

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held REMOTELY on THURSDAY 10th SEPTEMBER, 2020 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D. MacKnight in the Chair

Councillors D. Dixon, Heron, Hunt, Jenkins, McDonough, Mullen, P. Smith, D. Trueman and Turner.

Also in attendance:-

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

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Digital and Customer Service, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny and Members' Support Coordinator, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

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

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

Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies received.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 25th June, 2020

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services referred the Committee to the typographical error on page 3, which stated that the 7 Local Authorities owned a 71% stake in Newcastle Airport and he pointed out that this should read that they owned a 51% stake.

Mr Ritchie referred the Committee to page 5 and clarified that although the Council was planning for a worst case scenario that this was not the expected case and that a worst case scenario was only one of the cases which the Council was planning for.

1. RESOLVED that subject to the above amendment and clarification, the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 25th June, 2020 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Reference from Cabinet – 14 July 2020 – First Revenue Budget Review 2020/2021

The Assistant Director of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) setting out for advice and consideration of the Committee, the report on the First Revenue Budget Review 2020/2021.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services referred the Committee to the table at 3.1.3 which showed that the overall forecast outturn position was a deficit of £10.552m pending any further COVID-19 grant allocations from government. Paragraph 3.1.6 showed the current forecast impact on the Council based on the return made to MHCLG on the 19th June 2020 which was £22.4m. Mr Ritchie advised that some of this would hit in the current financial year and some would roll forward and would be picked up in the budget reports to Cabinet in October and November. The tables were supplemented by further detail in the appendices to the report which showed where those costs had come through.

Mr Ritchie commented that Social Care continued to be a challenging area. COVID - 19 had hit very much into Adult Social Care. The summary also showed where there had been lost income for instance from car parking as the car parks were closed and then fees were frozen.

Mr Ritchie highlighted the Treasury Management savings. The timing of the Capital Programme spend and very effective treasury management procedures had meant that they were forecasting an underspend of £3.6m for the year which would be used to support the overall corporate position.

Councillor McDonough commented that there had been a big overspend on adult social care and homelessness response and enquired whether the Council had applied to any of the government funding streams to offset the Council's costs. For example, there was a government emergency fund for COVID of £1.6 billion for Adult Social Care and there was a homelessness response fund for example of £6m.

In response to Councillor McDonough, Mr Ritchie referred Members to the table at paragraph 3.1.6 which was the position at June, where the Council was forecasting that the gross financial impact would be £1.3m in the last financial year and £39.3m in the current year. £18.2m in grants had been received at that point in time from MHCLG. There had been two government contributions of £1.6b nationally. Adult Social Care was a major part of that but it wasn't earmarked for certain services. it was in terms of overall support. In the first tranche of this funding the Council got £10.6m, in the second tranche the Council got £7.6m and there had been a subsequent drop of £2.8m, so the total the Council had now received had gone up by this amount from £18.2m. The shortfall detailed in paragraph 3.1.6 of £22.4m was the total after taking into account the £18.2m grant funding. Some of the funding would be into future years, Council Tax and Business Rates would impact into future years.

The Council had received a very small amount for homelessness of £1,000-£2,000 as the grant was mostly in relation to rough sleeping. The issues the Council had with regards to homelessness did not fall into the category of that funding. There

had been subsequent funding for wider homelessness support as this could include Bed and Breakfast or sofa surfing and that allocation hadn't come through yet.

The Council had made an application which was in relation to emergency accommodation, some hotel or hostel accommodation, but that wasn't covered by the Homelessness fund mentioned by Councillor McDonough.

Mr Ritchie advised that the government had announced further support measures for local government on 2nd July and these were detailed in paragraph 3.1.5 of the report. The Council's share of the further £500m was £2.8m which was the last amount that government had said would come through. The Council was currently preparing the first return for the Compensation Scheme for Lost Fees and Charges. The Government had said that with regards to eligible fees and charges, Local Authorities were expected to pick up the first 5% and would be compensated by government for 75% of lost fees and charges. However, this support did not include Council tax and business rates or commercial income. A large part of lost income was in relation to Council rents and also the Siglion rents that were charged and the support available only included services directly delivered by the Council. Therefore, the arrangements the Council had with Everyone Active in the Joint Venture meant that the Council's leisure impact would not be covered by the scheme as things stood at that time. Mr Ritchie reported that there might be other funding which the government brought forward but they were forecasting that as a sector there would be financial pressures that Councils would have to deal with themselves. At the moment the report was forecasting a deficit of £22m and an updated estimated report would be submitted to Cabinet in October. The current spike nationally of cases of COVID -19 would have a bearing on this so there might be further government funding schemes that come through, however this was the position as at June 2020.

Councillor D. Dixon asked how much of the total pandemic spend which the government had committed itself to cover, had the Council actually recovered from the government.

In response to Councillor Dixon, Mr Ritchie reported that based on the table at 3.1.6, there had been roughly £42m of costs related to the pandemic and £18.2m, slightly under half, had been received from government at that point in time. About £10.7m of that funding was the impact on the Collection Fund, the Council Tax and business rates that the Council had not collected. This wasn't funded by the government funding. The government had put an extra £4m into the Local Council Tax Support Scheme which would be spread over the next three financial years but the complication was that not all of that cost would hit at the minute and based on the forecasts in the report the costs were about twice the amount of the grant funding which the Council had received.

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

2. RESOLVED that the Cabinet be advised that the Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of the report and thank Members and Officers for the preparation and continued monitoring of the council's revenue budget position, especially given that the Council continues to operate through very difficult times.

Performance Management Update – 2019/20 Year End and Quarter 1 of 2020/21

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for the year end of 2019/20 and Quarter 1 of 2020/2021.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Digital and Customer Services, Corporate Services Directorate presented the report. Ms St Louis took the Committee through the summary for the three key themes of Dynamic City, Healthy City and Vibrant City of the Sunderland City Plan, highlighting commitments, achievements and progress made for each key theme, as well as performance against additional Council indicators for organisational health, productive and innovative working, financial management and a Council ready for the future. Ms St Louis pointed out how the Coronavirus pandemic had impacted on the Council's achievements and had affected residents.

Councillor Hunt commented that all of the performance measures would be affected by COVID - 19 and she enquired how this would be reported in future and how the impact would be shown. For example, Vibrant City had been especially impacted and she queried how the problems caused by this would be mitigated.

Ms St Louis advised that the report under consideration covered the period up to the end of Quarter 1. Future reports would continue to show all of the actions and activities and the impact of the COVID Recovery Working Groups and the initiatives and activities that they had managed to put in place such as the Community Hubs to mitigate the impact. Ms St Louis added that it was pleasing to see work had commenced on the delivery of the new city hotel and many of the construction schemes work were up and running and had continued through the pandemic so there were some positives, however they would report a balanced position through the next quarterly report.

Councillor Smith referred to the commitment for 'More local people with better qualifications and skills' under the theme Dynamic City and to the statement that 'the qualifications that residents have don't match the needs of industry in the city'. Councillor Smith commented that the Council and partners had done various things to rectify this and yet this was still being said 20 years later. She enquired what else needed to be done to change the position. Councillor Smith referred to the statement that people were less able to access all the employment opportunities and she queried where all of the employment opportunities were in Sunderland as she felt there wasn't enough. Councillors were tired of hearing this as they knew things had been put in place.

Ms St Louis stated that there was a significant amount of work being done with the Council's partners across the city, particularly with the University and the College as well as with the Community led Development Fund and the area arrangements through the Neighbourhood Plans which had been developed. It was a recognised problem and Ms St Louis advised that she would bring updates to the Committee on this.

Councillor Dixon referred to Council led action and progress in relation to Healthy City pointing out that all of the actions had been completed and that 4660 individuals had taken part in Active Sunderland Big events in the year to March 2020 for example, however there was a lower healthy life expectancy for both males and females than they had been 5 years ago and it had been declining for some time and that the percentage of people who were fairly active was declining. He enquired whether enough was being done to improve the situation.

Ms St Louis commented that there was a need to do a lot more, however the initiatives were taking things in the right direction, some of which would take time and a significant amount of work was being done with the Council's partners across the city, particularly health partners. Progress would be reported at future Scrutiny committee meetings.

Councillor Turner referred to the commitment 'A Stronger city centre with more business, housing and cultural opportunities' under the theme Dynamic City and commented that there was a need to identify new jobs, office jobs in particular. She felt the trend was that businesses were having smaller offices, people were working from home and she enquired whether the Council had had any indication whether businesses were not wanting to work in the city anymore.

Ms St Louis commented that the picture was changing quite rapidly. There had been more confidence about people returning to workplaces, although the picture had changed again over the last week. Some businesses were starting a phased return to offices, some were continuing to work from home, but it was a mixed picture and they were working very closely with businesses. There was significant work going on to attract businesses and retain those already in Sunderland.

Councillor McDonough commented that the figures suggested that less than 1% of the population were taking part in Step Up Sunderland and he queried whether the project still had value and what the Council was doing to keep people engaged in it.

Ms St Louis advised that the initial work had been done to engage residents in the initiative and it was simple and cost effective to have it there for residents who did want to use it. The project was promoted on a periodic basis and was a useful tool. Likewise there were other initiatives such as the Couch to 5K initiative. However, there was more that could be done and she would take this back for colleagues to consider.

The Chairman acknowledged the work volunteers had done over the last few months during the pandemic and also asked that thanks be passed on to all the frontline staff for their work.

The Chairman referred to the Stack at Seaburn which had recently opened and commented that it was great to see it being so popular with residents.

Ms St Louis advised that she would pass on those comments and they would report on the success of the Beam in Quarter 2.

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

3. RESOLVED that the information provided in the report be received and noted.

Compliments, Complaints and Feedback Annual Report 2019/20

The Executive Director of Corporate Services submitted the Annual Report for the financial year April 2019 – March 2020 (copy circulated) presenting an overview across the full range of compliments, complaints and feedback received by the Council.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Digital and Customer Service advised that Quarter 4, January to March 2020 had been incorporated into the annual report.

Ms St Louis referred Members to the complaints overview showing the complaints received for each Directorate service area at corporate stages one and two.

Ms St Louis highlighted that there had been 563 compliments in 2019/20. Appendix 2 provided a summary of the 38 complaints the Council received from the Ombudsman and showed that 11 had been investigated and 7 had been upheld by the Ombudsman which was comparative with previous years.

Ms St Louis referred the Committee to the corporate complaint procedure pointing out that complaints in respect of Environmental Services made up 95% of the complaints made against the Neighbourhoods Directorate and of the 1932 complaints received for Environmental Services, 1583, 82% were about issues to do with refuse collection. This however, needed to be viewed in context in that in any quarter the Council would service approximately 1.6m containers and therefore this number represented approximately 0.02% of activity for this service area. Ms St Louis reported that there had been a 49% decrease in the number of complaints about refuse from Quarter 3 to Quarter 4.

Ms St Louis reported that there had been 3 Stage 2 Reviews of complaints which had been upheld in full and details of these were included in the report.

Turning to Adult Social Care, Ms St Louis advised that there had been 81 complaints in 2019-20, 11 of which had been upheld in full. There had been 2 detailed investigations completed during the period 2019-20 which equated to 2.5% of all complaints received. This compared with 5 investigations in 2018-19 and 2 investigations in 2017-18.

With regards to Sunderland Care and Support Limited, there had been a total of 93 compliments received by the Company from 1st January to 31st March 2020. There had been a total of 17 complaints during the same period. Just prior to the pandemic the Company had successfully completed a thorough review of its Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy and Procedures.

Ms St Louis drew attention to Appendix 6 regarding the Annual Report from Together for Children (TfC), reporting that there had been 301 compliments received in 2019-20 and 132 pre-complaints and that through responding to issues or concerns at the outset, 120 customers had received satisfactory resolutions informally with just 12

pre-complaints escalating to a formal stage one complaint. Overall in 2029-20 TfC received 172 complaints compared to 260 in 2018-19 which showed a decrease of 33.8%. There were 154 statutory complaints and 18 non-statutory complaints and a full break down was presented within the report.

Councillor Smith referred to the complaints made to Together for Children and stated that most related to communication. Councillor Smith commented that this had been a problem for years and that she hoped to see an improvement. She was pleased to see that under lessons learnt, TfC were going to commission an independent SEND consultant to review all current processes including communication.

Ms St Louis commented that she would pass those comments on to colleagues in TfC.

Councillor Dixon pointed out that there had been a significant improvement in the number of complaints to TfC this year from last year which pointed to the fact that they were heading in the right direction, albeit not as quickly as he would like and that there was still a lot to do in this regard and that this needed to be acknowledged. There was still a significant amount of complaints in some areas and he made a general request for the report to show more emphasis as to whether there had been improvements made.

Ms St Louis stated that this could be provided and advised that within the body of the report, detailed at Appendix 3, comparative data was provided for every quarter. In 2018-19 there had been 4,431 corporate complaints which had reduced by 40% in 2019-20 to 2660, so they were trying to show the trends. Ms St Louis added that a further course had just been delivered to Council staff by the Ombudsman which should also assist when dealing with complaints and looking to put things right.

Councillor Dixon stated that he was pleased to hear that every complaint was now reviewed by a Senior Manager which hadn't always been the case.

Councillor Heron commended the work of the bin men describing them as unsung heroes because of the service they had continued to provide throughout the COVID – 19 pandemic and that she hoped that this appreciation could be fed back to them.

The Chairman concurred with the sentiments of Councillor Heron on behalf of the whole of the Committee and asked Ms St Louis to take this back to them.

Councillor Jenkins commented that he totally agreed with Councillor Smith that communication was the key and enquired whether there was a forum in which complainants could talk where they could air their grievance and see if it could be sorted out rather than moving straight to making a formal complaint.

Ms St Louis advised that the Customer Services Network handled a significant amount of contacts every quarter, just over 1.4m in the year financial year 2019-20 and through talking to customers many were stopped from making formal complaints.

Ms St Louis added that TfC also had an informal stage where a lot of effort was put in to resolve issues. A lot of effort was put in to try to resolve the customer's issues at the very first point and to avoid the need to put in a complaint.

Ms St Louis stated that she would feed the comments back to make sure they were doing everything possible around that.

There being no further questions for Ms St Louis, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the Annual Report providing details of the Compliments, Complaints and Feedback received by the Council for the financial year April 2019 – March 2020, be received and noted.

Compliments, Complaints and Feedback Quarter 1 April – June 2020

The Executive Director of Corporate Services submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with information regarding compliments, complaints and feedback received by the Council in Quarter 1 of the financial year, April – June 2020.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Digital and Customer Service referred Members to the complaints overview showing the complaints received for each Directorate service area at corporate stages one and two.

Ms St Louis highlighted that there had been 245 compliments in the first quarter of the year, which was the highest received in the last two years and she suggested this might be down to the public giving recognition to the role carried out by frontline services during the pandemic.

Ms St Louis referred to the 4 complaints dealt with by the Ombudsman which had all been closed after initial enquiries.

Ms St Louis referred the Committee to the Ombudsman's Annual Review Letter for 2019/20 which showed that there were 74 received regarding Sunderland City Council and she pointed out that 38 of these were forwarded to the Council. The Ombudsman carried out 11 detailed investigations from the 38 complaints and 7 were upheld.

Ms St Louis drew Members' attention to the number of stage one corporate complaints which at 636 was a reduction of 9% from the same period from the previous year. Ms St Louis highlighted that of these 419 were related to refuse collection and represented a very low percentage in relation to the 1.6m collections carried out.

In respect of Stage 2 reviews, where customers remained dissatisfied with the response to their stage one complaint, three reviews had been undertaken in the quarter, which was 2 less than Quarter 1 the previous year and 3 had been not upheld.

Ms St Louis advised that there were 10 complaints received in Quarter 1 regarding adult social care services and 4 had some element upheld or partly upheld. There was one detailed investigation undertaken in Quarter 1 by an independent investigator. It was a very complex complaint and there were 10 different elements

to that complaint; 3 elements had been upheld, 6 were not upheld and 1 element was unsubstantiated.

Finally, Ms St Louis reported that despite the report covering the beginning of the initial peak of the Pandemic, Sunderland Care and Support Limited had received a total of 88 compliments between 1st April and 30th June 2020. There had been 12 complaints which represented 29% less than had been recorded over the previous period, Quarter 4 and 58 % less than the quarter before that, Quarter 3.

Councillor Dixon congratulated the services for the number of compliments they had received which had risen and commented that overall the Council was performing very well.

The Chairman having thanked Ms St Louis for her detailed reports, it was:-

5. RESOLVED that the report providing details of the Compliments, Complaints and Feedback covering Quarter 1 of the financial year be received and noted.

Scrutiny Annual Report 2019/2020

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) asking the Committee to approve the scrutiny annual report 2019/20 that was to be presented to Council at a future date.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, reported that each of the Scrutiny Committees had agreed their part of the report which provided a brief overview of some of the main work they had undertaken during 2019/20.

Mr Cummings pointed out that the report did not include any issues relating to the COVID – 19 Pandemic as this had just impacted when the Scrutiny Committee reporting year had been drawing to a close.

Councillor Heron commented that it was a very good report.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

6. RESOLVED that the Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committees for 2019/20 be approved and submitted to Council at an appropriate time.

Annual Scrutiny Work Programme 2020/21

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) asking the Committee to consider and agree a work programme for the remainder of the municipal year 2020/21.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, briefed the Committee on the report and referred to the workshop held on 30th July to develop the work programme.

Mr Cummings referred Members to paragraph 3.2 of the report which provided a summary of the regular items which would feature on the work programme and to appendix 1, the draft work programme for the Committee's approval.

Mr Cummings reminded Members that the Work Programme was a 'living' document and could be amended throughout the course of the municipal year. The Committee would receive a report on the work Programme each month together with a copy of those of the 3 thematic Scrutiny Committees in order to carry out its coordinating role to avoid duplication, make best use of resources and to provide a corporate overview of the scrutiny function.

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

7. RESOLVED that the draft work programme for 2020/21 be approved and that emerging issues be incorporated as and when they arise throughout the coming year and that the work programmes of the thematic Scrutiny Committees 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 17th August, 2020.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, advised that if there was anything on which any Member wanted further information to let him know and he would get that for them and circulate it.

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

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

(Signed) D. MACKNIGHT,
Chairman.