

**At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 7<sup>th</sup> APRIL, 2022 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor D.E. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Hartnack, D. MacKnight, Mann, Mullen and D. Snowdon

Also in attendance:-

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

Mr Simon Henry, Quality Control and Review Manager, Transactional Services, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Nic Marko, Local Democracy Reporter

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator, Corporate Services Directorate

Mrs Christine Tilley, Community Governance Services Team Leader, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Paul Wilson, Assistant Director of Finance, Corporate Services Directorate

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and in particular Councillor D. MacKnight, on her return after a period of absence.

Councillor D. MacKnight thanked Councillor D.E. Snowdon for Chairing the meetings of the Scrutiny Committee in her absence.

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Doyle, Heron, Hodson, N. MacKnight, P. Smith and Thornton.

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

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

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

There were no declarations of interest made.

## **Council Tax - Empty Homes Premium**

The Executive Director of Corporate Services submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with an overview of the Council Tax - Empty Homes Premium and its application in Sunderland.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Assistant Director of Finance, Corporate Services Directorate briefed the Committee on the report highlighting paragraphs 2.3 and 2.4 detailing the background to the provisions covering properties that were empty for long periods and paragraph 3 setting out the current position in Sunderland.

Members raised individual cases where residents had received letters seeking payment of the council tax empty homes premium where the property could not be let for security reasons and enquired whether there were any Council properties which fell into this category.

Mr Simon Henry, Quality Control and Review Manager, Transactional Services, Corporate Services Directorate addressed Members' concerns, explained the appeal process and advised that they did look at individual cases and whether they were eligible for consideration under the Discretionary Relief Scheme. He also confirmed that there were old school houses, cemetery houses etc. which could not be let due to safeguarding reasons and therefore could not be subjected to the Council Tax - Empty Homes Premium.

In response to Members' questions, Mr Wilson advised that there were a variety of reasons why properties remained empty, some were difficult to sell, some had negative equity, sometimes people held them as an investment. He advised that the collection rate on houses subject to the premium varied year on year and as they got into the higher bands it became more challenging. There were a number of absent landlords who were not particularly bothered about paying the premium and there were people who struggled but the Council followed the recovery process.

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services advised that they could provide a copy of the Housing Development and Investment Programme which detailed the different properties and looked at the different ways to deal with them.

In response to the Chair, Mr Henry advised that there wasn't a definition of a furnished property. Government had provided guidance such as there needed to be some white goods, a bed and a chair, but effectively Officers needed to make a determination.

Mr Wilson admitted that there were ways to avoid the premium and if the property was furnished the premium didn't apply. He also added that liability stayed with the property and did not transfer on disposal.

Mr Henry advised however, that the property needed to be furnished/occupied for a 6 week minimum a year, otherwise the premium would be applied.

Members considered the report and the issues raised with individual cases which had to go through the process each year, although they had properties which could

not be let due to various reasons such as security and discussed how residents in this situation could be provided with further advice and guidance and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee noted the report and requested that consideration be given to an additional paragraph to the Council Tax letter, or an alternative communication, to anyone in receipt of a council tax empty homes premium in relation to providing updated information that might need to be taken into account when determining the application of the premium.

## **Scrutiny Annual Report 2021/2022**

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) to approve the Scrutiny Annual Report 2021/2022 that was to be presented to Council at a future date.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, advised that the Annual report would be submitted to the Council meeting in June.

Councillor D. MacKnight suggested that the Chair of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee, Councillor P. Smith's role in Children's Services receiving the Ofsted outstanding rating be acknowledged in the report.

Councillor Mullen commented that his name had been misspelt and Mr Cummings undertook to correct this in the report.

Councillor Mullen commented that it was important that when the Committee was considering the Performance report that appropriate Officers were in attendance to answer any questions which the Committee might have.

Councillor Mullen also commented that it was generous to give positions on Outside Bodies to Opposition Members in his Group to represent the Council, however unfortunately those Members had not received the necessary support to enable them to carry out the role effectively.

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator advised that this was something which they could pick up as part of the review of scrutiny.

Mr Cummings advised that Performance Monitoring now came under the remit of Ms Beverley Poulter and it was about getting the balance right and practicality. He suggested that it might be better to choose a theme to scrutinise and then they could ensure the appropriate Officers were present to respond to any enquiries Members might have rather than have a whole host of 10-12 Officers present and there being no questions raised for a number of them. Another way of managing this was for Members to advise in advance of the kind of questions they would be raising so that appropriate Officers could be in attendance.

Councillor Mann commented that it would be better to focus on a particular area.

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

3. RESOLVED that subject to the above amendments and comments being taken into account, the Scrutiny Annual Report 2021/2022 be approved for submission to Council.

### **Work Programme 2021/22**

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2021/22 and providing an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2021/22.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, advised that those items which had not been included in the work programmes to date would be programmed in for the year ahead.

Councillor Mullen enquired how the review of City Hall had gone and suggested a session be programmed in for six months' time to talk about the issues.

Councillor D. Snowdon advised that the Working Group on the Sunnyside area would continue in the year ahead.

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

4. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2021/22 and the variations to these work programmes be noted, together with the 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 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2022.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

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

The Chair paid tribute to Councillor D. MacKnight as the Chair and Lead Member for Scrutiny in the Council and wished her a happy retirement.

Councillor MacKnight replied suitably, thanking Members and Officers for their support and commenting that she would continue to be active in her local community.

The Chair in closing the meeting, thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) D. E. SNOWDON,  
Chairman.