

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 8TH FEBRUARY 2022 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors M. Dixon, Edgeworth, Fagan, Greener, Laws, Price, Taylor, Thornton and Warne.

Also in attendance: -

Councillor Dianne Snowdon

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 Peter Graham – Group Engineer, Sunderland City Council

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Ali.

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 11th January 2022

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 11th January, 2022 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

In relation to Councillor Taylors comments on page 3 paragraph 8, James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer advised that enquiries had been made as to why a SCC Officer had not been present and this had been due to ill health and for Covid related reasons.

The Chairman commented that Councillor Taylors concerns were noted and that greater efforts should be made to ensure a substitute representative be provided in future scenarios.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 11th January 2022 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest

Low Carbon Approach - Update

The Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) to set out the progress being made in relation to the Low Carbon Framework and reducing carbon emission in the city.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Catherine Auld, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Edgeworth commented that one of the consistent queries raised by his constituents was by those residents that lived in housing estates that did not have driveways but were eager for EV driving charging and queried if there was any ambition to think creatively to provide infrastructure for those estates.

Ms Auld confirmed that this was an issue that had been raised at Area Committee Boards and was something that needed to be looked at along with all the efficient technologies that were out there. In terms of timescales for this, Ms Auld advised that she would take this request away and come back to Councillor Edgeworth with a direct answer.

In response to Councillor Taylor's enquiry with regards to available figures on the uptake of usage of electric charging stations, Ms Auld advised that she would source the data and provide this directly to Councillor Taylor.

Councillor Taylor commented that one of the main issues was complaints received in relation to parents parking outside of schools and enquired if there were any initiatives considered to tackle this. Ms Auld advised that the intention was to work with the young people in trying to include them to drive this change organically so that they wanted to walk to school rather than be taken by car and that this would encourage parents indirectly. Ms Auld also commented that it was now about how they supported this and they were looking at using Active Travel Funds.

Councillor Greener commented that the issue of parking around schools and encouraging walking was so important as there was a great deal of people who lived locally but still drove to school, but not only this, they would have the engine running idle for 20 mins during drop off/pick up. Councillor Greener advised that Switzerland had made this illegal, which had made a great difference in the emissions generated.

Councillor Greener also raised the issue of dedicated bus lanes and commented that whilst they were a good idea in principle, in practice it was resulting in great numbers of cars stuck in traffic with engines running whilst a bus only carrying a small number of people was benefitting and more thought needed to be given over this.

Councillor M. Dixon advised that he had raised the issue of parents keeping car engines running outside of schools around 4 years ago and a constituent's granddaughter had produced some artwork which highlighted the effects that this behaviour caused. Councillor Dixon suggested that Head Teachers be encouraged to send something out to parent's on this.

Ms Auld agreed and advised that there was a pilot around School Streets and was something she could look to liaise with the schools on through Together for Children and she would also pick up on this with her Transport colleagues.

Ms Auld commented that there did need to greater consideration given on this but with dedicated bus lanes it was more about changing the habits of residents and making public transport more advantageous but Ms Auld did acknowledge there was a balance to be made.

In response to Councillor Taylor's enquiry over the battery life of the Councils Bin lorries, Peter Graham, Group Engineer advised that the vehicle was charged daily and that the range could be dependent on the temperature as the colder temperatures could reduce the range. Ms Auld advised that she would source the data in terms of the average life span of the battery in terms of if they were sufficiently capable of lasting the refuse collectors common shift hours.

Councillor Fagan referred to the presentation and the schools garden/food growing initiatives and queried the Council Plans for allotments, which had a long waiting list. Councillor Fagan queried if there were any plans to try and increase the accessibility for allotments. Ms Auld advised that she would take this request back as she did not have the specific statistics on allotments.

Councillor Laws referred to the statistics within the presentation and the reduction of 14.4%, whereas what was in our control was at 13.2%. Councillor Law's queried if we were therefore falling short of our targets. Ms Auld advised that the 13.2% was what was within Council control and the figure of 14.4% related to City wide targets.

The Chairman referred to the carbon footprint of emails and the drive to move to Teams chat etc and queried as more and more meetings were held over Teams now, what the carbon footprint of using Teams was. Ms Auld advised that she would investigate this further and get back to the Chairman on this. Ms Auld also advised that the use of Teams for messaging was preferred as the data was erased after a short period of time whereas an email would be stored on a server, resulting in a greater carbon footprint.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Ms Auld on behalf of the Committee for her attendance.

2. RESOLVED that the progress report be received and noted.

Sunderland Heat Network - Progress

The Assistant Director of Infrastructure, Planning and Transportation submitted a report (copy circulated) to set out the progress being made in relation to the Sunderland Heat Network.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Peter Graham, Group Engineer presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Dianne Snowdon commented that usually borehole companies tried to miss mine workings and that surely there were mine entrances in the area that had been capped off that would be easier sources to access.

Mr Graham advised that they had looked at all the various existing options and these had been exhausted.

Councillor Taylor enquired if they had looked at any alternative sites such as Houghton Colliery which he believed to be a good source to supply the units.

Mr Graham advised that at the start of the project in 2018 there had been energy master planning across the entire city which took into account the cost association of accessing the mineworks and they needed significant heat loads which they would struggle to find in other areas of the City. For viability they needed that large City Centre anchor load.

In response to Councillor Price's query, Mr Graham advised that there would need to be a minimum of 2 boreholes drilled and there may need to be a third for contingency, this was still up for debate depending on the pilot drills.

Councillor Price queried when this was up and running, how the facility would be seen by residents. Mr Graham advised that the energy centre itself could be quite unassuming, if there was to be a gas back up there would also be a 25m flue and they were aiming for something more architecturally interesting.

The Chairman enquired where we stood country wide in terms of this proposal. Mr Graham informed the Committee that they were working very closely with the Coal Authority's Charlotte Adams and that in terms of heat demand this would make us one of the largest mine sourced heat schemes in the country.

In response to the Chairman's query over timescales put on the process lasting into the future, Mr Graham advised that it was hoped this would be infinite as the quantities taken out would be small relative to the amounts that were available.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Mr Graham for his attendance and commented that he was sure officers would be back to update the Committee on this in the future.

3. RESOLVED that the progress report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2021-22

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 2021/2022

(For copy report – see original minutes).

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

Councillor Edgeworth referred to the imminent Cabinet decision on the £25 replacement Bin charge policy and queried if there could be a role for this Committee

to have. Mr Diamond commented that he would liaise with Graham Scanlon to give an update on this.

Councillor M. Dixon wished to seek the Committee's comments in relation to the Task and Finish Group which had been formed to look at the Sunnyside Area and informed that Councillor Ali had recently been advised that he should remove himself from the group due to a conflict of interest with his property portfolio.

Councillor Dixon commented that he was concerned that this action was needed when it related to one shop, yet the group was looking at the whole area in general and he believed this was unfair to remove Councillor Ali from the group for this reason. Councillor Dixon acknowledged that this wasn't party political as the advice given was to replace Councillor Ali with another Conservative Member but he wished to seek the Committee's opinion on this.

The Chairman further clarified that an initial meeting had been convened to outline the terms of reference of the group and to consider what to look at, this meeting had taken place with Members, Police and Officers. Councillor Ali had raised an issue over his property in the area. The Police raised concerns and clarity was needed with Legal Services on possible conflicts of interest.

The Chairman advised that he was aware that a letter had been sent to Councillor Ali and that he and Councillor Mullen were to meet with Legal Services for clarification on the matter. The Chairman also advised that he would raise the issue again to try and get a resolution but whilst Councillor Ali may not be able to have any direct input on the Task and Finish Group there was a possibility of giving input via a consultative basis.

Councillor Taylor commented that he felt it was very important that Councillor Ali takes the advice of the City Solicitor as Members were not above the rules and if the guidance given by legal was to withdraw then this should be followed.

Councillor Laws agreed that the Members should be guided by the City Solicitors advice and that whilst it may appear unfair, consideration had to be given to the perceived conflict of interest and how this could look upon the Council.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that if the Task and Finish Group was specifically looking at Borough Road then he could understand, but the group were looking at the whole area and the owning of one property in Borough Road would not have an overall bearing on the range of issues being considered and he felt this came back to Councillor expertise which Councillor Ali was ideal for and he felt they were precluding his expertise for such a small area of concern.

The Chairman clarified that Councillor Ali hadn't been removed from the Task and Finish Group as yet and efforts were being made to resolve the situation and ensure there wasn't any comeback before they could move forward.

Councillor Fagan commented that whilst she did not have any strong feelings on this either way, in terms of the conflict of interest, should the group recommend funding be allocated into the area and Councillor Ali benefitted from this funding it would be perceived to be a conflict of interest in the eyes of residents.

Councillor Taylor commented that nobody doubted Councillor Ali's expertise therefore he suggested they await the outcome of the meeting with Legal Services as the Committee should really follow their guidance on the issue. Mr Diamond advised that he would chase up details of the meeting with the City Solicitor.

The Chairman commented that he understood the concerns raised by Councillor Dixon and acknowledged that Councillor Ali did have a lot to contribute.

In relation to the work programme, Mr Diamond informed the Committee that there was a great deal of items scheduled for the next meeting and enquired if the Committee wished to reschedule any items to a later date for consideration. The Committee discussed and agreed to keep the work programme as it was as all items were important to consider.

4. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2021-2022 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 10th January, 2022 (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.

Councillor Taylor raised the concern that the Notice contained 17 out of 24 decisions that had been taken earlier that same morning by Cabinet.

Mr Diamond advised that not all decisions on the Plan would have been referred to this Committee for consideration. The Chairman advised that he took the comments on board and would forward these on.

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. SNOWDON,
Chairman.