

Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Mark Burrell

Vice Chair: Cllr Lindsey Leonard

Committee Members: Councillors, Michael Dixon, Heather Fagan, Stephen Foster, Logan Guy, Sam Johnston, Sean Laws, Michael Mordey, Stephen O'Brien, Lynda Scanlan and James Warne

During the year, the Committee's work programme has focused on a range of issues affecting the economic prosperity of the city and the opportunities and challenges we face.

In relation to regeneration, the Committee received a progress report on a number of major projects taking place in the city. These include the Culture House, which will provide a new state of the art library and cultural hub; the refurbishment of the Elephant Tea Rooms Building, the development of Keel Square, plans for the Crowtree site and the opening of the new Rail Station.

Toward the end of the year, we also received an update on the work of Siglion. We heard that the main priorities for Siglion was to improve the concentration of new economic activity in the city centre, create a city centre that supports higher value job creation, bring back into use dormant areas such as the former Vaux site, offer a wider choice of housing to the market and position Sunderland as a place to invest.

We also heard about the progress of schemes being funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund which is designed to replace the previous European Structural and Investment Funds. The total amount of funding allocated to Sunderland is £16.57m over three years from 2022/23 – 2024/25. The funding will support projects across three investment priorities: communities and place, supporting local business and people and skills. We heard in detail about the development of the programme in Sunderland which will reflect the priorities set out in the City Plan and the processes by which funds will be allocated.

In 2021, the Committee set up a Working Group to consider the regeneration of the Sunnyside area and during the year, we have continued to monitor the progress being made. We feel that while the challenges facing Sunnyside are highly complexed and deep rooted there are a number of positives and opportunities. Sunnyside is an attractive area close to the city centre and possesses a historic core. It is increasingly proving attractive to social enterprise, early stage businesses and an emerging cultural and creative services sector. In the years ahead, the Committee looks forward to the implementation of the Sunnyside Masterplan which will be crucial in delivering long term sustainable improvement of the area.

Rebecca Ball, Chief Executive of Sunderland Culture outlined the important contribution made by the cultural sector to the economic prosperity of the city. For the future, we heard that the opening of the Culture House and the Museum redevelopment should substantially improve the cultural offer in the city. Attendance figures were now on the rise, though it was recognised that it could be several years before we see attendance figures back up to pre covid levels.

In setting its work programme the Committee asked for an update on development of screen industries in the city. We heard that early in 2021, the BBC had announced that it would invest up to £25m in the region, with regional partners seeking to commit £11.4m over a five year period. A new North East Screen Industries Partnership (NESIP) has been developed and with the support of North East Screen (formerly Northern Film and Media) a number of new productions have been developed or filmed in Sunderland. The Committee also heard about exciting plans for the proposed development of Crown Works Studios, which it is estimated will create 8,000 new jobs regionally in a wide range of fields and professions. The proposed Studios will be one of the largest in Europe, with 20 sound stages located on the south bank of the River Wear generating in the region of £336m a year.

Sharon Appleby of the Sunderland Improvement District (BID) updated us on the work of the BID in supporting local businesses in the city. This included events such as the Summer Food and Drink Festival and the March Restaurant Week, together with a summer and seasonal programme of family activities. We were pleased to note that following the Covid pandemic, footfall and retail spending in the city centre has begun the process of recovery and that the development of Sunderland Riverside should provide an added impetus for the growth of the independent retail sector.

The Committee also received an update from Natasha McDonagh, Sunderland Chamber of Commerce and Rhiannon Bearne, North East Chamber of Commerce on economic challenges facing the city and the region. These included long term recovery from the Covid pandemic, the challenges for many businesses arising from the UK's exit from the European Union and the nationwide downturn in the high street retail sector. However, on a positive note, it was felt that the Sunderland economy retained strong foundations and that many opportunities existed, particularly in the engineering, manufacturing and the software sectors.

The Committee received an update on a wide range of events organised in the city, including the Festival of Light, the Triathlon and the Kings Coronation. It was noted that moving forward a greater emphasis would be placed on facilitating smaller community based events with a wider geographical spread which were less at risk at cancellation and often more cost effective. The Council was also looking to work more closely with local communities and partners such as the BID,

Last year, the Committee was consulted on the refresh of the Council's Housing Strategy. This year, the Committee has focused on the progress being made in a number of key areas; including the approach being taken to dealing with Empty Properties and the operation and challenges facing the Council's homelessness service. The Committee commended the efforts of staff in an area of work that was seeing increasingly higher pressure and demand.

The Committee met with representatives from social housing providers including Gentoo, Thirteen Group, Believe, Karbon Homes and Bernicia to discuss the challenges they face and any operational issues relating to housing management. The issues raised included the treatment of and responsiveness to complaints, the effect on residents of the cost of living crises, anti-social behaviour, stock condition and damp and mould. We heard that increases in building costs had also had an impact;

it was now considerably more expensive to build houses and it was becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain skilled workers. Substantial investment was being made in the sustainability agenda, with there being a drive for greater energy efficiency and reduced carbon emissions.

Members stressed the importance of ensuring clear lines of communication between housing associations and their tenants and also between housing associations and local councillors. It was noted that partnership working between housing associations was good and that the Council's housing team was now holding formal group meetings in order to discuss housing issues in the city.

In setting its work programme for the year, the Committee asked for an update on operation of Environmental Services within the city and its plans for the future. We heard that the Pallion Household Waste & Recycling Centre had now opened and was proving a great success. The Refuse Electric RCV had begun operations and the fleet service had introduced 24 new refuse collection vehicles during the year. Cemetery regulations have been improved and remedial works to cemetery lawn sections were ongoing.

The Committee views was sought on the Food and Food Controls Service Plan 2023/2026. This document will provide the basis for undertaking food safety enforcement and ensuring standards of cleanliness and food hygiene across the city. The Committee commended staff on their hard work in this important area of work.

Toward the end of the year, the Committee considered the Council's Road Safety Annual Report 2022 which provided details of a range of road safety works and initiatives, including the introduction of road safety schemes, educational programmes, training courses and road safety campaigns. The report also provided data analysis relating to accidents and collisions which at this point remain relatively stable.

In 2022, the Committee was consulted on the Draft Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). This document sets out the long-term approach to the development of local cycling and walking networks in the city. As part of this year's work programme, the Committee received an update on the planned programme of infrastructure improvements to the cycling network. The Committee emphasised the importance of consulting with local communities before such works are undertaken.

In March 2019, the Council declared a climate emergency. In response, a city-wide 2030 Shadow Board was established, bringing together partners from across the city, with the ambition of the city becoming carbon neutral by 2040 and the Council carbon neutral by 2030. The Committee received a report on the progress being made on the Low Carbon Framework and Action Plan that reflected the importance of fully involving partners from throughout the city if the goals are to be achieved.

All in all, it has been a very busy and productive year for the Committee. I would just like to take this opportunity to thank members of the Committee and everyone else involved for their hard work and commitment, together with the relevant Cabinet portfolio holders who attended and contributed to the meetings during the year.

Councillor Mark Burrell
Chair of the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

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