

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 10th MARCH, 2022 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D.E. Snowden in the Chair

Councillors Butler, Doyle, Hartnack, Heron, N. MacKnight, Mann, P. Smith, D. Snowden and Thornton

Also in attendance:-

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

Mr Matthew Jackson, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Nic Marko, Local Democracy Reporter

Ms Julie Parker-Walton, Public Health Consultant, Public Health Directorate

Ms Beverley Poulter, Senior Manager Corporate Strategy, Corporate Affairs, Corporate Services Directorate

Ms Elaine Waugh, Assistant Director of Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and highlighted the importance of everyone present continuing to wear face coverings to reduce the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hodson, Mullen and D. MacKnight together with Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 10th February, 2022

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

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

Item 4 – Complaints and Feedback

Councillor Thornton made an open declaration in respect of SCAS as a Council appointed member.

Item 5 – Performance Management Update – Quarter 3 of 2021/22

Councillor D.E. Snowden made an open declaration as a trustee of Washington MIND.

Item 7 – Notice of Key Decisions

Councillor Doyle made an open declaration on item number 210728/613 due to his employer being involved in land acquisition relating to the matter on the notice regarding Sunnyside Regeneration Scheme.

Complaints and Feedback

The Assistant Director of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with information regarding compliments, complaints and feedback received by the council.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Elaine Waugh, Assistant Director of Law and Governance briefed the Committee on the report advising that it was the report for Quarter 3 of the financial year April 2021 to March 2022 and presented an overview across the full range of complaints and feedback received by the Council. There were no trends to highlight as a cause for concern and she suggested that it would be useful to look back at the figures in another year or two to see whether there was a spike post Covid. There had been an increase in complaints relating to refuse collection however it was important to consider the number of complaints against the volume of service provided; it was an extremely small percentage of the total number of customer contacts.

Councillor Doyle referred to the increase in complaints regarding council tax and the explanation that this had been due to the recommencement of enforcement action following the suspension of enforcement during the pandemic. He raised the issue that residents had contacted him to advise that they had received bills for empty properties which had been issued at the wrong time resulting in them having to settle the full years amount in only a couple of months; he asked whether any enquiries could be made into this issue as well as asking how this had occurred and what was being done to ensure that it would not happen again.

Ms Waugh stated that she would feed this back to the appropriate department and Mr Cummings advised that there would be a report relating to this matter brought to a future meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the complaints against environmental services and asked what learning took place as a result of complaints in order to reduce complaints and improve the service in the future.

Ms Waugh advised that she would ask the department to provide feedback and stated that the number of complaints was very small when considering the volume of service provided by the department.

Councillor Mann referred to the breakdown of environmental services complaints by ward. There were some wards with a higher number of complaints than average; she queried whether there was a reason for this such as there being different crews working in those areas and also questioned whether there was best practice could be shared from the Coalfield area where there was a much lower than average volume of complaints.

Ms Waugh agreed to refer this to the department.

Councillor Butler stated that sharing best practice was key to improving services and he also expressed his complements for SCAS for the work they had done during the pandemic; together with those who had been provided with care he could not thank SCAS enough for their hard work.

Councillor N. MacKnight commented that it would be useful to be able to see the information on complaints over a longer period as there were normal variations between quarters whereas information over a few years would allow the identification of any longer-term trends. He suggested that this could be incorporated into the year end report.

Ms Waugh agreed that longer term information would make it easier to see trends however there needed to be a balance between being able to see long term trends and also sudden changes between quarters.

Councillor Hartnack commented that it would be useful when looking at complaints to know the outcomes of the complaints as it was possible that there could be numerous unsubstantiated complaints made.

Councillor Mann referred to the SCAS Customer Satisfaction Consultations and the lack of response received. She felt that this was due to the format of them; she had received one and had looked at it but not had time to complete it due to the complexity of it; she felt that a simpler tick box survey would be easier for families to complete which would then mean more responses would be received.

Ms Waugh agreed to report these concerns back.

Councillor Butler suggested that the methods of collecting information needed to be looked at; he was a fan of digital surveys such as Survey Monkey being used.

The Chair expressed her thanks for the hard work done by Environmental Services; it was not often that praise was given for the number of complements received but she felt it was important to highlight that 73 complements had been received by the service which was the second highest number of all departments.

2. RESOLVED that the information provided regarding compliments, complaints and feedback received by the Local Authority and that responses to the issues raised above be obtained and forwarded to the Members concerned.

Performance Management Update – Quarter 3 of 2021/22

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for Quarter 3 of 2021/22.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Beverley Poulter presented the report and advised that a lot of work had been done to ensure that the delivery plans fit in with the overall city plan and to ensure that the performance monitoring would provide information on whether the aims delivery plans were being met. She provided an overview of the progress made against the performance indicators during the quarter.

The Chair took questions from the Committee on each of the Themes in turn starting with the Dynamic Smart City theme.

Councillor Doyle referred to the Deliver connected, automated logistics project and its connections to the agenda for increasing access to ultrafast broadband; there had been a reduction in the percentage of properties with access to ultrafast broadband and he questioned whether this was as a result of newly built properties not being connected to ultrafast broadband.

Ms Poulter agreed to find out the details of this.

Councillor Doyle then referred to the outage in publicly accessible Wi-Fi in December and asked what the cause of the outage was and also what was being done to improve resilience to ensure that outages would not happen again.

Ms Poulter advised that increasing resilience was a priority and that she would find out the details of the outage.

Councillor Doyle then referred to the 106 empty properties brought back into use and queried what the medium-term goal was.

Ms Poulter advised that there was a target and that the work was currently on track to meet this goal, she would find out the specifics of the target.

Councillor Mann then referred to the Carbon Neutral goals and commented that the reduction over the period was excellent, especially as it was the highest reduction in the north east.

Prior to taking questions relating to the Healthy Smart City theme the Chair invited Julie Parker-Walton to provide an update on this theme.

Ms Parker-Walton advised that there were figures available now for the alcohol related hospital admissions; which had reduced by over 2,400 to around 1,500; it was positive to see this improvement, but the figure was still higher than comparison authorities. There was a new service provider for alcohol treatment and work was being done to re-establish the drug and alcohol harm reduction partnership. It was hoped that people would come into the service at an earlier stage to further reduce the hospital admissions. Wear Recovery was also working closely with the hospital. Work was being done around responsible retailing with all retailers being encouraged to adopt challenge 25 policies.

Work was being done around suicide prevention and Sunderland had seen the biggest reduction in the north east in 2021; there was a regional dashboard which included real time information updates from Northumbria Police. There was work being done to refocus the work of the Suicide Prevention Partnership and a new 2-year action plan was being developed. Work was being done in conjunction with the CCG and the Primary Care Trust and training around mental health and suicide prevention was being done by Washington MIND. Work was being done with VCS partners to support resident's wellbeing during the pandemic.

Councillor N. MacKnight recommended that everyone should undertake the Life Worth Living training and Councillor Mann echoed this having undertaken the training as a Covid champion. Councillor N. MacKnight then stated that overall everything was moving in the right direction but he did have concerns over the life expectancy having reduced since last year. It was encouraging to see that the figures relating to harm caused by alcohol were reducing.

Councillor Butler stated that he was also pleased to see the work taking place on suicide prevention and reducing alcohol harm. Suicide harmed families as well as the wider community and he knew of the harm that was caused having lost friends in this way. He stated that he had been involved in the setting up of a men's mental health group however this had not been well attended as men did not want to sit around and discuss their feelings.

The Chair added that Washington Football Club and Washington MIND were doing a lot of work around men's mental health but there still needed to be more work done.

Councillor D. Snowdon expressed concerns that some of the indicators did not provide sufficient information. The metric around smokers quitting gave a percentage but did not give actual numbers and there was no detail on the number of visits that had been undertaken for new births and 2.5 year olds. The household waste sent for reuse, recycling or composting did not show a tonnage. He felt that for the next update this information needed to be provided.

Ms Poulter advised that she would look at getting this information provided for future updates.

Councillor Heron advised that work had been ongoing around teenage pregnancies for a long time. The Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee had undertaken a review on this subject and there had been a presentation to the meeting last night. young men's mental health was a concern; there was an event held which had raised £13,000 for Washington MIND and which had highlighted this issue. The Men's Sheds projects had done good work around improving mental health for men in the area as it had given an opportunity for people to come together and talk while engaging in activities. The Chat Benches were also helping to improve mental health by helping people to have the opportunity to speak to others. Councillor N. MacKnight agreed that the Men's Sheds were excellent.

Councillor P. Smith commented that there needed to be a focus on reducing drug use as this would then impact on all of the other issues being discussed today.

Ms Parker-Walton agreed to look at this further.

Councillor Doyle referred to the Council resolution which had been passed in 2019 that messages of hope be installed on the Wearmouth Bridge; this had not yet happened.

Ms Parker-Walton advised that the lead practitioner on mental health, the Samaritans, and the bridge engineers had been in discussions and new signage around mental health services had been installed.

The Chair asked that Mr Cummings follow up on the actions from the Council's resolution.

Councillor Doyle then asked that the new and improved cycle ways be separated into two separate measures in future reports.

Councillor Hartnack stated that there had been discussions at the North Sunderland Area Committee regarding the use of CCTV on bridges for suicide prevention; there was only the Queen Alexandra Bridge which was not covered. He queried whether the CCTV control room staff had training on looking for people who were potentially suicidal.

Ms Poulter agreed to find out the answer to this.

Councillor Butler added that he lived near to the Wearmouth Bridge and had seen three people who were in need of help on the bridge; he had seen the fantastic response from the police and fire service. He had seen the fire service use some equipment to strap the person into place to keep them safe and he queried whether this was something the police could be equipped with as well.

Councillor Hartnack agreed that this should be explored; there were a lot of people who would threaten or attempt suicide from the bridge each month.

Councillor Mann then referred to the Sunderland Weight Management programme which had commenced in August 2021; it was good to see that such a large number of people had been referred to the programme. The pandemic had got people into the habit of eating fast food which was a difficult habit to break; there was a need for the healthy eating message to be got across to people. She asked what was being done to signpost people to this programme and other related activities. She felt that the 78 new users signing up to the Step Up Sunderland app was not good enough; there needed to be an examination of what was being done to promote the app and to encourage people to engage. She also referred to the lack of an update on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile and asked for information on why the data release had been cancelled; it was important to ensure that this did not slip through the net. She then referred to Environmental Enforcement action; this was a difficult area and there was a need to ensure that everything possible was being done; the number of Section 46 notices was quite low considering the rate of incidents. She asked what was being done to improve this.

The Chair agreed that there was a need to encourage all Councillors to sign up to the Step Up app.

Ms Poulter advised that she had taken on board all of these points.

The Chair then moved onto questions relating to the Vibrant Smart City theme.

Councillor Doyle commented that there was a need to look at the number of museum visitors over a longer time so that more context could be given as to whether these current numbers were typical attendances or if they had been affected by the pandemic. He felt that there needed to be changes to the opening hours of museums and also targeted interventions to increase visitor numbers.

Ms Poulter agreed to bring back the strategy and would also look at providing information on the long-term trends.

Councillor D. Snowden referred to the spike in welfare provision awards and stated that he would expect this to increase further. People were depending on the additional support, especially now that there was a further cost of living increase with the increasing fuel costs. He referred to the work on social prescribing in conjunction with the VCS Alliance and advised that he worked within such a project and that it worked well however there was a need to ensure that when there were different organisations there was joined up working to ensure that the different organisations were working together effectively.

Councillor N. MacKnight stated that it was reassuring to see that residents felt safe despite the negativity that was often seen on social media. He commented that people were struggling; especially the working poor who were being forced to use foodbanks; he felt that a national policy change was needed to address this. He asked for assurances that there was resiliency within the food bank system within the city.

Ms Poulter agreed to find out the answer to this.

Councillor Heron stated that it was sad that food banks were now the norm and also expressed concerns over the impact of increases in gas and electricity costs.

The Chair added that it was the increased daily standing charges for utilities which would hurt the most given that this was increasing bills even if residents were reducing consumption.

Councillor Mann referred to the new indicator relating to responsible retailers and asked whether this would include all retailers including takeaways; betting shops and off licences. She asked what the scheme would involve and whether it would be used to tackle underage sales.

Ms Poulter agreed to get this information.

Councillor Thornton queried the number of residents participating in volunteering and asked what would happen going forward.

Ms Poulter advised that there had been around 1000 new volunteers recruited at the start of the Covid19 pandemic. The existing volunteers had often been within vulnerable groups so had been unable to participate during the pandemic while the new volunteers were often furloughed workers who had now returned to work.

The Chair commented that she had been speaking with volunteers at the Nightingale hospital/vaccination centre and they were now looking for new ways to participate in volunteering activities.

Councillor Hartnack queried how the data around museum visitors was collected and whether there was information on whether visitors were repeat visitors and also whether they had come from within the city or from outside of the area.

Ms Poulter agreed to find this out.

Councillor Hartnack then referred to the information around feelings of safety; in the past he had seen more information on this which had shown that there had been a low number of people surveyed; he stated that the British Crime Survey provided more accurate information. He had experience of residents telling him that they did not feel safe.

Councillor Hartnack then stated that he had worked with the foodbank operated by SNYPP and also with the soup kitchen; he was concerned that some of the most needy people might not be accessing the support offered due to either lacking the courage to go to the service or due to people who were not truly needy taking advantage of the service; he had witnessed people visiting takeaways one day and then the food bank the next.

Councillor Butler acknowledged that some people may take advantage however he felt that people should be able to have luxuries such as takeaways even if they were poor.

Councillor D. Snowdon stated that the number of people who abused the system was very small and that in his experience the people who regularly used the services were worked with to try and help identify the issues resulting in them using the food banks.

Councillor Mann commented that she had worked with food banks during the pandemic; it had been upsetting to see that some people had been too frail to be able to attend the food banks while others were attending and only taking crisps, biscuits and other unhealthy foods. She felt that education on healthy eating was important. She stated that the food banks could not decide who was needy or most deserving and should help everyone who attended looking for support.

The Chair agreed that it was important not to risk letting the needy go hungry and stated that a lot of providers would work with service users to ensure that they were accessing all of the support and benefits that they were able to.

Councillor P. Smith stated that there should not be any need for there to be food banks and levelled the blame at the benefits system.

Ms Poulter advised that she would report these issues back to colleagues to ensure that they were aware of the issues raised.

The Chair then invited questions on the Organisational Health theme.

Councillor Doyle queried whether the transition to Teams had been completed and asked for more information on the decommissioning of the traditional network shared drives.

Ms Poulter advised that the transition had been completed and advised that the previous network drives had been moved onto Microsoft 365 cloud based storage and during this transition the opportunity had been taken to remove any unnecessary or duplicate data.

Councillor Doyle then referred to the new retention schedule for emails. He had been told that the 3 months retention schedule was to encourage better practice with storage of ongoing work which worked fine for officers but for councillors' issues often took longer to be completed and emails therefore needed to be retained for longer; he asked that the retention policy be looked at again.

Ms Poulter agreed to refer this back for consideration.

Councillor Doyle then commented that people were expressing fatigue over using virtual meetings and he asked what strategy was in place for face to face meetings to be held for people who were feeling the strain of virtual meetings and who were finding their mental health affected. He did not feel that there needed to be a return to full time office working for all staff but there needed to be an appropriate balance.

Ms Poulter advised that there was a strategy in place and there was hybrid working with people spreading their time between working from home and in the office. The move of staff into City Hall was underway and while there was no requirement for most staff to be in the office every day there would be work done between individuals and their managers to ensure that individual needs were met. She agreed to bring back more detail on how the new way of working would look.

Councillor Butler agreed with the email retention policy not allowing emails to be kept for long enough. There was a current planning application which he had been consulted on over a year ago which he could no longer access the emails for.

Councillor D. Snowdon queried whether the axis on the graph for sickness absence was per day per employee.

Ms Poulter agreed to check this.

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

3. RESOLVED that the information provided on corporate performance in the report and the comments made, be received and noted and responses be provided to the questions raised, as detailed above.

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.)

Councillor Doyle queried the procedure for inviting Cabinet Members to the Scrutiny Committees, as had been referred to by the Leader of the Council at the last meeting of the full Council.

Mr Cummings advised that the Committee could invite Cabinet Members to the Committee to answer questions; should the Committee wish to call in a decision then there was a different process to follow. These processes were set out in the Scrutiny Handbook which he would forward to Members. Discussions took place around the fact that Cabinet Members had attended meetings in the past; there had been a time when the relevant Cabinet Member had attended every meeting however the Committee members had asked them not to attend unless invited to do so.

Councillor Hartnack queried what the Scrutiny budget could be spent on.

Mr Cummings advised that this was used to support the work of the Committees by, for example, allowing experts to be paid to attend to provide information on policy reviews or to pay for transport for Members to visit sites related to policy reviews.

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 21st February, 2022.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

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

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

(Signed) D. E. SNOWDON,
Chairman.