

Sunderland City Council

At an Extraordinary meeting of SUNDERLAND CITY COUNCIL held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, SUNDERLAND CIVIC CENTRE on WEDNESDAY, 8TH JULY, 2009 at 5.30 p.m.

Present: The Mayor (Councillor D. Richardson) in the Chair
The Deputy Mayor (Councillor T. Martin)

Councillors	Allan	E. Gibson	Shattock	Walker
	Ball	P. Gibson	D. Smith	J. Walton
	Bell	Gofton	M. Smith	L. Walton
	Blackburn	G. Hall	P. Smith	Wares
	Charlton	Kelly	Snowdon	P. Watson
	Copeland	Leadbitter	Speding	S. Watson
	I. Cuthbert	Paul Maddison	Stephenson	Whalen
	M. Dixon	Peter Maddison	Symonds	A. Wilson
	P. Dixon	Miller	Tate	D. Wilson
	Errington	Morrissey	Timmins	A. Wright
	Fletcher	Old	Trueman	N. Wright
	M. Forbes	Oliver	Vardy	T. Wright
	Francis	Rolph	Wakefield	

Also Present:

Dave Smith	Chief Executive
Phil Barrett	Sunderland City Council
Keith Beardmore	Sunderland City Council
Ken Bremner	City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Trust
Alan Caddick	Sunderland City Council
Nonnie Crawford	Sunderland TPCT
Paul Dobson	Sunderland City Council
Stuart Douglass	Safer Communities
Chris Lowther	Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service
Jessica May	Sunderland Partnership
Chris McCarthy	Sunderland City Council
Keith Moore	Sunderland City Council
Chief Superintendent Dave Pryer	Northumbria Police
Sarah Reed	Sunderland City Council
June Robinson	Voluntary and Community Sector Network
Tom Smyth	Government Office for NE
Sue Stanhope	Sunderland City Council
Stephen Taylor	Sunderland Partnership
Vince Taylor	Sunderland City Council
Mick Thurlbeck	North East Chamber of Commerce
David Walker	Sunderland ARC
Teresa Cullen	IDeA
Cheryl Flack	IDeA

Kevin Dykes	IDeA
Sue Oppenheimer	IDeA
Andrew Carton	Connexions
Catherine Auld	Sunderland City Council
Bob Rayner	Sunderland City Council
Ian Porter	Gentoo
Raj Singh	Sunderland City Council
Mike Foster	Sunderland City Council
Lee Stoddart	Sunderland City Council
Kate Cuthbert	Sunderland City Council
Anna Harrison	Sunderland City Council
S. Palonbek	GWK
B. Glasster	Audit Commission
S. Buckler	Sunderland City Council
David Coulbeck	G & ASS

Notice

The Notice convening the meeting was taken as read.

Welcome by the Mayor

The Mayor, Councillor D. Richardson, welcomed those present to the City Council's Annual State of the City Debate and advised that this followed from the recent State of the City Event and was the first type of event at which Partners in the Local Strategic Partnership were invited, along with Senior Officers within the Council, to join with Members in the debate. In briefly outlining the Programme for the debate, he advised that there would be some presentations followed by an hour and ten minutes of "question time" debate.

Declarations of Interest

The following Councillor declared a personal interest in the following item on the agenda for the reasons indicated:-

Overview of Key Priorities	Councillor Gofton	Board Member of University of Sunderland
		City of Sunderland College
		Pennywell Academy 360
		Early Years and Childcare Strategic Partnership

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors F. Anderson, Arnott, D. Forbes, T. Foster, A. Hall, Heron, L. Martin, Scaplehorn, Stewart and Tye.

Introduction

Councillor P. Watson, Leader of the Council

The Leader of the Council delivered an Introductory Speech and explained that the debate followed on from the State of the City Event that had been held a few weeks earlier at Crowtree Leisure Centre. He said the current event was about listening to people's views on how they think the Council and Partners were doing and what they could do in the future. The event focused on three key areas, namely improving the economy and regeneration of the City, improving the health of local people and keeping the City safe.

He stated that, in his view, communities in Sunderland had a very strong sense of belonging to their local area and this had increased recently. The Council needed to ensure that in challenging times – like the present, in terms of economy – communities were outward looking and welcomed new and different opportunities. The challenge for the Council therefore, was to balance being more responsive to communities' differing needs and aspirations, while fostering a sense of people belonging to 'Sunderland the City' rather than to only one small neighbourhood.

He maintained that he was personally committed and he knew his fellow Members and Officers, throughout the Council, shared this commitment, to ensure that the services they delivered and the support provided in future, matched the needs and aspirations of the local people. They were further committed to ensuring that this was done in ways that were fair and inclusive, and that, irrespective of background, age, faith, race or gender, everyone in Sunderland had access to the services and opportunities they wanted and needed.

To do this, representatives of the Council intended to work even more closely with Partners and local people and they were putting a variety of measures in place to ensure that they engaged effectively with them and better understand their requirements. The work done to update the Council's Area Committees was a good example of how they were moving closer to local communities and they would do more in the future. The Council was moving beyond consultation to real engagement and taking steps to ensure that all of the different communities and groups of people had some influence over decisions that were made in the City.

The Leader acknowledged that he and colleagues must become more sophisticated in their understanding of the City's most disadvantaged and excluded communities and really challenge themselves to think about – and break down – the barriers that people such as carers and single parents can face when it came to being involved in City-life and influencing services and decisions.

He went on to say, Partnerships played a critical role in continuing to improve many of the things that residents told them were most important and much of what had been achieved already would not have happened without the input, collaboration and support of valued partners.

Even though there were still significant challenges facing the City, Sunderland was a much stronger City now than in the 1980's and 90's. By any measure Sunderland was a better place to live.

Councillor P. Watson closed by saying he was keen to go further and deliver more of what people ask for by:-

- building a stronger local economy;
- attracting more jobs into the City;
- regenerating the City centre;
- closing the health inequalities gap;
- ensuring people feel safe;
- improving educational achievement for children and young people;
- providing greater housing availability and choice; and
- improved quality of life in neighbourhoods.

Setting the Scene, Dave Smith, Chief Executive

Dave Smith opened by reminding those present that the British economy, in line with the global economy, officially entered recession after two consecutive quarters of negative growth in January 2009. At this stage in the recession it was clear that the adverse impact had been greatest in the traditional industrial communities in the North of England, than in the financial sector and the south east.

From a Sunderland perspective, downward trends in the retail, construction and manufacturing sectors, over the previous nine months, had resulted in a number of redundancies throughout the City. As a result, the number of benefit claimants in the City had doubled between April 2008 and April 2009.

He explained that the Council had responded to this by putting in place a series of actions to reduce the impact of the downturn on local people and businesses. A few examples of what had already achieved with partners were:-

- Sunderland Business Club and the North East Chamber of Commerce had organised advice and information sessions for businesses in the City;

- Packages of support had been delivered to key employers in the City who had faced difficulties as a result of the downturn. For example the Rapid Response Team made up of the Council, ONE NorthEast, JobCentre Plus, amongst others;
- The Council had also worked with JobCentre Plus and the Tax Credit Office to help get people quickly on and off benefits;
- A number of initiatives that would support people into work or self employment had been progressed as part of the Working Neighbourhoods Strategy. Specialist services that would enable people to deal with health problems and childcare needs as well as debt problems;
- A contract had been awarded to a group of local partners, including Gentoo and business support organisations to encourage and support people into self employment. This had become fully operational the previous week.
- The Council and Gentoo were working with the Housing and Communities Agency to stimulate house building in the City by bringing forward housing development schemes under the HCA's 'Kick Start' initiative;
- Adults were being helped to further develop their skills through a variety of initiatives, using funding partly from the Learning and Skills Council.
- Young people who were at risk of leaving school without a clear routeway into work, training or further education were being supported by the Engagement Support and Prevention Project which was supported by all Partners in the 14-19 Partnership;
- Voluntary and community sector organisations provided advice services within local community settings;
- The Council was continuing to pursue strategic regeneration schemes in partnership with the ARC; and
- Finally, Sunderland had seized the opportunities to really work in partnership to help its communities through two specific projects which have been initiated by the Government in recent months.

Overview of the Key Priorities by Cabinet Members

Councillor Charlton began by introducing himself as Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Prosperity. He explained that Sunderland had led the way in attracting some of the region's biggest names and in the last five years had attracted around 7,500 new jobs through inward investment. To prepare young people for this changing world of work, new diplomas were being rolled out in Sunderland schools. Councillor Charlton went on to discuss the increase in the number of people on out-of-work benefits and commented that work must continue to reduce the number and bring many more residents into the workplace.

Councillor Allan, Portfolio Holder for Resources outlined the current regeneration plans and the development of landmark facilities and sites. He acknowledged that the Vaux site was important and that its future should be resolved as soon as possible. The Council had recently agreed new governance arrangements for the Port of Sunderland and should have these in place by the end of the year. Construction of a new Wear road bridge would bring benefits in the form of reduced congestion and improved access to key employment sites. Having recently completed a Housing Market Assessment the Council was now clear on locations of greatest need in relation to housing requirements and affordability.

Councillor N. Wright, Portfolio Holder for Healthy City advised of the key priorities within this area for example the ageing population. Significant achievements had been made within the Primary Care Centres, with three already operating within the City. Wellness Centres had also been introduced to improve the health and well-being of residents across the City. At these Centres lifestyle advice and education was also provided as a preventative measure. Recent statistics showed that 23% of the population still smoked and the number of teenage pregnancies were still above the national average. Endeavours would therefore be made to improve the health of people across the City.

Councillor D. Wilson introduced himself as Portfolio Holder for Safer City and highlighted elements of the Cultural Strategy and its initiatives. Sunderland Safer Partnership was carrying out work in relation to the effects of alcohol and with the collective, was working across the City to reduce underage alcohol and tobacco sales. In addition to this, intervention with pubs and clubs was proving helpful in making the City Centre a Safe Place.

The Portfolio Holder for Learning City, Councillor Gofton, was pleased to report that the educational attainment of children and young people were improving, often at a faster rate than nationally, at all key stages. In addition to this, the Partnership of the schools with the college had been acknowledged locally, regionally and nationally and the Council was one of only six authorities on line to deliver a full range of diplomas. However, not without challenges, the Council would continue to consider narrowing the gap for the most vulnerable children in core subjects a priority. In addition to this, work was still to be done on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile as this was currently below what should be hoped for children starting school.

Councillor Blackburn, Portfolio Holder for Attractive and Inclusive City, advised that the City was currently experiencing an increase in the number of people using buses. To date, an additional £2.4 million of Council funding had contributed to improving the condition of roads and footway. As a result, public satisfaction was consistently high. Despite the concern over the loss of some local bus services in Sunderland, the new Tyne and Wear Bus Strategy provided the opportunity to help restore services. It was acknowledged that transfer between buses of different operators was a significant problem and plans were in hand to introduce smart ticketing technology on bus and metro during the next two years.

The final Cabinet Member to present his key priorities was Councillor Harry Trueman, Portfolio Holder for Sustainable Communities, who advised that the overall satisfaction remained high at 76.8% and many residents felt a real sense of pride to be part of the City. In addition to this, awards for tackling climate change had been won and good progress had been made with Decent Home Standards. The impact of economic recession on community cohesion did however need to be addressed as did the lack of investment in private housing stock together with the high level of long term empty properties.

Debate Chaired by the Mayor

The Mayor then opened the debate which was based on the following theme:-

“In the current economic climate are we, as a City, doing the right things in the right way to optimise the benefits for Sunderland’s Citizens”.

Councillor P. Gibson commenced the debate by clarifying a point raised at the earlier State of the City Event in relation to the Vaux Site and explained that this land was not owned by the Council but was currently owned by Tesco. The Coles Cranes site did however need progressing and moving forward.

David Walker (Sunderland arc) responded by advising that Coles Cranes was owned by a Company based in London and the arc therefore had to compete with the private sector in relation to this site.

With regard to the Vaux Site, those present at the debate were advised that a resolution had almost been reached. Aspirations for this site included good quality bars and restaurants which would, in turn, generate jobs. Much planning work was also being done on the proposed new Iconic Bridge.

Councillor T. Martin commented on problems throughout the City related to anti-social behaviour and welcomed the compulsory registration of landlords whilst Councillor M. Dixon expressed his concern over the number of empty properties and welcomed a discussion with partners on this issue.

Ian Porter (Gentoo) began by agreeing with Councillor Dixon that the issue of social housing should be addressed. Currently there were a number of empty properties across the City. Alan Caddick added that at present there were currently 2,391 empty properties. 390 had been brought back into use the previous year, however much work was still to be done. Proposals were to be considered in the future relating to selective licensing and work with landlords as mentioned by Councillor T. Martin.

Cannon Stephen Taylor, Chair of the Sunderland Partnership in answering the question “Are we doing things in the right way”, expressed his views that collaborative working was the approach to take with a great commitment for working together on commonly agreed targets and yes, we could probably do this better and use the same approach more often.

Councillor J. Kelly agreed and commented upon the Local Area Arrangements in place whereby Area Regeneration Officers worked with Gentoo, the Police, and the Fire Authority etc. Some Partners across the City were not involved and therefore an open invitation was being made requesting that all partners join in with the Council to adopt this way of working.

Various points in relation to health and exercise were raised by Councillor Errington, particularly in relation to education and the importance of health and well-being. As recent statistics showed that the number of Sunderland children who were overweight was higher than the national average, he requested that this be addressed over the forthcoming years.

Superintendent David Pryer went on to discuss crime and disorder and advised that a 39% reduction in crime had been seen, which meant 15,000 less victims of crime. This placed the City's crime rate below the national average which was an extremely pleasing finding.

Councillor Copeland welcomed this information, however she commented on the poor state of Fawcett Street and the general fear of crime around this area due to the metal shutters on shop windows and a poorly lit area making it look unpleasant and unwelcoming. She therefore proposed that the street scene in this area be reconsidered to make it a brighter, friendlier place.

After a brief summing up of the debate by the Leader of the Council, the Mayor closed the debate and thanked Partners for the healthy discussion held.

Upon a motion by the Mayor it was then: -

RESOLVED that the contents of the debate be circulated to all Partner Agencies and the community and that the Leader take note of the comments in proposing the budget for the following year.

(Signed) D. RICHARDSON,
Mayor.