

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 17th JUNE, 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D. MacKnight in the Chair

Councillors Butler, Doyle, Hartnack, Heron, Hodson, O'Brien, Peacock, D. Snowdon and D. E. Snowdon

Also in attendance:-

Mr Chris Binding, Local Democracy Reporter

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

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Smart Cities, 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

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors N. MacKnight, P. Smith and Thornton.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 15th April, 2021

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 15th April, 2021 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

Item 8 - Notice of Key Decisions

Councillor Doyle made an open declaration in relation to item no. 210510/593 in relation to Sunnyside Redevelopment as his employer undertakes consultancy work concerning the project.

Councillors D. and D.E. Snowdon made open declarations in relation to item no. 210513/599 regarding a proposed extension to the lease and management agreement with Ambassador Theatre Group for the Empire Theatre as a family Member worked there.

Reference from Cabinet – 15 June 2021 – Revenue Budget Outturn 2020/2021

The Assistant Director of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated) setting out for the advice and consideration of the Scrutiny Committee, a report by the Executive Director of Corporate Services, which was considered by Cabinet on 15 June 2021, on the outcome of the Revenue Budget Outturn for 2020/2021 including the budget transfers, contingency and reserves transfers proposed.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services proceeded to brief the Committee on the report and referred Members to paragraph 3.2.2 where a summary of the outturn position was set out in the table showing the final outturn position of £0.264m. He highlighted the Government un-ringfenced COVID support grant funding received by the Council of £26.158m in recognition of cost pressures faced by councils as a result of the pandemic and the use of reserves set out in paragraph 3.7 totalling £19.615m to meet a number of high priorities aligned to COVID recovery.

Mr Ritchie drew attention to the General Fund Balances at paragraph 4 and his declaration that the level of General Fund balance which would represent 5.4% of the Council's net budget requirement, remained at a level considered appropriate for a large unitary council. He also referred the Committee to paragraph 5 which detailed a review of existing reserves.

In response to Councillor O'Brien, Mr Ritchie referred to section 4 of the report and advised that 5.4% of the Council's net budget requirement, which was £12m as detailed in Appendix C, was a reasonable level of reserves in his professional view and that this was based on a number of factors.

Councillor Hodson referred to the Sport and Leisure overspend of £1.127m and the lost income from Derwent Hill and enquired whether pumping money in ensured the viability of those facilities.

Mr Ritchie advised that as the Sport and Leisure was a Joint Venture the Council had received specific funding from Government for this year and last year to bridge the gap. Bookings were now coming in for Derwent Hill and forecasts were positive for this year. Social distancing measures had been put in place and health sanitiser etc. had been provided. It was his opinion that Derwent Hill would bounce back. Schools were wanting to continue to use it. A review was being undertaken with SLM and business cases were being revised because of the extension to the roadmap. There were budgetary pressures in relation to sport and leisure, but it was hoped that by next year the business would be on an even keel.

Councillor Hodson enquired whether SLM was back up to pre pandemic staffing levels.

Mr Ritchie advised that as a general rule, Local Authorities had not furloughed their staff and so staff at Derwent Hill had been reassigned to admin tasks and vacant posts had not been filled, however recruitment was now underway. He added that a large number of staff had been furloughed at SLM and the company had started to bring staff back as things were opening up and as restrictions were being eased, although he did not know if all staff had returned back to work.

Mr Ritchie stated that he would get detailed information in relation to the above to ascertain whether any staff had lost their jobs at Everyone Active and forward this to Councillor Hodson.

Councillor Hodson enquired as to the reason for the waste collection and recycling and waste disposal overspends.

Mr Ritchie advised that there had been a spike and extra money had been put into the Medium-Term Financial Plan that year. If high levels continued, they would need to react to this and would need to look at the financial impact, for example, if weekly collections resumed.

Councillor Hodson enquired about the £1.2m overspend querying how much of this had been on staffing.

In response, Mr Ritchie reported that most had been on environmental services and refuse collection wages; any subsequent change would need to be taken to Cabinet for approval in future years.

Councillor Doyle enquired whether the Council's General Fund balance of 5.4% was comparable with other Local Authorities.

Mr Ritchie advised that looking at the CIPFA Financial Resilience Index, similar organisations to the Council were mostly in the 5% area, however a range of factors were considered in coming to a decision as to what was appropriate.

Councillor Doyle referred to the earmarking of specific reserves and asked whether the enforcement activity was specific to COVID or wider.

Mr Ritchie confirmed that the enforcement activity was not purely COVID related but in relation to the wider long-term environmental improvements.

Councillors Butler and D. E. Snowdon remarked on the future of triathlons being held in the city and what a coup this would be, together with the longer term potential financial benefits they would have in bringing business to the area.

Mr Ritchie advised that the intention was to continue to attract events to the city and commented that although the financial benefits would not come directly to the Council, they would benefit businesses in the city and help towards having a vibrant economy which would benefit residents. Estimates had been drawn up as to how much would come into the city as a result.

In response to Councillor Snowdon, Mr Ritchie advised that more than £90m had been paid out in business grants in the city based on national criteria.

The Chairman commented that it was good news that the planned increase in telecare charges had not been progressed on 2020/2021.

Full consideration having been given to the report, there being no further questions of Mr Ritchie and the Chairman having thanked him for his very comprehensive report and having asked that he pass on the thanks of the Committee to the finance staff for all the hard work they had undertaken, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee notes the content of the report and the overall outturn position of the Council for 2020/2021.

Performance Management Update – Quarter 4 of 2020/21 and 2020/21 Year-End

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for Quarter 4 of 2020/21 and 2020/21 year-end.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Smart Cities presented the report and advised that the Council's Corporate Performance Management Framework was aligned to the Sunderland City Plan 2019 – 2030 and to the three key themes of the City Plan, Dynamic City, Healthy City and Vibrant City, as well as including the organisational health indicators. The report set out the progress made to the end of Quarter 4 of 2020/21.

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 each of the five aspirations for each theme and against the additional Council indicators for good organisational health, productive and innovative working, strong financial management and a Council ready for the future.

A number of Councillors made enquiries on the information provided in the report which are set out below. Where responses from Officers could be provided at the meeting the information is also set out below. Where Officers were unable to answer the questions, it was noted that the question would be taken back to the relevant service area to provide a response.

Councillor Butler referred to influencing the type of events taking place on council land. He stated that he was particularly interested in somewhere for the use of off-road bikes etc. which could be supervised and be a safety compliant activity and also reduce stress on residents where it was taking place in neighbourhood residential areas.

Councillor Doyle enquired how the number of affordable homes completed in 2020/21 compared with the previous year, 2019/20.

Councillor Doyle asked what was being done about the proportion of adults in Sunderland who were overweight or obese as this was significant.

Councillor Doyle enquired if a definition could be provided as to how the Council defined cycle ways and for a breakdown of the cycle ways in the City.

Councillor Hodson requested further information on the 50 empty properties that had been brought back into use.

Councillor Hodson asked for information on the mental health indicators and interventions the Council was focussing on to be included in the report.

Councillor Hodson enquired as to what was being done to improve recycling across the city.

Cllr Hodson referred to the Quarter 4 enforcement activities and asked how many successful fines/enforcements there had been from the 312 investigations and 1,140 warning letters.

Councillor Hodson asked whether the Council had a published cycling strategy.

Councillor Hodson commented that the Museum and Arts Centre Graphic detailing the number of visitors did not highlight other cultural venues across the city e.g. the Empire Theatre, the Glass Centre etc and could be improved upon.

Councillor Hodson also enquired about the building of a new Cultural House, whether there would be a large increase in staffing, where the money was coming for this and if this was to be operated by Sunderland Culture or kept in-house. Councillor Hodson expressed concern that this would be running in direct competition if it was run by the Council.

In response to the above Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services reported that the High Street Fund was funding the Culture House and all costs associated with it had been factored in. It was his understanding that the Culture House was meant to be complementary, however he would raise the matter with the appropriate service department.

Councillor O'Brien enquired about the range of rents across the city and in particular, affordable rents based on financial evaluations and how many homes were covered by this.

Councillor D. Snowdon enquired whether there was concern that city centre buildings/office space was not being used.

Ms St Louis said that she would take the question back to the Riverside Team as to what the impact of COVID had been on plans for the city centre.

Councillor D. Snowdon raised concern about the potential for further impacts on foodbank usage when, in September, the additional £20 universal credit was removed which 5,000 people were receiving and he asked what support was in place for them.

Ms St Louis advised that a lot of additional support had been put in place, including financial checks to ensure they were receiving whatever they were entitled to, community sector organisations were providing support and the Council Tax support scheme was available to help.

Mr Ritchie added that the Council had put in £1m to support families through the Welfare Rights Team.

Councillor D. Snowdon enquired whether the sickness and absence rates were attributable to COVID related issues or general health issues.

Councillor Butler commented that he was pleased to hear that £1m had been put in to help families who were struggling and that he hoped this could also be used to support the working poor.

Councillor D. E. Snowdon praised the 'Local 0' approach where all test and trace cases in Sunderland were followed up locally and she asked that thanks go back to Team for the work carried out.

Councillor D. E. Snowdon also encouraged everyone to sign up to Step Up Sunderland.

Councillor O'Brien enquired asked about the 5G rollout timeline.

Ms St Louis advised that full rollout across the city would take 10-15 years, however there was lots of progress. She briefed the Committee in terms of CityFibre which would have its first connection at the end of the calendar year, advising that Virgin Media was building out and would have connectivity that summer and that they were out to procure a 5G partner and an announcement would be made in due course.

Councillor Doyle referred to business incubator occupancy noting that there had been a decrease due to COVID but enquired about rent reductions for businesses operating in council properties and in particular a possible reduction in service charges.

Mr Ritchie advised that 1 month's free rental had been given to all Council and Siglion owned properties. The Council would continue to work in a pragmatic way with individual businesses, however they were not in a position to offer further rent reductions without affecting Council finances.

Councillor Hartnack enquired as to how many jobs had been created in the construction industry for Sunderland residents.

Ms St Louis advised that she would get the above information but advised that the Council did pay great attention to the social value in contracts and by way of example advised that the contract with CityFibre was going to employ 90 fulltime equivalent people locally and was going to create 24 apprenticeships through the contract over three years.

Mr Ritchie added that there was also an expectation that businesses paid the real living wage.

Full discussion having taken place on 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.

Compliments, Complaints and Feedback

The Assistant Director of Smart Cities submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with information regarding compliments, complaints and feedback received by the Council.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Smart Cities, Corporate Services Directorate briefed the Committee on the report advising that it was the Annual Report for the financial year April 2020-March 2021 and presented an overview across the full range of complaints and feedback received by the Council. Ms St Louis advised that it had not been possible to present a separate report covering Quarter 4 (January – March 2021) and information about Quarter 4 had been incorporated into the Annual Report.

Ms St Louis referred the Committee to Part A, the Complaints and Compliments overview by type received which provided a departmental or company breakdown.

Ms St Louis referred Members to Part B which set out the procedures by which the Council and its companies operated.

Ms St Louis referred to Part C Appendix 1 highlighting the 909 compliments received by the Council during the year. Some examples of compliments received in Quarter 4 were detailed in the report which covered a range of services and expressed customers' appreciation.

Ms St Louis referred Members to Appendix 2 of the report which detailed that the Council had received 19 complaints from the Ombudsman for the period 2020-21 which was a significant drop from the previous year's figure of 38 or 50% less.

Ms St Louis referred to Appendix 3 which covered corporate complaints and showed comparative data for the previous years. She pointed out that there had been 2689 complaints received at Stage One during 2020-21 and that they were broken down into Directorates with 82%, that is, 2214 being in respect of the Neighbourhoods Directorate. She pointed out that of the 2214 complaints, 2093 were in respect of Environmental Services.

In terms of Stage two complaints, 21 reviews had been undertaken during the course of the year and 2 of those were upheld in full, 6 upheld in part and 13 were not upheld. The Directorate breakdown was set out in the report along with a summary of the complaints which were upheld in quarter 4.

Ms St Louis referred to Appendix 4 which provided a summary of Adult Social Care complaints of which there were 76 received in total for the year. A breakdown was shown alongside the nature of the complaint. Out of the 76 complaints, 25 had some element upheld, 49 were either not upheld, withdrawn, not eligible or classified as 'other' and 2 were ongoing with outcomes not yet known.

Ms St Louis stated that Appendix 5 provided a summary of complaints received in quarter 4.

Ms St Louis stated that Appendix 6 provided a summary of compliments and complaints for Sunderland Care and Support received in quarter 4. There had been 41 compliments received in quarter 4 and a summary was provided in the report.

There were 18 complaints during the period and details of the those were provided in the report. Ms St Louis pointed out that half, that is 9 of the complaints were not upheld, 3 were upheld in part, 5 were upheld in full and 1 remained in the process of being resolved.

Ms St Louis referred the Committee to the Together for Children Customer Feedback Annual Report 2020-2021. She pointed out that they had received 387 compliments from children and young people, parents and other family members, foster carers, external professionals and staff within TfC. There had been a total of 145 pre-complaints and enquiries for 2020/21. In 2020/21 there had been 44 statutory stage one complaints compared with 125 in 2019/20.

A number of Councillors made enquiries on the information provided in the report which are set out below. Where responses from Officers could be provided at the meeting the information is also set out below. Where Officers were unable to answer the questions, it was noted that the question would be taken back to the relevant service area to provide a response.

Councillor Butler raised a query about the inconsistent approach to the collection of bagged waste collected by refuse teams from affluent areas in comparison with other areas. Councillor Butler asked if there was a reason for this and if a more consistent approach could be taken.

Ms St Louis commented that this should not be the case and that there was one policy across the city.

Councillor Doyle asked for a breakdown of the number of complaints which resulted from consultation and whether the complaints related to the consultation not being done properly or in time.

Councillor Doyle stated in terms of the wedding ceremony where the complaint had been upheld, that he was curious as to whether the offer had been accepted.

Councillor Hodson commented that it was good to hear that a number of compliments had been received.

In terms of Environmental Services' complaints, Councillor Hodson commented that these were only the people taking an interest, many people did not know how to make a complaint and he queried whether the department was sufficiently staffed.

Councillor Hodson highlighted that for the past year or two with regards to the rodent reporting system on the Council's website, anyone reporting an issue did not receive a reference number or a response and it was not being monitored in the same way as other complaints were.

Ms St Louis advised that there was an extension programme of reporting issues such as Councillor Hodson had mentioned which were being picked up and prioritised.

The Chairman commented that Councillor reporting of issues was quite frustrating, often with long delays in receiving responses and she asked whether this could also be looked at.

Councillor D. E. Snowdon commented that she was delighted to see that the number of compliments had increased. Council staff were doing a fabulous job and the comments from the public were powerful.

Ms St Louis advised that she would ensure that this was passed on to staff.

Councillor Hartnack commented that the compliments were positive.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the Customer Service Network and commented that his own experience had been very negative in that he had not once been put through to the person he had wanted to speak to. He asked whether the Council examined lost calls data to determine satisfaction or could they identify an indicator of dissatisfaction.

Ms St Louis confirmed that lost calls, abandoned calls, average length of calls were all looked at with the aim of dealing with calls as quickly as possible but effectively. She advised that there had been difficulties with the automated switchboard and getting through was more difficult at the moment due to staff working from home. Ms St Louis confirmed that the data in relation to the above could and had been scrutinised in the past and could be prioritised.

Councillor D.E. Snowdon commented that it might also be useful to break the complaints about environmental services down into Area Committee level.

Councillor Hodson commented that the data showed that it was a localised problem in the city and suggested that individual teams and staffing rotas needed to be looked at.

Councillor Hodson referred to the complaints in respect of refuse collection and the point made regarding street sweepers coming round before the refuse collectors and then rubbish being left everywhere. He asked if this could be looked at and communication between the teams and service areas improved.

Ms St Louis advised that a complete review of the service was being undertaken at that time and she would take the point back to Senior Officers.

4. RESOLVED that the information provided regarding compliments, complaints and feedback received by the Local Authority, as detailed in the report and the comments made, be received and noted and responses be provided to the questions raised as detailed above.

Annual Scrutiny Work Programme for 2021-22

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide options, support and advise Members on the development of the scrutiny work programmes for 2021/22.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer referred the Committee to paragraph 2.2 of the report which detailed the principles guiding the development of Scrutiny Work Programmes. He reminded Members of the workshop being held to develop the work programmes on 24th June where key Officers would also be in attendance.

Councillor Hodson enquired about the full review of the scrutiny function and the role the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee would play.

Mr Cummings advised that the Centre for Public Scrutiny had drafted up a remit for the review and would embark on that in the next couple of weeks. The Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee would be used as representation for the review and to gather evidence. A final report would be submitted to this committee for consideration.

Mr Cummings advised that Scrutiny Officers would be working with staff from the Centre, however the review would be done independently.

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

5. RESOLVED that the scrutiny work programme be developed through a working group session; the aim of the session to be to provide a number of relevant issues and topics for consideration and approval by the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee.

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 May, 2021.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, advised that there had been an updated Notice of Key Decisions published earlier that week and if there was anything on either notice which any Member wanted further information on to let him know and he would be happy to take that forward on their behalf.

Councillor O'Brien enquired about item no. 210513/599 regarding a proposed extension to the lease and management agreement with Ambassador Theatre Group for the Empire Theatre.

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services advised that the report had not been submitted to the Cabinet on 15th June 2021 as scheduled.

Mr Cummings agreed to make some enquiries with the relevant Officers.

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

The Chairman in closing, thanked everyone for their attendance that evening which she commented had been a very comprehensive scrutiny meeting.

(Signed) D. MACKNIGHT,
Chairman.