

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on TUESDAY 12TH FEBRUARY, 2019 at 4.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D. MacKnight in the Chair

Councillors Blackburn, Curran, M. Dixon, Foster, Galbraith, E. Gibson, Jackson, Marshall, Taylor and Turner

Also in attendance:-

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Iain Fairlamb, Head of Planning and Regeneration, Sunderland City Council
Ms Victoria French, Head of Events, Sunderland City Council
Ms Nicky Rowland, Area Manager – Local Services, Sunderland City Council
Mrs Christine Tilley, Governance Services Team Leader, Sunderland City Council
Ms Julie Wearmouth, Housing Strategy Team Leader, Sunderland City Council

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

Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies received.

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 15th January 2019

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 15th January, 2019 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer advised as follows in relation to the additional items suggested for the work plan at the last meeting:-

- Update on the International Strategy including the recent Council visit to China – this would be submitted to the June meeting of the Committee;
- IAMP - this would be submitted to the April meeting of the Committee;
- Proposed Waste Energy Plant/Incinerator in Washington – this was a live planning application and therefore it was inappropriate for the Scrutiny Committee at this time, however a report would be submitted when possible.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 15th January, 2019 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record and the above information be noted.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Variation in the Order of Business

The Chairman proposed and it was agreed that the order of business be changed so that the item on Major Events – Economic Impact was considered at this point on the agenda, as Ms French had another meeting to attend with other Members of the Council.

Major Events – Economic Impact

The Head of Events submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide feedback on the 2018 Illuminations and Festival of Light.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms Victoria French, Head of Events advised the Committee that the Sunderland Illuminations and Festival of Light had taken place from 18th October to 18th November 2018 with displays, fireworks and music drawing in the region of 150,000 visitors to the seafront and Roker Park.

The event had received good media and social media coverage. Ms French briefed Members on the visitor profile and advised that 77% of visitors had rated the event as 8, 9 or 10 out of 10.

The presentation detailed the average expenditure for Sunderland residents and for non-resident visitors and what visitors had liked the most. Visitors were coming from Stockton, Teesside, Yorkshire, Scotland and the south of England. The Sunderland Illuminations and Festival of Light had contributed £8.5m to the city's economy.

Ms French advised that research had found the event was seen as value for money with 83% of visitors stating this. She confirmed however that the Festival of Light would be held in Mowbray Park the following year between 21 November and 21 December and they aimed to get more people to visit the city centre by moving the location.

Councillor Jackson enquired what impact there was on local businesses during the event period.

Ms French advised she would be able to pull out specific information on a ward basis for Councillors. She stated that they worked a lot with the residents in the area around parking arrangements and access, as they recognised that for some that the event meant inconvenience and so they tried to make sure things ran as smoothly as possible.

Councillor Marshall commented that it had been a fantastic event and it would be interesting to hear the feedback from businesses in the city centre next year. Ms French advised that they would gather this information.

In response to Councillors Turner and Marshall, Ms French advised that some national bus companies did tours and stays and that she was aware of the link between the Grand Hotel at Seaburn and National Holidays. Ms French added that they were looking to work with companies like this to promote events and attractions in Sunderland and promote the city as a tourist destination.

In response to Councillor Dixon, Ms French advised that the move would also provide the potential for revised prices and content in the run up to Christmas and that the theme would be 'Winter Wonderland'. There would also be some discounts through remodelling. There was however, a balance between upping the entrance fee and continuing to get the number of visitors through.

Councillor Curran commented on the success of the event which had been a culmination of many years work dealing with residents' concerns, adding that most came on board and that Mowbray Park would be an ideal venue for the event, where he was sure groups could work together in a similar way to make it a success.

The Chairman commented that the event had been a huge success and that she felt moving it to Mowbray Park and having it nearer to Christmas when people would be doing their Christmas shopping, was an excellent idea and would boost footfall in the city centre.

Ms French advised that that this was the thinking behind the change as they knew people were travelling from outside Sunderland to the event and this would be a way of encouraging them to do some shopping, have something to eat and contribute to the economy while they were here.

Full consideration having been given to the report and presentation, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the contents of the report and presentation and the information brought out during the discussion be received and noted.

Housing Strategy for Sunderland 2017-2022 - Update

The Executive Director of Economy and Place submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide an update on the key achievements over the past 12 months as identified in the Housing Strategy for Sunderland 2017-2022.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Iain Fairlamb, Head of Planning and Regeneration briefed the Committee on the report referring Members to the three chapters which recognise the Council's three greatest housing priorities:-

- maximising housing growth and increasing the choice of housing;
- making the best use of existing homes and improving our neighbourhoods; and
- supporting vulnerable people to access and maintain housing.

Mr Fairlamb highlighted some of the progress that had been made during 2018/2019 identified in tables 1-3 which included:-

- The Local Plan had been submitted before Christmas to the Secretary of State for Examination in Public;
- They were well on track to achieving the number of new homes set out in the strategy;
- The Council had published its Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA);
- The Council had been successful in a round 1 submission for the Housing Infrastructure Fund;
- The Council had started to prepare an empty properties strategy to identify how it will invest in empty homes across the city;
- The Council had progressed 1 enforced sale during the past year;
- The Council had prevented 381 households from becoming homeless over the past 12 months;
- A draft Homelessness Strategy has been produced and was out to consultation;
- Staffing resource had been reviewed and an additional 2 members of staff employed to effectively meet the duties set out in the Homeless Reduction Act.

In response to Councillor Foster's comments regarding the Developer Event held in January 2018 and whether this was a speculative event, Mr Fairlamb advised that the event had been a networking event to bring developers together along with council officials to discuss future housing development across the city and identify land surplus to needs. There were always different views about land and they sought to engage with Ward Councillors.

Councillor Foster stated that knowledge of the event at the time would have been useful.

Councillor Dixon queried the number of houses to be built and whether they would be built on brownfield sites.

In response Mr Fairlamb advised that they were looking to have similar levels of new houses built as the previous year and that there were not going to be as large a number on brownfield sites as greenfield sites. Some of the brownfield sites were traditional sites alongside the river and other brownfield sites were important for economic use.

Mr Fairlamb echoed Councillor Dixon's view of the importance of taking up the opportunity to work with the new Chief Executive of Gentoo as the company was a large stakeholder in the city.

Councillor Curran expressed his support for the number of building programmes in the city which would boost the number of people and the economy.

Councillor Jackson enquired how rigorous the Council was in identifying people who were homeless.

Mr Fairlamb advised that lots of resources had gone into this to keep the register and identify the numbers involved.

Ms Julie Wearmouth, Housing Strategy Team Leader added that they captured the detail and needs with a recording system they have to do this. Voluntary services were extremely important to upstream services, identifying where people will go to and putting advice and services in to capture those people.

In response to Councillors Jackson and Turner, Ms Wearmouth advised that she would be able to obtain the number of homeless people in the city and added that they were trying to bring empty properties back into use for those who needed them.

In response to Councillor Blackburn, Mr Fairlamb advised that Fulwell Quarry had been identified for a retirement village development consisting of over 100 independent living units.

Councillor Gibson commented on the importance of infrastructure when building the number of houses that were being built, the number of families moving in causing congestion problems on the roads etc. and the need for Doctors' surgeries, schools to be in place etc., adding that it was a shame that these services followed the development and that there were not in place as families moved in as this would solve a lot of problems.

Councillor Taylor enquired as to the number of homes approved on greenfield sites and on brownfield sites.

Mr Fairlamb advised he would provide this information.

Full consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the report and the information brought out in the meeting be received and noted.

Environmental Enforcement – Update

The Chief Operating Officer (Place) submitted a report (copy circulated), to update Members about the progress being made by the Environmental Enforcement Team since the implementation of the revised Environmental Policy in 2017.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms Nicky Rowland, Area Manager – Local Services provided the Committee with a presentation advising that there was now an operational team of 10 where previously there had been 3 officers to carry out environmental investigations and enforcement.

The presentation provided details of the investigation types, actions and investigations undertaken from April 2018 until December 2018.

Ms Rowland highlighted that Millfield, Hendon, Pallion and Barnes wards had the highest incidences of dumping of waste from April 2018 until December 2018. Since the implementation of the revised Environmental Policy in April 2017 there had been 8985 environmental investigations which she explained could take up to 12 months to investigate and there had been 11 successful prosecutions. She pointed out that this was in comparison with 2014-2017 where there had been 4141 investigations and 0 successful prosecutions.

Councillor Jackson commented that the work undertaken was very impressive and enquired about dog fouling and the measures to reduce incidences.

Ms Rowland responded to say that they had not been targeting the offence and it had been a case of being in the right place, however this would be looked at in the next steps.

Councillor Curran commented that the team had done really well with the number of staff it had. He then enquired what the Authority's policy was in relation to Christmas trees left in the back lanes.

Ms Rowland advised that there was not a policy on Christmas trees and that they should be cut up and put in the brown bin. She added that it was unlawful to leave them in the back lane and that the Council would prosecute anyone doing so if found.

In response to Councillor Curran's further questions, Ms Rowland reported that in future illegal waste collected by the Council would be weighed to calculate the cost of fly-tipping to the authority. The staff did not work weekends but worked a 37 hour week. In 18 months' time they would be looking to target events in the city working in liaison with Victoria French's events team. Staff were not inoculated, however they were provided with the appropriate equipment and clothes and therefore were protected when collecting waste.

Councillor Taylor thanked Ms Rowland for her help and the work her team had undertaken in the Washington area. He enquired whether they worked with other local authorities to gather intelligence.

Councillor Taylor commented on the problems in his ward and others in Washington with trade waste. He advised that the Environment Agency had done some roadside checks recently to try to reduce the problem. It was a major concern with residents in Washington that people were dumping rubbish on the grass verges; landlords dumping waste ready for the next tenants etc. on Council land.

Ms Rowland commented that they needed to get better with working with other local authorities and she felt that the links would improve naturally. The issue at the moment was to get the staff all trained up to provide a robust enforcement team working in Sunderland first.

Ms Rowland advised that the Council used to do roadside checks with the Police which did work successfully, however due to austerity they had not been able to continue with them. They were however looking to meet with the Police to see how they could do some joint working in the future.

Ms Rowland commented that there were some professional fly tippers and they wanted to get the message out that this would not be accepted in Sunderland. With regards to landlords removing rubbish after a tenant had moved in/out, Ms Rowland advised that they tried to work with them to avoid the rubbish being dumped and having to clear it up afterwards and they had arrangements in place with Gentoo for example in this respect.

In response to Councillor Dixon, Ms Rowland advised that they had built up some intelligence with Durham and other local authorities as part of joint working. With regards to the amount of incidents in Millfield and his query whether there needed to be 2 officers working in that ward, Ms Rowland stated that there wouldn't be 1 officer per area in future and it could be all working together, if there was a particular issue. They were looking to take preventative action going forward rather than be reactive.

Councillor Blackburn stated that there was a case in Durham where a van which had been used to dump waste was to be scrapped and he enquired whether Sunderland was looking to do this.

Ms Rowland advised that the Council was about to use the new legal powers which came into force in April 2018 to seize vehicles used in waste trade or deposit offences. There were 8 vehicles at that time that they were looking at potentially seizing. One of the problems was that the vehicles were cloned and the registration on the vehicle was not correct. However they were working with the Police to identify the vehicles so they could be seized and scrapped. Ms Rowland added that there was a procedure to be followed whereby the owner had to prove legitimacy for the van and if they were unable to do this it was scrapped.

Councillor Galbraith commented on cases where people genuinely put rubbish out for household collection thinking that the Council would take it away, as it used to do so and then found themselves reported.

Ms Rowland advised that all of the offences were criminal matters and had to be proved without reasonable doubt and that they were duty bound to see them all the way through. Everyone involved had to be interviewed under caution.

Full consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the contents of the report and presentation and the information brought out during the discussion be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2018-19

The Head of Member Support and Community Partnerships submitted a report (copy circulated), setting out the current work programme of the Committee for the 2018-19 Municipal year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer advised that the visit to Vaux site would take place on 8th March and Members would be informed of the detailed arrangements around this in due course.

Mr Diamond also advised that an item on 'Apprenticeships' was scheduled for the March meeting of the Committee.

5. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2018-19 together with the above be noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

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 January, 2019 (copy circulated), was submitted.

(For copy report – 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. MACKNIGHT,
Chairman.