

Executive Scrutiny Committee

A meeting of Executive Scrutiny Committee was held on Tuesday, 22nd October, 2013.

Present: Cllr Ken Lupton(Chairman), Cllr Julia Cherrett, Cllr Carol Clark, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr Robert Gibson, Cllr Eileen Johnson, Cllr Jean Kirby, Cllr Terry Laing, Cllr Maurice Perry, Cllr Mick Stoker, Cllr Mrs Mary Womphrey

Officers: Richard Pundford(DNS), Lesley King, Debbie Hurwood, Esme Hall(RES), Judith Trainer, Sarah Whaley(LD)

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Cllr Mrs Jean O'Donnell

1 Evacuation Procedure

The Evacuation Procedure was noted.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes from the meeting which was held on the 30th July 2013.

The Chair signed the minutes as a correct record.

4 Draft Minutes from the meeting which was held on the 24th September 2013.

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of the meeting which was held on the 24th September 2013.

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

5 Council Tax Charges for Empty Dwellings

Members had asked that a progress report in relation to Council Tax Charges for Empty Dwellings be brought back to the Committee following the first 6 months operating the new charges in terms of feedback from Council Tax payers, collection and performance and impact on workload.

The Head of Customer Services and Taxation gave Members a brief overview of the report and highlighted the main issues as follows:

- Work load for the Taxation team had increased following implementation of the changes. There had been a number of unhappy clients, and in response, officers had explained the rationale behind the decision in relation to the change to Council Tax Charges

- An increase in workload had also been experienced due to the number of appeals/tribunals.

- The volume of calls was reducing although new complaints/disputes remained complex and time consuming.
- Referrals to the Councils Empty Homes Team were bringing empty properties back into use
- Council Tax records indicated that the number of empty dwellings had reduced by 170+

Members went on to discuss the issue in relation to properties that became empty due to flood damage and the problems this created for families in financial hardship and experiencing difficulties in securing insurance.

The Committee requested that a further report come back to a future meeting of the Executive Scrutiny Committee on the progress of flood alleviation measures since the 2012 flooding incidents.

AGREED that:

- 1) the report be noted
- 2) an update report detailing the progress of flood alleviation measures be presented to Executive Scrutiny Committee in January.

6 Sub Regional Growth Strategy

The Head Regeneration and Economic Development gave the Committee a brief overview of the Sub Regional Growth Strategy. The main issues discussed were as follows:

- In relation to the growth strategy, £173 million of European growth funds had already been secured by 5 neighbouring authorities in the Tees Valley over 5 years. The programme was currently out for consultation on Tees Valley Unlimited's website. Although some of the European funding had been allocated as detailed above, the Committee heard that there was more to be bid for by a whole host of organisations ranging from 3rd Sector businesses to local authorities.
- City Deal proposals were now due end November

AGREED that the report be noted.

7 Forward Plan

Members were provided with the statutory forward plan for the 1st November 2013 to the 28th February 2014

The Chairman asked members to consider whether some items which appeared on the Councils' internal draft forward plan should be presented to the Executive Scrutiny Committee in order to identify any issues which may benefit from scrutiny prior to submission to Cabinet

Members agreed that a discussion take place with the Leader of the Council to

determine the best course of action.

AGREED that the Chairman approach the Leader of the Council to discuss further.

8 Report on Chairs Updates

Members were provided with an update from each of the Select Committee's Chairman.

The main issues discussed were as follows:

The Chairman of Corporate and Social Inclusion Select Committee explained that the North East Purchasing Organisation (NEPO) review had been delayed until the 22nd October 2013 and a report would be presented to the Select Committee in November 2013.

In relation to the Review of Street Café Furniture and A Board Advertising, the committee had identified that the RNIB and Blind Voice would be used to gather evidence. To enable a more balanced view it was suggested that the Committee consider bringing traders and Blind Voice together to discuss the issues.

The Vice Chairman of the Arts Leisure and Culture Select Committee informed Members that the last meeting received evidence from representatives of the Stockton & District Advice & Information Service (SDAIS) and catalyst. Anonymous case studies were to be presented at a future meeting.

The Chairman of Housing and Community Safety Select Committee highlighted that concern had been raised during the Review of Welfare Reform and Financial Inclusion in relation to whether there should be a policy within Stockton Borough Council regarding food banks. It was suggested that improvements could be made in particular working more closely with partnerships, introducing collection points for food parcels within Stockton Borough Council's own buildings.

The Chairman of the Children and Young People Select Committee informed Members that since the last meeting a visit had taken place to Stockton Sixth Form and undertaken several informal visits to local businesses.

AGREED that the information be noted.

9 Members' Policy Briefings - Discussion Item

The Committee discussed low attendance at Members' Policy Briefings. Members commented that those who worked full time or had families to care for needed to prioritise which meetings were most important. It was suggested that scheduling the policy briefing ahead of a Council meeting may encourage a higher attendance. The Head of Policy and Performance explained that this could impact on the attendance of outside speakers which were key to the briefings and invitations to external speakers had already been extended for the next policy briefing.

AGREED that the Head of Policy and Performance identify a suitable Policy

Briefing which could be re-scheduled to take place prior to a Council meeting to trial whether this would encourage a higher attendance.