

Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Doris MacKnight

Vice Chair: Cllr Doris Turner

Committee Members: Councillors: James Blackburn, Barry Curran, Michael Dixon, Stephen Foster, Ian Galbraith, Elizabeth Gibson, Julia Jackson, Christine Marshall, Stephen O'Brien and Tony Taylor.

During the year, a key priority for the Committee has been to monitor the progress being made to improve the economic prosperity of the city and deliver the many regeneration initiatives either planned or underway.

Throughout the year, the Committee was consulted on the current position with regard to the Council's Draft Core Strategy and Development Plan 2015-2023. A key strategic document, the Plan will provide the overarching framework for shaping the development and growth in the city in the years ahead. The Committee welcomed the exciting developments contained in the Plan and stressed the importance of ensuring that there sufficient infrastructure in place to accommodate the new housing planned for the city, including roads links, public transport, schools, health and leisure facilities.

On the issue of housing, the Committee also received a progress report on the Council's Housing Strategy 2017-2022. The proposed growth in housing numbers and the need for a better housing offer were considered vital to the long term prosperity of the city. Members were also keen that every avenue was explored for bringing empty properties in to use and tackling the problem of homelessness.

In terms of the regeneration of the city, the Committee once again heard from the Chief Executive of Siglion on the delivery of their plans for the Vaux site, Seaburn and Chapelgarth. It is pleasing that regeneration of the Vaux site is now progressing and Members undertook a highly informative visit to the site in order to view the soon to be completed Beem development which will provide high quality office accommodation together with residential, retail and leisure use.

The Committee also heard about the developments planned for the Bishopwearmouth Conservation area and the Sunderland Heritage Action Zone area; all of which should help to preserve and restore the Sunderland's historic core and improve the appearance of the city centre.

The Committee also received an update on the work of the private sector led Business Improvement District (BID). We were pleased to hear that in November 2018 local businesses had voted to renew the BID project for a further five years. We heard about the initiatives planned to encourage footfall and vibrancy in the city centre including a programme of events and improvements to the local environment.

The significance of events was also highlighted in a series of reports the Committee received on the economic impact of three major events held in the city during 2018; the Tall Ships Race, the Sunderland Airshow and the Sunderland Illuminations and Festival of Light. The Committee heard that an assessment commissioned had found that the combined economic impact of these three events was in the region of £24 million and that each had been well attended and had high visitor satisfaction rates.

In setting its work programme for the year, the Committee felt that it was important to hear more about the views of the business sector on the economic opportunities and challenges facing the city. Jonathan Walker Assistant Director of the North East Chamber of Commerce noted that the local economy was by and large performing well and was particularly strong in the advanced manufacturing, engineering and digital sectors. However he felt that the chief areas of risk lay in the uncertainty and risk surrounding the UK's exit from the European Union and the nationwide down turn in the high street retail sector. As with many other areas of the country, more needed to be done to improve the city's skills base and levels of productivity to prevent these being a significant constraint on future economic growth.

In order to hear more about the work being done to improve the level of skills in the city, the Committee visited Sunderland College to hear more about their contribution to the economy and skills base of the city and, in particular, their role as the main provider of apprenticeships in the city. Members were impressed by the commitment and ambition of the College and its role in raising the achievements of its students. Clearly the College is committed to working with the business sector and helping to provide our young people with the skills to meet the job opportunities that will be needed in the future. We were interested to hear about the work going on in schools to provide career advice for young people and raise the profile of apprenticeships.

Another major project being undertaken in the city is the development of the International Advanced Manufacturing Park (IAMP). Comprising 260,000 sq. metres of business space on a 100 hectare site, the IAMP will have a massive impact on the city and region creating around 5,200 jobs and bringing in around £300m of private investment over the next ten years. Again, the Committee heard about the very encouraging progress being made.

Following on from last year's work programme, the Committee received an update on city's three business centres – the Evolve Business Centre, Sunderland Software Centre and the Washington Business Centre. These act to encourage growth in expanding areas of the economy, such as IT and software and help to diversify the local economy as a whole. The Committee heard about the measures being taken to improve the operation and efficiency of the centres. We look forward to seeing continuing improvements in the occupancy figures for Sunderland Software Centre.

The Committee also has within its remit the provision environmental services within the city. In April 2017 a new Environmental Policy was introduced following recommendations made from this Committee. The Committee heard

about the progress that had been made since the adoption of the new policy and the additional resources that had been made available for its enforcement. The Committee expressed its support for the further development of enforcement initiatives into the future. The Committee has also looked in detail at the treatment of household waste in the city and to this end visited our waste transfer centre at Jack Crawford House and the South Tyne and Wear Waste Management Facility located in Billingham. We also looked at the system for the collection and treatment of recyclable waste by visiting the Material Recovery Facility Plan in Hartlepool. All of these visits graphically highlighted the complicated nature of the treatment of waste and the importance of developing an effective communications strategy to make our residents aware of how best to recycle.

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.

Councillor Doris MacKnight
Chair of the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee