

Sunderland City Council

State of the City Event

Tuesday 28 October 2014

Present:

Councillors	Allan	Gofton	Miller, G	Walker
	Ball	Jackson	Mordey	Waller
	Bell	Kay	Porthouse	Watson, S
	Blackburn	Kelly	Price	Williams
	Curran	Lauchlan	Shattock	Wilson, A
	Davison	Lawson	Smith, P	Wilson, D
	D. Dixon	MacKnight	Snowdon, D	Wood
	Emerson	Marshall	Snowdon, D E	Wright, N
	Farthing	L.Martin	Speding	
	Foster	McClennan	Thompson	
	Gibson, P	Miller, F	Trueman, H	

In Attendance: Members of the Panel

Councillor Paul Watson (Leader of Sunderland City Council), Dr Dave Smith (Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council), Anne Isherwood (Sunderland College), Ken Bremner (City Hospitals Sunderland NHS Trust), Paul Woolston (Chair of North East Local Enterprise Partnership)

Also in attendance:

Council officers, partners, community organisations, local businesses, members of Community Spirit and local residents.

Richard Moss, BBC Political Editor, North East and Cumbria, the host for the event welcomed those present, thanked them for attending and introduced the Panel.

The State of the City 2014 by the Leader of the Council

Councillor Paul Watson, the Leader of the Council, began by reflecting on some of the events of the past year and described the scene going forward.

In the past 10 months or so since the last State of the City event, there had been many highlights and achievements. During 2014, some of things that particularly stood out for him included:

The announcement of the City Deal in March which was a great boost for the city. Working in partnership with South Tyneside Council and the North East Local Enterprise Partnership which Paul Woolston chaired, the deal would see the creation of an International Advanced Manufacturing Park, the size of 140 football pitches, to the west of the A19 and to the north of Nissan.

The manufacturing park was expected to attract up to 300 million pounds of private-sector investment and create up to five thousand new jobs. The City Deal also included a range of improvements to the A19 and it provided confirmation that 82.5 million pounds would go towards the new Wear bridge project and its approach roads.

The new Wear Crossing and the associated Sunderland Strategic Transport Corridor would bring significant opportunities for the city's economy and would link three of the city's key, economic assets – The Port of Sunderland, the city centre and the industrial cluster around Nissan. A further 40 million pounds of government money had been earmarked for the road link connecting the new bridge to the city centre, and this year the Council would complete the road section within the city centre itself.

Work on the city centre's new public space was also progressing well and it had recently been named by members of the public as Keel Square. This would be an important landmark welcoming visitors and residents to the heart of the city, with the design, materials and artworks within the new square celebrating Sunderland's proud industrial heritage, particularly its world-class shipbuilding prowess. It would be a meeting place for friends, a location for events, and a landmark that Sunderland could be proud of.

Sunderland College was set to transform part of the city centre after funding for a new 29 million pound flagship campus was confirmed. The state of the art, 11,500 square metre campus would be built on the land opposite Park Lane transport interchange and would accommodate up to 2,000 students and over 120 staff who would breathe new life into the city centre and help with its continued regeneration.

The University of Sunderland had announced the creation of Sunderland Fab Lab – a fabrication and digital manufacturing laboratory, combining 2D and 3D design with the latest fabrication technology. A first for the North East, the University would co-locate the Fab Lab with incubation and business units to allow ideas created through the initiative to be developed as businesses on-site.

Nissan continued to do well through constant innovation and improvement, boosting the region's reputation as a world leading location for automotive manufacturing. The plant continued to break records, winning more and more work and supplying markets globally. It was now responsible for more than one in every two cars produced in the United Kingdom. It was a tremendous achievement that the North East now produced more cars than the West Midlands.

Business was also doing well at the Port of Sunderland which now handled in excess of half a million tonnes of cargo each year. The reconnection of the rail lines into the Port should be completed in the next few months with rail traffic recommencing in the first quarter of 2015. This would allow the Port to compete on a greater scale - particularly when linked with the new bridge across the Wear and the potential for imports and exports connected with the International Advanced Manufacturing Park, and other high-tech businesses in the area, as well as the offshore industry.

The Port and its workforce were already playing an important role in the development of offshore wind farms and were highly skilled in supporting offshore projects, while elsewhere in renewable energy, the North East continued to lead the way. Nissan just announced in the previous month, that sales of the 100% electric Nissan LEAF, built in Sunderland, broke records with the best sales month ever, for any European country. The region also boasted an extensive charging infrastructure which was continually being expanded and the Council was wholly committed to a low carbon future.

In relation to 'industries of the future' Sunderland was awarded UK Digital City 2014 in the Municipal Journal Awards. The accolade recognised progress and partnerships between the public and private sector across all aspects of IT, software and hi-tech work, ranging from the provision of council services to job creation and investment. The award celebrated the fact that Sunderland was the city that judges felt had most improved the lives of its citizens, developed their potential and met their changing needs for integrated, digital public services.

In the business world, Hays Travel, the largest employer in Sunderland city centre, took on 100 apprentices to extend their total workforce to over one thousand, and the newly completed Washington Business Centre was now welcoming its first companies. There was also the growing success of Sunderland Software Centre and the numerous successes within the automotive supply chain.

The Leader commented that he was looking forward to hearing from residents during the evening on the theme of boosting the local economy and the related skills and health issues but firstly wished to highlight another piece of important progress in an area that Ken Bremner had been involved in.

Sunderland had been selected as one of only five 'fast track' local authority areas in the country to be a 'trailblazer' for the Better Care Fund which was about integrating formerly separate pots of health and social care funding. This was testament to the incredibly strong partnerships between the council and health providers in the city, including the Clinical Commissioning Group.

What it would mean in practice, was that local people would be amongst the first in the queue nationally, to be able to get easier access to health and social care services, delivered in communities and based on individuals' needs, rather than that provision being dictated through remote, national frameworks.

On the subject of collaboration and cross agency and boundary working, seven of the North East's councils this year had come together to form the North East Combined Authority whose ambition, working alongside the North East Local Enterprise Partnership, was to create the best possible conditions for economic growth, to increase investment in the area as an excellent location for business, to create more and better jobs and enable residents to develop the skills they needed to access those jobs and careers.

The Leader commented that of course if it was that simple, these conditions would have been in place long ago in every part of the country and indeed the world, but the fact was that there were a range of complex and inter-connected issues that all played a part, sometimes at odds with one another, in creating a successful economy and an excellent quality of life that goes alongside it.

The Leader believed everybody recognised the difficulties - to have a plentiful, balanced mix of jobs, you need businesses, and to attract and keep businesses you need good transport networks and an appropriately skilled and healthy workforce. You then need that workforce to have money to spend, and to spend it in the area – doing so because they live here in the house they need with the schools, health, leisure and whole range of other services available for their families, and so the cycle continued.

The Combined Authority was here to take a perspective across the whole 'functional economic area' and identify how we could 'cut in' to some of these issues and make real progress, identifying where the jobs would come from, what we as an area had to offer to businesses and investors, and what would enable and support people to access the employment opportunities available.

The aim was to tackle the barriers that people faced, such as lack of adequate transport to key sites and locations, and help them be clear on the skills that the particular businesses need, both now and in the future. There was a need to assist people to acquire these skills and to have the best health possible so that they were able to work.

In the wake of the Scottish Referendum and the Government's promises for devolution from Westminster, the Combined Authority was making a powerful case to receive devolved powers to stimulate economic growth.

A plan was in place in the form of the North East Strategic Economic Plan entitled 'More and Better Jobs' and there was a legitimate body with the democratic mandate in the shape of the Combined Authority, working with partners and particularly the business community.

Returning to key events over the past year, the 26th International Air Show took place on the seafront and the good weather for most of the three day event showed the stunning natural assets Sunderland had in all their unique glory, while the flying programme entertained and thrilled the huge crowds of people gathered on the beach and along the seafront. This part of the city was one of the jewels in its crown and the Council should continue to make the most of it and capitalise on it as an asset for both residents and visitors to enjoy. The Council had therefore continued with the seafront regeneration programme, which only this month was shortlisted for a top UK planning award.

The Stadium of Light continued its successful programme of events during the summer hosting the biggest boy band in the world, One Direction, and North East Live which attracted headline acts and large numbers of visitors to the area. This fantastic annual programme raised the profile of the city as an events destination and introduced many people from outside the region to all the city had to offer, much like the prestigious National Portrait Gallery tour which had brought 55 of the most outstanding portraits from the BP Portrait Awards to the city's Museum and Winter Gardens. Sunderland was the only place in England outside of the National Portrait Gallery where the 55 portraits could be seen.

Then turning to the city's communities, the Leader felt that whilst the types of things mentioned above were the 'headline grabbers' the city has a huge number of unsung heroes who deserve the highest praise and recognition as shining examples of the community spirit that the city is famous for.

Despite the landmark projects and the strategies we have in place, all of which were vital to the city and its people, the fact was that many families and individuals continued to struggle with low and indeed decreasing wages and the Leader was sorry to have to say that since the last State of the City event, he could not report a lower number of people needing to turn to food banks.

It was doubly saddening that just as people need the council and public services the most, the council was grappling with unprecedented cuts as the Government continued with its austerity programme.

Having saved 171 million pounds since 2010, there were another 36 million pounds to cut next year and potentially another 108 million by 2019/20.

The Council could in no way continue to achieve this by 'squeezing out efficiencies, successful as that's been to date and so needed to become as a council, a very different organisation, with a very different role and in meeting the challenge, it needed the help of local people, partners, organisations and businesses.

The Council had received national recognition for its Community Leadership Programme and was committed to continuing on its journey to becoming a true Community Leadership Council forging new and ever closer relationships with local people and organisations.

Rather than directly deliver services, the Council needed to help and enable others to do so – be that communities themselves, or other organisations, to develop better, more efficient and effective models that suit the community and individuals in question, that are tailored to need, and are free to operate outside of some of the restrictive frameworks that the Council had to adhere to.

There was untold and untapped potential in the city's communities - people and assets that could frankly contribute to fantastic services and it was the Council's role going forward to mobilise this. And it would be the role of councillors, to be working day-in, day-out within the communities they serve, to identify the needs and challenges and then work on the solutions, bringing everyone and every organisation that can make a difference, together.

This was why the Council had developed the brand or concept of "All together Sunderland" and for the Council's part, it would do its utmost to transition into its new role of enabler, convener and connector, with elected members championing the needs and aspirations of communities in decision making processes at all levels, and influencing other agencies and organisations to play their part.

The Leader commented that whilst he was the first to appreciate that these necessary changes could seem daunting and challenging for both service users and providers, he felt we could move forward with confidence that the changes would be for the most part, very positive.

Fundamental to this, was being certain that our efforts and use of resources reflect what local people want and need. This is why events like this one were so important, and he was genuinely grateful to everyone for giving up their time to come along.

The Leader thanked his fellow panel members for joining him, and Mr Moss for hosting the event. He looked forward to hearing the views of those present and answering their questions.

Top 3 Questions

Mr Moss advised that questions had been submitted to the "Your City, Your Say" State of the City event website and that the three most popular had been selected and would be answered prior to the open debate: -

1. City Centre Offer and Appearance/Appeal (state/ closure of buildings and shops and no "top class" retailers but abundance of betting shops, pound shops, etc)

The Council's Chief Executive, Dave Smith responded by stating that as advised last year, there needed to be more spend in the city centre to create the demand for 'more decent shops' – it was genuinely 'chicken and egg' but as stated before, the Council and other city centre stakeholders were doing their utmost to 'cut in' to the issue.

In chairing the national Key Cities group, the Council fundamentally understood and had made it one of four key priorities to address, the fact that city centres needed to thrive in order to boost the overall economies of cities.

And this means developing a diverse and balanced mix of offers and uses within the city centre, good retail as well as service based businesses (e.g. financial sector companies) that not only provided people coming into the city centre with everything they need but also creating good, higher paid jobs with those employees in turn spending their money in the city centre -the very issue the Leader was talking about earlier.

To this end there was on-going, significant investment in the development of the Vaux site and the development of Keel Square - all practical and positive developments, improving the look and feel of the city centre, better connecting its different parts together, and heightening its appeal to shoppers and the sorts of businesses the council needed to attract.

City centre businesses were certainly playing their part, with the City Council supporting them to establish the Business Improvement District (BID) which started operating in April 2014. It brought with it some £3.4million of private investment into the city centre over the next five years along with the talents and energies of city centre business people themselves, all putting their heads together and working with other agencies who have a role to play, to create a better and more cohesive city centre overall.

As mentioned, the reality was that if residents did not use the quality shops that the city had on offer in Sunderland then the shops would not survive. One of the key priorities of the BID was therefore to market the offer of Sunderland city centre as a collective shopping environment with a good offer which counters and indeed far outweighs some of the negative perceptions and views that there were too many bargain shops for example.

In relation to these sorts of shops, the same rule applied - a business would follow demand, and the Council has no powers to dictate, or stop these sorts of shops from being in the city centre.

Finally in relation to the state of repair of some city centre buildings and rows of shops, the Council recognised that there were some buildings in the city centre that had been neglected by their owners. Whilst the Council does have powers to tackle the condition of properties, they do have to be in a very poor state of repair before, legally, they can act and the properties in question, whilst clearly appearing to be neglected, were not in such a state of disrepair whereby the Council could take action.

The Council was also conscious that there were many businesses in the city centre who continued to be challenged by very difficult times economically, and the Council did not want to take unreasonable action against businesses without pursuing all other avenues.

However, the Council was conscious of the fact that a successful city centre would be the result of everybody playing their part and doing what they can, therefore it monitored the situation closely and where council action was required, the Council would seek to come to an agreement with a property owner before taking any formal action.

2. City 'Accessibility' – the impression you get when you arrive, car parking, railway station, etc

The Leader of the Council responded firstly in relation to the Railway Station advising that the Council fully understood that first impressions count and that people want to come and go from the city in a pleasant, modern railway station, if that's how they travel. The Council shared local people's frustrations on this and had been working hard to engage other relevant parties to find a way forward including securing the necessary funding package.

The Leader was pleased to be able to say that the City Council was now working with Network Rail and Nexus to bring forward plans for a new railway station.

The funding was now in place, and a detailed feasibility and design exercise was underway. The Council expected to have a final design early next year, with a view to works starting during 2015 to create a station that was fitting for, and gives the right impression of, the City of Sunderland.

With regards to parking, a couple of questioners expressed the view that visiting Sunderland by car was expensive and lacking in incentives, comparing it to neighbouring cities. The Leader advised that parking was in fact less expensive than either Newcastle or Durham.

As for free car parking, the Council would be running a "Free After Three" scheme on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays over the Christmas period.

Then after Christmas the Council would be continuing the scheme on Thursdays throughout the year to help encourage late night shopping and people using city centre restaurants. This was something that people were very keen to see at last year's State of the City event and the same messages had been received through a range of communications and consultations.

Park and ride was also suggested - the Leader said that these schemes worked if there was a combination of a lack of car parking space in a city centre, together with a considerable delay getting into the city centre because of road congestion. The idea being that it's quicker to get out of your car and get on a bus but this is not actually the case in Sunderland, except on match days when there was a park and ride running to the Stadium of Light.

However, the Council was constantly monitoring road traffic and was open minded about introducing park and ride if and when the need was there.

The Leader agreed with one particular questioner that St Mary's car park and the approaches to it needed a facelift. After Christmas, the lifts were being overhauled and the arcade and bridge that join the car park onto High Street West were going to be fully refurbished.

Questioners also mentioned the state of landmark buildings and the impression they gave as you arrived by road, the Aquatic Centre being mentioned for example and yes, the Council would do its utmost within available resources to ensure that all of its buildings were in the best condition possible

3. Questions about the timescales and budgets for the works in the vicinity of St Mary's Way and Keel Square?

Dr Smith advised that the final elements to create St Mary's Boulevard were coming together. The main highway works would be mostly complete by the 12th November ahead of late night shopping which started on Thursday 13th November, the evening of the City Centre lights switch on.

After this there would be some off peak lane closures for short periods of time in order to complete the new road.

Contractors were well aware that we needed two lanes open in both directions in this crucial trading period for City Centre businesses. The Council was working with them to make sure this happened and received regular updates on progress.

Work to create the new Keel Square was planned to continue into early January. As with any major project, and particularly one in a busy city centre, there had been unknown and unforeseen factors that had delayed progress and these unknown issues and required changes had increased the costs of the works.

For example, existing utilities such as phone lines, sewers and electricity cables, were not always as shown on records and sometimes not shown at all.

Although these hurdles had been negotiated, they had delayed progress while investigations were undertaken and alternative options found.

4. Marine Walk

The Leader advised that a number of similar questions had been received after the deadline in relation to the issue of Marine Walk. Whilst the deadline had passed, he felt in order to be open and transparent, the issue needed to be addressed. The main point of concern had been over the release of the valuation report for the land and the Leader advised that dependent upon the agreement of legal advisors, he would make this report available for public viewing, as soon as possible.

Questions from the Floor

Why nurses did not ask for patient's permission to carry out blood tests?

Ken Bremner responded that the nature of the nursing profession had changed considerably over the years and within their organisation, involving patients in all aspect of care was important and appropriate consent was needed, with the point reinforced amongst staff.

There was the feeling that the parking measures to be taken were too little too late and it was requested that free parking for more days of the week be implemented (for at least half of the week). This would bring more money into the economy and more traffic/footfall into the city centre?

The Leader replied that parking was an issue across the whole of the North East, with problems around hospitals and such like. Should the Council introduce free parking, this would have a knock on effect in other areas, which would have to follow suit to compete and there needed to be some income in order to maintain the City's car parks.

In response to Mr Moss' enquiry if the loss of revenue/implications to the Council had been considered against the benefits of increased footfall free parking may bring - and if a sensible balance could be found - the Leader advised that work had been done on strategies and studies and the Council worked with partners on the subject. The Leader also advised that he would take the proposals suggested tonight back for consideration.

St Mary's Road works and the statement that it was believed there had been limited staff carrying out the works, which could have been completed quicker if the contractors had wished to do so, and the enquiry if the works were £750,000 over budget

The Leader advised that when you set out on a project such as this, you did not know what you would find when digging up existing roads in terms of utilities and the efforts that would be needed to in order to address these issues do cause delays. The budget included a contingency sum for such eventualities which was being used, so the project was not over budget and a deadline had been set for the contractor to complete the works.

Dr Smith advised that the contractor was obligated to complete the scheme within the agreed timescale and this was expected to be delivered upon.

A representative from Grand Central Rail advised that they had gained permission to run trains from Sunderland to London for the next 12 years and enquired as to what they could do to help bring more people from London to Sunderland?

The Leader responded that the Council already worked and was proud to work with Grand Central Trains and to see Sunderland as a destination from other parts of the country, which gave the city a profile. Advertising at city visitor attractions and the Port of Sunderland for example were a good way to inform the public, which was integral to any success.

Paul Woolston advised that good transport links made a big difference and were part of the strategic economic plan to bring jobs to the region. Connectivity and eco systems were really important in looking to attract businesses as they would need such services to enable their businesses to operate.

Mr Moss referred to the HS2 link and enquired how important this was and if it was felt to be a positive development despite there not being a stop in the north east - was this a concern?

Mr Woolston advised that the region did need to get the benefits from this development despite there being no stop in the region. It was felt that if we could release the freight off the York/Teesside line and open it up to passengers then we could still see some significant benefits.

A student in her final year of education enquired why Sunderland did not have much to offer in terms of Work Experience and such like, as opposed to other areas

Anne Isherwood responded that there was a lot of work to do with inward investment to increase job opportunities and attract businesses which would create more opportunities for students to get the experience/skills for when they graduate. They were working with the employers they already had on board and envisaged this number growing.

Mr Bremner commented that in relation to the NHS, it was about ensuring the right students were coming forward with the right skills and the accessible/attractive city priorities were linked in attracting people with these skills.

Mr Woolston commented that they would like students to be able to stay in the city to fulfil their potential and the Fab Lab, the first for the North East, would help to nurture new businesses. We needed more big companies coming to the North East so that the smaller businesses could be part of the supply chain.

In response to Mr Moss' enquiry in relation to anything that could be done on the declining population of Sunderland, the Leader advised that they were working with the Combined Authority and other partners including the Local Enterprise Partnership, where real benefits would come. It was one economy, where people could work in Sunderland for example, but live in Newcastle and vice versa so whilst towns and cities working by themselves had a good offer, by working together we had an even stronger appeal.

20 mph Speed Limit signs on estates and if these were still to be erected?

The Leader responded that he did not have the specific details of the resident's street and the circumstances behind the question, but in general, we to consider introducing more 20mph speed limits where needed, but also had to address and make provision for the enforcement of the lower limits. In addition to enforcement, there was an issue in relation to educating drivers and there needed to be a cultural change throughout the community.

Dr Smith advised that he would be happy to speak with the resident after the event along with a Highways Engineer to discuss details of their concerns but there was an evaluation process carried out in all instances before the Authority came to any conclusion.

Devolution of Power - the Combined Authority and its democratic mandate despite the previous referendum on the Regional Assembly resulting in a no vote.

The Leader advised that the Combined Authority was different from the Regional Assembly as the Members were democratically elected to represent their component areas of the Combined Authority geography. Comprehensive consultation was undertaken and the funding for this was not coming out of tax payer's money.

The duties and activities of the Combined Authority would by law, run concurrently with those of the individual local authorities and the decisions it took were in the interests of the wider area with the Members having responsibility for ensuring they were in the best interests of their local areas.

Mr Woolston advised that the LEP would be working alongside the Combined Authority as a business led partnership. There had been a wide consultation in putting the Strategic Economic Plan together and there was widespread support for the Combined Authority so that a strong voice was provided for the region.

Location of the Sunderland Central Rail Station

It was suggested that the new railway station would still be located in the same place and accessed in the same way, therefore it was not going to be a 'new' station, only modernised and it was felt that it would make more sense for a new station to be located near Park Lane for example. It was also queried how a lot more funding was provided for the modernisation of the Haymarket station in Newcastle.

Mr Moss queried if the current proposals were just the equivalent of applying a sticking plaster over the problem and if a new location had been considered.

The Leader advised that the Haymarket Station got tens of thousands in terms of footfall, therefore had a better business case when it came to receiving funding from regional and national sources. The Leader also commented that he would prefer a new location for the station on Burdon Road for example, but the funding received was just for the existing site, and so we had to make the very best out of what we had received but the Council would never stop fighting for the betterment of Sunderland.

The representative from Grand Central Rail wished to advise that they had held discussions with Network Rail and their plans for Sunderland did look exciting and if people had any specific questions, they would be holding an event at the Glass Centre in the near future.

Ms Isherwood commented that they would welcome any developments and with the City Centre campus, more people would be coming into the area from other regions so it was important that the first impression they receive was a good one.

What measures the Council was taking to protect the public and its staff with mental health problems?

Mr Bremner commented on the need for more concentrated services going forward in relation to mental health.

The Leader advised that he would be happy to speak with the gentleman who raised the point after the meeting to discuss his individual case, but on the whole, we have a duty of care and there were a great deal of programmes and protections in place but we would never be able to guarantee safety 100% of the time, depending on an individual situation and its circumstances.

With regards to staff safety, Dr Smith advised that this was also incredibly important as the Council was only as good as the staff it employs so it was important the staff could provide services free from intimidation or harm. The Council strives to provide the right support and training when things did happen and it was incumbent upon the Council to provide such support when needed.

Protection of vulnerable people – in light of the situation which occurred in Rotherham

Dr Smith advised that as an organisation, the Council was constantly open and transparent so if it did make mistakes it addressed them openly and honestly. The question was, if a mistake did occur, how the Council would address this, so it challenged how it works effectively, as much as possible.

In response to Mr Moss' enquiry as to how confident we were that systems were in place, Dr Smith advised that he was confident we were striving to make things better and the elected Members as Community Champions were also challenging any gaps in services. The question for this Local Authority and its partners was to be alert to prevent any mistakes and to address them in the right and responsible manner if they should occur.

The Leader added that the Council worked in the best way it possibly could to safeguard those vulnerable in our society and there was a lot of good work that went on also, which maybe did not get the recognition it deserved.

Mr Bremner commented that this was an issue we all had to be vigilant on and the Clinical Commissioning Group for example, has got this firmly in their sights.

With the Welfare reforms and the closure of Libraries, what plans were there to support the Community Organisations who had to provide services that others have traditionally done?

The Leader commented that the Community Organisations were really important as the Government were giving more responsibility to the Local Authority yet cutting the funding to provide services. As people's benefits were being stopped and the soon to be implemented universal credit came in, this would require claimants to apply online, many of whom did not have skills to deal with such systems.

The Leader added that he felt it was a tragedy that these issues were occurring and that funds including the European Social Fund needed to get to the grass roots as quickly as possible.

In response to Mr Moss' query as to if there was anything the Council could do, the Leader advised that clearly they would do everything in their capacity to mitigate against these issues.

How safe/protected are our children?

The Leader responded that there were a number of schemes and protections in place to safeguard the children of Sunderland but there was a limited amount which the Council could do with the first responsibility for duty of care being a child's parents/guardians.

Dr Smith agreed that there was nothing more important than the safety of children and commented that as a Council, it was half as big as it was four years ago with 4000 staff now gone, yet the one service which had grown despite the cuts had been the Social Care Service. In relation to individual children, the first responsibility of social workers was to constantly assess children to keep them out of danger and ensure all concerns arising were investigated and addressed.

Ms Isherwood commented that all partners have a responsibility on this and as a college they were proactive, with trained staff to deal with looked after children. It was difficult to state that every child was safe but there was a very robust mechanism in place in the city.

Cost of Travel around the City for Students

The Leader responded that the Combined Authority was in negotiations on a Quality Contract Scheme, which would include the determination of bus and train fares.

The Leader added that the city needed talented young people to access education and people travelled many miles to do this so it was very important that the Quality Contract Scheme supported aims and initiatives for people to access learning and skills provision and employment.

Ms Isherwood commented that this was a big issue and the college set aside a particular amount of money for transport to help students so each particular organisation had their own way of dealing with the issue but she welcomed the progress in negotiations on the Quality Contract.

Chief Executive's Salary

The Leader confirmed that Sunderland had consulted with experts from Human Resources and other fields to determine the appropriate salary for the Chief Executive for Sunderland. It would not reflect the level of responsibility or be in the interests of achieving the ambitions for the city to appoint a chief executive at a lower level.

Teaching Life Skills in Secondary Schools

Ms Isherwood commented that the school curriculum was set nationally but agreed there was a need to prepare students for working life and there were a number of additional initiatives running in schools as feedback from employers was that readiness for work was critical.

Mr Woolston advised that it was one of the biggest challenges to ensure jobs available matched skills on offer and the Combined Authority / LEP were focusing on bringing the two together. The purpose of the regional Education Challenge initiative was to ensure that that young people not only came out of school with a good education but also job skills.

Dr Smith advised that there were set targets nationally but there was a need for schools to understand what the local economy needed and schools should be encouraged and supported to be better connected with local businesses.

Safer Communities advice/advertising

A member of the public commented on the number of cuts to the Fire Service and Police Service and that this had been replaced with a sticker to be placed in windows in relation to safer communities advice and he felt that more should be done on this, with more feet on the ground, only then could we have a safer community.

The Leader agreed and commented that he would love to be able to protect everyone and for them to have a safe and prosperous life, but as the Police and Fire Authority didn't have the resources, this had become more difficult and the stickers referred to would have been a cost effective way to impart information to the public. When the region had the suffered funding cuts it had, then there would be an effect on front line services.

The Leader also agreed with the gentleman that you would not get a better way to ensure a safer community than to have 'feet on the ground'.

Close of the Event

As Chair of the debate, Richard Moss closed the open discussion and thanked all present for their attendance.

Members of the public were informed that members of the Council's Cabinet would be available to answer individual questions following the conclusion of the event.