESDAY 3RD NOVEMBER, 2020 at 4.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D. Turner in the Chair

Councillors Blackburn, Blackett, M. Dixon, Fagan, Foster, Jackson, Jenkins, Marshall and Thornton

Also in attendance:-

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Ms Catherine Auld, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration
Ms Louise Sloan, Strategic Plans and Housing Manager
Mr Paul Wilson, Assistant Director of Finance
Mr Steve Wearing, Principal Licensing Officer

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor D. E. Snowdon and Taylor

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th October 2020

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th October, 2020 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th October, 2020 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Review of Statement of Licensing Policy

The Assistant Director of Neighbourhoods submitted a report (copy circulated) to advise the Committee of the requirement on the Council, in its capacity of a Licensing Authority, to undertake a review of the Council's Statement of Licensing Policy, ("the Licensing Policy"), under the Licensing Act 2003, ("the Act"), and to carry out a consultation exercise as prescribed under Section 5 of the Act; and to

advise the Committee of the outcome of a consultation on the review of the Statement of Licensing Policy.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Steve Wearing, Principal Licensing Officer presented the report and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Blackburn referred to paragraph 2.5 of the report and that this mentions on 19th September 2018, a Communitive Impact Assessment (CIA) was implemented in seven areas of the City, one of which was a ward he represented and enquired if any changes had been seen since that implementation.

Mr Wearing advised that there had been no changes, the position with the CIA was that it still had another year to run, until September next year. The data to justify the CIA was quite old and out of date, which we had to accept and was why they wished to review that and for work to start on this in early 2021 subject to conditions.

Councillor M. Dixon enquired that should a business contravene any of the licensing act and reapplied at a later date, what sort of response/reaction would be given to these sort of reapplications, was there a policy which covered this.

Mr Wearing advised that there was a policy and they were governed by the Licensing Act under section 182 guidance. However if a premises were to cause problems and there was a need for enforcement action it did not necessarily mean that those premises would lose their licence and there was various sanctions that could be given. Matters were on occasion brought to the attention of the Licensing Committee concerning licensed premises for a review when there were problems associated with the establishment such as breaching of noise conditions or not having door staff on at required times etc. The Licensing Sub Committee would then ultimately decide whether to exercise the right to review and the sanctions required.

If a license was revoked, then each case was treated on its own merits and there was a right of appeal over any action taken by the Licensing Sub Committee. In some cases a reapplication could be for the same premises but under different management which had to be taken on face value and was subject to consultation with the Police and other various agencies within the locality.

Councillor M. Dixon queried if an employer cheated its employees out of furlough money, was there any way the Council could obtain information from HMRC as to people who may have contravened this and if we could look at their permission to trade when they have contravened the State and individuals.

Mr Wearing advised that this had not come up as yet, but if doubt had been cast on the credibility of the premises holder with regard to criminal activity, and this was brought to attention of Licensing Authority, if there was cause for concern a review could be held over the suitability of the individuals running the business but generally they do not have the resources to investigate themselves and it is more of a reactive basis once it had been brought to their attention.

Councillor M. Dixon suggested it was worth considering more proactive measures such as a clerical operation with HMRC to gain information about local cases, when things eventually went back to normal.

Mr Wearing informed the Committee that this was something that was possible and they do work with various internal and external partners already, including the immigration service for issues relating to illegal workers for example. They have engaged with HMRC in the past.

The Chairman queried if it would have been easier for the Government to legislate for a two year extension of the review, as it seems as though officers haven't had very much time and this had resulted in a lot of bureaucracy for Local Authorities at a very busy and difficult time.

Mr Wearing advised that it would have helped, as there had been a lot of uncertainty this year, the Local Government Association had been pursuing this, along with officers who had been hoping to receive some form of dispensation. Unfortunately they had received the advice that the review was still necessary, hence the fast track consultation to get us over the line and have a Licensing Policy in place.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Mr Wearing for his attendance

2. RESOLVED that the Committee received the report and supported the proposed arrangements for the roll forward of the existing Statement of Licensing Policy; and its comments be provided to Cabinet on the responses to the consultation.

Low Carbon Approach

The Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) for the Committee to consider and comment on the Draft Low Carbon Framework

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Catherine Auld, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration and Ms Louise Sloan, Strategic Plans and Housing Manager presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and were on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Blackburn referred to the list of partner members and highlighted that it did not mention any of the utility companies and queried why none of the Sunderland based power, water, and gas companies were used.

Ms Auld advised that the reason they have the companies listed around the table was that they were the partner organisations established within the city but Cllr Blackburn was correct in highlighting the huge role that was to be played by the utility companies such as Northern Powergrid and Northumbrian Water but we needed to work in different ways with these as every Authority and region wanted to work with those on their strategies.

Ms Auld advised that they did have conversations lined up with Northern Powergrid on doing some work around their decarbonisation and how we can achieve what we are trying to do as City and incorporate with their plans.

Councillor Blackett commented that since putting the council motion to declare a climate emergency and being the first Council in the region to do so, he queried if this had put us ahead of other Councils at any stage and how we compared to what actions they had taken so far.

Ms Auld advised that each Authority had declared a climate emergency and each were moving in their own ways in terms of how they pulled together their plans. Interestingly there were also conversations happening with the Local Enterprise Partnership on how we work together and with the seven other local authorities on shared experiences and where the opportunities were to work together.

Ms Sloan advised that they have had conversations across the region and all are taking slightly different approaches, for example Gateshead see this very much as an engagement approach and aren't doing a strategy and feel they can achieve their targets by talking to businesses. They have started to put into place how they will monitor data.

Newcastle had taken a similar approach to Sunderland in terms of preparing a draft action plan and have also established a partnership board. Durham were very much leading on this in terms of key projects so these were just examples of how the areas were approaching this slightly different but there were discussions on a regional level on how this was all brought together and coordinated.

In response to Councillor M. Dixons query over the omission of Sunderland BID on the list of partners involved with the Board, Ms Auld advised that they weren't included on the list as they were not part of the Sunderland Partnership formal board network, the Council do work really closely with the BID from a business investment perspective and they would be key in terms of the implementation.

One of the other areas they have talked to in terms of development is Sunderland Business Group, as through these avenues they have a lot of reach to the business community. In terms of approach and engagement we need to work with partners in terms of communicating what we are trying to achieve and the conversations with the BID are part of the Business Group.

Councillor M. Dixon enquired if the North East Chamber of Commerce were in this and why wasn't it specifically the Sunderland Chamber of Commerce we worked with. Ms Auld informed the committee there were two aspects to the Chamber of Commerce. The North East Chamber of Commerce was a regional body and each area had its own committee, which Sunderland has.

The Chairman commented that it was nice to see that the Youth Council was involved with the partnership and that the schools were being visited as obviously it was our children that would benefit from our city becoming carbon neutral.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Ms Auld and Ms Sloan for the report.

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

COVID-19 Grants – Final Position Summary

The Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration and the Assistant Director of Finance submitted a joint report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with an overview of the Covid-19 Business Support programmes provided by Government, focussing primarily on the grants to businesses and their administration within Sunderland by the Council including the closing position. The report provided information which had been collated from across the organisation.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Catherine Auld, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration and Mr Paul Wilson, Assistant Director of Finance presented the report and were on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Blackett commented that with so many people having been made unemployed in recent weeks, some of these may seek to attempt start ups and new businesses and enquired what support would be available for these.

Ms Auld advised that the North East Business Innovation Centre tended to lead on our enterprise start ups and they have contracted provision which is funded through European resources and that's where we would look to refer those looking to start up businesses.

The Chairman commented that there had been concerns expressed over fraud and queried if this had been an issue within Sunderland. Mr Wilson advised that it was a difficult question to answer as there had been over 1100 applications which they considered not to be eligible, but it would be unjust to say that all of these had been fraudulent applications as the guidance for applying came out at pace and was complicated to understand. We have had some which they believe were incorrect payments and we were busy working through those small numbers.

Mr Wilson commented that he believed government recognised themselves that given the pace of all the business support measures brought out that there was a risk of fraud in all of these schemes but we tried to do as much due diligence as we possibly could.

Councillor M. Dixon wished to thank the officers involved for all their hard work done in the background both locally and nationally and also to commend the Council for the support given to the VCS and its groups. Councillor Dixon enquired if they had received any feedback from the VCS groups.

Ms Auld advised that she had not had as much involvement with the Area Committees so mostly the local support had been taken through Sandra Mitchells teams for more neighbourhood investigation.

Mr Wilson commented that many businesses had expressed their gratitude to Ms Auld's Team in terms of support given.

The Chairman commented that the voluntary organisations that she was involved with in her own area have been very thankful for all the help they've had and the funds they have received.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Ms Auld and Mr Wilson for their attendance.

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2020-21

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide options, provide support and advise Members on the development of the scrutiny work programmes for 2020/2021

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Members information

5. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2020-2021 be noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report providing Members with an opportunity to consider the items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 19 October, 2020 (copies circulated).

(For copy report and notice – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer reminded Members to contact him if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

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

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

(Signed) D. TURNER,
Chairman.