

**At a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE
SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 11th FEBRUARY, 2016 at 5.30 p.m.**

Present:-

Councillor N. Wright in the Chair

Councillors Davison, D. Dixon, Scanlan, David Snowdon and Dianne Snowdon together with Ms A. Blakey and Mr S. Williamson.

Also in attendance:-

Cllr H. Trueman

Mr Les Clark, Chief Operating Officer – Place, Sunderland City Council
Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Ms Karen Davison, Deputy Head of Financial Resources, Sunderland City Council
Ms Rhiannon Hood, Assistant Head of Law and Governance, Sunderland City Council
Mr Dennis Napier, Assistant Head of Financial Resources, Sunderland City Council
Mr David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Ms Beverley Poulter, Lead Policy Officer to the Leader and the Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council
Mr Neil Revely, Executive Director, People Services, Sunderland City Council,
Mr David Tate, Healthwatch
Mr Paul S. Wilson, Assistant Head of Financial Resources, Sunderland City Council

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Fletcher and Howe.

Minutes of the last Meeting of the Committee held on 14th January, 2016

The Chairman referred to Resolution 9ii) of the minutes and confirmed that she and the Vice Chairman had met with Legal Services in relation to issues raised at the meeting in respect of the Sunderland Integrated Substance Misuse Treatment and Harm Reduction Service. There was nothing further to add at this stage but a full report would be submitted to the Committee in due course.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 14th January, 2016 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Change in the order of Business

The Chairman advised that she would be taking item 5 on the agenda (North East Combined Authority – Proposed Devolution Agreement and Elected Regional Mayor) at this juncture to allow Councillor Trueman to leave and attend another meeting immediately thereafter.

North East Combined Authority – Proposed Devolution Agreement and Elected Regional Mayor

The Interim Head of Paid Service submitted a report attaching a copy of the report considered by the Cabinet at its meeting held on 10th February 2016 (copies circulated) which provided details of the current position in relation to the devolution proposals for the region including that the North East Combined Authority (NECA) would become a Mayoral Combined Authority. The report had been referred to the Scrutiny Committee as part of the consultation process.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Councillor Trueman, Deputy Leader of the Council and Beverley Poulter, Lead Policy Officer the Leader and the Chief Executive presented the report and addressed questions and comments thereon.

The Chairman expressed her personal view that the £30m per year for 30 years on offer was insignificant give the cuts that had been faced and would continue to be faced by the north east Local Authorities. Councillor Trueman shared this concern and stated that Sunderland alone had to find savings of £46m this year.

Councillor Dixon referred to the £30m on offer and asked if the costs of running the Combined Authority would have to be borne from this figure. Ms Poulter advised that that detailed issues such as this remained to be clarified however it had to be assumed currently that the answer would be yes.

Councillor Dianne Snowdon referred to the questionnaire included in the consultation document and asked how the questions had been devised and whether the same questions being asked in each local authority area. Ms Poulter replied that Sunderland's questionnaire had been devised in conjunction with experts at Sunderland University. It had been decided to ask very open questions. Each authority were responsible for undertaking their own consultation and differing approaches had been taken. Durham in particular had opted to ask very specific questions.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dianne Snowdon regarding the timescales involved, Ms Poulter advised that the consultation in Sunderland would close on 17th February. The Cabinet or Council of each of the 7 Local Authorities would then formulate their own position on the proposals prior to a final decision being taken by the NECA Leadership Board on 24th March. The Government had advised that the Mayoral Combined Authority could be formed from as little as 2 out of the 7 Local Authorities.

The Chairman expressed her concern that such a situation would not be practical especially in relation to plans for integrated transport and health and social care. For

example if Sunderland and Newcastle had opted in but Gateshead had opted out, the operation of an integrated transport system would be very difficult if not impossible.

Ms Poulter agreed that this was a very valid point. The Act would allow for up to 5 of the constituent Authorities to drop out. It was Sunderland's view however that the Devolution deal would not be feasible if even 1 or 2 of the Local Authorities opted out. Councillor Trueman stated his belief that all 7 would need to opt in for the proposal to work effectively.

Councillor D. Dixon expressed his concerns at the apparent haste with which the NECA was being forced to consider the proposals, given the many unknowns and the lack of understanding of the implications involved. He found it incredible that Ministers believed that it was feasible to establish a Mayoral Combined Authority for the North East comprising just 2 Local Authority areas.

Ms Blakely stated that she was extremely sceptical of the proposals. She cautioned that it was reminiscent of the introduction of the academy system for schools which initially offered a 'very big carrot' that ultimately diminished in size.

The Chairman advised that she also chaired the NECA Scrutiny Committee and that Councillor Dianne Snowdon also represented Sunderland on that Committee. There had been plenty of discussion on the devolution deal and the views generated had been mixed. Members were advised that Karen Brown also provided Scrutiny Officer support to the NECA and that if Members had any further views on the devolution consultation they could be forwarded to Karen or directly to Ms Poulter.

The Chairman having thanked Ms Poulter and Councillor H. Trueman for their attendance it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the comments made by the Committee Members be noted and considered as part of Sunderland's devolution consultation process.

Reference from Cabinet – 10th 2016 – Budget and Service Reports

(A) Collection Fund 2015/2016

(B) (i) Capital Programme 2016/2017 and Treasury Management Policy and Strategy 2016/2017, including Prudential Indicators for 2016/2017 to 2018/2019.

(B) (ii) Revenue Budget and Proposed Council Tax for 2016/2017 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2016/2017 to 2018/2019.

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (copy circulated), seeking the advice and consideration of the Committee on a number of reports considered by the Cabinet at its meeting held on 10th February, 2016, on the Revenue Budget and Capital Programme for 2016/2017 to assist the Council with its service and financial planning arrangements.

(For copy reports – see original minutes).

Ms Karen Davison, Deputy Head of Financial Resources, together with Mr Dennis Napier, Assistant Head of Financial Resources and Mr Paul S. Wilson, Assistant

Head of Financial Resources presented the report and addressed comments and questions from Members in relation to

- Usage of the collection fund surplus
- The potential to further increase provision for pupils on the Autistic Spectrum
- Allocation of Education Basic Need funding
- Sec. 106 funding for play areas
- The anticipated amount of better care funding
- Concerns regarding the effectiveness and transparency of school place planning
- The operation of the Council's Minimum Revenue Provision policy
- The schemes comprising the transport element of the Council's Capital Commitments
- The unfairness of the Government's transitional grant funding allocation
- The response to the consultation process from the Chamber of Commerce and the Trade Unions
- The future direction of Children's Services
- Enhancement of the Council's Efficiency Strategy through the use of creative thinking
- Timescales for the review of the Reablement at Home Service and potential implications
- The operation of the Community Equipment Service
- Potential negative implications arising from the review of Day Care Opportunities and the review of Crossing Patrol Staff

The Chairman having thanked Ms Davison, Mr Napier, Mr Wilson, Mr Revely and Mr Clark for their attendance it was:-

3. RESOLVED that:-

- i) a report be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee on work to expand provision in the city for pupils on the Autistic Spectrum;
- ii) appropriate officers be asked to consider the effectiveness of pupil place planning together with the provision of greater transparency given the unforeseen additional demand for places highlighted in the report;
- iii) Mr Phillip Foster, Chief Operating Officer Sunderland Care and Support be invited to attend a future meeting to provide an update report on service provision (with particular reference to Reablement at Home, Community Equipment and Day Care Opportunities) and that the invitation be extended to Mr Neil Revely, Executive Director, People Services, Sunderland City Council
- iv) Mr Steve Williamson contact the Scrutiny Section to arrange a meeting with the Council's Finance Team in relation to the Council's Efficiency Strategy, and;
- v) Council be advised that the Scrutiny Committee commented that, having considered the proposals, it was satisfied with the information provided within the Budget and Service reports and therefore supported the Cabinet recommendation to Council that the budget proposals be approved. It recognised the difficult financial situation that the Council continues to operate within. It placed on record its acknowledgement of all the hard work, commitment and support provided by the Council's Finance Team in preparing and delivering a balanced budget.

Notice of Key Decisions

The Head of Scrutiny and Area Arrangements 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 12th January 2016.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

The Chairman asked that Members having any issues to raise or requiring further detail on any of the items included in the notice, contact Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, for initial assistance.

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

Annual Work Programme 2015/16

The Head of Scrutiny and Area Arrangement submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching for Members' information, the work programme for the Committee's work being undertaken during the 2015/16 council year.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

5. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme be received and noted.

The Chairman then closed the meeting having thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

(Signed) N. WRIGHT,
Chairman.