

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 7TH NOVEMBER 2023 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor Burrell in the Chair

Councillors, Dixon, Fagan, Foster, Leonard, Reed, Scanlan and Watson

Also in attendance: -

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Ms Susie Thompson, Executive Director of Housing, Gentoo
Ms Kerry Leng, Director of Marketing and Engagement, Gentoo
Ms Joanne Gordon, Homes and Development Director, Gentoo
Mr Marc Edwards, Director of Asset and Sustainability, Gentoo

Members of the Press

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillor Warne

Minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Committee held on 10th October, 2023

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting held on 10th October 2023 were submitted.

(For copy reports – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting held on 10th October 2023 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Gentoo Consultation

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) for Gentoo to discuss a range of housing issues facing the City

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Gentoo Officers in attendance presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation.

Ms Susie Thompson, Executive Director of Housing presented on Gentoos values, Priorities, Leadership Team structure, Board and Committee Memberships.

Ms Kerry Leng, Director of Marketing and Engagement presented on Complaints Handling, Customers Voices and the challenges they faced along with the Cost of Living Support being provided.

Mr Edwards, Director of Asset and Sustainability briefed the Committee in relation to the stock condition, Damp and Mould progress being made and details of the property investment plan over the next 5 years.

Ms Joanne Gordon, Homes and Development Director gave an overview of developments and details of Gentoos affordable housing offer.

The Chairman then opened up the meeting for questions from Members.

Councillor Foster wished to congratulate Gentoo on the scheme of supplying carpets to under 25's which was another plus. Councillor Foster added that in his ward in particular, there was an issue that constituents still believed Gentoo was part of the Council when looking for Housing and also that since they took over the housing stock it was surprising how many pieces of land/trees that had been impacted upon with not only Gentoo but private home owners also and felt that the tree policy needed tweaking. Ms Thompson commented that any feedback would be gladly received on this.

In response to Councillor Foster's comment that he felt there was still work to be done on Bonfire Night, Ms Thompson advised that she felt the Council should have one specific event for Bonfire Night in which Gentoo could contribute towards as a more cost effective way to manage the evening.

Councillor Foster commented that he believed all partners needed to have serious discussions on this. Ms Thompson advised that there was a bonfire strategy produced and as bonfire night had been on a Sunday night this year it had lead to less bonfires which was a success.

In relation to Councillor Fosters query over the increase in damp and mould and if this had been a consequence of injecting cavity walls, Mr Edwards advised that most of the housing stock inherited had been built in the 1950's/60's so was draughty and wasn't well insulated therefore the sector had tried to make these air tight boxes for efficiency which had contributed towards the issue. Mr Edwards informed that there was a retrofit programme now to install extractor fans/vents etc so as to improve efficiency whilst still allowing the homes to breathe.

Councillor Reed referred to the 7,500 repairs and queried how these were recorded. Mr Edwards confirmed that if there were two issues in the same house it would be counted as two repairs for example and that he could get the property numbers for Members.

In response to Councillor Reed's query over the 15,000 external decoration improvements, Mr Edwards advised that these would have been timber/render improvement works and timber gate/outhouse doors and such like.

Councillor Reed referred to the Washington District Heating Scheme and queried what the escalation path was for those that had not yet received a bill. Mr Edwards advised that they hoped to have this finalised by the end of April and they had great challenges with providers and also getting access to the properties as some residents wouldn't allow access therefore, they would appreciate any support that Members could give in this regard.

Councillor Dixon requested further detail on the affordable housing/rent to buy. Ms Gordon advised that 85% was affordable rent with 15% rent to buy.

Councillor Dixon referred to previous tours of the North East given to Members showing developments in other regions such as Gosforth, where the idea was the profits made on these developments were put into building more houses in Sunderland and enquired if this model still existed. Ms Gordon confirmed that this model was still part of their approach and they were still building estates out of the area as part of Gentoo Homes in order to invest the profits into affordable homes in Sunderland.

Councillor Dixon enquired as to what the general reputation was of Gentoo Housing Association nationally and if there was a positivity towards them. Ms Gordon commented that they felt they had a generally good reputation now and were rated as G1. People were impressed with their approach and from a sector perspective they felt they were in a good place.

Councillor Dixon commented that his overall opinion was that the management of the properties was superior to that of when they were Council owned but did feel standards had slipped recently.

Mr Edwards advised that they had refocused on what their core purpose was and invested £40 million in existing homes. In terms of standards they felt Gentoo had done what was right at the time, with single glazing for instance, but they went too quickly and double glazing emerged shortly after implementation.

In response to Councillor Dixons query over the one bedroomed flats at Hill View and if these would be used for people in need of support or for everyone, Ms Thompson advised that these were a complete mix. They worked with managed agents such as Oasis, Together for Children and Changing Lives etc to work with those who needed help but this was across the whole of the city.

Councillor Fagan commented that she was pleased to see the change in outlook from Gentoo towards issues of Damp and Mould and that these were not a lifestyle choice with residents being previously told that that they should be opening windows during the middle of winter. Councillor Fagan referred to the Cragdale Gardens development and enquired if Officers felt they could have communicated with residents better over this.

Ms Gordon commented that they were in frequent conversations with the Members who had raised the complaints over this and their priority was to get this site up and running but it was difficult to communicate more when they were in the middle of a commercial procurement process.

Councillor Fagan wished to raise the complaints made by private owners at Hall Farm Estate and that the common areas and brick planters were not being well maintained. Councillor Fagan commented that these were Gentoo's responsibility and the concern was that these were not being looked at and enquired if there was any plans to look at situations such as these.

Ms Thompson informed the Committee that they were working with Marc Morley and they had a session coming up to look at the differing standards of Gentoo and Sunderland City Council with an exercise to try and pull everything together so it was seamless. Ms Thompson advised that they would come back to Councillor Fagan on the individual case of Hall Farm Estate and they had noted this issue.

Councillor Scanlan referred to Drury Lane and that the doors on these properties were almost Dickensian and enquired when these would be getting replaced. Mr Edwards advised that those had been factored into the £225 million of investment and under the 5 year plans there would be new roofing and doors installed in that area.

In response to Councillor Dixon's query over the relationship between Gentoo and the Council, Ms Thompson commented that there was a good relationship and that they worked well together at all levels and especially on things such as grounds maintenance and homelessness so there was a good model of partnership working.

Councillor Dixon stated that he welcomed these meetings at scrutiny as historically there had been a gap in Gentoo meeting with opposition parties within the Council and he welcomed the increased consultation and long may it continue. Ms Thompson advised of the next round of walkabouts and that she would make sure details/invites were circulated.

The Chairman enquired as to stability, in terms of Housing Officer staff retention. Ms Thompson advised that there had been a 30% turnover of staff after Covid with staff moving into jobs that were more home working etc but this had now slowed. Ms Thompson also advised that the website was kept up to date with any changes to staffing and the contact details for Members to contact if needed.

There being no further questions, The Chairman thanked the Gentoo representatives for their report. it was then:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Annual Work Programme 2023-24

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), which set out the current work programme for the Committee for the municipal year 2023/24.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Member's information and possible discussion, advising of the extraordinary meeting which had been

scheduled for 21st November to hear from other external housing providers within the City.

Discussions were held over the Housing update for January and the possibility of moving this item to another date if required.

3. RESOLVED that the Committee received and noted the report

Notice of Key Decisions

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report providing Members with an opportunity to consider the items on the Executive's Notice of Key Decisions for the 28-day period from 11th October, 2023 (copies circulated).

(For copy report and notice – see original minutes).

Mr Diamond reminded Members to get in touch if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

4. RESOLVED that the Notice of Key Decisions be received and noted.

The Chairman thanked everyone for their attendance and closed the meeting.

(Signed) M. BURRELL,
Chairman.