

At a meeting of the WASHINGTON AREA COMMITTEE held remotely on THURSDAY, 24TH SEPTEMBER, 2019 at 6.00p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Lauchlan in the Chair

Councillors Armstrong, Farthing, Fletcher, Kelly, G. Miller, F. Miller, Scaplehorn, D.E. Snowdon, D. Snowdon, Taylor, D. Trueman, H. Trueman and Williams.

Also in Attendance:-

Ms. Pauline Hopper	-	Area Officer – Sunderland City Council
Mr. Jon Ritchie	-	Executive Director of Corporate Services, Sunderland City Council
Mr. Paul Wood	-	Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mrs. Allison Patterson	-	Area Co-ordinator, Sunderland City Council
Mr Graham Scanlon	-	Assistant Director of Housing Services
Mr John Chapman	-	Gentoo

The Chairman welcomed everyone and opened the meeting.

Apologies for Absence

There were apologies for absence from Councillor P. Walker, Karon Purvis and Inspector Gjorven.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes of the last meeting held on 16th July 2020

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 16th July, 2020 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Washington Area Neighbourhood Investment Delivery Plan 2020 -2023

The Chair of Washington Neighbourhoods and Community Board submitted a report (copy circulated) presenting the Washington Area Committee Delivery Plan 2020-2023 and provided an update of progress against the Area priorities associated with the Delivery Plan.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Councillor F. Miller presented the report as Chair of the Washington Neighbourhood and Community Board and enquired if Members had any questions or comments they wished to make.

Councillor Scaplehorn referred to the last paragraph on page 15 of the agenda and the next steps to develop local neighbourhoods schemes and commented that whilst not wanting to appear negative, the Police were under tremendous pressure due to cuts from the last few years and they could not support the existing schemes that were in operation let alone support newly formed groups.

Councillor F. Miller commented that this was a response that Inspector Gjørven needed to be able to provide in person and that she knew her neighbourhood watch schemes in Teal Farm would like to be updated and suggested that a virtual PACT meeting may be a possible way forward to discuss this.

The Chairman advised that Mrs Purvis was trying to arrange such a meeting and this could be something brought up in that forum.

Councillor Kelly raised concerns that since the Committee had put together this list of priorities, We were now seeing another rise in cases of Covid, so whilst we had a lot of projects ongoing, there was not a lot of flexibility to respond quickly in areas where we needed to work with the community around Covid. Councillor Kelly requested that the opportunity be taken to align some funding in order to make sure we could respond, should we be required to.

The Chairman agreed and asked that this be noted for Officers to look further at allocating funding in this regard.

Councillor Farthing wished to enquire over the Kitchen/Social Chef proposal and as she understood it, we wouldn't be employing a chef but using the Community and Family learning to help support families in how to learn to cook/prepare budget recipes rather than create a new post and requested more information on what was proposed in this project.

Councillor F. Miller advised that she believed details of this would be brought to the November meeting of the Washington Neighbourhood and Community Board. John Chapman, Gentoo advised that he would make enquiries also.

Councillor Williams advised that she would like more information in this regard as we needed to make the most out of the money available and to reach the widest audience as possible.

Councillor Williams also stated that she would like to see progression in the establishment of the Task and Finish Groups with the Membership getting agreed so we could move forward with plans.

The Chairman advised that they were trying to progress this and he and Councillor F. Miller would be selecting the Membership for the Task and Finish Groups to take place over Teams.

Councillor H. Trueman referred to the VAS signs, which were most welcome but had recently reported a concern with regards to an issue of speeding in Springwell Village. Unfortunately Officer advice had been that the criteria had not been met for a VAS sign to be used. Councillor H. Trueman commented that he felt Members should be given some discretion on the location of the VAS signs when their residents were raising concerns about issues in their streets.

Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services commented that a crib sheet which detailed the criteria that Officers used would be beneficial for Members and requested that Councillor H. Trueman send him details of the issue he had faced and he would be happy to raise this on behalf of the Committee.

Councillor Taylor expressed disappointment that the Police could not be here as he had a resident's association contact him from Teal Farm with regards to Neighbourhood Watch Schemes. Due to an increase in housing developments in the area there had been an increase in ASB and whilst the Area Response Team had done a brilliant job in cleaning up broken glass and such like there was a concern and suggestion of a need for a neighbourhood watch scheme covering the whole of that area.

Councillor Scaplehorn wished to take the opportunity to welcome Mr John Chapman of Gentoo to the Washington Area Committee.

2. RESOLVED that the Committee considered the progress and performance update with regards to the Washington Area Committee Delivery Plan 2020-2023 as detailed within Annex 1 of the report, subject to clarification of projects at the November Board meeting and noted the items referred to in Item 4 of the agenda for consideration.

Partner Agency Reports

a) Washington Area Community Voluntary Sector Network

The Voluntary and Community Sector Network submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided an update with regard to the Washington Area Community and Voluntary Sector Network.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

As there was no VCS Representative available to present the report, the Chairman advised that if Members had any queries or comments, to pass these onto the Area Officer to liaise with the Sector.

Councillor Armstrong wished to comment on the importance of the VCS during these current times and how they had really stepped up to the plate and wished to acknowledge how great they had been in Washington.

Members having considered the report, it was: -

3. RESOLVED that the content of the report and the opportunities and issues raised by the Washington Area Voluntary and Community Sector Network be received and noted.

b) Northumbria Police

Northumbria Police submitted a report which provided data on crime and disorder in the Washington area comparing 'Year to date' figures with the preceding year.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Inspector Gjorven had been unable to attend the meeting therefore the Chairman suggested that if Members had any comments or questions that these could be passed on.

Councillor Farthing requested that figures be provided on incidents of domestic abuse during lockdown.

Councillor Armstrong referred to the continued reduction in figures for Youth ASB and it was great to see the Police working with partners such as the Oxclose and District Young People's Project.

The Chairman commented that the Police Report figures did make for good reading with the total crime statistics for Washington down 12%.

Councillor D. E. Snowdon informed the Committee as the representative on LMAPs of their last meeting which reported that figures were down and whilst there had been a small burst of burglaries in Washington, the Police felt that they had this in hand. In relation to COVID ASB, there had been 10 reports

over the rule of 6 which was manageable at the moment, but concerns were raised on how they would manage going into the future should there be a spike in this regard.

Councillor D. E. Snowdon advised that there were local issues which she would share with Members relevant to them outside of the meeting.

In the absence of a report from TWFRS, Councillor Taylor informed the Committee of a change within the Service and that Phil Sowerby had now moved to cover the Gateshead area and had been replaced with Ian Stewart.

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted and that a request be made for figures on domestic violence incidents that had occurred during lockdown.

c) Unauthorised Encampments

The Assistant Director of Community Resilience submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with an update on Unauthorised Encampments Policy and site activity in 2020 and the associated financial and service impact.

The report also requested the Area Committee review the sites in their area that have been used in the past 3 years and decide on whether they wished to consider any mitigation measures on sites in their area from Area Committee budgets.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services presented the report and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Kelly commented that as a Councillor of a Ward that has had numerous visits from travellers it was incredibly difficult to relay to the public that the Council can't work as quickly as they would like. Councillor Kelly stated that his frustration was that it felt the Centre was passing the buck as we had previously set money aside with his Colleagues in Washington West Ward but had been stopped from going ahead with what they wanted to do.

Councillor Kelly commented that the problem he had with the Policy on Travellers was that we did not appear to give the same concern to our residents and sincerely hoped that the Centre could look at this again and give us better guidance as they felt that Members had been left alone on this issue.

Councillor Taylor queried the number of encampments in relation to James Steel Park as there had been 2 encampments pre lockdown alone, there had been at least 4 separate encampments on one occasion and then the extra ones during August which had been mentioned.

Councillor Taylor referred to the comment that The Councils response had to be different due to Covid and Government restrictions, and commented that this was right as it made the encampment review policy out of date. So the Council implemented a negotiated stopping agreement (NSA) where the Council and lead camp member agreed to comply with a code of conduct and this could be valid for anything up to 28 days.

Councillor Taylor informed the Committee that the Council visited the site on the bank holiday weekend in May and said that there had been one encampment, all from the same family. There was actually four separate encampments and they were from different families. Councillor Taylor advised that the implementation of the NSA for four weeks, absolutely infuriated residents because none of the groups observed social distancing with other Members of public also visiting the site when we were supposed to be under a lockdown and the place was an absolute pig sty.

Councillor Taylor wished to pay tribute to the Area Response Team within the Council for the amount of mess that they had to remove throughout the summer.

Councillor Taylor also informed of issues from an encampment opposite Wormhill including car racing on the grass, thankfully the Council varied the agreement to 14 days on this occasion, however due to the inclement weather conditions the travellers could not get the caravans off the field.

Councillor Taylor advised that he had received huge amounts of complaints, including a resident that had witnessed travellers fly tipping into the River Wear, they had been in the children's play parks when they were closed for lockdown, and there had been no social distancing.

Councillor Taylor commented that the response had to change due to Covid but he felt the Council and it's Officers could have handled the situation much better than how they did. Unfortunately it was left to Ward Councillors to visit residents and take their complaints so something definitely needed to be done and due to the events of this year, the Policy needed to be revisited as it was not fit for purpose.

Councillor Taylor stated that the encampment in James Steel Park was near residential developments and a children's play park and in his mind that was an unsuitable area to have one, however such encampments at the Vaux site were removed immediately due to unsuitability so there was a disparity in how the policy was implemented.

Councillor Taylor also commented that some of the people involved were not actually travellers and lived locally, they were cutting down perfectly healthy trees, starting fires and queried why they were allowed to do this under a local lockdown when normal residents were not. The people of Washington had suffered long enough and something needed to change and felt a Working Group needed to be set up to look at this.

Councillor Farthing commented that the difficulties faced on this situation had been made worse through Covid as everybody had been at home, everyone had been out walking and seen the travellers. In the Washington South Ward they tended to come on to an area which was part of the park which caused uproar amongst the local community as instances were occurring that other residents wouldn't be allowed to do.

Councillor Farthing commented that she did not believe people objected to the travellers themselves it was the behaviours that occurred. In previous years there had been tethered horses and caravans in an area quite close to the road, visible to everybody and caused a lot of concern.

Councillor Farthing stated that we had adopted this policy as a Council and she understood the reasons for this. This year had been particularly difficult as the Courts were closed so no court action could be taken as in past years. We may need to look at temporary stop over sites such as Industrial estates, but this would rely on the Court action to get the travellers to move to such locations.

Councillor Farthing also queried the list of costs in restricting access attached to the report and wondered if consideration had been given to the consequences that might come about from such actions and where the problems would then move to. Councillor Farthing felt that this needed looking at in more detail along with the areas that would then become vulnerable because of this.

Councillor Williams referred to the list of encampments and advised that View Point Car Park wasn't listed and that there had definitely been some visitors over the bank holiday weekend and had stayed until the following Monday and people were quite rightly annoyed over this. People had been concerned over the horses as people used the park for walks/running and to walk their dogs. Councillor Williams advised that she would be interested in Mr Scanlon's view on the suggestion of horse owners being fined the same as owners of dogs that fouled the park.

Councillor Williams commented that she would like to know the rules around Horses, how they should be kept safe and what to do if there were any concerns. Councillor Williams agreed that this needed to be part of a Board discussion as to the consequences of implementing deterrents, what happens if the equipment gets damaged and there needed to be a longer term plan.

Councillor Williams also queried if we had any representatives from the traveller's community that we could speak with and to work with them during any such policy review. Mr Scanlon advised that in terms of engaging with the traveller community, Officers did carry out a piece of work last year as the travellers arrived but unfortunately had received very limited support in terms of engagement from the community, this year they hadn't really followed that up but it was something they definitely needed to pursue to try and engage the community and what type of support we had.

Councillor Scaplehorn wished to raise the fact that there had been no clearance costs associated to Albany Park, and suggested that this was down to the work of one individual who was a volunteer within the Keep Washington Tidy campaign, in conjunction with the Area Response Team, who saved the Council a huge amount of money through the work they carry out in removing the waste and would like to acknowledge the particular volunteer and the Keep Washington Tidy volunteers.

Councillor F. Miller commented that a long-term strategy was important and she did have a number of traveller work colleagues so she did have an understanding of what their lifestyle entailed. Councillor F. Miller informed of issues experienced within her ward and commented that the traveller Community was the same as any other in terms of there being good and bad and we shouldn't judge them all the same.

Councillor F. Miller commented on the need for a long term strategy down at the Riverside, she had been asked previously on what was wanted and she had come up with a plan, if the dog park was located in the place originally requested, the next field over to become the new Harraton C.A play park and then the play park already there would become a new community garden and possibly allotment that could feed into the Harraton C.A who could utilise the produce to cook food for the café.

Councillor G. Miller commented that at the end of the day, we had a policy and this was a national requirement. We must do this or the Government would impose one on us. This wasn't the problem, unfortunately the problem was when we slavishly adhered to such a policy, residents become frustrated when travellers are able to get away with such behaviours that residents do not and they feel this is grossly unfair on them, which he fully understood.

Councillor G. Miller stated that the Local Authority needed to bear in mind that we were carrying out services to our Council Tax payers and our policies work to fit that, by slavishly following policies over the years had gotten us into terrible trouble resulting in us not doing anything.

Councillor G. Miller commented that he understood that Mr Scanlon and Officers were in a very awkward situation here and it was a policy that we must have and Members would be in agreement that we must have this policy as it were the right and fair thing to do, but it was our residents that they were elected to represent on this. Councillor G. Miller added that we genuinely needed to have a high level discussion with senior officers on what this policy was meaning for the city as it cannot be right that it primarily impacts upon the Washington and Coalfield Areas. It was not acceptable to routinely let our residents down each year and he genuinely believed there was a sizeable minority of residents who were becoming increasingly more vocal and unhappy with a Council who seemingly are doing nothing for them and allow visitors to do whatever they like.

Councillor G. Miller enquired about the options proposed and as a resident he was still waiting on a dog park that was promised within the Ward for the past

3 years, this park would've broken up the site which wouldn't have stopped travellers from going there but it would have limited them. Elements of this were frustrating as nothing had happened and it was unacceptable that Area Committee had put forward proposals and these were not delivered every year by Officers and this must change.

Councillor G. Miller stated that we managed this, by making sure the policy worked but we needed to get the mitigation strategy right and identify the funding for it and then get on with collectively carrying this out.

Councillor Armstrong wished to defend the Officers in a difficult situation as they had a policy of tolerance that they had to abide by this summer, and we all have had to, along with government advice to abide by for travellers during Covid, all this with angry residents getting on to local councillors putting pressure on so he could imagine this was quite a difficult job to balance both sides.

Councillor Armstrong commented that we had to be tolerant and respectful, treating everyone equally but on the other hand seeing transgressions of behaviour, especially during the period with Covid where neighbours were noticing these actions, made these behaviours seem out of order. Councillor Armstrong advised that he believed the way forward was in discussions and agreed that engagement with the traveller community would be beneficial and possibly a long term strategy to build in with the policies of tolerance whilst keeping our residents happy.

Councillor Taylor referred to actions taken by neighbouring Councils such as County Durham who issued press releases advising the travelling community as soon as their Appleby Horse fair had been cancelled that there would be no provision for temporary stop over sites and advised everybody not to travel. This was publicised in local press and radio, yet Sunderland City Council didn't do any of that and he felt that this was something the Council should learn from.

Councillor Taylor raised the issue that none of the parks/areas that the travellers used this year had any toilet facilities so along with using the areas for camping they were being used as a toilet also. It should be noted that when these areas were being used by the travellers it meant that our residents were unable to utilise the parks.

Councillor Taylor wished to query the costings and when these started from as they may have only been started from late May/early June when he had requested them.

Councillor Taylor informed of a site meeting with a previous Portfolio Holder who had suggested finding a way of prohibiting overnight parking within the Car Parks and provide enforcement. This would have meant introducing localised by laws. This idea was proposed to Officers and was ruled out rather than trying to work with Members to introduce this. Should this have been introduced then he believed we wouldn't be in this position today.

Mr Scanlon advised that he had noted Members comments and concerns and he would respond to the Members directly outside of the meeting. Mr Scanlon did feel it worth mentioning that in relation to County Durham Council's actions, he had contacted them afterwards and that despite all of their efforts it did not prevent the Travellers going in and having unauthorised encampments, but Mr Scanlon did take on board Councillor Taylors point and they would follow that up.

Mr Scanlon informed the Committee that the policy had been reviewed, as recently as February this year and he took on board the suggestion that another high level discussion needed to be had to understand how best it was taken forward and structured.

Mr Scanlon advised that he was really interested to understand how best to engage with the traveller community. There was a national organisation that they could engage with for further advice and support. In terms of the future Mr Scanlon hoped that he and his team along with Police and other partners could work well with local Members and Communities to work with the travellers to agree future arrangements as easy as possible so that our communities don't experience the issues they have had this year.

Mr Scanlon commented that it had been especially difficult this year for the team as they didn't have access to the Courts and he had spoken to numerous residents at the request of Members, so he had heard first hand of some of the experiences suffered by residents and the team did work with the Police and partners to try and deal with those.

Councillor Kelly informed the Committee that in a previous job role enforcing against travellers within Newcastle City Council, there was a Traveller and Gypsy Council, a recognised body representing their community that could be approached for possible engagement. Councillor Kelly advised that his biggest concern was that they were not willing to engage with us which made finding a solution difficult and it may be worth us speaking with the travelling Council of Great Britain to have a conversation through them to find a solution that worked for everybody.

The Chairman referred to the recommendations on the report and suggested that the item be deferred to the Washington and Community Board meeting in November for Members to have a more full and frank discussion before bringing it back to Area Committee for a decision in December.

Councillor G. Miller agreed and commented that he wanted Mr Scanlon to have the time to investigate and confirm the costs involved along with costs of the dog parks in fatfield that were suggested earlier. Councillor G. Miller also queried some of the mitigation costs in relation to the price of barriers quoted and advised that we needed to ensure we had mitigation measures whilst also adhering to the policy without shifting the problem into other areas and not damaging true travellers way of life.

Councillor Farthing agreed on the proposal to defer the item but felt there needed to be indications of what the implications would be if we did try to implement some of these mitigation measures and if they dispersed, this could just be to other parts of Washington. Much closer consideration needed to be given to the locations within the area so we did not make the situation worse in implementing this.

Councillor F. Miller agreed that the item should go to the November Board meeting for more discussion as there was quite a few implications to be considered not just about the communities that Members represent but also for the travelling community also so we really needed to sit down and discuss the best way forward.

5. RESOLVED that the report be noted and further information be brought to the November meeting of the Washington Area Neighbourhood and Community Board for discussions and then be brought back to Area Committee in December.

Washington Budget Report

The Assistant Director of Neighbourhood Directorate submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided a financial statement as an update position on progress in relation to allocating Neighbourhood Investment Capital Programme, Neighbourhood Fund and Community Chest as well as presenting proposals for further funding requests.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Hopper presented the report and was on hand to answer any queries raised by Members.

In response to Councillor Taylors query over how the COVID 19 situation would affect the Holiday Activities projects, Ms Hopper advised that each organisation that had applied, had its own COVID Safety procedures in place and some of the projects had been meeting with the young people both virtually and in smaller numbers.

6. RESOLVED that the Committee:-

- i) Noted the financial statements set out in Table 1 and 2 of the report;
- ii) Approved the £50,000 application to Neighbourhood Fund for the Washington Ward Improvement Project as set out in Annex 1 of the report;
- iii) Approved the 10 projects, totalling £19,999 for holiday activities as set out in Annex 2 of the report;
- iv) Noted the Ward Improvement Project Statement as set out in Paragraph 4 Table 3 of the report; and
- v) Noted the approved Community Chest grants between March 2020 to 1st September 2020 as set out in Annex 3 of the report.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting.

(Signed) L. LAUHLAN,
Chairman.