

Prosperity and Economic Development Scrutiny Committee

At the start of the year – when the Committee was considering which issues to include in its work programme – we had pretty much unanimous support to focus on what we considered to be two of the key priorities for the city; namely the progress being made on Aim 1 of the Economic Masterplan – the development of a new kind of University City and the work and challenges facing the North Eastern Local Enterprise Board.

We approached these topics in different ways. In the case of the Aim 1 of the Economic Masterplan, the Committee chose to undertake an in depth review over the course of the year. For examining, the North Eastern Enterprise Partnership, we considered that the issues involved could best be tackled through a one off special meeting. I think that this flexibility of approach was important in allowing the Committee to tailor its approach to the particular needs of the issue at hand.

The Committee's review of Aim 1 of the Masterplan set out to examine the measures being taken by the Council, the University and all of our partners to support the development in Sunderland of a new kind of University City. The review also looked at the influence and impact that the University has on the city's economy at the present time and the potential for this to be increased. The Committee examined the way in which the Council and the University can more fully integrate the University into the city's economy, including business start up and growth; the development of workforce skills through education and retention and the potential for research to support business growth through innovation, graduate placement and management and staff development.

As part of its evidence gathering process, the Committee undertook a visit to the University of Sunderland to examine at first hand the kinds of projects and initiatives being developed and to speak to the academic, staff and students involved. We also visited Sheffield Hallam University in order to consider and contrast the approach of another University.

In our work, we were supported throughout by staff and academics from the University and we would particularly like to thank the University's Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive), Deputy Vice Chancellor and Deputy Chief Executive and the Assistant Director for their support and guidance during the review.

The Committee's report includes a number of significant recommendations. Firstly, that the Council and University should continue to investigate means of developing partnership working around Aim 1 of the Economic Masterplan in order to coordinate work on business growth and economic development and to make the most of available resources. We also consider that the University should look to further develop its links with the City's business community and increase its understanding of the needs of local businesses and the ways in which it can respond with appropriate expertise, support and guidance including through a large scale networking event or a high profile trade fair. We suggest that the University and Council should continue to work together to ensure that business advice and guidance is provided in a coordinated and complementary manner along the lines of a one stop shop approach.

We consider that there is scope for the University to further promote its profile in the city and better publicise and market its considerable strengths and successes including through the development of a promotional document summarising its contribution to the local economy and economic regeneration in the city and the region. We consider it important that the University conduct further research into the factors surrounding the levels of retention of students; including the influence of the local jobs market and job opportunities and continue to work with partners in order to monitor and react quickly to help meet local skills requirements and to continue to develop links with local Further Education Colleges and schools. Finally, we think that the Council and the University should work closely together to develop ways of linking and integrating the city campus to the rest of the city and improve the quality of the public realm.

The other main issue examined by the Committee during the year involved examining the aims and progress of the North Eastern Local Enterprise Board. To consider this, the Committee arranged a special meeting which was open to all members of the Council and involved the Leader of the Council, LEP board members and contributions from a Lecturer from the University of Birmingham. I think that the special meeting proved a great success; allowing members of the Council to consider and discuss the important work of the LEP and its implications for the future economic prosperity of the city.

All in all, it has been another very busy and productive year for the Committee. I would like to take this opportunity of thanking my colleagues for all their hard work and enthusiasm and I feel sure that the progress we have made can be built upon in the year ahead.

Councillor Michael Mordey
Chair of the Prosperity and Economic Development Scrutiny Committee

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