

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC CENTRE on TUESDAY 9TH NOVEMBER 2021 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

Councillors Ali, M. Dixon, Edgeworth, Fagan, Foster, Greener, Laws, Price, Thornton and Warne.

Also in attendance: -

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Mark Wilson, Future Infrastructure Manager, Sunderland City Council
Ms Sharon Appleby, Sunderland Business Improvement District
Mr Jonathan Walker, North East Chamber of Commerce

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

Apologies for Absence

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

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12th October 2021

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12th October, 2021 was submitted.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 12th October, 2021 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest

Change in Order of Business

The Chairman advised that the Business Improvement District Update and Chamber of Commerce Update reports would be considered first to allow the presenting officers external to the Council to leave afterwards.

Business Improvement District (BID) – Annual Update

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with a progress report on the work of the Sunderland Business Improvement District (BID).

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Ms Sharon Appleby, presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor M. Dixon wished to congratulate Ms Appleby on their success at the recent Silver Stars Awards and on their work carried out over the Covid period. In relation to the mention of ASB within Ms Appleby's presentation, Councillor Dixon enquired what this included and the locations, such as the Bridges or Sunnyside?

Ms Appleby advised that this included a range of issues such as burglaries and youth ASB in areas such as Sunnyside and large groups drinking in Market Square. The statistics for the burglaries were showing that this was being brought under control thankfully and additional resource was made available to try and keep on top of these issues.

Councillor M. Dixon advised of the Committee's Sunnyside Quarter Working Group and suggested that through the Chairman, this may be something that could benefit from Ms Appleby's expertise. The Chairman advised that the working group had been raised with Ms Appleby.

In response to Councillor Dixon's enquiry over the Sunnyside Group and what they did, Ms Appleby advised that they were a group which celebrated what the Sunnyside Quarter provided, promoting what was in the area and worked closely with the Council and Police, dealing with issues when they arose and ensuring a long term strategy, whilst trying to regenerate the area that they deal with the issues presently being experienced.

With regards to Councillor Dixon's enquiry over the BID's links to the University and if they were happy with the level of contact they had, Ms Appleby advised that they worked very closely with the University and they were also trying to build relationships with the Student Unions but this had been made harder due to the pandemic and students having to access studies remotely.

Ms Appleby commented that prior to Covid, students did not tend to use the City Centre enough and they were trying to carry out a piece of work on enticing students to come into the city centre and to stay. There was also a keenness to see a greater link to the two campuses. Ms Appleby also commented that in relation to student accommodation she didn't think that there was enough good quality accommodation in the City Centre and that was one thing that should be looked at along with ensuring we were offering what students needed.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that there were many positives such as Mackies Corner and the Elephant Tea Room developments for instance, but there were also

some negatives such as empty properties like the Place and D'acqua and enquired if there was a particular trend which caused such closures, which seemed especially striking around the Cinema area of Sunnyside.

Ms Appleby advised that the appearance around the Cinema did give this impression however the Bowling Alley was very busy with patrons generally stopping within for long periods of time, so it gave a false impression of the area being unused/unfrequented. Ms Appleby advised that there were definitely more businesses opening than closing so on the face of it there was more positive stories than negative occurring.

Councillor Edgeworth enquired as to what engagement the BID carried out with people to find out what they thought of the City Centre, their concerns over store closures such as Debenhams and also enquired if it was felt there was anything more the Council should be doing with regards to cleanliness/state of the City Centre.

Ms Appleby informed the Committee that they survey consumers on a regular basis at events, there had been some taken at the recent Halloween events but they hadn't been able to do this for some time due to Covid. Ultimately it was the businesses that they mainly had to respond to as they were the ones funding the BID.

Ms Appleby advised that talks were ongoing as to what would occupy the Debenhams site and whilst the closure had resulted in a short term impact it was felt that in the medium to long term it would be far better offer than it was before, as a lot of work was ongoing around this. It was the intention that this would be a more leisure, food and drink, entertainment type of offering.

In regards to cleanliness, Ms Appleby agreed that this was an issue, which was why they had purchased equipment and carried out recruitment. There had been a massive will and resource put in by the Council and the BID could not ask for them to do more on this and they just needed the boots on the ground now.

Councillor Ali wished to congratulate Ms Appleby on her work and also on the Christmas Ice Rink proposals as part of the Festive programme. Councillor Ali referred to the ASB in the City Centre and commented that many of the businesses and Police he spoke to, advised that they weren't receiving help and he felt it was unfair to blame them.

Ms Appleby commented that there was no blame made and that they work in partnership which was why additional resources had been put in, but there were issues that definitely needed addressing. Ms Appleby commented that we could always benefit from additional police presence on the streets and that businesses could also be doing more to report instances.

Councillor Ali advised that it was not an easy process to report instances and many businesses had commented on this. A business owner within Mackies Corner has had their windows smashed numerous times and it was starting to become a real issue and couldn't be sugar coated.

Ms Appleby agreed that it was definitely an issue and that it had been organised for the Crime Prevention Team to go in and speak with the businesses around that area but a whole range of additional support was needed. Ms Appleby informed that there were a number of things going on to deal with that particular issue along with other issues in the surrounding areas.

In relation to Debenhams, Councillor Ali accepted that the stores closure may have been a victim of the times but he would like to see another department store brought in its place, even if it were a smaller store similar to other areas which have achieved this. Councillor Ali felt this should be aimed for rather than just more leisure and bars.

Ms Appleby commented that we did need a department store but Debenhams was a huge space and would never be replaced like for like and she would like to see new up and coming local, ethical brands coming in to revitalise the store.

Councillor Ali made reference to comments at previous meetings about the Metrocentre experiencing the same issues of stores closing yet they were still attracting a Harrod's affiliated brand, and we should be shooting for the stars in this regard also. Ms Appleby commented that we needed to concentrate on the brilliant local independent businesses for now and the Riverside Plans, once they came to fruition would enable us to look and attract the Harrod's affiliated style stores.

The Chairman enquired if the perpetrators of the graffiti within the City Centre were ever caught by the Police. Ms Appleby advised that on some occasions, but not all, they were apprehended.

In response to the Chairman's enquiry over the Business Breakfasts, Ms Appleby advise that these were happening and were a mix between the smaller and bigger businesses with Patrick Melia and Peter McIntyre. The first one had been held in August and the next one was due to be in December and was something ongoing.

Ms Appleby was thanked by the Chairman for her attendance

2. RESOLVED that the progress report be received and noted.

Chamber of Commerce - Update

The Scrutiny and Members Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide the Committee with a progress report from the Chamber of Commerce on the economic opportunities and challenges facing the city in the years ahead.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Jonathan Walker of North East Chamber of Commerce presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor Ali referred to the flexibility the banks were showing on the payback of the furlough loans issued and queried if this made any difference in the survey results undertaken as part of their studies.

Mr Walker advised that this was a fair point as the announcements on the flexibility had been made after the studies were carried out and the Chamber of Commerce were grateful for such flexibility but whilst the level would fall, their overall concern was that if there would remain the ability to pay back those loans and he was not sure the 6 months period given would be enough.

Councillor Ali commented that the situation may not appear as gloomy as suggested as businesses got through the recent period and other factors needed to be considered. Mr Walker advised that the concern was about the resilience of businesses and their ability to absorb any further shocks but they had enormous respect for the current businesses in the North East and how they had coped during the last few years.

Councillor Edgeworth enquired if the Chamber of Commerce had carried out any work on possible devolution deals for the North East. Mr Walker advised that there were still a lot of unanswered questions around the new models/deals. Mr Walker added that it was felt the country was far too centralised and that decisions affecting regional economies should be taken as local as possible and it was their view that they wanted more devolution and for business to be part of that and get the best deal possible.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to the shortages of staff and queried if Mr Walker could explain why this was still an issue, when the living wage increase was being implemented and if this was due to Brexit, the pandemic or a mixture of both.

Mr Walker advised that it was a number of factors but undoubtedly a combination of both Brexit and the pandemic affecting the hospitality, logistics and leisure sectors in different ways. We were also starting to see the result of peoples lifestyle changes due to the pandemic, which had caused the perception of the hospitality sector to be more risky and unsociable places to work.

Mr Walker added that big logistics firms which had seen an increase in business were giving more generous joining bonuses which was also draining the pool of staff away from other sectors. The acceleration of retirement plans and voluntary redundancies was also a factor.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that people's employment prospects were quite good then if they wanted to find work, it was available. Mr Walker advised that this was true in parts but there were specific skill shortages in sectors such as digital and engineering sectors and there was also a historical lack of apprenticeships.

In response to Councillor Dixon's query as to why there was a disparity with Sunderland's higher figures in the North East, Mr Walker advised that the North Easts figures were skewed by the more affluent parts such as Northumberland but as Sunderland had historically, lower health outcomes, if a population wasn't as healthy as other parts of the country, this affected the ability to work and the reputation to invest in the region.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to the list of negatives provided within the presentation on Brexit and enquired if there was any examples of good news/positives for their Members, if Mr Walker was able to inform of any short to medium term benefits and

as it was a new system , if the mentality of businesses could change once they got used to the new way of working.

Mr Walker advised that most businesses were accepting of the new system and the added bureaucracy. In terms of positives, the national conversation had shed a light on the huge side of exporting and this was now taken far more seriously in government level and policy level which should open up more opportunities.

Mr Walker also informed the Committee that previous EU funding had come with much tighter rules which the new levelling up funds were less restrictive on, however the caveat on this was that the North East was yet to see any of this funding.

The Chairman wished to echo comments made on how resilient the North East businesses had been and praised their ability to diversify more during the pandemic.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Mr Walker on behalf of the Committee for his attendance

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Draft Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan - Consultation

The Executive Director of City Development submitted a report (copy circulated) to seek the Committees views on the Council's Draft Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Mark Wilson, Future Infrastructure Manager, presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation and was on hand to answer Members queries.

In response to Councillor Ali's query over the statistics provided in the presentation, Mr Wilson advised that the population breakdowns may render the figures slightly incorrect and he would look to get the detail broken down further.

Councillor Fagan referred to identifying barriers and informed that during the Sunderland Illuminations event, the signage for temporary road closures had been knocked down and in many cases encroached into the cycling/walking paths. With the growth of street furniture and these signs taking up valuable space if cyclists were forced onto the road they might not bother cycling as it became too dangerous.

Councillor Edgeworth raised the concern over getting people in more deprived areas to cycle as it was very costly to obtain bikes etc and if thought had been given on the different criteria to interact.

Mr Wilson advised that it was a careful balance proposed in the document to mark against all criteria and to give various funding scenarios. They would identify areas of low uptake in cycling and target those with schemes and it would be a whole package of things to provide a process of targets based on objectives.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to a scheme recently installed within his Ward and raised concerns that it hadn't been very satisfactory. The consultation and statistics

used did not always reflect what the residents wanted in the area and the scheme installed was not hugely used. Councillor M. Dixon therefore asked that residents and Ward Councillors be consulted on any proposals and learn from doing things differently in the future.

Mr Wilson assured the Committee that every scheme would be subject to a thorough consultation beforehand.

Councillor Greener commented that the cycle track on either side of the A690, on the way to Durham was never used and a greater benefit would have been a wider road so we did need to look into greater depth which schemes were actually needed.

Councillor Greener also suggested that this project needed to start with our schools and to get the children into the mindset of cycling and walking from an early age.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Mr Wilson for his attendance

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and the Committees comments on the Draft Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan be noted.

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 2021/2022

(For copy report – see original minutes).

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Members information

5. RESOLVED that the information contained in the work programme for 2021-2022 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 18th October, 2021 (copies circulated).

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

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer reminded Members to contact him if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

6. 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.