

At a meeting of the ENVIRONMENT AND ATTRACTIVE CITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE on MONDAY, 12TH SEPTEMBER, 2011 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Miller in the Chair

Councillors Bonallie, E. Gibson, Heron, Lauchlan, D. Richardson, I. Richardson, Tye and A. Wright.

Also Present:-

Councillor Tate – Chair of Management Scrutiny Committee.
Councillor Kelly – Portfolio Holder for Safer City and Culture.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Porthouse.

Minutes of the Last Meeting of the Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee held on 25th July, 2011

On page 3 of the minutes there was a typing error and should read ‘achieving our goal of reducing omissions throughout the whole process’.

On page 4 of the minutes and Mr. Lewins comment on the decision of relevant fees for charging of electric vehicles, the Chairman advised that this would be decided by Cabinet or Council and not this committee.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 25th July, 2011 be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest

Item 4 – Response from Cabinet – 22 June 2011 – Policy Review 2010/11 – Sunderland ‘the Place’

In accordance with Part 5 – [Part 2, Paragraph 11 (b)] of the Council’s Constitution, Councillor Kelly declared a personal and prejudicial interest in the item as a member

of the Cabinet and left the meeting having addressed questions from Members of the Committee in respect of their presentation and prior to any deliberation.

Response from Cabinet – 22 June 2011 – Policy Review 2010/11 – Sunderland ‘the Place’

The Executive Director of City Services and the Portfolio Holder for Safer City and Culture submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide feedback from the Cabinet meeting held on 22 June 2011, which considered the Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee’s Policy Review into Sunderland ‘the Place’.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Kelly, Portfolio Holder for Safer City and Culture, presented the report advising that Cabinet had approved the Committee’s recommendations in their entirety and then gave progress updates on the work underway to move forward on those recommendations.

In response to Councillor D. Richardson’s enquiry, Jane Peverley, External Communications Manager, advised that the current ambassador programme was being led by Debra Lewin’s Team, Communications, and that there was a long list of ambassadors but these were people of interest to the City and did not have a particular role. There was a need for fewer people with more important roles around Business and Tourism for example.

Councillor J. Scott enquired as to who the Ambassadors were and how the programme could be broadened if they were looking to reduce the number of candidates.

Councillor Kelly advised that the focus would be on those Ambassadors that could promote at a higher strategic level further afield and raise the profile of the City outside of the region.

Councillor E. Gibson referred to the recent announcement of plans for a new Travelodge Hotel in the City and that she was pleased to see this, which should help with tourism and hopefully other developers would follow.

Councillor J. Scott commented that a number of excellent shows/events had taken place but felt that as an Authority we had let ourselves down when it came to the High Street with a need to change the face of the City as many shops were boarded up/shuttered on evenings and looked rather unattractive.

Councillor Kelly agreed that it would be great to see Fawcett Street, for example, as a livelier, attractive area but there were various issues as the vast majority of properties could be owned by private companies rather than the Authority, and Sunderland had numerous different areas rather than one main shopping area to consider.

Councillor I. Richardson commented that he felt the difference between Newcastle and Sunderland was that Newcastle had more diversity at the moment but this was something we were working on.

Trina Murphy, Service Development Manager, advised that there were a number of projects looking at the designing of programmes for Events to consider footfall into the area.

The Chairman enquired as to how consultation with members would be carried out in relation to the Ambassador's Programme as this was a key element in his opinion.

Ms. Peverley advised that she would investigate further and report back to the Committee.

2. RESOLVED that Members note the proposed actions detailed within the Action Plan, appended to the report (Appendix A).

Low Carbon Vehicles – Delivery of Public Services in Sunderland Policy Review 2011/12: Approach to the Review

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) to seek Members' agreement in relation to the evidence gathering activities for the Scrutiny Committee's policy review for 2011/12 into Low Carbon Vehicles – Delivery of Public Services.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Helen Lancaster, Scrutiny Officer, presented the report and advised of a site visit scheduled to Smith's Electric Vehicles on 12th October, 2011 and that a meeting with Sharon Hodgson, M.P. was also being arranged.

In response to Councillor J. Scott's enquiry, Ms. Lancaster advised that Nexus and Go North East would be attending the next Committee meeting and hopefully Stagecoach also, pending further information, with the purpose of providing an update around low carbon public transport.

3. RESOLVED that Members agreed the proposed plan for the policy review.

Performance Report Quarter 4 (April 2010 – March 2011)

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with a performance update against the former national indicators relating to the period April 2010 to March 2011.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mike Lowe, Head of Performance Improvement, presented the report and advised that 27 of the performance indicators were being achieved above target with only 13 indicators below target.

Mr. Lowe highlighted that Recycling performance had improved due to the implementation of the Blue Bin service and the expectation was that the improvements would continue.

Graffiti and flytipping targets had also been met and transport/bus figures had also improved.

Mr. Lowe advised that in relation to Road Safety the number of people killed or injured had fallen and also that the extreme weather conditions had influenced a rise in the amount of litter found during the winter period. Performance did however improve in March, when the weather conditions had subsided. The extreme conditions also had led to extra grit and whinstone chippings being used on footpaths which created a negative impression of uncleanliness.

Mr. Lowe also informed that the percentage of the Authority's road network where maintenance should be considered had worsened and that although these figures still compared well with other authorities, the issue still needed to be kept under careful review.

Councillor Tye commented that he felt the issue of children travelling to school by car was worthy of another report coming before this Committee as there was clearly something wrong with our strategy, due to the increase in the statistics.

Councillor Tye also referred to the Road Safety Performance Indicators and questioned the statistics received via third parties, as he was aware of three examples where accidents had occurred, yet were not recorded. Councillor Tye commented that he would like to understand how the data was collated by the third parties.

Mr. Lowe advised that he would co-ordinate a response with third party colleagues.

Les Clark, Head of Street Scene, referred to the statistics of children travelling to school by car and that in terms of tackling the issue, he was happy to announce that a £5 million Local Sustainable Transport Bid had been won, by North East authorities, to look at reducing car journeys to school and the Committee may wish to look at the work programme for this.

Mr. Clark also advised that he wished to carry out a full audit trail of the accident figures supplied by the Police, etc. and requested that members inform him of any known accidents that had occurred and were not recorded.

The Chairman agreed with Councillor Tye's comments on children travelling to school and felt that the reason this was occurring was due to a lack of bus services and a report on the issue may be the best way forward.

The Chairman also referred to the accident statistics and commented that some road users did not wish to report accidents as it would affect their insurance premiums, which was a major issue in trying to identify problem areas.

In reference to children's transport to school, Councillor D. Richardson commented that there may be the need to concentrate on persuading the children on the idea of walking to school, rather than targeting the parents.

In response to Councillor E. Gibson's enquiry on if there had been an increase in prosecutions when there was an increase in littering, Mr. Clark advised that the volume of fixed penalty notices had risen and that he would circulate the information to the Committee.

Councillor E. Gibson commented that during the extreme weather conditions, Members had requested grit be used, but the type used had left a terrible mess behind. Councillor Gibson also commented that she was most pleased to see a reduction in the number of deaths in relation to Road Safety statistics.

Councillor A. Wright also agreed with Councillor Tye's comments and raised another issue of declining numbers of School Crossing Patrols, with a shortage of 20 officers across the City and the difficulty of recruiting to the posts.

Councillor A. Wright informed of a large number of accidents that had occurred in the St. Chad's area which had not been recorded, accidents which had caused a tremendous amount of inconvenience to road users and felt there was a huge difference in what some perceived as accidents or not.

Councillor J. Scott referred to the Performance Indicator target for number of children 16 and under killed or injured in road traffic collisions, and commented this should be amended to zero.

Councillor Tye commented that he believed this Committee had received a commitment that the whinstone chippings would not be used again, yet they were used the subsequent year and queried that the costs to clean up after their use could outweigh the benefits of using them in the first place.

Mr. Clark advised that he could not recall such a commitment being made and that the chippings were used to help maintain the stock. Rock salt did not melt the snow and the grit helped provide traction ; they were always happy to look at alternatives but what with the extreme weather conditions encountered previously, the best course of action had been taken at the time.

The Chairman commented that he could not recall a commitment having been made but requested that Mr. Clark investigate further.

In response to Councillor I. Richardson's enquiry, Mr. Clark commented that depending on the quality of salt used, it could stop working during such low temperatures.

Councillor Tye agreed that the use of chippings had been the right decision at that time but his personal view was that it did not work and it surely was better to mix with the current salt stock and use on the roads, not the footpaths.

Mr. Clark advised that they were about to review the winter maintenance programme and would include the issue in their investigations.

The Chairman commented that he was very pleased with the improvements in the Recycling Performance Indicators which showed the Council's Recycling Plan to be working well but felt that the projected target of 8% for unacceptable levels of litter was far too high and that this needed to be reduced.

The Chairman also referred to the worsening percentage of the authority's road network where maintenance should be considered and stressed that we needed to keep a careful eye on the issue as it would be a major problem in the future if not addressed now.

Councillor I. Richardson enquired as to the successful insurance claims due to Highways issues.

The Chairman believed that a report had been provided which stated that the amount of successful claims was low but requested a further report be brought back to the Committee.

Mr. Clark advised of a website run by a cycling group which had Sunderland in the top 10 authorities for responding to road network issues quickly.

4. RESOLVED that the Committee considered the continued good progress made by the Council and the Sunderland Partnership and those areas requiring further development to ensure that performance is actively managed.

Policy Review – Monitoring of Recommendations

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with the progress in relation to the Traffic Issues; 20 mph zones, and Allotment Provision Policy Review recommendations.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Ms. Lancaster presented the report and advised that 14 recommendations had been completed with another 8 due for completion.

The Chairman referred to the Allotment recommendation 5.1 and commented that he was delighted the Council had confirmed they could not sell the allotments and this would mean they could be upgraded and brought back into use.

Councillor J. Scott informed the Committee that through the Coalfield Area Committee, an Allotment Task and Finish Group had been formed and Strategic

Initiative Budget money had been made available to improve the sites, bring them up to date and look to remove people who were neglecting the allotments.

Councillor I. Richardson enquired if the land would be shared to allow multiple occupancy of the allotments.

Mr. Clark advised that work was ongoing in the North Area with Community Allotments used not just by individuals but by Community Groups and schools.

Councillor I. Richardson enquired if this work would then be rolled out into other areas of the City.

Mr. Clark advised that it was at an information gathering basis which could then be rolled out into other areas.

Councillor J. Scott advised that it was already happening in the Coalfield area.

Councillor E. Gibson referred to page 35 of the report and advised that residents were very happy with the work being carried out to try and tackle the traffic problems.

The Chairman commented that £210,000 had been allocated to improve safety and he was looking forward to seeing this happen. The Chairman also commented that it was pleasing to see this funding being made available, especially during the current economic difficulties the Council was facing.

5. RESOLVED that Members noted the progress towards completion of the actions detailed within the Action Plan, appended to the report (Appendix A).

Public Conveniences

The Executive Director of City Services submitted a report (copy circulated) to update Members about the current provision of public toilets in the City.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Clark presented the report and circulated supplementary information in relation to the costs involved for the public conveniences.

Councillor Tye referred to paragraph 3, Indicative New Build Costs and felt that the costs had been over-exaggerated as Community Centres had been renovated for less than the amount quoted.

Councillor J. Scott also felt that the estimates were too high.

Mr. Clark commented that the refurbishment plan for the Cat and Dog facilities would be going ahead through the Sea Change Funding Programme but the Authority's budget for renewals would struggle to bring one set of toilets up to a suitable standard.

Councillor Heron commented that there was a strong smell of urine, usually emanating from the older toilets, despite being cleaned regularly and felt that it may be that the drains needed cleaning to tackle the problem.

Councillor Heron also suggested that the issue of building new toilet facilities should come under planning and could be funded through Section 106 agreements.

Councillor D. Richardson enquired if the Authority paid insurance premiums on the toilet blocks then why were we having to pay for repairs in the Tram Shelter toilets due to structural damage caused during the Airshow.

Mr. Clark advised that he would look into the issue.

The Chairman commented that most toilet provision had disabled access but some did not and enquired if consideration had been given to expand the male/female disabled facilities.

Mr. Clark advised that a great deal of the toilets tended to be old and if they were looking to expand it probably made more sense to do a complete refurbishment. This may not be the case in every scenario as it could be more worthwhile to demolish some toilets and start again in those instances.

The Chairman then asked Keith Lowes, Head of Planning and Environment, if Section 106 agreements could be used to fund new toilet provision.

Mr. Lowes advised that it could not be used as it was picked up by other legislation and supermarkets, for example, had to provide their own public toilet facilities.

Councillor Tye suggested that as we now had sufficient play provision, which would be attracting more people to those areas, creating a demand for toilet facilities, could Section 106 agreement money be sought for this.

Mr Lowes advised that unfortunately they would not be liable in such cases, but if the Community Infrastructure Levys had been in place, funding could have been sought through those.

Councillor J. Scott commented that Herrington Country Park had toilet facilities which had been omitted from the report.

6. RESOLVED that the Committee receive a further report on the outcome survey in relation to participation in a community toilet scheme in Houghton-le-Spring.

Work Programme 2011-12

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which was attached for Members' information, the current Work Programme for the Committee's work during the 2011-12 Council year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

7. RESOLVED that Members noted the information contained in the Work Programme and considered the inclusion of proposals for the Committee into the Work Programme.

Forward Plan – Key Decisions for the Period 1 September 2011 – 31 December 2011

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide Members with an opportunity to consider those items on the Executive Forward Plan for the period 1 September 2011 – 31 December 2011 which related to the Environment and Attractive City Scrutiny Committee.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr. Clark informed Members that the report on the Accessible Bus Network Design Project would not be going to the October meeting of the Cabinet as it was on hold pending negotiations with Nexus.

8. RESOLVED that the Committee had considered the Executive's Forward Plan for the period 1 September 2011 – 31 December 2011.

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

(Signed) G. MILLER,
Chairman.