

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 27TH SEPTEMBER 2022 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Dixon, Edgeworth, Fagan, Foster, Laws, Reed, H. Trueman and Warne.

Also in attendance: -

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr Steve Wearing, Principal Licensing Officer, Sunderland City Council

Ms Dawn Howley, Senior Licensing Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services

Ms Katherine Corfield, Housing Strategy Officer, Sunderland City Council

Mr Martin Bewick, Senior Housing Manager, Sunderland City Council

Members of the Press

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Ali, Mordey and Scanlan.

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12th July 2022

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12th July, 2022 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12th July 2022 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest submitted.

Consultation on Proposed Draft Statement of Private Hire and Hackney Carriage Licensing Policy

The Executive Director for City Development submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought the Committee's comments in response to the consultation on the Council's proposed Draft Statement of Private Hire and Hackney Carriage Licensing Policy.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Steve Wearing, Principal Licensing Officer and Dawn Howley, Senior Licensing Officer presented the report and were on hand to answer Members queries.

Mr Wearing wished to draw the Committees attention to paragraph 3.7 of the report and the key proposals raised at the Trade Group Liaison Meeting which formed part of the draft policy. Mr Wearing proposed that each matter be considered in turn.

- (a) The introduction of a new Code of Conduct for Licensed Drivers, which includes a Dress Code

In response to Councillor Dixon's query Mr Wearing confirmed that the enforcement of the dress code would be reliant on either Members of the public reporting this or Licensing staff witnessing this on their checks. It was envisaged that should complaints be received they would speak with the driver involved and if there were continued breaches then this may be put before the Licensing Committee.

- b) The proposed change in the medical requirements for drivers and the adoption of the DVLA Group 2 Medical Standard

In response to Councillor Foster's query Mr Wearing advised that the standard was not set in line with the retirement age but was set to the DVLA Statutory Standard.

Councillor H. Trueman enquired as to the medicals required for drivers of public service vehicles. Mr Wearing advised that he believed drivers would receive a reminder about undertaking medicals but as this was not within the Councils remit he could not advise with certainty on this.

Councillor Laws enquired if this change was being implemented due to problems we had experienced in the past or if it was just to bring us in line with other parts of the country. Mr Wearing confirmed that it was just to standardise our practice along with other parts of the country

- (c) The introduction of a Driver Improvement Programme for existing licensed drivers;

Councillor Dixon enquired if this programme would apply for all minor offences or if it was strictly for speeding. Mr Wearing informed that it would apply for anything that resulted in 3 penalty points and the Programme would be a requirement when the trigger of 6 points was accrued.

In response to Councillor Warnes enquiry as to how the department would know if a driver had accrued 6 points, Mr Wearing advised that the driver was required to notify the Team and that sanctions could be imposed and put before the Licensing and Regulatory Committee if they did not.

- (d) A change in the requirements regarding the reporting of matters to the Council on the part of existing licensed drivers, ie. the tightening-up of self-reporting obligations, including a shorter time period and extending the scope of matters to be reported;

Councillor Fagan referred to the requirement for drivers to notify of any arrests and enquired if they had been arrested in serious cases such as rape for instance, would the driver be suspended immediately whilst investigations continued or would they be considered innocent until proven guilty and allowed to continue to trade. Mr Wearing advised that each case was considered on its individual merits and most cases would await the outcome of any investigation but depending on the seriousness of the situation could require urgent consideration and action.

Mr Wearing also advised that this was referred to later within the report and that offences of a sexual nature, where the driver was under investigation, decisions could be delegated to the Director where they could revoke a license with immediate effect.

In response to Councillor Reed's query, Mr Wearing advised that the Council could look at certain cases where individuals may have been found not guilty in the past and the circumstance around that to take into account the suitability of a driver. This was not often but could happen.

- (e) The introduction of a revised convictions policy via the Convictions Policy and Assessment of Previous Convictions document;

No comments

- (f) A proposal to change the current arrangements regarding vehicle age limits and emissions standards;

Councillor Warne enquired if there were taxi drivers leaving because of the cost of living crisis and the amount on fares that they could charge, which may not be enough. Ms Howley advised that it was difficult to say. They were building relations with the universities to try and increase more recruits into the sector but it could be that drivers were going elsewhere now into such routes as delivery drivers etc.

Mr Wearing advised that Covid had changed the landscape but that they were trying to encourage new drivers into the sector.

Councillor Laws referred to the increased cost of newer vehicles and the fact that Covid, the recent falling of the pound and increased interest rates which would have an impact on taxi drivers custom as people changed priorities away from eating and drinking out, therefore enquired as to what the future looked like in the short to medium term.

Mr Wearing advised that it was a difficult balance as they had air quality/emissions standards on one hand whilst also trying to be reasonable to the drivers so they were looking to allow a little bit more flexibility but Mr Wearing did take on board Councillor Law's comments and the economic factors had to be kept under review.

In response to Councillor Edgeworth's enquiry over any discussions had with those in charge of the City's Electric Vehicle strategy, Mr Wearing advised that they had discussions with Transport for the North East who they worked closely with, road shows highlighting the benefits of Electric Vehicles had been put on also. Of course

we had to have the infrastructure in place and there was still a lot of work to make that push for drivers to come forward with those types of vehicles.

Councillor Edgeworth suggested that Catherine Auld be contacted to enquire if Electric Taxi vehicles were part of the City's Electric Strategy.

In response to Councillor H. Truman's enquiry over the evidence used in determining emissions of vehicles and the tests carried out, Mr Wearing advised that the requirements were to be provided in documentation as well as the physical tests.

- (g) A proposed new requirement for private hire operators to maintain a register of booking and dispatch staff, including the need to have sight of Basic DBS Certificates for all individuals listed on the register;

In response to Councillor Fagan's enquiry Mr Wearing advised that they do currently check license operators but this was specifically about the call handlers being included in the DBS checks also and that they would need to see how this played out in terms of procedure but it may be that it went through the Licensing Committee, this would be rare but it did happen.

- (h) A proposal to change the existing policy on vehicle tints that would allow the licensing of vehicles fitted with glass of a light transmittance lower than the current standard, subject to a requirement that a suitable CCTV system be installed in the vehicle.

In response to Councillor Law's request for clarification, Mr Wearing advised that this would allow those executive vehicles to do "normal" work with their darkened tint but this must be offset with having CCTV in the vehicle.

Councillor H. Trueman commented that he felt this was an excellent proposal as it meant we were getting the high end vehicles in but still safeguarding of passengers therefore was a good move.

Councillor Foster commented that he partly agreed and that he understood why it was being done but personally felt the tint should not be allowed at all as there may be safeguarding issues along the way.

Having debated the changes, the Chairman opened up the discussion on the Policy in general.

Councillor M. Dixon thanked the officers for a comprehensive report and enquired if the reductions in number of drivers in Sunderland was mirrored in other urbanised regions such as Gateshead or Newcastle or if it was a Sunderland specific issue.

Mr Wearing advised that he didn't have the specific figures for the regions but it was certainly the case that all regions had seen a reduction and were suffering the same issues as Sunderland.

Ms Howley advised that nationally there had been around a 30% reduction in drivers. Mr Wearing commented that they were looking at initiatives with local colleges for training etc.

Councillor Warne commented that he was convinced these figures were correct as recent experiences of trying to obtain a taxi in Newcastle had been most difficult and he was sure this was the case across all areas. Councillor Warne thanked Officers for their excellent report.

Having discussed the report, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the Committee received the report and that their comments in response to the public consultation exercise on the Council's proposed Draft Statement of Private Hire and Hackney Carriage Licensing Policy be noted.

Housing and Homelessness Reduction Strategies - Consultation

The Assistant Director of Housing Services submitted a report (copy circulated) which sought Members views on the initial consultation process and input on the review of the Council's Housing and Homelessness Reduction Strategies.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing and Communities, Katherine Corfield, Housing Strategy Officer and Martin Bewick, Senior Housing Manager presented the report along with PowerPoint presentation and were on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Laws thanked the Officers for their comprehensive report and commented that there was a great team that sat behind them. Councillor Laws referred to the Gypsy and Traveller Strategy and advised that in Washington, work had mainly involved placing barriers to stop access to locations and enquired what was in the strategy to support them.

Mr Scanlon advised that the Strategy was approved through Cabinet and a Ward Member Sub Group was held with the intention of another meeting to be held. The aim was to strengthen areas of guidance and support. Mr Scanlon commented that the Policy was changed last year and he felt these changes were appropriate and necessary. Aspects needed to be tightened up as we now had the City of Sanctuary approach and this needed to be reflected in the Policy.

Councillor Laws commented that whilst we have a Homelessness Strategy, any night of the week you could invariably witness someone sleeping rough around the City and enquired as to what we were doing operationally day to day to address this and if an officer was patrolling the City at night.

Mr Scanlon advised that a report on homelessness had recently been presented to the Chief Officer Group and he could bring this to Scrutiny also to highlight the challenges faced. We did have an Officer with the role to go out and engage but unfortunately there was a cohort of people who didn't wish to engage and chose to sleep on the streets, so it was a complex area where the circumstances were always different.

Mr Scanlon added that the main causes of homelessness in the past had been drug addiction, mental health or alcohol addiction but now this was changing with the cost of living crisis and the war in Ukraine we were seeing new challenging situations and

different types of homeless people so it was about changing the perceptions, realizing and responding as a team in different ways. Mr Scanlon also commented that there was an accommodation issue with hostels becoming full as the cost of living crisis deepened this meant those who may have used a friends sofa for the night didn't have this option anymore as people were reluctant to help others when they were struggling themselves.

Mr Bewick advised that we also have an outreach service which can identify people most days where some will engage with the service but others would not.

In response to Councillor Edgeworth's query on the review of reporting rough sleeping, Mr Scanlon advised that in terms of out of hours they had set up with the Customer Service Network to use the Housing Options Team rather than the traditional approach which would improve the service and there was also work ongoing not within the strategy to rectify any issues.

Councillor Reed referred to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the necessity to have a strategy in place yet there seemed to be a gap in 2022. Mr Scanlon advised that due to the pandemic they didn't have the time to carry out the required consultations which were the best way to align with the Housing Strategy but due to the unprecedented circumstances, leeway would be given to the Council on this.

In response to Councillor Reeds query, Ms Corfield advised that there was a strategy dedicated to Homelessness, with clear actions around prevention, intervention and partnerships.

Councillor Reed queried how the Council would acquire its housing stock. Mr Scanlon informed that this would be done by building bungalows, acquiring empty properties and buying or building supported accommodation, so it was a mixed bag.

Mr Scanlon added that they were here to compliment and fill in the gaps rather than be in competition to the other housing providers and that they had recently received funding for another 20 homes from Homes England.

Councillor Reed referred to Priority One of the presentation and the key action of "Consider surplus to requirement land for housing" and requested further clarification as to what was defined as surplus. Mr Scanlon informed the Committee that this would be around brownfield sites and as the Councils land ownership was not extensive they would have to be creative in how they engaged with landowners.

Councillor Reed raised that the previous plan on the Council's website still had a previous Portfolio Holder of Councillor Porthouse on the homepage who had left the Council some time ago. Mr Scanlon advised that they would have this rectified immediately.

Councillor Dixon referred to a previously carried out survey on the condition of private housing and the worry that standards in the City were declining and queried if anything was being done now on this. Mr Scanlon advised that the system had drifted out of date so they were out to consultation at the moment on this but there was a big piece of work ongoing.

In relation to Councillor Dixon's enquiry, Ms Corfield advised that they do have regular conversations with Gentoo and these included overviews of what was in the pipeline for instance and these were in line with the strategic needs which had been really well received by Homes England.

Mr Scanlon commented that Gentoo had been really receptive in the challenges we faced, particularly around refugees and they had been really supportive in the latest discussions had.

Councillor Dixon referred to the future use of CPO's on Riverside and enquired if these applied to commercial premises, why they were not used more for residential properties. Ms Corfield advised that carrying out CPO's was incredibly resource intensive and the Council had to evidence that they had exhausted all other options first.

Mr Scanlon added that the CPO process was lengthy and expensive so it was no mean feat to get over the line.

In response to Councillor Dixon's enquiry over acquiring more homes for victims of domestic abuse, Mr Scanlon advised that the strategy was evolving as they couldn't use hotels anymore so they identified three pilot properties, funded for two years for CCTV, security and furnishings. This had been trialled on three houses and they were also having thoughts to different accommodation to meet different needs.

Councillor Dixon referred to the Gypsy/Travellers and that sites were identified in 2017/2018 but there wasn't a great deal of thought put into those in his opinion. Mr Scanlon advised that at that time those three sites weren't taken forward and that they weren't available anymore. Councillor Dixon suggested that it was a good idea to liaise with Ward Members in future plans.

With regards to Councillor H. Truman's query if there were any areas of deprivation in Sunderland that needed clearing, Mr Scanlon advised that there were some areas in Hendon with difficulties and if they could put new homes in this would make them fit for purpose. They were looking at an area in Hetton also but they had to overcome social issues and get private owners to sell so it was not easy. There were pockets of the city in need of clearing.

Councillor Warne commented that the report had been fascinating and wished to thank the Officers for the fabulous amount of work they were doing. Mr Bewick commented that pressures were great in relation to dealing with Homelessness and the only way it was able to be tackled was through the hard work of the entire Team, so he would take these comments back to colleagues.

Councillor Edgeworth raised the issue of reporting domestic abuse and how this had not worked so effectively for the LGBTQ+ Charities. Ms Corfield advised that this reports to the Exec Board. Mr Scanlon commented that they did need to give thought around how best to allocate accommodation for example but this was on the list of work.

The Chairman thanked Officers for their report and commented that he'd been made aware of two constituents who had already had their rents increased by private landlords. Mr Scanlon advised that the Government had put out their consultation on

the threshold on what the increase to rents could be. If repair bills increased with inflation then some organisations would have problems with income to the point where repairs could not be done. It was likely the Government directive would be either 3,5 or 7% but they were waiting to hear. This was no longer a Council decision but a government directive, however this didn't apply to private sector so this would be why they were already putting up rents.

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and Members input be noted.

Annual Work Programme 2021-22

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide options, provide support and advise Members on the development of the scrutiny work programmes for 2022/2023

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Member's information

4. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2022-2023 be noted.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report providing Members with an opportunity to consider the items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 10th August, 2022 (copies circulated).

(For copy report and notice – see original minutes).

Mr Diamond reminded Members to get in touch if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

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

The Chairman thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting

(Signed) D. SNOWDON,
Chairman.