

Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee

It gives me great pleasure to present the annual report of the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee – the second since its establishment in 2009/10. Once again it has proved to be a busy year for the Committee and one in which we have looked to build upon the work and progress made last year.

For our policy review, the Committee agreed to look at the role of culture in supporting sustainable communities, reinforcing community identity and combating social exclusion. This has proved to be an extensive piece of work and has been the primary focus of the Committee during the year. This has involved the Committee examining the cultural offer available to residents of the city across a range of services including libraries; museums and archives; heritage and built heritage; sport development; tourism and leisure attractions.

The Committee has looked at the contribution of culture to a number of key elements that make a sustainable community. For example:-

Economic development – a vibrant local culture attracts investors and a skilled workforce, particularly within the knowledge-based economic sectors. It can also help people to develop new skills and retain graduates. Tourism remains an important part of the economy, while the creative industries are one of their fastest growing sectors.

Community cohesion – cultural activities such as festivals and sports tournaments build local pride and often provide a focus for local volunteering. Cultural facilities often provide neutral meeting ground for groups experiencing conflict.

Education – cultural activities help people to find ways into lifelong learning and to acquire transferable skills. For example, museum and library professionals provide some of the most inventive ways to engage excluded and at risk groups.

Health – cultural activities positively affect health outcomes. Participating in sport directly improves health and combats obesity, while participating in many cultural activities is linked to increased physical and mental wellbeing.

The review has highlighted the breadth and high quality of cultural services on offer within the city – from high profile facilities such as the Aquatic Centre, Empire Theatre, Monkwearmouth Station Museum to work going on at a more grass routes level. Certainly, the review has been a reminder that culture should not be confined to dedicated cultural facilities and the people who use them. Just as important are the less professionalised and less formal cultural activities in which everyone from all communities takes part, in homes, pubs, public spaces, schools, places of worship, and so on.

I feel the review has proved a very worthwhile piece of work to undertake. With the invaluable contribution from my colleagues on the Committee we have highlighted a number of issues and recommendations. Clearly we face difficult times ahead in relation to the future funding and delivery of cultural services within the city. However, I feel that with the enthusiasm and commitment shown by staff and service providers we will as a city do our utmost to continue to provide a cultural offer of the highest quality.

As well as looking at culture, the Committee has also looked at a range of housing issues – reflecting the importance of housing to the people of Sunderland. This has included consideration of the Council's Housing Priorities Plan; a document that will form the basis for future housing investment decisions and the economic viability of affordable housing in the city. We have also been consulted on the draft Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Enforcement Policy and the draft Enabling Independence Delivery Strategy. On both of these documents, as with the Council's Volunteering Strategy we felt that it was important that we as a Committee had the opportunity to be consulted prior to its approval by the Executive.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my colleagues on the Committee for the support and assistance during the year and also thank those officers and partners who have assisted the Committee in its work. I feel that a great deal has been achieved during the year and that this will place us in a strong position to face the challenges of the year ahead.

Councillor Susan Watson
Chair of the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Committee

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