

**At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 13<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY, 2020 at 5.30 p.m.**

**Present:-**

Councillor Hunt in the Chair

Councillors D. Dixon, Heron, Hodson, F. Miller, Oliver, P. Smith and Turner.

Also in attendance:-

Mr James Harrison, Local Democracy Reporter

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

Ms Marie Johnston, Complaints Manager, Complaints and Feedback Team, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services

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

**Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Francis, Jenkins, D. MacKnight, Speding, D. Trueman and Watson.

**Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2020**

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 2020 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

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

There were no declarations of interest made.

**Variation of Agenda**

The Chairman proposed and it was agreed that the order of business be changed so that the item on Compliments, Complaints and Feedback be considered next on the agenda in order to allow Ms Johnston to leave the meeting.

## **Compliments, Complaints and Feedback**

The Executive Director of Corporate Services submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with information regarding complaints and feedback received by the Council.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Marie Johnston, Complaints Manager, briefed the Committee on the quarterly report which covered Quarter 3, October - December of the financial year April 2019 – March 2020.

Ms Johnston highlighted that there had been a slight increase in compliments received for the quarter which was pleasing. There had been 6 complaints to the Ombudsman for the quarter which was comparable with the same quarter for the previous year. There was a slight increase in the number of corporate complaints at stage 1 in comparison with the same quarter the previous year, however this was a decrease from Quarter 2 for this year. The number of complaints this year appeared to be finding a level and were stabilising around the 700 mark. There had been 20 complaints received in Quarter 3 of 2019-2020 regarding Adult Social Care Services. This represented an overall dissatisfaction rate of 0.3% as there were a total of 6252 open cases in Adult Social Care at the end of the quarter. In summary, overall compliments were up and complaints were down and therefore this represented a pleasing report for the Council.

Councillor Oliver enquired about the complaints which had been upheld by the Ombudsman in relation to Together for Children, as to how they had been remedied and how things would be improved as the information in the report was vague.

Councillor Dixon queried why one of the cases had not gone to Stage 2.

Ms Johnston advised that the complaints were dealt with on an individual basis and by way of a personal letter and therefore there had been very little which could be included in the report. One of the complaints was about lack of communication and this would be picked up going forward. This was the case which in hindsight, should have gone to Stage 2. However, the lines had been blurred. There had been issues at Court and therefore some issues could have been picked up and others not. If an investigation was at court, it was fair to say that it was for the Judge to make a decision. The other had requested an increased compensation. However, the Ombudsman had considered that the injustice had been remedied and had not recommended the Council to pay more.

In response to Councillor Hodson, Ms Johnston explained how a grave had been dug in a different section of the cemetery and confirmed that internal procedures were now in place to prevent this occurring again.

Councillor Hodson referred to another complaint relating to Bereavement Services which he had been involved in on behalf of a resident in his role as Councillor and commented that there was a need to look at cases where residents were on a single point of contact, as it had been frustrating for them and him in this particular case.

Councillor Hodson referred to the complaints about the parking service which had been logged as complaints when they should have been logged as an appeal against a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN).

Ms Johnston advised that colleagues in the Parking Team and Customer Services were going to meet to look at how issues were recorded so that they were correctly recorded in future and did not go down as complaints.

Full consideration having been given to the report and there being no further questions for Ms Johnston, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report providing information on the compliments, complaints and feedback received by the Council be received and noted.

**Reference from Cabinet – 11 February 2020 – Budget and Service Reports:**

**(A) Collection Fund (Council Tax) 2019/2020**

**(B) (i) Capital Programme 2020/2021 to 2023/2024 and Treasury Management Policy and Strategy 2020/2021, including Prudential Indicators for 2020/2021 to 2023/2024**

**(ii) Revenue Budget and Proposed Council Tax for 2020/2021 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2020/2021 to 2023/2024**

The Assistant Director of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) setting out for the advice and consideration of the Committee, a number of reports which were considered by Cabinet on the 11 February 2020, on the Revenue Budget and Capital Programme 2020/2021. An addendum report recommending to Council a proposal to set a council tax requirement which would require a 3.99% increase to the council tax for 2020/2021 (including an increase of 2% in respect of the ringfenced social care precept), was also considered by Cabinet at the meeting on 11 February 2020 and was subsequently circulated to the Committee, prior to the meeting, for Members' consideration.

(For copy reports – see original minutes.)

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services briefed the Committee on the reports highlighting section 4 of the report on the Capital Programme, which provided a summary of the proposed programme by Portfolio and expenditure for 2020/2021 to 2023/2024. Mr Ritchie drew attention to paragraph 4.6 which provided details of the individual new starts including the Smart Cities Project of £10m for 5G, Clinton Place Car Park project spend £2.2m and referred to the £59m Housing Delivery and Investment Plan.

Mr Ritchie referred the Committee to the report on the Revenue Budget and Proposed Council Tax 2020/21 and advised that the Budget was predicated on an increase of 3.99%.

Mr Ritchie highlighted the Spending Pressures and Commitments taken into account when the Budget Planning Framework was approved in October 2019 and the cost pressures such as inflationary increases and pay awards as well as the proposal around the reduction in charge in bulky waste collection, the Deep Clean of the city centre, investment in housing enforcement and carbon reduction.

Mr Ritchie advised that the budget included prudent provision of £6m in Health and Social Care to provide for increases in demand and cost for 2020/2021. Mr Ritchie highlighted that as part of the previous year's budget process, an initial suite of savings plans for 2020/2021 to 2022/2023 were approved by Council. The previously approved plans had been subject to stringent review and verification to ensure continued deliverability and adjusted where no longer considered deliverable as originally envisaged.

Mr Ritchie pointed out that the overall budget position was set out at paragraph 8.1 of the report, taking into account Government funding changes, cost pressures and proposals to meet the funding gap. This showed a balanced budget position for 2020/2021 taking into account proposed council tax and social care precept increases and use of reserves. He pointed out that there remained a budget gap of £24.72m for 2021/2022 to 2023/2024. Mr Ritchie referred Members to the statement detailed at paragraph 13.6 which he had made stating that the Budget was considered robust and the level of reserves considered to be adequate for 2020/2021 after an assessment of the financial risks and future plans of the Council had been taken into account.

Councillor Heron welcomed the proposed extension to Newbottle Primary School which would be very beneficial to the area in view of the new house building which was taking place there.

Councillor P. Smith commented that she was pleased to see that the Council was still investing in Derwent Hill Outdoor Centre which had been an enormous success, not only benefitting children in the city but those of other areas also.

Councillor Turner referred to the investment in Herrington Country Park and expressed disappointment that there was no mention of Hetton Lyons Country Park to receive capital investment.

Mr Ritchie advised that it was not possible to do everything and an assessment had been made of the project to invest in Herrington Country Park. Hetton Lyons Country Park might be considered for future investment.

Councillor D. Dixon enquired how secure the proposals were as there remained a budget gap of £24.72m for 2021/2022 to 2023/2024.

Mr Ritchie advised that as a large organisation there was an impact on the budget of inflation and pay awards pressures to even standstill. Over the coming months, some of the efficiencies would start to come through. There was a balanced budget position for 2020/2021. There remained a budget gap of £24.72m for 2021/2022 to 2023/2024 which they were working towards and trying to identify efficiencies. The Government Budget was set for 11<sup>th</sup> March when more of an indication on Local Government finance would be provided and certainty.

Councillor Oliver commented that the Old Pier had been closed a very long time and there had been proposals to make it safe. He enquired whether there were any proposals to re-open the Old Pier and provide access to it for the general public.

Mr Ritchie advised that this was linked to the Environment Agency and that he would seek a response.

Councillor Oliver asked whether the extension to the Bridges Shopping Centre at the Crowtree site was aimed at a particular type of retail, or was it going to be similar to what was there now in the Shopping Centre.

Mr Ritchie commented that there were commercial sensitivities, however the overall approach was a mixed offer with national high street brands together with independent retailers. This was linked to the Council's bid for the Future High Streets Fund. He added that the City Centre needed to create an environment where companies and people wanted to come to. Things like 5G WIFI in High Street West would add to the offer and attract more people and as footfall increased the city would become more attractive to businesses.

Councillor Hodson enquired about the extent of the works planned for Jacky Whites Market as there was a funding proposal included in the budget for £400,000 and asked at what point Members would have more clarification as to what the works would be.

Councillor Hodson commented that the Council was building/reburbishing a lot of car parks including at the Vaux site, Holmside and Park Lane, as well as renewing parking meters and enquired whether there was a pre-existing study about parking in the city centre or a strategy and whether Mr Ritchie could provide some background to this.

Mr Ritchie advised that plans were being developed for Jacky Whites Market however Mr Peter McIntyre, Executive Director of City Development was the appropriate officer to ask for details of the works to be carried out.

With regards to car parks this was a capital investment and did not add any costs to the revenue budget as the income generated was used to carry out the improvements. There was a Car Parking Strategy and there was a rolling programme to look at the car parks in the city and the nature of car parking. There were car parking initiatives to attract visitors to the city such as 'Free after 3' and special initiatives at Christmastime to encourage people to shop in the city. The Chief Officers Group had received a presentation earlier that week providing a space by space analysis of car parks in the city. There was also money being put into a sustainable travel hub and thought being given to an environmental green policy. There was a need to get the right balance between the two and Mr Mark Jackson was continually updating the Strategy to take on board the different needs.

Mr Ritchie advised that as part of the investment on the Vaux site, Legal and General expected a certain level of car parking spaces. Park Lane Bus Station was linked in with the transport interchange and traffic flows were monitored so as to provide appropriate parking provision.

Councillor Oliver enquired about the proposal relating to improvement works in respect of the Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens and whether the Council was aiming for something different/a particular theme, if the bid for external funding was successful.

Mr Ritchie advised that this was being worked on at the moment and the Council was seeking to improve the offer and not rest on its laurels in respect of the Winter Gardens.

Councillor Oliver commented that the city boundary signs were faded and scruffy and were not a great way to enter the city. He was pleased to see that new ones were planned.

Mr Ritchie stated that he was able to advise that the city boundary signs would be a combination of traditional and electronic signs. Mr Mark Jackson, Assistant Director of Infrastructure, Planning and Transportation would be able to provide further information if needed. Mr Ritchie agreed that first impressions of the city were important.

In response to Councillor P. Smith, Mr Ritchie advised that there was only a certain amount of information available at the moment in respect of the Fair Funding Review and how the formula was expected to work and was only in relation to Adult Social Care. He needed to see what this meant which would be later in the year. A lot would depend on whether the factors favoured rural or urban/deprived authorities as to how Sunderland would fair.

Councillor Hodson referred to the increase in funding for the Museums and Archives Service.

Mr Ritchie advised that there had been some joint working with Sunderland Culture to drive out efficiencies, however this had not happened so the budget had been corrected to what they would realistically expect to spend on the service and therefore the budget had increased by over £500,000.

Councillor Hodson enquired why the savings had not come about and Mr Ritchie advised that he would ask the relevant Service Area to provide the detail on this to Councillor Hodson.

Full consideration having been given to the report and there being no further questions for Mr Ritchie, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the Cabinet be advised that the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee welcomed the detailed budget report, noted the contents and was satisfied with the information as presented. The Committee would also like to put on record its thanks to the various departments, Officers and Members who have contributed to the finance report.

## **Scrutiny Committee Work Programmes for 2019/20**

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the variations to the Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2019/20 and providing an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2019/20.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

4. RESOLVED that:-

- (a) the variations to the Scrutiny Committee Work Programmes for 2019/20 and to its own work programme, be noted; and
- (b) the current expenditure and remaining scrutiny budget for 2019/20 be noted.

## **Notice of Key Decisions**

The Scrutiny and Members' 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 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2020.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

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

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

(Signed) P. HUNT,  
Chairman.