

At a meeting of the SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE held in the CIVIC CENTRE, SUNDERLAND on THURSDAY 11th NOVEMBER, 2021 at 5.30 p.m.

Present:-

Councillor D.E. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Butler, Hartnack, Mann, Mullen, P. Smith and D. Snowdon

Also in attendance:-

Mr Chris Binding, Local Democracy Reporter

Ms Jemma Burdis, Senior Internal Communications Officer, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services

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

Mrs Christine Tilley, Community Governance Services Team Leader, Law and Governance, Corporate Services Directorate

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and requested that they wear face coverings to reduce the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Doyle, Heron, Hodson, D. MacKnight, N. MacKnight and O'Brien.

Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 14th October, 2021

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 14th October, 2021 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest made.

Internal Communications

The Assistant Director of Corporate Affairs submitted a report and presentation (copies circulated) providing the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee with an overview of the internal communication methods of the City Council.

(For copy reports – see original minutes).

Ms Jemma Burdis, Senior Internal Communications Officer, Corporate Services Directorate provide the Committee with a presentation detailing the methods of communication with staff which included email, the communicator app, Teams, Monthly Staff Newsletters, Manager's Briefing, Yammer and the Hub and provided details of how they were used and the numbers of staff accessing the information.

Councillor Mullen commented that internal communications had clearly been very important throughout lockdown and due to staff working from home. He was concerned however, about those such as binmen who did not have access to email and enquired whether there were any plans to address this issue.

Ms Burdis confirmed that as part of the intranet development there were plans to give frontline workers email. She advised that currently they received newsletters from Internal Communications which included all relevant information. There were 400 staff engaged at the moment and they were looking to make sure frontline workers had access to everything other workers did.

In response to the Chair, Ms Burdis confirmed that they were looking to find ways of engaging with staff to improve access, upskill people who did not have the IT skills as Digital Poverty did not stop because people worked for the Council.

Councillor Butler commented positively on the Live Events which provided access to the Chief Executive, encouraged involvement and empowerment of the workforce.

Councillor Hartnack commented that he agreed with the comments made by Councillors Mullen and Butler and added that he felt that it was vital that staff were kept informed and that it enhanced good service. He asked whether there was a way of measuring this with a link to what service they were providing and with Yammer etc., whether there were measurable cost savings linked to the work done and if so, what the savings were being used for.

Ms Burdis advised that there were limited cost savings. They were currently working with HR on a Staff Survey and an action plan to support different areas which might impact on service.

Mr Jon Ritchie, Executive Director of Corporate Services added that IT was important as was the need to buy the appropriate licences and that the use of IT had been accelerated due to COVID. Cyber security was also very important and to ensure that the Council's systems were as protected as possible and that they were doing everything possible to make sure the Council's data and that of its residents were kept safe.

Councillor D. Snowden asked with reference to COP21, how 'green' the Council's communications were.

Ms Burdis responded by saying that moving away from email was saving on carbon emissions. Instant messages on Teams were much more cost effective. They had not been doing any printing as they had not been working in the office and they intended to reinforce behaviours such as these when they moved to City Hall. They were working with the Carbon Team, looking at the Council's footprint and targets for reduction.

Councillor P. Smith enquired how many staff would be working from home and not in the City Hall and commented that working from home did not necessarily suit young people.

Mr Ritchie reported that only a proportion of the Council's staff would be working at City Hall and that it had been built under the premise of 5 desks for 10 members of staff. The majority of staff would come in for a meeting and leave afterwards. It was likely there would be half of the Team in at any one time and it would be a case of seeing how things go. The Council was following the line a lot of companies had been doing. Staff were used to working from home due to COVID. However, the Council was not mandating anyone to work from home if it didn't suit them.

Councillor Smith asked what would happen if it didn't work.

Mr Ritchie added that the Council had a laptop replacement budget as they only lasted 5-10 years. There were new cables in the ground. Microsoft had invested in backup in alternative parts of the city. Core critical services would continue together with the ability to reach the most vulnerable and Business Continuity Plans were in place.

Councillor Hartnack asked in relation to the Customer Service Network, whether it was practical for the customer and commented that some people might not want to work from home. He enquired whether employee assessments for those working from home had been carried out so as the Council did not have to deal with personal injury claims down the line.

Mr Ritchie advised that the Customer Service Network had been in the office at first. Some of the staff had been using their personal mobiles as it took some time to move the system across so that they were able to work from home. Telecare and some others had remained on site. Agile working was not just in relation to where you were working but also the times staff were working. With regards to Display Screen Equipment (DSE) Assessments, the onus was on people to do it themselves. Staff were given the opportunity to take office chairs, fans, lights and desks were all re-cycled and help was given with transportation where needed. Arrangements would be made for staff to drop in to have electrical equipment PAT tested.

The Chair advised that the link to Yammer would be re-sent to Councillors to encourage their engagement and she thanked Ms Burdis for her presentation and it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the presentation and information brought out during the discussion be received and noted.

Work Programme 2021/22

The Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) attaching, for Members' information, the thematic Scrutiny Committee work programmes for 2020/21 and providing an opportunity to review the Committee's own work programme for 2020/21.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

Mr Nigel Cummings, Scrutiny Officer advised that a report on the City Plan would be submitted to the next meeting and a workshop on Teams would be held on the City Plan on 30th November.

The Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee would receive an update on Environmental Services at its meeting on 7th December and Members of this Committee were invited to attend.

Full consideration having been given to the report it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the above information, 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 18th October, 2021.

(For copy report – see original minutes.)

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

Councillor P. Smith commented on the time the meeting was held, noting that the agenda did not have many items which she thought had resulted in the poor attendance of Members.

The Chair advised that Councillor Smith's comments would be taken on board and advised that it had been thought that it might have been possible to add other items to the agenda but unfortunately nothing had been brought forward.

The Chair closed the meeting and thanked everyone for their attendance.

(Signed) D. E. SNOWDON,
Chairman.