

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 16th SEPTEMBER, 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D.E. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Doyle, Hartnack, N. MacKnight, Mann, Mullen and D. Snowdon

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

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Smart Cities, Corporate Services Directorate

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members' Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Local Democracy Reporter

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and briefed Members on the current Government guidance being followed and the measures in place in Council buildings for the meeting with regards to reducing the spread of COVID-19.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Butler, Hodson, D. MacKnight and P. Smith.

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

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

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

Item 7 – Notice of Key Decisions

Councillor Doyle made an open declaration on item number 210728/613 due to his employer being involved in the project.

Performance Management Update – Quarter 1 of 2021/22

The Chief Executive submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for Quarter 1 of 2021/22.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Liz St Louis, Assistant Director of Smart Cities, 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 1 of 2021/22.

Ms St Louis took the Committee through the summary for the three key themes of Dynamic Smart City, Healthy Smart City and Vibrant Smart City of the Sunderland City Plan, highlighting commitments, achievements and progress made for each key theme, as well as performance against each of the 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.

The Chair invited Members to raise questions and comments on each of the key themes in turn.

In respect of the Dynamic Smart City Theme the following were raised.

Councillor D. Snowdon referred to the increase in the percent of the population achieving an NVQ Level 4 qualification and queried whether it was known what subjects these were in. Ms St Louis advised that she would find out whether this information was available.

Councillor Doyle referred to the More and Better Housing aspiration and questioned how quality was assessed and also how hazards were assessed. Ms St Louis advised that there was a lot of work done around new builds including ensuring that quality developers were chosen and that there were a range of property types built. When empty properties were brought back into use there was work to ensure that high standards were achieved. When hazards were identified in privately rented properties, work was done with landlords to ensure that they were addressed.

Councillor Doyle then asked whether the Council operated above the minimum standards set out by building regulations and Ms St Louis agreed to find out.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the More and Better Jobs aspiration and questioned how many local people were employed in Council led construction projects. Ms St Louis advised that she did not have the information to hand but that there was a measure of local people employed by the Council's contractors; she would get the information and report back.

Councillor Hartnack added that employing local people would help to reduce the Council's carbon footprint as people would not be having to travel to work. Ms St Louis advised that this was a part of the social value element of the Council's procurement procedures; there was a national toolkit of social value which she would provide.

Councillor Mullen referred to the improvement in the percentage of people achieving GCSEs while there had been a reduction in those achieving A level equivalent qualifications and asked whether there was any information on the decline in achievement of A levels. He also stated that at the new City Hall the opposition groups had originally been allocated group rooms on the third floor but had now been moved to the second floor into rooms with glass walls and a capacity for only three people. He queried whether it would be possible for the groups to be moved back to the originally assigned rooms. Ms St Louis advised that the A level results were not comparable to previous years due to the number of exams which were cancelled. She would pass on the comments relating to the City Hall.

The Chair then queried the increased employment figures from September to December 2020 and also asked whether the economic inactivity rate should be recorded as this could help to give more information about the true picture within the city. Ms St Louis advised that the new employment figures for April 2020 to March 2021 had been released and had show a rate of 68.8 percent in the city. Economic inactivity was at a higher level than for the North East and for the Country and she would look at including this information in future reports.

The Chair then queried the decrease in occupation of the Software Centre. Ms St Louis advised that due to the nature of the businesses using the Software Centre Covid had impacted on how the businesses operated with a number moving to home working. There had been interest from businesses who wanted to take on space within the centre.

Councillor N. MacKnight queried whether the economic inactivity figures would include NEETs and Ms St Louis agreed to find out. The Chair stated that as the figures covered people from 16 year old then she expected that it would.

Members then raised questions on the Healthy Smart City theme.

Councillor Doyle referred to the City with great transport and travel links aspiration and that there had been no new cycle ways. He asked why there had been no improvements and whether there were plans for the development of new cycle networks. Ms St Louis advised that there was a lot of ongoing activity but during this quarter there had been no schemes completed. Councillor Doyle then asked whether a breakdown of the ongoing schemes could be provided.

Councillor Mann stated that the suicide rate was a real concern; mental health was a huge issue and the lockdowns had an impact on people's mental health. She asked what was being done to prepare for an increase in mental health issues. Ms St Louis agreed to speak to Public Health colleagues for a response. The Chair asked that a representative from Public Health attend a future meeting.

Councillor Mann agreed that there was a need for Public Health representatives to attend and then advised that there were reports that the Step Up app was not working. Ms St Louis advised that the developer was based at the Software Centre and she would ask the relevant department to liaise with them to address the issues.

Councillor Mann then referred to the health check visits for new borns and 2.5 year olds. Children of this age had not been socialised due to the lockdowns so she felt that it was important to focus on ensuring that these health checks were done. A decline in the number of visits had been recorded and she asked what the reason for this was and what was being done to address it. Ms St Louis agreed to find out.

The Chair asked that a representative of Public Health attend to discuss the alcohol related hospital admissions. Ms St Louis advised that Gerry Taylor was keen on performance management so expected that she would be happy to attend a future meeting.

Members then discussed the Vibrant Smart City theme.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the Residents feelings of safety indicator. He stated that the information appeared to come from the Police survey which was completed by victims of crime so did not accurately capture everything which impacted on feelings of safety. The Council had a responsibility for litter and vandalism which did have an impact on feelings of safety. Ms St Louis advised that residents surveys were regularly undertaken by the Council and Mr Cummings advised that there would be the report from Sunderland Partnership brought to the Committee in December.

Councillor Doyle referred to the Museum opening hours. The current hours presented a barrier to working families attending the museum. He questioned whether there were any plans to increase the hours. Ms St Louis agreed to find out.

Councillor Mann referred to the rate of children in need. The report stated that there was a reduction, however the rate still seemed to be high. She asked whether a comparison with last year's figures could be provided. Ms St Louis stated that her interpretation was that it was an improving trend and she agreed to bring back comparison information.

Members then raised questions on the Organisational Health theme.

Councillor D. Snowdon queried the reasons for the reduction in sickness rates during July and August and Ms St Louis agreed to speak to Human Resources to find out.

2. 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 Executive Director of Corporate services submitted a report (copy circulated) which provided 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, briefed the Committee on the report advising that it was the report for Quarter 1 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.

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 206 compliments received by the Council during the quarter. Some examples of compliments received in Quarter 1 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 4 complaints from the Ombudsman for the quarter 1 period which was a reduction from the 6 received during the same quarter last year.

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 807 complaints received at Stage One during the quarter which was a 27% increase on the same quarter last year and that they were broken down into Directorates with 646 being in respect of the Neighbourhoods Directorate. She pointed out that of the 646 complaints, 603 were in respect of Environmental Services.

In terms of Stage two complaints, 5 reviews had been undertaken during the course of the quarter and 1 of those were upheld in full, 2 were not upheld, 1 was unsubstantiated and 1 was not eligible.

Ms St Louis referred to Appendix 4 which provided a summary of Adult Social Care complaints of which there were 18 received during the quarter. A breakdown was shown alongside the nature of the complaint. Out of the 18 complaints, 3 were upheld in full, 1 had some element upheld, 10 were either not upheld, withdrawn, not eligible or classified as 'other' and 4 were ongoing with outcomes not yet known.

Ms St Louis stated that Appendix 5 provided a sample of stage 1 complaints received in quarter 1; the outcomes varied from not upheld, partially upheld and upheld.

Ms St Louis stated that Appendix 6 provided a summary of compliments and complaints for Sunderland Care and Support received in quarter 1. There had been 56 compliments received in quarter 1 and a summary was provided in the report. There were 15 complaints during the period and details of the those were provided in

the report. Ms St Louis pointed out that nearly 27% of the complaints were not upheld, 14% were upheld in part, 47% were upheld in full and 7% remained in the process of being resolved.

Councillor Mullen referred to the complaints relating to bin collection. He questioned why the number of complaints in Barnes was so high and whether this was related to issues with access for the bin lorries. He also referred to the electric bin lorries and raised concerns that they might not be able to complete the full round on a single charge. Ms St Louis agreed to look into these issues.

Councillor Doyle stated that the compliments received relating to Planning were encouraging. They spoke to the good work the Council was doing and showed that Officers went beyond the statutory minimum requirements. He asked whether the residents survey could include a question about how well informed of planning applications near to them residents felt they were. Ms St Louis agreed to raise this with colleagues in Planning.

Councillor Mann queried whether the complaints regarding Environmental Services included both residents and Councillors' complaints. Ms St Louis advised that this was all complaints that had been raised through the complaints system.

Councillor Mann then commented that although there were a large number of complaints relating to refuse collection it was put into perspective when the number of bin collections was taken into account. She advised that she had received complaints from residents who had separated paper into the recycling caddy but had then seen operatives emptying the caddy into the lorry alongside the other recycling. She then stated that it was good to see such a low number of complaints relating to Adult Social Care and it was good to see the compliments received in respect of the short break services. She queried whether this was for a particular centre. Ms St Louis agreed to look into these and report back.

Councillor N. MacKnight then stated that it was interesting to see the compliments; people were four to eight times more likely to leave negative feedback than positive. He asked how the feedback was used to improve services and also whether staff got compliments fed back to them. He then referred to the hospital based social work team and asked whether they were council or NHS employees and whether the NHS trust received feedback from the Council. Ms St Louis advised that there was work done to improve based on feedback received and this was built into the departmental management processes. Compliments were fed back to staff and were also included in staff newsletters. The hospital social care team were Council employees and feedback was provided to them and into the NHS trust.

Councillor Hartnack queried how complaints were identified. For example if a resident phoned to report a missed bin collection would this be automatically classed as a complaint. Ms St Louis advised that this would only be classed as a complaint if the resident expressed dissatisfaction.

Councillor Hartnack then stated that it was Environmental Services which received the majority of complaints each quarter. He asked what was done to change and improve these services. Ms St Louis advised that there was a lot of work done by Environmental Services to identify the cause of complaints and she would ask for a detailed response from the department.

Councillor Hartnack then queried whether there were comparisons done with other Local Authorities. Ms St Louis advised that it was difficult to do comparisons as other Local Authorities had different definitions of what a complaint was.

3. 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 Work Programme for 2021-22

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which asked the Committee to consider the work programme for the Committee for the municipal year 2021/22.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer advised that the City Plan Refresh report scheduled to come to the Committee in October would now be brought to the December meeting. There would also be a report brought on the development of the new City Hall and work was ongoing to try and get a visit arranged for Members. Members should have received an email relating to the scrutiny survey. This was an anonymous survey and all Members were encouraged to complete it.

Councillor Mullen asked whether an update on Environmental Services could be provided from a representative from the department or the Portfolio Holder. Ms Cummings stated that he would ensure that relevant Officers were in attendance as part of the next performance update and complaints report. The Chair added that in the past there had been more Officers in attendance and she expected that it would increase again in the future.

In response to comments from Councillor D. Snowdon the Chair advised that all Members were welcome to attend any Scrutiny Committee meeting and that if they emailed the Chair of that Committee in advance then it was possible that they would be given the opportunity to ask questions.

Councillor Mann questioned the absence of any items relating to mental health on the work programme for the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee. Ms Robinson advised that there were still items to add to the work programme. There would be a session held with young people to identify issues they wanted discussed and an updated work programme would be provided. Mr Cummings added that the work programme would be brought to the Committee at each meeting.

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 16th August, 2021.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, advised Members that if there was anything on the Notice which any Member wanted further information on to let him know and he would be happy to take that forward on their behalf.

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

The Chairman in closing, thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) D. E. SNOWDON,
Chairman.