Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr John Price
Vice Chair: Cllr Logan Guy

Committee Members: Councillors Michael Dixon, Steven Donkin, Heather Fagan, Stephen Foster, David Newey, Lyall Reed, Lynda Scanlan, George Smith and Sue Watson

During the year, the Committee's work programme has focused on a range of issues affecting the economic prosperity of the city and the opportunities and challenges we face.

In October, the Committee received an update report on the regeneration and development of the city centre. We heard that the redevelopment of Riverside Sunderland will result in 1,000 new homes to rent or buy in four neighbourhoods of the city (West Park, Vaux Housing, Farringdon Row and Sheepfolds) and lead to a doubling of the resident population of the city centre to around 5000 people. There will also be 1,000sq feet of modern offices in a new central business district and 8,000-10,000 additional city centre jobs. The Riverside development will include a range of civic, public and cultural assets including the City Hall, the Eye Hospital and the Culture House. The Keel Crossing footbridge will strengthen walking and cycling networks and improvements have been made in terms of public realm, public art and lighting.

One of the key drivers of economic development within the city is Siglion and toward the end of the year we received a comprehensive progress report on its work. We heard that the main priorities for Siglion was to improve the concentration of new economic activity in the city centre, create a city centre that supports higher value job creation, bring back into use dormant areas, offer a wider choice of housing to the market and position Sunderland as a place to invest. The Committee heard about progress on the developments at Riverside Sunderland, Seaburn, Potters Hill and Sunniside.

In 2021, the Committee set up a Working Group to consider the regeneration of the Sunniside district, and we have continued to monitor the progress being made. Kate Percival, Development Manager attended the Committee to update us on the latest position. It is recognised that the challenges facing Sunniside are highly complexed and we are still in a relatively early stages of the redevelopment journey. Much will depend on continuing to access external funding. However, there are a number of positives and opportunities which should help provide the foundations for its long-term redevelopment.

Following on from previous years, we received an update on the schemes funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, from which Sunderland received £16.57m over three years from 2022/23 – 2024/25. The funding has supported a range of projects across three investment priorities: communities and place, supporting local business and people and skills. We heard in detail about the development of the programme in Sunderland which has reflected the priorities set out in the City Plan, the processes by which funds have been allocated and an assessment of the impact to date.

The Committee received an update on the progress being made by the city's three business centres in encouraging growth in the IT and software sectors. It was recognised that the pandemic period had seen a fall in occupancy levels across the three centres. While measures have been taken to stabilise the situation, there has not been a sustained improvement in the financial or occupancy position. We heard that a Managing Agent was being procured to deliver a customised range of services across the centres. This is expected to bring in specific expertise and experience and potentially increase revenue and reduce expenditure.

Sharon Appleby of the Sunderland Improvement District (BID) updated us on the work of the BID in supporting local businesses. This included events and promotional activities; environmental improvements and measures to reduce anti-social behaviour. Sharon highlighted a number of challenges facing businesses in the city, including the rates revaluation, the increase in costs resulting from a rise in the minimum wage, the cost of living crises and continuing uncertainty in the global economy. However, on a positive note, it was felt that many opportunities existed as a result of the transformation of the city centre, new business openings, the economic knock-on effect of the football clubs premier league status and the impact of major events such as the Women's Rugby World Cup and the Radio 1 Big Weekend.

Nick Maylan, Chief Executive of Sunderland Culture and Catherine Auld attended the Committee to provide an update on the contribution made by the cultural sector to the economic prosperity of the city. In terms of Sunderland Culture, key objectives include growing the city's cultural economy, improving health and well-being, creating connectivity amongst our communities and building confidence and aspiration in our young people. Looking ahead, the focus would be on continued progress towards establishing Glassworks:Sunderland, working closely with the University of Sunderland on an expanded Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art exhibition programme, developing new city-wide partnerships and exploring collaboration with Culture House Sunderland.

The Committee also received an update on Culture House Sunderland, the development of Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens and the F Pit and Albany Park Regeneration Project. We heard that the opening of the Culture House and the Museum redevelopment should substantially improve the cultural offer in the city. A central feature of their work was to ensure that residents and communities can better connect with the cultural offer. It was also important to better market what is on offer in the city and look to hold on to visitors longer.

The Committee received an update on a wide range of events organised in the city, including the Women's Rugy World Cup, the Expo Screen in Keel Square and the Music City. It was noted that, moving forward, a greater emphasis would be placed on facilitating smaller community-based events with a wider geographical spread, which were often more cost effective. The Council was also looking to maximise resources by working more closely with local communities, the voluntary sector and partners such as the BID.

The Committee met with representatives from a range of social housing providers including Gentoo, Thirteen Group, Karbon Homes and Bernicia to discuss the provision of affordable housing in the city. It was noted that demand for affordable

housing in Sunderland was very high, as was the case across the whole of the North East. The planned demolition of Lambton, Lumley and Londonderry Towers would require a large number of residents to be rehomed, creating further pressure on available housing. Right To Buy policies had also resulted in a falling social housing supply that had not been replaced with new build.

The social housing providers noted that the relationship with Sunderland Council was very strong. Relationships with planning officers were good and the Council was considered one of the most positive and helpful authorities to deal with. It was felt that a strong constructive relationship was an important determinant of future investment. There was a consensus that it will be very challenging to achieve the national homes target and issues remained around skills shortages and the difficulty in attracting contractors.

The Committee was consulted on the review of the Council's Allocations Policy which sets out the rules on how the council prioritises and nominates applicants on the Housing Register for social rented homes in the city. The review reflects the increased demand for social housing and the need to ensure those in the highest housing need are prioritised. The main changes include the introduction of a local connection for those wishing to join the Housing Register, which should help to prioritise the city's residents. It will also include an Exceptional Circumstances clause which aims to assist those at serious risk where there is a detrimental impact to health and wellbeing. The Committee welcomed the changes set out in the Council's revised housing allocations policy.

The Committee received an update on the Renters' Rights Act 2025 which aims to enhance tenant rights and protections and professionalise landlord practices by offering clear advantages to responsible landlords who provide quality homes and a reliable service to tenants. It was felt the Council was well prepared for the implementation of the Act. Clear roles across departments and strong regional cooperation should ensure a consistent application of the Act, staff training was ongoing and a public awareness campaign will start in April 2026. The Committee welcomed the introduction of the Act.

The Committee received a report on the regulation of the private rented sector. While the private rented sector provides access to flexible housing, it can pose risks where properties fail to meet standards. The Council has a statutory duty to ensure safe privately rented accommodation and operates under a robust legislative framework. Houses of Multiple (HMO's) are inspected at least once upon being licensed and then reinspected as part of a targeted risk-based inspection programme taking into account complaints and stakeholder information.

In relation to empty properties, the Council targets those causing public health or community issues, working with owners or using enforcement if needed. The Council is currently reviewing its Empty Homes Policy. The Committee was keen that the Council continue to proactively address the issues of empty homes in the city and that any review of Empty Homes policy should look to build on previous work.

The Committee also received a report on fire safety in medium and high-rise buildings located in the city. Since the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, major reforms have been

implemented to enhance building safety regulations, increase regulatory oversight and prioritise residents' involvement in safety management. The Committee heard that the Council is committed to ensuring that all medium and high-rise buildings in the city meet stringent fire safety standards, through a combination of strong partnerships, proactive monitoring and robust enforcement. The Council is taking a collaborative but firm approach to ensure compliance and where necessary enforcement powers would be used.

The Committee received an overview of the roles and responsibilities of the Council's Planning Enforcement Team and the approach taken in response to breaches of planning control. The Committee also received an update on the consultation arrangements in place with Ward Councillors in relation to Section 106 Agreements. We heard that the complexity of planning law often resulted in enforcement action being a slow process. While the emphasis was on negotiation, where this failed to bring about the desired resolution, formal enforcement action was initiated. The Committee encouraged all Member of the Council to take up the offer of training around the operation of Section 106 agreements as this was an important but complex area.

In setting its work programme for the year, the Committee asked for an update on operation of Environmental Services within the city and its plans for the future. The issues raised included local services, arboriculture, the preparation for response to winter weather, service improvements, bereavement services and refuse and recycling. We heard that the Pallion Household Waste & Recycling Centre had now opened and was proving a great success. The Refuse Electric RCV had begun operations, and the fleet service had introduced 24 new refuse collection vehicles. Cemetery regulations have been improved and remedial works to cemetery lawn sections were ongoing. The Committee thanked the service for its hard work during the year.

The Committee received a report on the progress being made by the new Road Safety Partnership, which involves the northeast local authorities, Northumbria Police and the Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner. The Partnership works to improve road safety and compliance with existing speed limits; collectively procure and consider the deployment of digitalised fixed speed cameras; develop information and intelligence processes and formualte joint media plans. The Committee welcomed the establishment of the Partnership and looked forward to it having a significant impact on improving road safety in the area.

The Committee was also updated on the progress in relation to cycling infrastructure in the city. The Committee emphasised the importance of thoroughly consulting with local communities before such works are undertaken.

The Committee received an update on the progress with regard to the Council's planned Highway Maintenance Programme 2025/26. The Committee again referred to the importance of communication with public in advance of work being undertaken and thanked the Team for the progress made during the year.

In March 2019, the Council declared a climate emergency. In response, a city-wide 2030 Shadow Board was established, bringing together partners from across the city,

with the ambition of the city becoming carbon neutral by 2040 and the Council carbon neutral by 2030. The Committee received a report on the progress being made on the Low Carbon Framework and Action Plan that reflected the importance of fully involving partners from throughout the city if the goals are to be achieved.

Climate change can significantly impact flood risk in various ways including changing weather patterns, increased rainfall density and sea level rise. The Committee heard about the progress of remedial action being taken through the Council's Flood Alleviation and Capital Maintenance Programme 2020-27. This follows the Council's allocation of around £28 million in funding from the Government to support 39 schemes over a seven-year period. Since April 2020, a total of 551 properties have been moved from a high risk of surface water flooding to a low risk. The Committee received details of the works planned for the remainder of the programme and commended the service for taking a proactive rather than reactive approach.

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, together with the relevant Cabinet portfolio holders who attended and contributed to the meetings during the year.

Councillor John Price
Chair of the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee