

At a meeting of the ECONOMIC PROSPERITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held in the COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC CENTRE on TUESDAY 12TH OCTOBER 2021 at 4.30 p.m.

Present: -

Councillor D. Snowdon in the Chair

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

Also in attendance: -

Mr Jim Diamond, Scrutiny Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Paul Wood, Principal Governance Services Officer, Sunderland City Council
Mr Steve Wearing, Principal Licensing Officer
Mr Peter McIntyre, Executive Director of City Development
Mr Paul Littlefair, Development Director, Major Projects

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

Apologies for Absence

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Councillor Warne

Minutes of the Last Ordinary Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 14th September 2021

A copy of the minutes of the last ordinary meeting of the Scrutiny Committee held on 14th September, 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 14th September, 2021 (copy circulated), be confirmed and signed as a correct record

Declarations of Interest (including Whipping Declarations)

There were no declarations of interest

Reference from Cabinet – Gambling Act 2005 – Statement of Principles

The Executive Director of Neighbourhoods submitted a report (copy circulated) to advise on the outcome of the consultation exercise concerning the Council's Draft Statement of Principles under the Gambling Act 2005, ("the Draft Statement")

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Steve Wearing, Principal Licensing Officer, presented the report and was on hand to answer Members queries.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that he very much welcomed the report and it was heartening to see the statement on page 11 of the agenda that statistics showed that problem gambling might finally be seeing a reduction and a commitment to spend money year on year for research and education.

Councillor M. Dixon enquired if there was anything the Council was compulsorily required to do, such as inspections with Betting shops, similar to an Ofsted inspection that schools receive. Mr Wearing advised that like any licensing review, this was intelligence led so if complaints were received these would be investigated. Officers proactively carry out inspections also and rarely find problems in the running of these businesses.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that the Local Plan takes a harder line for the granting of fast food establishments near schools and such like and enquired if the Local Authority were able to apply a similar criteria on betting shops. Mr Wearing advised that potentially this was possible and all applications were subject to a consultation process with all comments received considered. Mr Wearing advised that they had only received two applications within the last few years so it was very small numbers that they were dealing with.

Councillor Greener raised the concern that whilst there wasn't a great rate of known gambling problems, this tended to be an issue an addict kept secret or wouldn't admit to therefore there was still a need to look at this as a possible issue.

Mr Wearing commented that there were a lot of concerns nationwide over gambling addiction, but it was difficult as a Local Authority they could only regulate the premises available on their High Streets and it was possibly part of the bigger picture that the Authority discuss this with other partners, however they were limited on the Statement of Principles in terms of what they could actually deal with.

Councillor Taylor commented that he welcomed the report and queried if the overall decline of betting shops, mentioned on page 11 of the agenda was also true in the Washington Area. Mr Wearing confirmed that they hadn't seen any new applications in the last couple of years.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to the submission made by Gosschalks on behalf of the Betting and Gaming Council, commenting that it seemed a constructive response and queried if there was a good relationship here with the local authority. Mr Wearing advised that there was certainly a good relationship as they wanted to work with businesses and have an understanding of each other's respective roles.

Councillor Laws referred to a report commissioned on the geography of betting shops which indicated that the overwhelming majority were located in the most deprived areas, these areas generally had people who may not have much of a voice and very likely meant the full extent of the problems were not being picked up. Councillor Laws queried how we tackled this issue, how we change the processes to see the damage done as the industry was targeting the more vulnerable who were suffering in deprivation.

Mr Wearing informed the Committee that the betting companies signed up to a social responsibility charter that Officers assess during their inspections and they expect staff to be vigilant and identify customers that may be showing signs of vulnerability. Mr Wearing also advised that they have to be led by intelligence to approach these businesses and make them aware of their responsibilities.

The Chairman commented that many betting firms encouraged online betting which was easier for users but resulted in difficulties gauging how many people were partaking and getting into difficulties/becoming addicted. Mr Wearing advised that they could not control online betting as a local authority, and this was a much wider problem that needed partners and stakeholders to come together to tackle.

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

2. RESOLVED that the report be received, noted and that their approval be submitted to Cabinet for approval under the relevant provision of the Gambling Act 2005 at its meeting of the 16th November 2021.

Future High Street Fund Programme and Sunderland Rail Station

The Executive Director of City Development submitted a report (copy circulated) to provide progress reports on the Future High Street Fund Programme and Sunderland Rail Station.

(For copy report – see original minutes)

Mr Peter McIntyre, Executive Director of City Development presented the report along with a PowerPoint presentation on the Future High Street Fund Programme.

Mr Paul Littlefair, Development Director, Major Projects provided the PowerPoint presentation on the Sunderland Rail Station and both officers were on hand to answer Members queries.

In response to Councillor Fagan's enquiry over the ground floor plans for the Elephant Team Rooms, Mr McIntyre advised that the upper floor was ornate and original whereas the ground floor had been decimated by recent uses. Work and discussions were being undertaken to restore these and once the Culture House became operational the building would be put to the market, but the next step was to get the right treatment and get the building into a better condition.

In response to Councillor Fagan's query over if the shops at Crowtree were to be cleared, Mr McIntyre advised that a solid answer could not be given as yet due to some of the assets belonging to private owners. A comprehensive plan was being developed and an architectural movement to retain some aspects of historical natures and they were trying to figure out what could be achieved as ideally, they wished to recreate Crowtree Road and access to Keel Square so work was ongoing, but it wasn't settled yet.

Councillor Edgeworth enquired if the heritage stipulations at Crowtree would be taken into account when designing future plans. Mr McIntyre informed that the sensitivity of the area would be taken into consideration during the planning process.

Councillor Foster commented that the report and plans were really good and catered for the cultural area however he was disappointed in the commercial aspect and the promise which had not been kept regarding replacing bowling facilities but overall the development looked fantastic.

In response to Councillor M. Dixon's query if there were any plans at all for the bowling facilities, Mr McIntyre advised that there were currently none planned.

Councillor M. Dixon wished to congratulate the Council on beating off strong competition to obtain the maximum funding and advised that he had attended a recent seminar on the Culture House which was going to be a very exciting place and queried if this had played its part in securing the funding in the first place as it was such a unique place with so many possibilities.

Mr McIntyre informed that the inclusion of the Culture House certainly did not harm our bid as there were right and proper things for public money to be spent on and to anchor the Riverside development around something as ambitious as Culture House certainly helped. Mr McIntyre expanded that the uniqueness about Culture House was that not only was it a 21st Century interpretation of a Library but it also was able to piggyback upon the move towards digital connectivity.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that some of the suggestions for its use were so widespread it would be a challenge to incorporate as many uses and as many age groups as possible without the risk of falling between two stools and not fully capturing any of them. Mr McIntyre cautioned that we also had to be aware of other buildings and their offer in the area such as the new auditorium and we would consider the diverse ecology available.

Councillor M. Dixon referred to the Committee's working Group considering the Sunnyside area and enquired if the Future High Street Fund would eventually spill into the rest of the City such as Sunnyside, John Street and Fawcett Street areas for example. Mr McIntyre advised that there was currently a lot of interest commercially in John Street at present and the strategy for the City Centre had a clear investment corridor from the Civic Centre to the Stadium of Light and the scale of investment had to send out waves that other areas benefit from. Sunnyside area did however need to find its own way and discussions were taking place with the Government over housing units there along with units for creative entrepreneurs.

Mr McIntyre also informed that they had launched a marketing programme on behalf of the Sunnyside traders and there was a willingness to support the change that was needed but it would be a constant regeneration that would take longer than people think.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that the area around the Cinema in Sunnyside worried him as there were decent properties available, yet the area was dead. Mr McIntyre agreed that it was poor and needed to do better and he was happy to join the working group in situ to throw ideas around and advise in more depth what the opportunities of investment were there.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that from a personal point of view he would welcome the walk around suggested if this was agreeable to the Chair and wished to congratulate officers on the other parts of the city and its development so far.

Councillor Ali referred to the £25 million funding obtained and commented that it wasn't luck that this had been achieved as the City had been in decline for decades and this money should've been given a long time ago.

Councillor Ali commented that during the pandemic, our economy grew by 0.4% in Sunderland, mainly due to the number of public sector jobs in the region and the area was split between the have's and the have nots so there were plenty of people with disposable income but they were just not spending it in our city centre and preferred Durham or Newcastle's offer therefore Councillor Ali felt that we really needed to look at and work to try and attract retail that would bring people in to spend their money here.

Councillor Ali also commented that we could not keep blaming Covid or online sales as Newcastle were keeping their marquee stores such as Fenwick's open.

Mr McIntyre commented that historically Sunderland had been good at suburbanising itself which hollowed out the City Centre but the Riverside masterplan absolutely caters for "those that have" along with office space and the new hotel having high quality retails space included also.

Mr McIntyre advised that some events could not be controlled by the Council as the Sunderland Debenhams store was the 24th best performing store in the country and yet still closed so the way forward was not just chains but quality, independent retailers which the footprint they were developing would attract the people Councillor Ali talked of.

Mr McIntyre advised that businesses were coming into the City now that wouldn't have considered doing so two years ago due to the quality contained within the Riverside plans. The City Centre right now was failing, not just due to covid and the economy mainly held up due to the manufacturing jobs in the region.

In response to Councillor Ali's comment that small independent businesses couldn't afford the rents of the Bridges, Mr McIntyre advised that there wasn't a one size fits all approach.

Councillor Ali also queried why we could not attract the type of family run businesses such as Fenwick's which would make a big difference and also queried if there was a need for another hotel, being built at Keel Square.

Mr McIntyre informed that we were a tourist city that did not have a 4* city centre hotel, the Holiday Inn would have food and beverage capability on the ground floor and there was absolutely a need for higher quality infrastructure and really good quality hotels as this was one of the things Sunderland was missing.

With regards to independent businesses, Councillor Taylor suggested that a conversation with Sharon Appleby of Sunderland BID be beneficial as she provided opportunities for businesses to grow.

Councillor Taylor also commented that other areas were seeing a decline with the Metrocentre suffering at present with many businesses closing but he wished to congratulate officers on a very good report which was very encouraging.

The Chairman advised that Ms Appleby was due to come to a future meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Greener queried if parking charges would be looked at as many comments received from residents were that they'd rather go to Washington or the Metrocentre as there was free parking. The Chairman advised that he was sure this would be on the agenda at some point.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that Sunderland had missed the boat as a city and whilst Mr McIntyre and his team were doing very good work, it was belated. Newcastle was run down originally in the 70's so it would take time for improvement, which was where the frustration lied and queried when we could likely see the equivalent evidence of change like in other cities.

Mr McIntyre advised that it would take around ten years but we should see a real change in the next three years and we had to set our own path from a Sunderland perspective rather than benchmark against Newcastle/Durham as we had our own identity and we had to have the right offer.

Councillor Ali commented that he understood this was a thankless task but in terms of trajectories we had to compare to Newcastle and Durham as he firmly believed we could be better than those and overshadow them eventually. This was possible but we had to be dynamic.

Councillor Ali also referred to Crowtree and the loss of the Leisure Centre, commenting that he understood it wasn't making money at the end and had been run down, but it had been originally when it was up to standard and queried why it was not replaced and if there were plans for any leisure centre in the future.

Mr McIntyre informed that there were currently no plans in place for a city centre leisure centre but this was not to say it couldn't come forward in future phases and plans for Crowtree was being looked at in terms of market demand.

At this juncture, with no further questions on the Future High Street Fund Programme, Mr Littlefair provided his PowerPoint presentation on the Sunderland Rail Station.

Councillor Edgeworth commented that residents had asked about the feasibility of making the new station open air. Mr Littlefair advised that the middle section had formed part of that study and part of the capacity upgrade but a lot of the area was in private ownership so whilst it was not off the table it was reliant on obtaining the private ownership sections.

Mr Littlefair also advised that Network Rail would own the new building and through their maintenance contract with Northern, would have responsibility for the upkeep but the Council would be on their case if the building was not looked after.

Councillor Edgeworth referred to the southern entrance and residents complaints about current disabled pick up and drop offs so the new plans were very welcome.

In response to Councillor Fagan's query, Mr Littlefair advised that there would be toilet facilities in the new station and in relation to the location of the proposed car park in Holmeside, this was the plot of vacant land up to the Mecca.

Councillor Ali wished to congratulate officers on the plans as well as the proposal to put the building in Network Rails name for the upkeep but queried if any thought had been given to where people would park once the removal of the civic centre car park was carried out before the new Holmeside offer was constructed.

Mr Littlefair advised that this was being looked at by Mark Jackson but the new multi storey being constructed at Riverside would cater for 900 spaces which would be enough for the growth.

Councillor Ali queried who he could direct the traders from Market Square to that were interested in taking up the new units that would be available in the station and what the process would be to apply. Mr Littlefair advised that they would have to lodge their interest with Network Rail/Northern and that there would be units available once constructed however there was expected to be a queue of interest in these. Traders could register interest through the Business Investment Team who could also help and contact details for these would be sent to Councillor Ali.

In response to Councillor M. Dixon's enquiry, Mr Littlefair informed that plans were for the fixed ticket office to be in the south entrance but as all were piloting mobile ticketing, the traditional ticket offices might not be what everyone recognises in the future. The North entrance, ground floor would be commercial space.

Councillor M. Dixon commented that having lived in Sunderland all of his life he had been ashamed of the city's station which was nothing short of a disgrace and pleaded that they get this right as it was a fabulous opportunity and would help the city enormously.

In response to Councillor Edgeworth's query over platform artwork, Mr Littlefair advised that an art strategy was being developed and an expert commissioned for the art feature. This was in hand but was still being developed and they could bring this back to Ward Councillors.

The Chairman welcomed the presentation and commented that the funding for this was much needed as we had been talking about this station for a great deal of time therefore it was nice to see actions were being taken now.

Having fully considered the report, the Chairman thanked Mr McIntyre and Mr Littlefair for their attendance

3. RESOLVED that the progress report be received and 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

4. 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 13th September, 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.

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.