

**At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 18 JANUARY 2024 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Mason-Gage in the Chair.

Councillors Burrell, Dodds, Guy, Hartnack, Leonard, Mullen, P. Smith, Usher and Walton.

**Also in attendance:-**

Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Gill Hunter, Specialist Lead People Management, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

David Noon, Principal Democratic Services Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Bev Poulter, Senior Manager, Corporate Strategy

Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Directorate

Liz St Louis, Director of Smart Cities and Enabling Services

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

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Jones, Morrissey and Thornton.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2023**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2023 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

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

There were no declarations of interest made.

**Smart City Progress Update**

The Director of Smart Cities submitted a report (copy circulated) which following a request from the Committee, introduced a presentation to provide a progress update with regards to the Smart City Vision and Delivery Programme in the context of the significant impact it had made on the City Plan aspirations of delivering a dynamic smart, a healthy smart and a vibrant smart city.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Liz St Louis provided Members with a comprehensive powerpoint presentation which:

- Described the four stage Sunderland Smart City model in which no one and nowhere would be left behind,
- Demonstrated how Sunderland as a smart city was moving from a model to reality,
- Highlighted the partnership work being undertaken to deliver a smart city,
- Illustrated the growth of ultra fast and full fibre broadband in the city,
- Introduced the forthcoming (March 2024) Sunderland App which would be a one stop information hub providing local offers and discounts, alerts and notifications and practical information for anyone planning a visit,
- Outlined the digital solutions currently operating in the city and how the model supported education and enterprise, and
- Described how digital inclusion was being enabled through the 22 digital hubs established city wide.

The Chairman thanked Ms St Louis for her presentation and invited questions and comments from the Committee.

With regard to the Sunderland App, the Chair asked, how would visitors to the city be made aware of its existence? For example, for the benefit of people from outside the city attending an event at Fire Station, could a message be put on tickets along the lines of - 'for visitor information download the Sunderland App'? Ms St Louis confirmed that work was ongoing with partners to provide marketing solutions along those lines. It was intended that the information on the App would be expanded to cover items such as travel and transport. In response to an enquiry from Councillor Leonard, Ms St Louis confirmed that the App would also be capable of providing heritage trails and similar information in future phases.

Councillors Hartnack and P. Smith together with other members of the Committee expressed concern at the standard of the reinstatement work undertaken by fibre broadband providers following the installation of cabling. It was leaving a legacy of scarred roads and pavements across the city. The work was sub-standard, unsightly and potentially dangerous where surfaces were left uneven. Ms St Louis acknowledged the issues were understood and Highways colleagues work closely with providers to issue permits for work to take place and to ensure appropriate rectification. She advised that she would feedback the Committee's concerns to the Assistant Director of Infrastructure and Transportation to ensure the use of any powers that the Highways Team had regarding the standard of the reinstatement work were being fully utilised.

The Chair stated that this was an important point, because if the Council allowed the providers to get away with leaving sub standard reinstatement work, then they would have no incentive to carry out work of an acceptable standard in the future.

Councillor Mullen referred to the slide showing the VAS speed statistics and asked if it was possible to provide the information at a granular level on a ward by ward basis

for Members. Ms St Louis confirmed that it would be in time subject to the validation of the data by the service.

Councillor Mullen asked whether any evaluation had been undertaken as to the extent that smart solutions had resulted in savings and increased productivity. Ms St Louis replied that the data captured what the Council had planned to achieve matched against the actual result. It was also often the case that cost avoidance was being sought e.g., keeping people out of hospital.

Councillor Mullen referred to improvements in camera technology and asked if it was possible to use motion sensitive, covert spy cameras to catch fly-tippers in the act. Ms St Louis replied that such technology existed however it would require a conversation to understand whether the current legislation would permit its use in terms of enforcement action.

In response to a final question from Councillor Mullen, Ms St Louis confirmed that the smart billboards as proposed for Hastings Hill had not yet gone ahead.

Councillor Walton referred to the cost pressures being faced by Sports Centres in the city, and asked if it would be possible for the Council to work with them to provide smart solutions. Ms St Louis replied that it was possible with them subject to appropriate commercial arrangements.

There being no further questions or comments, it was:-

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

### **Sickness Absence Update**

The Director of Smart Cities submitted a report (copy circulated) which introduced a presentation from Gillian Hunter to provide an update on the current position in relation to sickness absence.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Members were informed that at its initial work planning meeting, the Committee had expressed their interest in better understanding the sickness absence position within the Council, comparator benchmarks and measures in place to support employees to remain healthy at work. Accordingly, the item had been brought to the Committee in view of the importance in supporting employees to remain at work and was aligned to the Organisational Health performance metrics and the Health and Wellbeing Task and Finish Working Group that was currently taking place.

Gill Hunter, Specialist Lead People Management provided Members with a powerpoint presentation which highlighted the current position with regard to absence management within the Council and the future plans in respect of the health and wellbeing of its workforce.

The Chairman thanked Ms Hunter for her presentation and invited questions and comments from the Committee.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the levels of absence and asked if the differences between directorates were investigated to establish the reasons why? For example, he cited the difference between City Development and Smart Cities and Enabling Services. Both had similar headcounts and he assumed had similar job roles however there was a significant difference between the two in respect of the level of absences. Ms Hunter confirmed that investigations were undertaken to establish the reasons for any differences, however in this example it was not a like for like comparison. In terms of job role, City Development had a significant cohort of manual workers within the Highways Section and the Port of Sunderland. This was not the case for Smart Cities and Enabling Services.

Councillor Hartnack asked if managers were held to account in respect of the need to take firmer action, where required, over and above the softer health and wellbeing issues? Ms Hunter replied that they were via Directorate Sickness Clinics held with HR business partners. The data would be assessed to ensure that in respect of employees who had hit particular attendance trigger levels, appropriate action had been taken in line with absence management policies.

In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Hartnack, Ms Hunter confirmed that data was analysed to identify trends, or patterns of behaviour (such as persistent absences on a particular day of the week), which may give cause for concern.

Councillor Walton noted the level of pressure that could be placed on managers dealing with issues of absence management and welcomed that HR continued to provide constant support for managers following the initial training given as part of their induction process.

Councillor Mullen noted that with regard to people in demanding manual jobs, 50% were over the age of 50 and asked could anything be done to support them, such as the provision of additional days leave? Ms Hunter replied that for example, Environmental Services had two main sections, Local Services and Refuse. Of the two, the duties of Local Services were less onerous physically, and therefore it was possible to rotate staff between the two teams if required. The Council were also piloting a workforce planning scheme where older more experienced team members would be utilised away from the job to upskill and train less experienced employees.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Burrell, Ms Hunter explained the reasons for the differences between respective Directorate targets and also the measures utilised to engage and communicate with non office based staff.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Ms St Louis and Ms Hunter for their attendance and it was:-

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

## City Plan and Indicative Timeline Assurance Process

Director of Strategy and Corporate Affairs submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee's consideration of the City Plan and Indicative Timeline assurance process and the proposed updating of both.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Members were informed that the City Plan was an Article 4 Plan and was subject to approval by full Council. The Plan currently covered the period up to 2035 and described the ambitions, themes and commitments associated with working in partnership to achieve the Vision for Sunderland – “to create a connected, international city with opportunities for all.” As in previous years, evidence had been collated to determine whether changes need to be made to the City Plan and Indicative Timeline for 2024-25 including:

- the council's quarterly performance reporting process
- responses to quarterly performance reporting to Scrutiny
- analysis and considerations from council services and city partners
- analysis of wider socio-economic, demographic and deprivation data and Intelligence

In addition, the Council's Joint Leadership Team had also met to consider the development of the plan.

Subject to the Committee's considerations a report (as an appendix to the Budget report) would be presented to Cabinet on 31 January 2024 with a view to the proposed updated City Plan and Indicative Timeline being adopted by full Council at its meeting on 28 February 2024.

To complement the report and assist Members in their consideration of the matter, Bev Poulter, Senior Manager, Corporate Strategy, provided the Committee with a presentation which detailed the vision for the Sunderland of 2035, the Partnership's ambitions for the city and its people, the three key themes supporting the delivery of the plan and an indicative timeline setting out the key projects and initiatives being undertaken in the coming years.

Ms Poulter then addressed the following questions and comments from the Committee.

- Was the terminology correct? (replacing 'Challenges' with 'Ambitions'). Ambitions were fine but the plan needed to show evidence that they were being met (for example in terms of the education and skills agenda).
- Action was required to address the decline in the city's retail and leisure offer. The main focus of the current riverside regeneration appeared to be office space and housing.
- There was a need to avoid a disconnect developing between the former Vaux site / Riverside, and areas of the city to the south of St Mary's Boulevard.

- It appeared to be more of a 'City Strategic Plan' than a 'City Plan' in that it described the 'what' rather than the 'how'.
- Greater reference should be made to Partners and the extent of their involvement in the delivery of the Plan.
- To what extent was the Plan achievable? At what point did the ambitions become too ambitious? Could carbon neutrality really be achieved by 2040? Would it be better to take more time developing the skills agenda providing firmer links with local business? In the city's areas of multi deprivation with an ongoing cost of living crisis and a declining retail offer, it was difficult for some residents to feel a pride in their city.
- It was difficult to know what could be done to address the decline in the retail offer. There had been a fundamental change in the way people shopped with a massive and continuing switch to on-line shopping. It was unlikely that the days of the department stores would ever return. Perhaps the redevelopment of Mackie's Corner with half a dozen individual businesses operating under the same roof would provide a model going forward? Debenhams had operated with numerous concessions operating within its store. Was it possible the building with its built-in concession spaces could follow the Mackie's Corner model in providing a home for local businesses? Could a strict design code be adopted, based on the appearance of Mackie's Corner, for business opening in buildings nearby? It was important to develop areas that people wanted to visit just for the experience of being there, in addition to being able to shop.

There being no further questions or comments, the Chairman thanked Ms Poulter for her attendance. Ms Poulter having confirmed that she would feed back the Committee's comments, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report and presentation be received and noted

### **Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2023/24**

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2023/24 and which provided an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings presented the report, updating Members on the current position regarding the Work Programmes of the Scrutiny Committees. Members were advised that the report in respect of the Safer Sunderland Partnership, previously scheduled for this evening's meeting, and which had been deferred to accommodate the number of presentations, would now be considered at the 7<sup>th</sup> of March Meeting.

5. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committees' work programmes for 2023/24 and the variations to these work programmes be noted, together with the current 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 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2024, 2023.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Consideration was given to the report and it was:-

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

The Chairman then closed the meeting, having thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) K. MASON-GAGE,  
Chairman.