

North East Regional Joint Scrutiny Member/Officer Network

26 March 2021

MS Teams

Present:

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| Cllr Rob Crute | Chair, Durham County Council |
| Cllr Anne-Marie Curry Cllr Scott Durham | Darlington Council |
| Cllr Alison Batey Tom Gorman Stephen Gwilym Marie Smith Marion Rucker Clare Luery | Durham County Council |
| Cllr Maria Hall Angela Frisby | Gateshead Council |
| Angela Armstrong Joan Stevens | Hartlepool Council |
| Cllr Janet Thompson Cllr Alma Hellaoui Caroline Breheny | Middlesbrough Council |
| Cllr Lara Ellis Cllr Wendy Taylor Janet Howard | Newcastle City Council |
| Cllr Sandra Graham Joanne Holmes | North Tyneside Council |
| Cllr Gregah Roughead Cllr Brian Gallacher Sean Nicholson | Northumberland County Council |
| Alison Pearson David Boville | Redcar & Cleveland Council |
| Cllr Geraldine Kilgour Paul Baldasera | South Tyneside Council; |
| Cllr Pauline Beall Cllr Carol Clark Cllr Clare Gamble Cllr Marilyn Surtees Cllr Sylvia Walmsley Cllr Evaline Cunningham | Stockton Council |

Cllr Maurice Perry
Gary Woods
Rebecca Saunders-Thompson

Sunderland City Council

Cllr Doris MacKnight
Nigel Cummings

NECA

Gavin Armstrong

Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

Ed Hammond
Apologies:

Cllr Mick Stoker

Cleveland FRA

Cllr Jamie Bartch
Alison Hill
Hannah Fay

Darlington Council

Jenny Haworth

Durham County Council

Cllr Bernadette Oliphant
Cllr Stuart Green

Gateshead Council

Cllr Gerard Hall
Cllr Lesley Hamilton

Hartlepool Council

Cllr Colin Ferguson
Cllr Nick Cott
Cllr Jane Byrne
Cllr Paula Holland
Cllr Teresa Cairns
Cllr Felicity Mendelson
Karen Christon

Newcastle City Council

Cllr Liz Dunn
Cllr Susan Dungworth
Cllr Margaret Hall
Cllr Paula Holland
Cllr Linda Wright
Cllr Peter Earley
Liz Kerr

North of Tyne CA

Cllr Linda Bell
Cllr Karen Cark
Yvonne Harrison

North Tyneside Council

Cllr Lesley Rickerby
Cllr Mark Swinburne
Jackie Roll

Northumberland County Council

1. Welcome

Cllr Rob Crute welcomed everyone to the Regional Member/Officer Scrutiny meeting being held on Teams.

2. Apologies for Absence

As listed above.

3. Minutes of Last Meeting – 12 January 2018

TG updated on the current position on the emergency COVID-19 regulations which allowed virtual council meetings to take place. Primary legislation would be required to formalise the regulations into law and it was unlikely there would be parliamentary time for this. The expectation was that face-to-face meetings would be resumed from 7 May 2021 onwards. The government were facing a legal challenge over the interpretation of the current legislation and it was expected the matter would be heard in the High Court prior to 7 May 2021.

It was noted that any change to the emergency regulations would not affect the regional scrutiny network as it was not a formal committee meeting.

Cllr Taylor commented she thought the expected return to in person meetings was a short-sighted decision which was unfair on the unvaccinated and those dependent on public transport. She added that councils should be able to make a choice about whether they hold in person or remote meetings. Cllr Crute referred to the legal requirement to hold the first council meeting within 21 days of the election and the difficulties that may be experienced in making the necessary arrangements.

4. Housing Update

Marie Smith and Marion Rucker (DCC) gave a comprehensive presentation on housing issues which covered an overview of Housing Solutions, the regional Rough Sleeper Initiative, poverty and homelessness, the impact and response to COVID-19 and domestic abuse. The bulk of the work for the team was around homelessness and threatened homelessness.

The North East region has received £3.5m from the Rough Sleeper Initiative in the past two years. There are two regional coordinators to support local authorities. Each local authority has a rough sleeper action group which meets every two weeks to discuss individuals in their area. All those who are rough sleeping are now known to their respective authority. The RSI has funded outreach workers and substance misuse workers who work on the streets to reduce harm and prosecutions. Prisons release

prisoners twenty four hours a day and many do not know where to go. Working closely with the discharge desk in the prisons has led to a massive reduction in the numbers of ex-prisoners rough sleeping and securing them a safe place to stay. A bid has been submitted recently for the current year to build on the work undertaken so far.

Everyone In, the government initiative for rough sleepers through the pandemic has been successful in helping homeless people who are more vulnerable and who often have existing health conditions to find accommodation. Weekly meetings with staff from the MHCLG have taken place and helped the initiative to work well in the region. It was confirmed that in DCC had helped 122 rough sleepers within the Everybody In period up to 1 February 2021. Only one bed and breakfast facility had been required.

Poverty and the link to homelessness was discussed. The main reason for homelessness was the ending of a shorthold tenancy and this was a national issue. Over 50% of cases cited mental health problems as being an issue. It was noted there had been a slight decrease in the number of presentations and this appeared to be as a result of the government's eviction ban which had been extended until May 2021. Information was also given on the Stop b4u Serve which had been brought in to assist landlords deal with the eviction embargo.

An update on the Domestic Abuse Bill was given as part of the presentation along with statistics relating to County Durham and the service offer from Housing Solutions. The offer is currently under review in advance of new duties arising from the Domestic Abuse Bill. The service has a dedicated housing worker for dealing with domestic abuse.

Cllr Kilgour thanked officers for an excellent report and referred to substance misuse workers. It was confirmed that they continued to work with rough sleepers once they were housed. A further tranche of funding from the government was awaited for substance misuse work.

Cllr MacKnight asked about owner occupiers and whether they received assistance from the team. It was confirmed that help was available, ie they were signposted to the Employability team and assistance was available for those that fell behind with Council Tax.

Cllr Taylor welcomed the ongoing support for the homeless. Marion Rucker advised that the authority was under a duty to give housing assistance to everybody albeit that might be signposting help for completing forms. Those in priority need are those that are more vulnerable will receive a continuation of support.

Tom Gorman suggested that there may be scope for specialist officers to attend the regional scrutiny meetings to give more in-depth information. Reference was made to the rough sleeping snapshot which is held annually. A count of homeless in hot spots is made and verified by Homeless Link. It was noted that any count of homeless people did not necessarily include those that are sofa surfing and put up by family and friends.

Cllr Curry recognised that there might be a number of people living rough that did not want to be housed and indicated there were three in Darlington. It was expected that those entrenched rough sleepers were expected to return during the summer months.

Cllr Walmsley asked whether the homeless were included in the census? It was confirmed that names of bed and breakfast locations were given to the census team and was combined with the bimonthly count of rough sleepers. Tom Gorman explained rough sleepers were recorded as temporary visitors.

Cllr Gallacher thanked officers for the very informative presentation and commented on the role of parish, town and local councillors in relaying information about the homeless.

Marie Smith explained that there were a number of opportunities for regional colleagues to share best practice and information, eg working with the NHS.

Cllr Crute thanked the officers for their informative presentation and referred to the valuable role of the network in sharing information around initiatives.

5. Terms of Reference – NE Regional Member/Officer Scrutiny Network

Tom Gorman took members through the draft terms of reference for the network which had recently been updated. It was noted there was balance to be made in the number of participants from each authority and it had been suggested this should be up to three or four members. Cllr Crute agreed the membership should be as inclusive as possible. Cllr Taylor suggested that the number of representatives from each authority could be up to a maximum of six.

Cllr Graham referred to the increased attendance at meetings since they had become remote and noted the links with the Combined Authorities and crosscutting issues. Cllr Kilgour agreed that remote meetings had worked well and added that specialist officers should be invited if meetings are planned along a theme such as with housing.

It was agreed that remote meetings encouraged inclusiveness and they should be the primary means of holding meetings although it was recognised that meetings held in person gave opportunities for networking. Membership from each authority would be up to four members.

6. Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) – update on CfGS and Health Scrutiny

Ed Hammond (CfGS) gave an update on the Health White Paper which was issued recently. He touched on the lack of detail on health scrutiny powers which he found concerning. The removal of the power of local government to make referrals to the Secretary of State was highlighted. The Secretary of State will have the power to intervene whenever required but the local accountability element had seemingly been removed.

The establishment and development of the ICSs would lead to a wave of reconfigurations and it was not clear how this would be undertaken. There was an assumption that health scrutiny would take place at a system level rather than at a place level and there was concern at how that would be effective. Changes to the current longstanding arrangements had provoked concern.

Ed Hammond indicated he was having conversations with the Bill team around the content and hoped to get more clarity and certainty on the future of health scrutiny. He suggested there would be a mini webinar for members to express their views directly to the Bill team. No date had been agreed for this currently.

Cllr Taylor expressed her concerns around the planned changes to health scrutiny and Cllr Hellaoui shared her concerns. She indicated that a referral had been made to the Secretary of State on respite care and had led to a successful outcome. She was concerned that this process was to be removed. Cllr Kilgour also expressed support for the retention of the right of referral to the Secretary of State.

Stephen Gwilym confirmed that representations were made by the two regional health overview and scrutiny committees on the contents of the White Paper including on the power of referral and transparency.

Cllr Taylor stated she had been unaware of the removal of the power of referral and had huge concerns over the role of the Secretary of State. She would be raising these issues further.

7. Future Items/Work Programme

TG presented a list of suggested topics for a work programme. In brief these were:

- Housing
- Transport
- Skills and employability
- Poverty – including the impact of COVID-19
- Climate Change
- High streets
- Transformation
- Arson and deliberate fires
- Mental Health - adults and children
- Waste
- Health

It was suggested that members could be surveyed to determine priorities for the network. TG undertook to arrange this.

8. Any Other Business

None.