

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 7TH DECEMBER 2021 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Ali, Edgeworth, Fagan, Foster, Greener, Laws, Price, Taylor, and Thornton.

Also in attendance: -

Councillors Mullen, O'Brien and D.E. Snowdon.

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Ms Catherine Auld, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration
Ms Sandra Mitchell, Assistant Director of Community Resilience
Mr Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors M. Dixon and Warne.

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 9th November 2021

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 9th November, 2021 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 9th November, 2021 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest

Environmental Services and Environmental Enforcement Update

The Executive Director of Neighbourhoods submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with an update on a range of environmental issues affecting the City and the plans for the future

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Sandra Mitchell, Assistant Director of Community Resilience and Mr Graham Scanlon, Assistant Director of Housing Services presented the report and were on hand to answer Members queries.

In response to Councillor Ali's query about the reporting system and the confusion over Officers being able to find the locations, Ms Mitchell advised that this may have been due to the reporting system but should not be an issue and she would feed these comments back.

Councillor Ali commented that Officers were very good at responding to reports of fly tipping yet the times taken to deal with issues of tree maintenance weren't as good. Ms Mitchell advised that tree maintenance required a specially trained team and that whilst people made complaints about trees in summer time, when they were in full leaf, the team could not address the situation until winter due to bird nesting seasons etc so it was beyond officers control in some scenarios.

Councillor Ali enquired if he needed to advise residents of this when they reported dangerous trees. Ms Mitchell advised that if the tree was dangerous, officers would inspect this first and a priority order was in place on how to respond in each case.

Councillor Laws commented that tree management was a big issue in Washington and he was pleased to see a new strategy was to be brought in the new year and hopefully there would be consideration given to ensure the right trees were put in, appropriate to the areas.

Councillor Laws queried if they were still looking to liaise with Gentoo to work together and also referred to side waste and if Officers could provide further clarity on what the issues and barriers were for this, if it were cost etc.

With regards to side waste, Mr Scanlon advised that operatives had to empty the green bin and then go back for the side waste, so this was two operations taking double the time. There was also the extra tonnage to consider and that much of side waste included glass etc which could lead to cuts and injuries to staff when having to handle directly.

Side waste put pressure on the Teams, needing additional support for increased tip runs and resulted in extra diesel costs also.

Mr Scanlon advised that the City was underperforming in terms of recycling and that some residents were putting their garden waste in the household bins to save paying the garden waste fees.

Mr Scanlon also advised that it was impossible to balance the rounds and judge how many vehicles would be required as they could not estimate how much side waste there may be in addition to the planned capacity on any given route.

In relation to trees, Ms Mitchell advised that they were aware of the legacy Washington has on these and could confirm that the trees being put in would be in open spaces and not near housing.

Ms Mitchell informed the Committee that they were working with Gentoo to try and ensure the best possible outcome and to work in tandem on scheduling of works.

Councillor Foster referred to the tree management strategy and that he had many a disagreement with officers from both the Council and Gentoo over inappropriate trees located in unsuitable areas and he felt that we should be sympathetic to the residents concerns on this so he was intrigued to see what the strategy would be coming forward and he was glad to hear that any new trees would be planted in open spaces rather than near residential areas.

Councillor Taylor wished to praise the Environmental Services staff, from the Washington Depot in particular for their speed in clearing fly tipping when reported and he couldn't speak highly enough of them and also the Enforcement Officers who were a credit to the Council and the Team.

Councillor Taylor referred to the report presented and that he was encouraged by the greater number of prosecutions for fly tipping and that it was clear to him that a Local Authority programme to educate the public about the cost, financially and environmentally in relation to fly tipping was needed.

Councillor Taylor informed the Committee that in some areas, residents were unaware that they were doing something illegal by putting out side waste, fuelling the fly tipping instances.

Councillor Taylor commented that we were very fortunate to have some amazing voluntary organizations who worked tirelessly in keeping our City tidy with litter picks and fly tipping should not be tolerated.

Councillor Taylor wished to praise the bulky waste service which he believed was excellent value for money and therefore there was no justification for fly tipping.

Councillor Taylor also commented that it was great to hear of staff training for driving HGV's and queried if they were wary that staff may leave for other more lucrative jobs once the training had been completed. Mr Scanlon advised that there were conditions attached to the training and should a member of staff leave straight after completing the training they were obliged to pay for the training, the costs of this decreased over the passing of time.

Councillor Taylor informed of a waste campaign being carried out by Gateshead Council including skip action days and suggested this may be something Officers could liaise with them over.

Councillor Greener advised that many residents had gotten in touch to comment that they believed some roads, particularly Houghton Cut had been lethal and that gritters had been needed here during the recent bad weather.

Mr Scanlon informed the Committee that there had been an accident at Houghton Cut but the Police had advised that this had been due to the driver speeding and not due to the roads conditions. Mr Scanlon advised that he would take these comments back to the duty managers to have conversations over but they hadn't had an issue as the gritters had been out in that location but they were keen to try and get them out quicker than normal.

Ms Mitchell also advised that Members should be receiving emails when the gritters have been out. This was confirmed to be the case.

In response to Councillor Greeners' query, Mr Scanlon advised that commercial vans with waste for the tip needed to go to Jack Crawford, but if Councillor Greener emailed details of the complaints she had received of residents with regular vans not being able to access Beech Street, he would look into those.

Councillor Dianne Snowdon wished to express her gratitude to the gritting teams as she worked as a Covid vaccinator at the Nightingale Hospital and that they had helped keep the centre open during the period of bad weather, whereas other centres in other authorities had to close so she requested thanks be passed onto the teams.

Councillor Edgeworth commented that he could appreciate the issues around side waste, environmentally and queried the policy on not collecting the green bins when the lid couldn't close. Mr Scanlon advised that if the lid could not close from the bin being overly full, this caused an issue with the bin lift, causing a health and safety concern for the staff and whilst there wasn't an enforcement policy, it was more about trying to educate people to keep the staff safe.

Councillor Edgeworth referred to a recent notice of motion at Council regarding complaints over the Bin replacement fee and enquired if there was anything further made on this. Mr Scanlon advised that this was progressing and they were pulling together all of the data and the financial implications involved to understand the impacts and pricing structures so that they could hopefully bring forward a potential policy for Cabinet to consider in due course.

The Chairman suggested that the Wheelie Bin Replacement policy be added to the Work Programme of the Committee for consideration.

Councillor Edgeworth enquired if the Council were expecting to see a reduction in recycling once the Deposit Returns Scheme was brought in. Mr Scanlon advised that consultation was still going through the system and would have massive cost implications to the Council/taxpayers so the whole agenda needed to go through the Waste Partnership as it was a significant agenda which would change the whole service approach.

In response to Councillor Fagan's comment, Mr Scanlon advised that there had been an error in the printing of some bin collection day Calendars, giving the wrong date for collection of the brown bins affecting some residents. This was changed quickly, and systems were put in place so that those residents received an extra collection.

Councillor Fagan raised concerns about Bulky Waste being left outside of flats and sheltered accommodation and enquired if there was any way this could be coordinated and picked up together so that it wasn't a continuous issue. Mr Scanlon advised that we had to be mindful that staff only take what was listed and we didn't want to have the scenario of residents just putting waste out on the streets with the expectation that all would be taken away, as this would be considered fly tipping.

In response to Councillor Fagan's suggestion, Ms Mitchell advised that they had carried out a social media campaign before, informing residents what to look for in licensed waste removal companies to ensure they were legitimate, and this was something they could look at again.

With regards to Councillor Price's enquiry over the Houghton Recycling Centre, Mr Scanlon advised that this was under Review as we had a state-of-the-art centre in Pallion and discussions were ongoing about the future approach.

Councillor Price commented on the reference to the City not meeting its percentage of recycling targets and enquired if there were any plans for an educational media campaign on this to advise what can go in the blue bins etc. Mr Scanlon informed the Committee that the Communications Team were putting something together on this to roll out next year. Education with schools through the Waste Partnership was also planned.

In response to Councillor Taylors enquiry, Mr Scanlon wished to assure Members that the grit used by Sunderland City Council was not mixed with gravel, as had been the claimed practice within other local authorities and could guarantee that all salt was brand new.

Councillor Thornton wished to commend the Sunderland gritting service and informed that as a worker within a neighbouring authority she could certainly tell the difference when crossing the boundary whilst commuting.

Councillor Mullen commented that very clear improvements had been made since Mr Scanlon had taken over the refuse service and enquired if, upon reflection of his time there, he could advise of recommendations to improve the service. Mr Scanlon advised that the improvements made had been a real team effort and had been achieved by working together with staff and the trade unions and that he had been surrounded by staff who knew their jobs very well.

Mr Scanlon also advised that they had worked well with Ms Mitchell and her Team to make such improvements.

Councillor Mullen referred to the stickers advising residents about disposal of batteries being placed on bins and that he had received complaints of staff dropping these on the floor and failing to pick them up, therefore leaving the streets dirtier than they found them and enquired if there had been any update in reports of this.

Mr Scanlon advised that data on this would be brought through the in house team along with missed bins etc and was an improving situation. They were getting better at monitoring and they needed to start working on response rates as these were not as quick as he would like them to be.

In response to Councillor Mullen's enquiries over the suspension of staff and when they expected to return to normal staffing arrangements and also on the contradictory Annual Healthy and Safety report and HR reports concerning staff contracting Weils disease, Mr Scanlon advised that unfortunately he was not part of this process and this would be best answered by a representative of HR.

Councillor Taylor raised the issue of scrapped cars being dumped on public highways in which the Police didn't deal with, therefore was left to Local Authorities. Some success in getting these cars shifted had been made but it was still an issue to be considered.

Ms Mitchell advised that a number of agencies such as the Police, Highways and Enforcement Officers could take action on such cases which historically have been passed around and that there was access to additional resource now, such as the DVLA systems so they were trying to carry out a much more proactive approach on this.

Councillor Mullen referred to Barnes Park and the problems faced over rats and commented that the rat catching bins implemented had been very successful, making a massive difference and suggested that these be promoted to colleagues for use across the City.

Ms Mitchell advised that this was included as part of the bin review and they were looking at installing these bins in other parks across the city.

In response to the Chairman's query over the issue of fines to people for dog waste or littering and what happened to people that had learning difficulties, Ms Mitchell advised that officers looked for evidence of disability and these cases would be considered differently.

In response to Councillor O'Brien's query, Ms Mitchell agreed that disabilities displayed in different ways or sometimes not at all and each case had to be looked upon on a case-by-case basis.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Ms Mitchell and Mr Scanlon on behalf of the Committee for their attendance and commented that it was important to acknowledge that the service did receive many compliments and not just complaints and to keep up the good work.

2. RESOLVED that the progress report be received and noted.

Business Centres Update

The Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide Members with the current position on the Council's business centres - Evolve Business Centre (Evolve), Sunderland Software Centre (SSC) and Washington Business Centre (WBC) - including an overview of the impact of COVID-19, and an update on progress in relation to the operational management of the centres.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Catherine Auld, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration presented the report and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Price commented that everyone had suffered due to the Covid pandemic and enquired if Officers were confident that the Evolve Centre would have attracted more businesses or remained static if the pandemic had not occurred.

Ms Auld advised that the Evolve Centre had always remained fairly full but it was a difficult question to answer on what would have occurred if the Pandemic hadn't happened. People were working in different ways now but some were still missing the face to face, collaborative working and the media coverage being given was most definitely helping the City to grow.

The Chairman commented that with all three Business Centres, but especially the Software Centre it may be difficult to gauge as they may have highly secretive duties, working with the Government etc and enquired if other Business Centres across the country had faced similar trends in their statistics.

Ms Auld advised that it was difficult to say as she did not have access to other Authorities statistics but it had been very clear nationally that there had been an exit in the early days of the pandemic on office based accommodation.

Ms Auld was thanked by the Chairman for her attendance

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and 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 2021/2022

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Members information

The Chairman advised that he had asked Officers to look at the policy on Street Trading due to an issue that had occurred in Washington and that he would inform the Committee on this when available.

Councillor Taylor commented that it had been asked for the Environmental Services/Enforcement report to be brought back for consideration later in the year once new officers had time to bed in and to update on progress made. Mr Diamond advised that he could look to put something on the work programme for spring time.

Councillor Foster referred to a previous visit carried out by the Committee in the past to the waste sites in the region and suggested another visit be arranged as it would be informative and a benefit to the new Members. Mr Diamond advised that once the issues of Covid settled down he would look to arrange another visit as suggested.

The Chairman advised that they were looking to arrange a visit to view the Transport Corridor also.

4. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2021-2022 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 8th November, 2021 (copies circulated).

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

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer reminded Members to contact him 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.