At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in COMMITTEE ROOM 1, CITY HALL on TUESDAY 13 JANUARY 2026 at 4.30pm

Present: -

Councillor Price in the Chair

Councillors Dixon, Donkin, Guy, Newey, Reed and G. Smith

Also in attendance: -

Pamela Collins, Regulatory Compliance Manager
Philip Scott, Principal Environmental Health Officer
Gillian Robinson, Scrutiny, Mayoral and Member Support Manager
James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer
Paul Wood, Principal Democratic Services Officer

Members of the Press

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were submitted to the meeting on behalf of Councillors Fagan, Foster and Scanlan.

Minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 2 December 2025

A copy of the minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2025 were submitted.

(For copy reports – see original minutes).

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 2 December 2025 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record subject to the inclusion of the additions below:-

   Councillor Lindsey Leonard, Portfolio Holder Environment, Transport and Net Zero informed the Committee on wider service improvements including the digitisation of the Play Team Inspection Forms, the optimisation of the Refuse collection routes by using the new Bartec software, accessing the collected refuse data to make routes/collections as efficient as it could be, and the Christmas Collection Dates which were included in the weekly newsletter as well as online.

   Councillor Leonard also referred to the recent Council Motion – ‘Cleaner streets for Sunderland’ and commented that the Environmental Services presentation/report received tonight included an update on what Council had asked Cabinet to do, and what actions had been taken. It was felt this was the most relevant Scrutiny Committee to consider feeding back to, and to being held to account regarding the Motion and consequent actions by

Cabinet and Officers. Councillor Dixon suggested that Area Committees could also give consideration.

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest.

Fire Safety in Hise Rise Building

The Assistant Director of Regulatory Services submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide an update on the fire safety in high rise building in the city.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Pamela Collins, Regulatory Compliance Manager and Philip Scott, Principal Environmental Health Officer were in attendance to present the report along with PowerPoint presentation and to answer any Member queries.

Councillor Guy queried if there was anything within the Mayoral Local Plan which stood out in terms of key highlights. Mr Scott advised that the Mayoral Plan aligned quite consistently with the National Plan and the targets set. This provided additional resource in the Authority to manage the process of remediation so there were no highlights that stood out as such.

Councillor Guy referred to Durham House in Washington and queried who would be in charge of any safety issues there. Mr Scott advised that if there were no residential properties within a building then the regulator for non residential high rise cladding issues etc would be the Fire Service. The regulator for work purposes would depend upon the activity being carried out.

In response to Councillor Reed's queries, Mr Scott advised that all 31 Buildings within Sunderland had been inspected and that the new elements that enforcement could be taken over included unreasonable delays for example and if a developer were to be seen to be dragging their feet on remediation works, they could then issue legal notices and then fines should there be non-compliance.

Councillor Reed enquired as to the Council tolerance levels. Mr Scott informed that they worked within the parameters of the guidance to give timelines and it is a reasonable period of time, based on the complexity of issues/works. As these could be complex cases which required a long time to resolve in comparison to smaller buildings.

Councillor Reed referred to the Grenfell tragedy and the issue highlighted in the recent documentary of undocumented people living within the buildings which the fire service had been unaware of and queried if there were any such concerns within the building in Sunderland. Mr Scott advised of fire risk assessments within the buildings and that whilst occupancy could change day to day the assessments process was there for the continued operation of the building.

In response to Councillor Donkin's query over the £100k Legal Proceedings grant given and if there was the potential to exceed this, Mr Scott advised that this was set up by the Government as a support fund to deal with the process and if the work cost less than the £100k, the difference would be returned. The budget was being monitored on a monthly basis and the full amount had not been reached as yet and they were waiting for the current costs. Ms Collins advised that it was difficult to predict the ultimate costs as they could not gauge what timeframes those involved responded to etc.

Councillor Dixon enquired if Officers met regularly with Gentoo to review work on High Rise Buildings. Mr Scott informed that they have inroads with the Safety Manager at Gentoo and the Fire Authority assess all high rise buildings so if something were to be flagged we would look to see what the plans for remediation were. With regards to partnership working Mr Scott advised that they had great links with both Gentoo and the Fire Service so were working well.

In respect of the three high rise buildings to be demolished, Mr Scott advised that this was purely a decision from Gentoo and the Council have had no input regarding this.

Councillor Newey referred to the constantly changing environmental regulations year on year and queried how Officers dealt with any changes and if this led to a constant level of inspections. Ms Collins commented that they had clear links with the Government and they find out quickly with advanced notice of any changes that could affect them so this allowed them to align processes and be up to speed on regulatory requirements.

In relation to communications with residents when any defects were discovered, Mr Scott advised that the duty holder, the landlord, was responsible to communicate with the residents and he understood that Gentoo were quite good in this area.

Councillor G. Smith enquired as to the help for disabled people during evacuations of high rise buildings. Mr Scott informed that as part of fire risk assessments there were personal evacuation plans which were the duty of the landlord to provide and review.

Councillor Donkin raised that the personal evacuation plans for Grenfell had advised residents to "stay put" and queried if the plans within Sunderland had been reviewed as a result of this and if they had been proven to be adequate. Mr Scott informed that in relation to the High Rise Buildings that the Council have a interest in, they had been reviewed and were determined to be adequate but he could not speak for Gentoo and their buildings.

There being no further questions, the Chairperson thanked the Officers for their report and it was then: -

2. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted.

Regulation of the Privately Rented Housing Sector

The Assistant Director of Regulatory Services submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide an update on the regulation of the privately rented housing sector.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Pamela Collins, Regulatory Compliance Manager and Philip Scott, Principal Environmental Health Officer were in attendance to present the report along with PowerPoint presentation and to answer any Member queries.

In relation to Councillor Guy's query over the Category Rating System contained within the presentation, Mr Scott advised that Officers used their own judgement and then provided a numerical score, examples under Category 1 could include deficient heating systems whereas category 2 could be where a staircase didn't have a correct handrail for instance.

Councillor Guy commented that he had seen some shocking cases in his experience of student accommodation and he felt there was a pessimism amongst students when living in HMO's and that it was a very exploitative industry in terms of lack of repairs undertaken etc. Councillor Guy queried if Officers had undertaken any work with the Universities.

Mr Scott confirmed that they had worked with Sunderland University representatives and attended freshers fairs but had to be honest that the student take up for this had not been great, attendance wise.

Councillor Reed referred to the figures on minimum room sizes for licensing HMO's and if these were the national minimum room sizes and if we could add to these independently. Mr Scott confirmed that these were national minimum sizing but the Council could introduce their own policy for larger minimum sizes if they so wished, but these wouldn't apply to those properties already in place.

Councillor Reed queried if a landlord were found to fail a test on a specific property, could they then be rejected for any future applications for properties elsewhere. Mr Scott informed that the specifics on each individual case were considered independently and it could also depend on the nature of the previous failure and if they had been found guilty of exploitation etc or if it was terms of care/repair work.

In terms of inspecting all HMO's, these were all inspected at least once upon being licensed and then reinspected dependant on the risk of the properties and their potential vulnerability of residents for example.

Councillor Reed referred to some concerns from constituents regarding suspicions over more residents living within HMO's than stated and queried if it were possible to inspect all HMO's across the city to allay resident fears. Ms Collins commented that this was something they could consider but they currently used an intelligence based system to react when information was brought to light. They would have to give

careful consideration to city wide inspection and wasn't something they could commit to at this meeting.

Councillor Donkin wished to thank the Officers for agreeing to look at a case passed onto him via a constituent and he would provide details of this to Officers outside of meeting. Councillor Donkin referred to the 16 properties that required improvement and queried of these landlords, how many owned multiple properties and would this trigger an inspection of those other properties or would they monitor those.

Councillor Donkin also commented that in relation to HMO's, there appeared to be a scourge of Airbnb's popping up within the City and enquired if these were monitored as they seemed to be very fluid. Ms Collins agreed that these were very fluid and advised that as Airbnb's were not permanent residences they fell outside of the scope of these regulations but assured Members that should they have any concerns over a property, to let Officers know and they would have Council colleagues give it consideration.

Councillor Guy commented that he believed there was a possible bill being proposed in relation to Airbnb's at the moment.

In relation to the 16 properties that required improvement, Mr Scott advised that he would have to take a look at those but there were none that he could call to mind that were one owner of multiple properties.

Councillor Dixon commented that there was a massive concentration of HMO's around the Park Lane area and he felt that some random inspections of these would be good, especially with families coming in from other parts of the world, he was not sure what conditions they could be living in. Councillor Dixon also queried how Officers worked with the landlords on this. Mr Scott advised that under the Housing Act they had to notify the landlords before any inspection and once assessed any hazards, if these were Category 1 then a notice would be issued. Mr Scott added that the procedure wasn't a quick process, especially if there was limited contact from the landlord.

In response to Councillor Dixon, Mr Scott advised that it was between the Landlord and the tenants responsibility to rehome the tenant if work/repairs were needed.

Councillor Dixon referred to the empty homes policy and commented that it appeared there had been a reboot of this and that the previous work done on this had not been successful which concerned him and it felt like we were starting from scratch again. Ms Collins assured the Committee that it was more due to the Policy having been reviewed as it was at the end of its cycle and they were looking to build upon what they had done previously and applying additional skills and tools to deal with these more difficult cases so she hoped it would not appear a backward step and more of an improvement to compliment the existing process.

In response to Councillor Newey's query, Mr Scott advised that in terms of minimum room sizes, the cut off to determine a child's bedroom was age 10 and over that would be an adults bedroom size. In terms of notification of inspections, the landlord

and the tenant would be notified and the timeframes were to give a clear 24 hours but in practice a full week was given in order to cater for the postal service.

There being no further questions, the Chairperson thanked the Officers for their report and it was then: -

3. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Renters' Rights Act 2025

The Assistant Director of Regulatory Services submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide an update on the implications of the Renters' Rights Act.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Pamela Collins, Regulatory Compliance Manager and Philip Scott, Principal Environmental Health Officer were in attendance to present the report along with PowerPoint presentation and to answer any Member queries.

Councillor Guy commented that the Act seemed very positive and he was keen to see how it would go.

Councillor Reed referred to the costings for the additional enforcements and if this had been funded for. Ms Collins advised that they had received additional funding and they expected that once the database was in place and fees were being collected, the landlords percentage would be ringfenced for future use.

In response to Councillor Reed's enquiry as to any signs that landlords were evicting tenants or raising rents in preparation for this Act coming in, Mr Scott informed that they hadn't seen any examples of this and that there were already some protections in place now for this.

Councillor Reed cautioned that landlords may become more selective about their tenants if they are unable to evict anymore and queried if Officers would be keeping an eye on any negative effects this could have on young people for example. Mr Scott advised that the Housing Options Team record the reasons for claiming homelessness and this would be part of the discussions amongst the teams should it occur.

Ms Collins added that as well as working with the Options Team to monitor this, any eviction would have to be evidence based.

Councillor Donkin queried if there were any protections a tenant could have if a landlord claimed to sell a property purely in order to evict a resident. Mr Scott advised that if the tenant was made to leave a property which was not then sold, they could claim up to 24 months worth of rent back so this policy was self policing in effect.

Councillor Donkin commented that it felt there was a gap in the tools available in respect of landlords selling properties to another landlord and that he did find this concerning.

Councillor Dixon commented that this proposal had been on the cards for some time and the general consensus seemed to be that the legislation had more intensity and queried if the accredited landlords in the City had been consulted on this and what their reaction was. Ms Collins confirmed that they had consulted with the accredited landlords and they had already been sent a copy of the Act. The general feeling was that if they were good landlords, they were already doing what the legislation required.

Councillor Dixon requested Officer opinions on scrapping of Section 21 and strengthening Section 8. Ms Collins commented that the outcome was positive and they could implement with best endeavours and measure for themselves.

In response to Councillor Newey's query over what main impacts this Bill would have, Ms Collins advised that the enforcement powers would be very useful. Mr Scott added that there was the added need to produce evidence now and even bank information which gave them greater powers to investigate.

The Chairman wished to thank the Officers for a great presentation which had proved very valuable and enquired if they worked hand in hand with the Housing Options Team and Homelessness Team and if there was any overlap on this. Mr Scott confirmed that there was lots of overlap between the teams and regular conversations to assist on issues such as referrals of illegal practices and undue process reports for example.

There being no further questions, the Chairperson thanked the Officers for their attendance and it was then: -

4. RESOLVED that the report be received and noted

Annual Work Programme 2025/2026

The Scrutiny and Members' Support Co-ordinator submitted a report (copy circulated), for the Committee to consider and agree the work programme for the municipal year 2025/26.

(For copy report – see original minutes).

James Diamond, Scrutiny Officer presented the report for Members' information and possible suggestions/comments.

5. 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 17 December 2025 (copies circulated).

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

The Scrutiny Officer reminded Members to get in touch if they required further information on any of the items included in the notice.

In response to Councillor Dixon's query, the Chairperson advised that the Portfolio Holder had been invited to the meeting but unfortunately had been unable to attend on this occasion.

Councillor Newey wished to request if future presentations could be included in the agenda papers for Members to study before a meeting rather than receive these on the day. The Chairperson agreed that this would be more beneficial to allow Members to have more time to formulate questions for Officers.

It was agreed that Mr Diamond to obtain the following information as below:

25114/1032 – To seek approval for procurement of banking and pre-paid card services - For Councillor Reed

25/1208/1035 – To seek approval for the procurement of a marketing services framework – For Councillor Donkin

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

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

(Signed) J. PRICE
Chair