

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY, 13TH JULY 2023 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor Dodds in the Chair.

Councillors Curtis, Guy, Hartnack, Jones, Leonard, Mason-Gage, Morrissey, Mullen, Thornton, Usher and Walton.

Also in attendance:-

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Mr Graham King, Director of Adult Services

Ms Julie Lynn, Head of Business Development, Adult Services Directorate.

Mr David Noon, Principal Governance Services Officer, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Services Directorate

Ms Julie Parker Walton, Public Health Consultant, Health, Housing & Communities Directorate

Mrs Beverley Poulter, Senior Manager Corporate Strategy, Strategy and Corporate Affairs

Ms Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members Support Co-ordinator, Law and Governance, Smart Cities and Enabling Directorate

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Burrell and P. Smith.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 6th April 2023

Councillor Hartnack questioned the accuracy of the response attributed to Ms Poulter as noted on page 5, paragraph 3 of the minutes with regard to his request for information on the reasons why the Council's sickness absence was so far above the national average and what was being done to reduce it. Ms Poulter replied that she understood the issue was to be picked up under the work programme item as part of the wider work stream on the 'Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce'. Councillor Hartnack reiterated his assertion that sickness absence at the Council needed to be scrutinised.

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 6th April 2023 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to the above matter.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Reference from Cabinet – 13 July 2023 - Capital Programme First Review 2023/2024 (including Treasury Management)

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 Director of Finance, which was considered by Cabinet on 13 July 2023, on the outcome of the First Capital Review for 2023/2024 and progress in implementing the Treasury Management Borrowing and Investment Strategy for 2023/2024.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance proceeded to brief the Committee on the report and referred Members to paragraph 4.1 where details of the changes to the 2023/2024 Capital Programme both in terms of expenditure and resourcing were set out and paragraph 4.3 which highlighted the impact of increased cost pressures since March 2020 on the Capital Programme.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Walton regarding what lay behind the rising capital cost of the Culture House development, Mr Wilson advised that following the initial estimates there had been significant increases in the costs of the basic construction materials involved in the provision of the building's superstructure such as concrete and steel. This had driven up the total cost of the project.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Hartnack, Mr Wilson confirmed that the total cost variations in relation to projects under the theme of Vibrant City amounted to £5.3m.

In response to enquiries from Councillor Morrissey, Mr Wilson explained that the Department for Transport additional pot hole funding of £0.734m for the 2023/2024 financial year would only be used for the intended purpose. It would not be used to fund any additional recruitment.

Full consideration having been given to the report and there being no further questions for Mr Wilson, the Chairman thanked him for his report, and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Committee noted the content of the Capital Programme including the information and assurances provided on the Prudential Indicators and Treasury Management Strategy. The Committee were also satisfied with the detailed variations to the capital programme and had no further comment to make.

Reference from Cabinet – 13 July 2023 - First Revenue Budget Review 2023/2024

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 Director of Finance, which was considered by Cabinet on 13 July 2023, on the First Revenue Budget Review 2023/2024.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Paul Wilson, Director of Finance briefed the Committee on the report highlighting that the budgets for 2023/2024 were as approved by Council in February 2023. A full review had been undertaken for each Portfolio, together with contingency allocations proposed for the first quarter.

Mr Wilson referred the Committee to the table at 3.1.3 of the report which illustrated the cost pressures facing the Council. The overall forecast outturn position for 2023/2024 was a deficit of £0.404m.

Councillor Mullen referred to the Dynamic City Portfolio and the forecast shortfall on income collection of £0.472m based on recent usage trends in respect of Parking Services. He asked whether there would be an impact on the Free After 3 scheme. Mr Wilson replied that this would be assessed as part of the review of Parking that was to be undertaken by the Executive Director of City Services.

The Chairman asked that given the current cost of living crisis, were there any concerns over collection rates for Council Tax and was any support available to help households who were struggling? Mr Wilson replied that collection rates currently remained good and the Council Tax support scheme was helping to support residents during the crisis.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Thornton regarding potential staff strike action, Mr Wilson replied that the position was not yet clear. The three Local Government Unions had recently undertaken a disaggregated ballot and the results were expected during the next few weeks.

Consideration having been given to the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee noted the contents of the report including the various budget positions, contingency transfers, treasury management savings and collection fund updates. The Committee would also like to thank Members and Officers for the preparation and continued monitoring of the Council's revenue budget position.

Performance Management Update – Quarter 4 of 2022/23

Mrs Beverley Poulter, Senior Manager Corporate Strategy, Strategy and Corporate Affairs submitted a report (copy circulated) providing the Committee with the Corporate Performance Report for Quarter 4 of 2022/23.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Ms Poulter advised that during the work programme development sessions, Members had requested that they were able to take a deep dive into one of the key themes of the report each time it appeared as an agenda item. The Key Theme for this evening's meeting was Healthy Smart City. Mr Cummings had emailed members to invite the submission of written questions in advance. This would allow for full

answers to be provided at the meeting without the need for the presenting officer to seek information from the appropriate Directorates and report back afterwards.

To this end Ms Julie Parker-Walton, Ms Julie Lynn and Mr Graham King had been invited to attend the meeting to address questions from Members in relation to the theme of Healthy City.

Councillor Walton referred to page 48, paragraph 2 regarding childhood obesity and asked, what percentage of Year 6 pupils did the 4,508 pupils who had completed the Change for Life Programme represent? Also, were there any plans for the pupils assessed as overweight who were not eligible for specialist interventions such as Change for Life? In reply, Ms Parker-Walton advised that unfortunately with regard to the first question, that data was not collected for year 6 children. With regard to the second question, she confirmed that all children who had been identified as overweight were eligible for the Change for Life programme. Councillor Hartnack added that the support provided by the School Nurses Service was excellent and he hoped that this would give the Committee a degree of reassurance. He asked that given obesity was measured at year 6, what was done as children moved through secondary school to drive down obesity levels? Ms Parker-Walton replied that continued support programmes would be provided by the School Nurses Service and activities led by the Council's Public Health Team.

In response to an observation made by Councillor Hartnack, Ms Parker-Walton confirmed that data in respect of 14 year olds would be helpful however no obesity data was collected nationally for secondary school pupils.

In response to enquiries from Councillor Curtis, Ms Parker-Walton confirmed that Public Health's 0-19 Service worked hand in hand with the Together for Children (TfC) staff, in particular with the Prevention Leads and that a member of staff from the Public Health Team was seconded to work within TfC.

Councillor Mullen referred to Planning Policy VC4 (managing the location/number of and access to unhealthy eating outlets) and asked if there was any evidence that it had worked? Ms Parker-Walton replied that challenges remained in implementing the policy, but it was working. She could seek details of applications refused in line with the Policy if Councillor Mullen required. In response to a supplementary question as to whether it could be evidenced that the policy had specifically resulted in reduced levels of obesity, Ms Parker-Walton advised that it would be difficult to disaggregate as the policy was one of a number of interventions being employed to target obesity.

Councillor Hartnack asked if it was possible to check if the figures for obesity were worse in certain schools, for example those in more deprived areas. Ms Parker Walton replied that she would take the question back however there was undoubtably a correlation between poor health outcomes and areas of multiple deprivation.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Guy regarding the 7.5% decrease in results for the Early Years Foundation Stage Good Level of Development, and the strategy of mitigations, Ms Parker-Walton advised that she would check with TfC and report back.

In response to an enquiry from the Chair, Ms Parker-Walton confirmed that figures in relation to smoking related purely to tobacco and did not include vaping. There were currently no figures available in relation to the extent of vaping locally, however in the UK the percentage of people who vaped was 8.3%. Of that figure, 57% were ex smokers. Nationally 7.6% of young people between the ages of 11 and 17 used vapes.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Hartnack, Ms Parker Walton confirmed that Public Health worked in tandem with Trading Standards to undertake vaping test purchases.

Councillor Morrissey asked if Public Health were seeking to reduce vaping in the same way it looked to reduce smoking. The Committee was informed that reducing smoking was the priority. Studies currently showed that vaping was 95% safer than smoking although the long term effects were yet to be understood. For people that smoked, vaping was undoubtedly a better option. The service did provide support for people looking to stop vaping however it did not involve the supply of any physical products unlike smokers who could be eligible for Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) products.

Councillor Curtis suggested that when it came to school children, equal concentration should be given to reducing both smoking and vaping. Ms Parker Walton replied that a great deal of discussion had been undertaken at a regional level around the support that could be provided for schools and various campaigns had been undertaken. The fact remained that the most effective way to stop young people from smoking and vaping was in supporting their parents not to smoke.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Guy regarding the source of the data used by the service in respect of young people, Ms Parker-Walton advised that one of the most important was the Health Related Behaviours in Schools Survey which provided good, robust, reliable data.

Councillor Hartnack referred to the figure of 2,146 place enforcement activities completed in Q4 and asked to receive a breakdown of the figure, as in his experience it appeared that enforcement activity was undertaken in respect of dogs on beaches but not in relation to alcohol and litter.

Councillor Walton referred to page 50 of the agenda papers which detailed a reduction in the number of Sunderland residents aged 65+ requiring an emergency hospital admission as the result of a fall and asked if a reason had been identified. Mr King replied that for the last 18 months his service had employed a Falls Coordinator who was analysing the hospital data regarding the causes of the falls in an attempt to develop preventative measures. It was likely that this work had impacted on the figure however it would require another 6 months before any significant conclusions could be drawn.

The Chair noted that it was good to see that the Suicide Prevention Training had been commissioned for a further 4 years and asked who could access it and how would it be advertised/promoted? Ms Parker Walton replied that anyone who is a resident of Sunderland or employed by an organisation in the city could take the training. She confirmed that people spoke very positively about the experience. Councillor Thornton advised that she had completed the free 'Life Worth Living'

training and recommended it to the Committee. Ms Parker-Walton confirmed that she would share a link to the training for the Committee.

The Chair asked what was the Omega Healthy Eating and Growing Programme and how did it support weight management? Ms Parker-Walton replied that the programme was provided by TfC rather than Public Health and that she would seek an answer and report back.

There being no further questions in relation to the Healthy City theme, the Chair thanked Ms Parker-Walton, Ms Lynn and Mr King for their attendance.

At the invitation of the Chair, Mrs Poulter took the Committee through the summary of the remaining two key themes of Dynamic City, and Vibrant City highlighting commitments, key achievements and progress made for each key theme, as well as performance against the additional Council indicators for good organisational health, strong financial management, productive and innovative working and a Council ready for the future.

The Committee raised a number of questions under each of the key themes as follows:-

Dynamic Smart City

Councillor Mullen drew the Committee's attention to the worryingly low percentage of young people in Sunderland achieving successful examination results in Maths and English and asked if reasons for this had been identified and interventions devised to address the issue? Mrs Poulter advised that she would take the question away and report back.

Councillor Morrissey referred to the figures regarding the instances of access to public wifi detailed on page 40 and asked if there was a reason for the decline from the highpoint of 11,500 in August 2022 to the low of 3,700 in March 2023. Mrs Poulter replied that it was likely to be a reflection of a seasonal trend where there were more people out and about accessing public wifi in August compared to the winter months. As previously reported there had also been a recalibration of the figures relating to broadband access following a finding that the initial number on which the figures were based was inaccurate.

Councillor Morrissey asked if there were any estimates of what the actual previous figures were prior to the recalibration, what were the estimates for usage during the forthcoming year, were people asked for reasons why they chose not to access the public wifi and did the Council look at comparative data from other local authorities?

Mrs Poulter confirmed that targets were set in terms of both roll out and usage and that she would find out what these were and report back. In response to a further enquiry from Councillor Morrissey, Mrs Poulter advised that the purpose of Sunderland's smart city infrastructure was to enable people to use whatever wifi package they had purchased to the best of its functionality.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Curtis regarding how the free wifi was promoted, Mrs Poulter advised that there had been a significant campaign around it including a recent targeted residents communication. In answer to a supplementary

question from Councillor Curtis, Mrs Poulter confirmed that the roll out would include shopping centres and the Coalfield area of the city.

Councillor Thornton welcomed how aspirational Sunderland was as a city in aiming to deliver this connectivity to its residents.

Councillor Guy referred to the Council's commitment to become carbon neutral and asked if the current level of progress indicated that the Council was on track to reach its target? Mrs Poulter replied that there was a robust action plan in place around the matter not only in respect of the Council but also the wider city partnership and that she would provide a link to the plan for the Committee's information. As a supplementary question, Councillor Guy asked if future Performance reports could also include reference to the progress made towards reaching the carbon neutral target.

With regard to the Yard Business Hub, the Chair asked how was it performing and what were the current occupancy rates? Mrs Poulter replied that she would seek an answer and report back.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Leonard, Mrs Poulter confirmed that she would report back on whether the figure of 207 privately rented properties inspected, included houses in multiple occupation.

Vibrant City

Mrs Poulter confirmed that she would seek answers in respect of the following questions from the members indicated:-

Councillor Mullen – Will the loss of the airshow and the impending closure of the glass centre, increase the downward trend in relation to the figures for visitor numbers and overall spend?

Councillor Mullen – Did figures in relation to Foodbanks include figures for 'the bread and butter thing'?

Councillor Mullen – Would Sunderland Culture's funding from the Arts Council reduce as a consequence of the Glass Centre no longer producing glass?

Councillor Hartnack – What was the sample size used to determine the figure of 94% in relation to Residents' Feelings of Safety?

Councillor Morrissey – Did the figures for Museums and Art Centre Visitors include visitors to the Glass Centre?

There being no further questions or comments, Mrs Poulter advised that the theme of Organisational Health would be the subject of the deep dive when the performance report was next presented to the Committee.

Councillor Hartnack placed on record that the issue of staff sickness absence needed to be looked at (including the sanctions available), as an average of 15 days was not acceptable. Councillor Mullen stated that he had questions regarding investigations undertaken by outside agencies in relation to staff absences that were not related to sickness.

The Chair having thanked Mrs Poulter for her attendance, it was:-

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2023/24

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) which briefed members on the developed of the Committee's work programme for the municipal year 2023/24 and appended a copy of the draft programme for Members' consideration.

(for copy report – see original minutes)

Councillor Mullen referred to the inclusion of Land Acquisitions and Disposals as a single issue item on the work programme and suggested that the matter would be better addressed as the subject of a task and finish group. He explained that his interest lay not in specific cases but in being able to scrutinise the wider organisational aspects of the issue including the culture behind the procurement process and its transparency.

Discussion ensued on the potential Task and Finish Group topics and the Chair indicated that her preference would be for 'The Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce'.

Upon being put to the vote, 9 Members voted in favour of 'The Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce' and 2 Members voted in favour of 'Land Acquisitions and Disposals'.

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that he would carry out a draft scoping exercise on the topic which he would then bring back to the Committee.

Councillor Mullen asked if Mr Cummings could also undertake a scoping exercise in respect of the Land Acquisitions and Disposals topic. Mr Cummings replied that he would only look to do so once the first Task and Finish Group had completed its review. He cautioned however that the work of the Task and Finish Group was time consuming and past experience indicated it was unlikely that the Committee would be able to undertake more than one Task and Finish Group study in any one Municipal Year.

5. RESOLVED that the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee draft work programme for 2023/24 be approved and that emerging issues be incorporated as and when they arise throughout the forthcoming year.

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 14th June 2023.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Consideration having been given to the report, it was :-

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

The Chairman then closed the meeting, having thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) T. DODDS,
Chairman.