

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 10TH JANUARY 2023 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Ali, Dixon, Edgeworth, Fagan, Foster, Laws, Mordey, Reed, Scanlan, H. Trueman and Warne.

Also in attendance: -

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Ms Rebecca Ball, Chief Executive of Sunderland Culture
Ms Katherine Corfield, Housing Strategy Manager, Sunderland City Council
Mr Martin Bewick, Senior Housing Manager, Sunderland City Council

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 Councillors Reed and Scanlan.

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th December 2022

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th December, 2022 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 6th December 2022 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Cultural Sector Update

The Chief Executive of Sunderland Culture submitted a report and PowerPoint presentation (copies circulated) which provided the Committee with the progress of the cultural sector and its impact on the local economy of the City.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Rebecca Ball, The Chief Executive of Sunderland Culture presented the report and was also on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Ali thanked Ms Ball for the presentation and wished to congratulate on the Fire Station which he believed was a really nice venue. Councillor Ali referred to the Winter Gardens and advised that Sunderland City Council owned a substantial amount of Art that wasn't being displayed and queried if there were any plans to display more of this.

Ms Ball advised that she did not know the figures in terms of value but that there was a great deal in stores. As part of the redevelopment with National Heritage Fund they were looking at what could be put on display /refreshing the current displays which had been static for a while, so the Team were aware of this and it was being considered.

In response to Councillor Ali's suggestion of considering the works be moved to other venues, Ms Ball commented that this was a good point and some works did get loaned out to venues such as Arts Centre Washington but it was a valid query to consider how far beyond museums they went and if Schools and such like be used. Ms Ball advised that she would take this back for consideration and also advised that when the works were loaned out that the costs of moving the works were covered but normally there was no fee for the loan.

Councillor Foster commented that the Sunderland Empire and the Fire Station were great venues and we should be proud of them but did raise that there were no discounts for children and whilst he acknowledged we had to pay for the top shows, it was expensive for tickets when purchasing for families.

Councillor Mordey referred to the presentation and the list of venues and commented that he hoped the venue 1719 would be added to this which was an excellent venue. Councillor Mordey also referred to the art installations which Sunderland listed through the decades and that these were still only going up to the 1990's, therefore queried at what point new attractions were going to come forward.

Ms Ball responded that in terms of a timetable they had been successful in the first stage of National Heritage Lottery Funding but unfortunately she was not the person to be able to answer on when plans would be announced but she could assure that work was underway. This may be a query that Catherine Auld/Trina Murphy could answer.

Ms Ball informed that in terms of theme, it was planned for permanent displays of work/Sunderland collections and new interpretations of works. Also within the space there would be spaces to bring new/temporary exhibitions so there would be a mix of both.

Councillor Mordey referred to attendance figures and enquired as to the projections of when we would see figures back to pre Covid levels. Ms Ball informed that we wouldn't be back up to pre Covid levels this year as other issues came into the mix such as the cost of living crisis and peoples financial situations had worsened. The ambition was that pre covid levels would be achieved by 2025-26 and whilst it was hoped this would be achieved sooner this was the stated ambition.

Councillor H. Trueman referred to the City of Culture Bid and commented that he was honoured to have been part of that group and that ultimately being unsuccessful in the bid hadn't done us any harm when you looked at what's happened in the City since then and enquired if any thoughts had been given to further bids in the future.

Ms Ball advised that such decisions would be for others to make but agreed that losing had allowed the City to carry out plans at their own pace over time and that there was a place for bidding in future competitions and there may be a time for Sunderland to throw their hat in the ring once more. These were big undertakings however and there was a need to be sure when applying.

Councillor H. Trueman commented that what had been achieved and the work done by the team was phenomenal and queried if the future expansion of Culture was at the level it needed to be or if they could go further. Ms Ball advised that she believed there was much further that they could do.

Councillor Law queried if there was a reason that the Fire Station was still trading behind the Arts Centre Washington in terms of attendances. Ms Ball advised that the figures for the Arts Centre were based on a full year whilst the Fire Station was missing a quarters figures. They also tracked every Youth Theatre attendee for example/everyone who came into the Arts Centre whereas the Fire Station was purely based on people buying a ticket for an event.

Councillor Laws raised that the National Theatre Website was advertising production of the Odyssey, and that one venue included the Fire Station therefore it seemed it was getting national recognition from major organisations and queried how we were being seen nationally.

Ms Ball commented that she was really excited about the National Theatre partnership as it would be good for the City. There were a number of different parts to the project with Odyssey running in April and Sucker Punch in June. There would also be "Speak Up" in schools so it was a really valuable partnership to us.

Ms Ball added that Sunderland was seen as a good partner and organisations were beginning to feel a responsibility/understanding to get out and reach other regions.

Councillor Laws referred to the Film Studios announcement for Pallion, which he believed would be a real opportunity to have a huge influence on our economy and enquired if they were looking at opportunities to work with them.

Ms Ball advised that this project was being driven by the likes of North East Screen and Fulwell73 etc but they have had conversations on how we could provide talent pipelines from schools etc and around workforce opportunities.

In response to Councillor Dixons query over Paul Callaghan's report within the annual review, Ms Ball advised that the initial Council support went into the Capital at the beginning and it wasn't an ongoing contribution.

Councillor Dixon queried if the Culture department had been scaled back since the unsuccessful City of Culture bid and what the morale within the department was like since then. Ms Ball advised that the Culture Team was independent rather than a Council department and in terms of morale, the team were undoubtedly disappointed

after the result but this was a long time ago now and the people wanted to get on and still achieve their objectives so the momentum was maintained.

Councillor Dixon commented that the Empire Theatre was a success story and queried if they had any links with the Cinema. Ms Ball advised that they had not worked with the Cinema directly but with Cinema Shorts and it was something they could look at.

Councillor Dixon queried if they felt they were reaching out sufficiently for minorities through Sunderland culture. Ms Ball commented that in terms of diversity and inclusion she felt there was always more that could be done but yes they had very strong relationships with groups in the region. This was a big area of development for the team and something they were committed to.

Councillor Dixon suggested that it would be nice if an event to cater for this was put on at the Fire Station. Ms Ball informed that Members should attend the Open House in February as they got a lot of different cultures attending.

Councillor Edgeworth queried if there had been any loss of identity since the Art Gallery had been moved to the Glass Centre. Ms Ball advised that in terms of footfall, there had been no decrease and they had seen good visitor numbers. They did struggle with identity as there was a risk that the brand becomes hidden in the building and they did feel there was more they could do in terms of visibility.

Councillor Edgeworth queried what the plans/future was for the Glass Centre as many constituents commented on the closing of the roof for a number of years and if there were any plans to repair this. Ms Ball advised that she also received many complaints about the loss of the roof access. This issue was challenging due to the many leaks during winter and its structural challenges. The cost of repair was significant and she was not aware of any plans to repair. Ongoing discussions were being held with the Council but there were no realistic plans for repair.

Councillor Warne wished to thank everyone within the Team for the work they did and commented that he believed Culture was so important in society. Councillor Warne highlighted Pop Recs and the Arts Centre Washington which he felt were lovely venues and that the Fire Station ticketing and pricing he had found to be good. Councillor Warne added that the more we could do to encourage Culture the better it would be for all of us.

Councillor Mordey commented that Art and Culture could feel out of reach in certain parts of the City and enquired what work had been done/was being done to reach out to these communities. Ms Ball advised that this was an important issue that did not have a simple answer. There was a number of things they were doing or planning to do. They also had audience demographics where they could map by postcode who was attending events and they could see the mismatch between people/areas and Sunderland as a whole.

Ms Ball stated that they knew there was an overrepresentation of those people likely to engage in Arts/Culture and they knew there was more to do. They were looking at considerations such as what they put in their buildings, the way they work with organisations and schools and the National Theatre Programme Speak Up would be working with the Beacon and Schools.

Ms Ball added that there wasn't one solution and a whole range of actions were required but it was important to them and they knew more work was needed.

In response to Councillor Mordey's query over targeting those areas where residents were visiting venues less, Ms Ball informed that they were working in most schools across the City in some way.

Councillor Dixon commented that the development of Culture House should help towards this due to the blend of different uses it was proposing.

The Chairman referred to the City of Culture bid and commented that he was thankful our team had the foresight to put in place a "what if" and therefore whilst the bid was unsuccessful we had been able to create our own legacy which lasted longer than had we won. The Chairman commented that he believed we were probably better off having not winning in the long run.

The Chairman also referred to Pop Recs and MBC, querying if the team had much input with these groups. Ms Ball advised that they had regular conversation, sharing opportunities and joint projects so they had strong relationships with the groups.

The Chairman thanked Ms Ball for her attendance.

Having discussed the report, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the Committee received and noted the report.

Housing Strategy - Update

The Assistant Director of Housing and Communities submitted a report (copy circulated) to seek the views of the Committee on the draft housing strategy.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Katherine Corfield, Housing Strategy Manager and Martin Bewick, Senior Housing Manager presented the report along with PowerPoint presentation and were on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Dixon referred to medium density flats in the City Centre and requested Officers views on their validity and if they felt there was a shortage. Ms Corfield advised that this was more a question for colleagues in City Development however the SHLAA did make reference to these and therefore they went off the data which they agreed with.

In response to Councillor Dixons' enquiry, it was advised that again it was more a question for City Development, but they did have links/meetings with private builders. City Development chairs' sub groups and they have said that they wish to strengthen those relationships but decisions would be taken by City Development.

Councillor Dixon enquired as to the logistics of the construction of Council owned bungalows. Mr Bewick advised that there were different development models as we did not always own the land and could be approached by land owners etc. They have always had a high successful grant rate, higher than the average in the region

so they were getting value for money. They currently had 92 properties at the moment and expected to reach 200 properties by March 2024.

In response to Councillor Dixon's request that more information be supplied when asked for on empty properties in order that he could pass this onto residents when issues were raised, Ms Corfield commented that she absolutely could give data, but cautioned that it may not always be specific details as there may be delicate concerns or issues that could affect the relationship with the owner or could attract antisocial behaviour if empty properties were advertised. Ms Corfield acknowledged that she did think they could work on their correspondence with regards to providing updates and she would take that back to the team.

Councillor Dixon referred to the Privately rented situation and informed that the East Area Committee had hosted an event with landlords and had discussed a similar event with tenants and requested that they bear this in mind for the future. Ms Corfield agreed and commented that they were looking at more ways to carry out engagement now that they had a full compliment of staff.

Councillor Mordey commented that he welcomed this piece of work as a Member of a ward that bordered the City Centre he had experienced the growth of less than desirable properties in the area and enquired if there was anything in the strategy that would see us be able to reduce the number of these being developed as the sheer number coming forward was having a knock on affect as the tenants were not supported, this spilled out into the streets. Councillor Mordey therefore queried if we would be able to crackdown on these particular landlords.

Mr Bewick acknowledged that there were a number of providers with properties in the City known as exempt accommodation. Fortunately we had a very strong benefits department who were very proactive in stopping claims and Sunderland had achieved a reputation that they could not be taken advantage of. There was a programme to work with providers and a project starting in April so the strategy underpinned what they were trying to achieve.

Councillor Mordey commented that he was delighted to hear this and that with all the investment put in, the project may be the perfect timing to deal with the issue.

Councillor Laws referred to student accommodation and stated that the Council did get many negative comments over the amount of applications that come forward and queried if there were any figures or evidence that could be provided on why there was a need for such accommodation. Ms Corfield advised that there were figures and she could provide these. Mr Bewick informed that they did work with the University and had good links to these.

Councillor H. Trueman commented that a Housing Strategy had to be the basis for any City to move forward, therefore we had to follow this. Councillor Trueman referred to ownership of properties and queried if we were looking to have a Housing Corporation, who collected the rents and who would maintain these properties. As we had 92 properties already, what was the number we would get to before we needed a Housing Revenue again.

Mr Bewick advised that we were a Council that offered social housing and that would remain. Once we reached the figure of 200 properties they did expect to open a self

sustaining housing revenue account and it was hoped this would be achieved by April 2024 but they had no plans to turn into a housing corporation.

Councillor H. Trueman queried if we had a fixed flow of funding for getting properties back into use. Mr Bewick informed the Committee that English Partnership had merged with Housing Corporation who had then given funding. These then changed to Homes and Communities and the amount of funding changed with a distinct shift with less for regeneration and more for new builds. Mr Bewick advised that they keep an open line of communication and they buy properties themselves where they do attract grant funding so it was not just Council money but a number of diverse ways to do this.

Councillor Fagan referred to the consultation review and the 24 respondents to this, enquiring if all the feedback was based on those respondents and if so, why was the response so low when the consultation was sent to all households. Ms Corfield confirmed that this was all the feedback and they had spoken with Communications on this and they had engaged with people outside but she did agree that this had been a low response.

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Dixon over where they drew the line in terms of length of time before taking action on an empty property, Mr Bewick advised that the legislation determined what they could and couldn't do and the owners may actually take just enough action that would result in the Council losing in court and this was a costly course of action so they needed to be certain before proceeding down that route.

Councillor Ali referred to private rented sector landlords, commenting that he knew that Officers were doing their best but felt that what they had available at their disposal wasn't enough to help some landlords survive and we needed to think of more ways to help them. Councillor Ali advised that some landlords did not have the money to bring these properties back up to standard and enquired if there was any help being planned.

Mr Bewick informed that they were governed by the rules and bound by parameters so they could only pay what the property was worth and the harsh reality was if the owner had overpaid for the property, they had to live by those consequences.

Councillor Ali commented that he felt we needed to concentrate on other ways of bringing these properties back into use and also referred to the mould issue with gentoo properties, commenting that some instances will have been down to tenants poor practices of ventilation and these were restricting other tenants from getting valid repairs seen to.

Mr Bewick advised that education was provided to tenants on how to dry clothes during winter etc but there were properties that genuinely had issues with mould and Gentoo had a robust method to tackle these.

Councillor Ali commented that he would like to see Environmental Health Officers be trained so they could help advise when visiting also.

Councillor Foster informed that Gentoo did advise on opening windows/allowing the homes to breathe and commented that the installation of cavity wall insulation and such like would be adding to the issue.

Mr Bewick commented that with increased UPVC windows/doors etc the buildings do not breathe like they used to.

The Chairman commented that those properties still with single glazed windows did not complain of damp and mould however they would have the alternative problem of drafts and increased heating costs.

The Chairman thanked Ms Corfield and Mr Bewick for their presentation.

Having discussed the report, it was:-

3. RESOLVED that the Committee received and noted the report.

Annual Work Programme 2021-22

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), to provide options, provide support and advise Members on the development of the scrutiny work programmes for 2022/2023

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Member's information and advise that the February meeting was due to host the City's housing providers and suggested if a separate meeting should be arranged for consideration of Gentoo therefore requested the Committee's thoughts on how to approach the set up, if Members would want to consider each provider at the same meeting but in time slots etc.

The Chairman suggested that the four housing providers be grouped in one meeting and a separate meeting for Gentoo.

Councillor Laws requested that as Gentoo had an interim Chief Executive that they be asked to provide detail about the change/direction of travel.

Councillor Foster commented that he was uncomfortable giving Gentoo their own dedicated meeting as this would appear we were putting them on their own pedestal and all providers should be considered together. The Chairman advised that Gentoo had the biggest proportion of stock and it was felt that most of the queries would be related to this.

Mr Diamond also advised that previous meetings with all providers together had resulted in a very long meeting.

Councillor Dixon commented that if the four housing providers attended and were given 20 minutes each then this would produce a lengthy meeting but this was dependant on all of those providers actually attending.

Councillor H. Trueman commented that he felt there would be a more open discussion with the providers if they were kept separate.

Councillor Warne suggested that the detail of how the meeting operate be left in the hands of the Chairman to determine. Councillor Foster stressed that Members should be allowed an opinion however.

Councillor Dixon suggested that between the Chairman and Mr Diamond, a solution be discussed with partners and then let Members know. This was agreed by Committee.

Councillor Dixon referred to Page 2 of the minutes of the previous meeting and raised that Ms Auld was to supply the information requested. Mr Diamond advised that he would ask Ms Auld to get in touch.

Councillor Fagan referred to the April meeting and the Public Transport Update, enquiring if Nexus was due to attend. Mr Diamond informed that he would check and advise accordingly.

4. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2022-2023 be noted.

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 21st December, 2022 (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.

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

The Chairman thanked Members and Officers for their attendance and closed the meeting

(Signed) D. SNOWDON,
Chairman.