

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held remotely on TUESDAY 7TH JULY, 2020 at 4.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D. Turner in the Chair

Councillors Blackett, M. Dixon, Fagan, Foster, Jenkins, Marshall D. E. Snowden, Taylor 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
Mr Paul Wilson, Assistant Director of Finance
Mr Mark Jackson, Assistant Director of Infrastructure and Planning and Transportation

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Blackburn and Jackson

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 10th March 2020

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 10th March, 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 10th March, 2020 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

COVID-19 – Business Support

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, focusing primarily on the grants to businesses, and their administration within Sunderland by the Council.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

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

Councillor M. Dixon wished to thank Ms Auld for her work over this period of time highlighting the help given to a particular business within his Ward.

Councillor Dixon enquired if the 1100 unsuccessful claims mentioned within the report had been as a result of naivety and misunderstanding of the businesses on the applicants part or if they had been fraudulent claims.

Ms Auld acknowledged the thanks given and advised that it had been a huge team effort and she would pass these comments back to her colleagues. In relation to the unsuccessful claims Mr Wilson advised that there had been a mixture of reasons for these such as applicants being based in residential properties which weren't eligible, some hadn't understood the many facets of the scheme and some hadn't been eligible for state aid reasons.

Mr Wilson advised that many had been approached by the Team to obtain further information and clarity over their application to try and work with them to re determine their eligibility so some of those 1100 unsuccessful applications may drop in number.

In response to Councillor M. Dixons query, Mr Wilson advised that they had tried to have as rigorous approach as possible in terms of processing applications and the information required so they hadn't seen a lot of activity in regards to fraudulent claims but there was assurance frameworks for returns to the government so they had checks and balances in place to minimise this.

Councillor Blackett referred to the second round of the discretionary fund and recent talks he had with a local resident and business owner within his Ward about what support was available. Councillor Blackett commented that he felt the support provided so far had been brilliant in speaking to businesses and the payments that had been given out which had really helped but queried the second phase and how these would apply particularly to businesses who had high costs going forward in certain sectors and he did not think his constituent would qualify for this but was it still worth him applying.

Ms Auld advised that it was definitely worth people applying in this phase with the government guidance for the discretionary fund being for those with relatively high ongoing costs, if the business owns the building outright, they wouldn't be eligible, if they had some costs in terms of rent or mortgage payments then the stepped process that was used under phase 1 would come in and a level of intervention could be made. Ms Auld added that if the constituent was in any doubt it was best to have a conversation with the team as she would not want them to possibly miss out based on a misunderstanding.

The Chairman enquired if the team had much feedback from the businesses in relation to the operation of the grants. Ms Auld advised that generally they have had

positive feedback within Sunderland and appreciated the ability to talk through the possibilities, even if some have ultimately been ineligible. Businesses are quite distressed at this challenging time and to be able to have a personal conversation with someone rather than an automated process has been reassuring.

There has been frustration with regards to the areas that aren't covered such as those who have a home based business or not in the particular sectors and this has been hard and difficult to have to explain but there has been some lovely feedback from those that were successful.

Mr Wilson commented that the process was challenging due to the sheer volume of work and businesses needing the money as soon as possible which they had endeavoured to achieve and this was appreciated by the applicants and good feedback was received for this.

Mr Wilson also advised that the strict government guidance the team had to adhere to did cause frustrations for those that missed out via slim margins/thresholds, so whilst this was helpful from an administrative perspective to implement it could feel brutal for those that had been unsuccessful.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Ms Auld for her attendance and for all the work carried out by the team.

2. RESOLVED that the Committee received and noted the report.

Sunderland Strategic Transport Corridor – Progress Report

The Assistant Director of Infrastructure and Planning and Transportation submitted a report and PowerPoint presentation (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with a progress report on the Sunderland Strategic Transport Corridor.

(for copy report and PowerPoint presentation– see original minutes)

Mr Mark Jackson, Assistant Director of Infrastructure and Planning and Transportation presented the report and PowerPoint presentation highlighting the key points arising and addressing questions and comments thereon.

Councillor M. Dixon enquired over Phase 5 of the project and concerns about the possible congestion on St Mary's Way towards south end of Wearmouth Bridge and if there were any proposals that may alleviate that issue.

Mr Jackson advised that under Phase 5 there were proposals for an additional lane on Sand Street using road markings which should alleviate pressure leading up to the bridge.

Councillor M. Dixon also raised the issue of only being able to turn left coming out of the car park and the potential for congestion going down to the Port in light of the number of vehicles that are going to be used. Mr Jackson advised that there are plans developed for that area with the ultimate aim to dual that road all the way to the Port and ideally that roundabout would become an improved junction but this would be dependant on the funding they could obtain. It was under development and they were investigating funding opportunities.

Councillor M. Dixon asked to raise a question on behalf of Councillor. P. Wood who was on the Port Board relating to the suggestion of a new entrance to the Port and if this was correct. Mr Jackson advised that when SSTC was first proposed, there had been a proposal for a new entrance to the Port but it was important to remember that the current access was working well but they were investigating what the opportunities were and the best way of accessing whilst maintaining the security of the Port and its maritime laws and regulations. Mr Jackson also informed that he believed an update would be given at the next Port Board meeting.

Councillor M. Dixon wished to raise a point that the Department had appeared to have carried out a lot of work very quickly and speaking to people the general consensus had been that you had made a great deal of progress. Mr Jackson commented that this had been a benefit of the current situation and the household waste recycling centre being shut down due to the response to Covid-19 meant there had been an opportunity to progress work without having to accommodate access arrangements. Traffic levels had dropped significantly due to the lockdown so work could be done without inconveniencing as many people whilst still maintain and adhering to public health guidance and best practice.

Councillor Jenkins informed the committee that he had regularly seen the construction workers when out on his daily exercise and not once had he witnessed them not practicing social distancing, which was very good. Councillor Jenkins also wished to praise the team for the work undertaken and how quickly they had progressed and this was credit also to the company undertaking the work in that area.

Having fully considered the report the Chairman thanked Mr Jackson for his attendance and also commented that it was nice to see the apprentices being taken on and given a chance.

3. RESOLVED that the Committee received and noted the contents of the report.

Annual Report

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), seeking approval of the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee report as part of the overall scrutiny annual report 2019/20 that was to be presented to Council.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report and requested Members comments or suggestions for further amends to the draft report.

Councillor. M. Dixon commented that he felt the report was excellent and covered most items but he would like to suggest the addition of the Committees study of housing and homelessness and also more detail on Culture, which was undertaken earlier in the year when Ms Rebecca Hall presented a report for the Committee.

Mr Diamond advised that he would expand on those areas and give a greater emphasis to those suggestions.

4. RESOLVED that Members approved the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee report for inclusion in the Scrutiny Annual Report 2019/20 subject to the inclusion of the additions suggested.

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 15th June, 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.

5. 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.