

SUNNISIDE WORKING GROUP - FINDINGS

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 During 2022, the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee set up a working group to look at the issues and challenges facing the regeneration of the Sunnyside area. Membership of the Group comprised Councillors David Snowdon, Michael Dixon, Paul Edgeworth and Stephen Foster.
- 1.2 In examining this issue, the Group chose not to fix a strict geographical boundary. However, it was agreed that the area in question basically comprised the eastern area of the city centre, bounded to the west by Fawcett Street, to the south by Borough Road and to the northeast by the inner ring road.
- 1.3 During our work, the Group met with a wide range of partner organisations. These included local businesses, the police, local ward Councillors, the Business Improvement District (BID) and officers from across the Council. A list of those involved is included in the final section of the report.
- 1.4 During the course of our review a number of new initiatives and developments relating to the Sunnyside area have been introduced. We welcome these and have sought to incorporate them into our report.
- 1.5 This paper is based on the issues raised during our discussions.

2 ISSUES AND RESPONSES

Background

- 2.1 The Sunnyside area was traditionally the historic business centre of Sunderland and there remains a longstanding professional sector attracted by its proximity to the city centre and its low rateable values.
- 2.2 While the area saw a decline in the 1990's, in the early 2000's Sunnyside was the subject of a major regeneration initiative. In 2007, Sunnyside Gardens was developed and substantial improvements made to the environment and public realm and the area saw the opening of new bars, retail and entertainment establishments and an emerging cultural sector.
- 2.3 However, despite the progress made during this period, there is a perception that the development of Sunnyside has, to an extent, stalled and a concern that the area could be left behind by the major regeneration initiatives on going at the Riverside and other parts of the city centre.

Anti-Social Behaviour

- 2.4 During our discussions with representatives from the business sector, several expressed the view that levels of crime and anti-social behaviour makes the

Sunniside area feel unsafe for staff and visitors and could result in some businesses choosing to relocate. At the very least, it was felt that anti-social behaviour was having a negative impact on the perception of Sunniside and the city centre itself. There was also concern at the potential impact this could have on the regeneration of the area around Sunderland Rail Station and the impression it could have on people using one of the main entry points to the city..

- 2.5 Moreover, it was contended that while issues of crime and anti-social behaviour were not uncommon in major cities, in Sunderland there was a particular problem with these issues being focused on an area immediately adjacent to a business district.
- 2.6 Some businesses we spoke to also contended that the Police and Council were not doing enough to tackle this problem; leading to a feeling of frustration at what was seen as a lack of action.
- 2.7 As a result of these discussions, the Group conducted a tour of the Sunniside area hosted by the Police, to view the issues at first hand. During the visit, the Police expressed concern at the significant level of resource having to be directed to the area, particularly in the summer months when numbers of people congregated in the streets. It was felt that this level of resource was not sustainable in the long term and that more deep-rooted solutions were needed to tackle the issues facing the area. It was also noted that because many of the people congregating in the streets lived in the area itself, there was often very little the Police could do in terms of dispersing or moving people on.
- 2.8 In terms of a response, we heard that additional resources had now been directed to the Sunniside area. These included additional street wardens and the launch of the SAIL Team (Sunderland Altogether Saving Lives); a dedicated multi agency team working from a city centre located hub.
- 2.9 We also heard that there were regular opportunities for liaison and discussion between the Police and local business, including Pub Watch, Shop Watch, City Watch and Business Breakfast events. All of these play an important role in promoting a shared understanding of the issues affecting the area and helping to reassure the business community that their concerns are being listened to.
- 2.10 However a key theme highlighted during our review has been that while it is important to tackle the immediate issue of anti-social behaviour, any long term sustainable improvement of the area will require deep rooted social and economic change and substantial support and intervention.

Supported Accommodation

- 2.11 During our review, frequent concerns have been expressed at the number of supported accommodations in the Sunniside area. On our visit with the local Police, we heard about the issues arising from the high concentration of such accommodation; many of whose residents have complex needs and drug/alcohol issues.

- 2.12 There was also a concern that some tenants are not being provided with adequate long-term support. While supported accommodation is intended to be a short-term measure, there was concern that, in some cases, residents are staying in supported accommodation for a considerable period without their problems being properly addressed.
- 2.13 The Group feel that it is vital that targeted interventions are on offer for those with complex problems such as drug and alcohol dependency. We need more pathways and targeted solutions for the people with complex needs living in the area. Over the medium and long term, it was also felt that measures be considered to reduce the concentration of supported accommodation in the area.

Concentration of Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO's)

- 2.14 The Sunnyside area is marked by a high number HMO's; some of low-quality. During our discussions, it was made clear that it is difficult for the Council to prevent or control the numbers and siting of HMO's due to existing planning regulations and control over change of use.
- 2.15 However, we were informed that the Council had recently received additional SHIP funding which will enable it to appoint three officers to inspect and provide support and guidance to the owners of Supported Accommodation. This should hopefully improve the support available to residents.
- 2.16 We feel that the Council should continue to explore any avenues available to reduce the number of HMO's in the area, ensure that there are no abuses of the housing benefit system and look to support landlords in providing a better standard of accommodation.
- 2.17 In the longer term, the Council should look at measures to drive up the value of property in the area in order to encourage and secure its better use.

Housing

- 2.18 The Sunnyside area is underpopulated. This results in a lack of economic activity and vibrancy, low footfall and a low demand for goods and services.
- 2.19 At the present time there exists a number of void and poor quality properties, particularly around Borough Road, Suffolk Street, Nile Street and Villiers Street. Any long-term regeneration of the Sunnyside area will therefore hinge on the provision of more housing, of a better quality and mix of tenure.
- 2.20 During our discussions we heard about plans to improve the housing offer in the Sunnyside area. This is vital if we are to repopulate the area and improve the quality and mix of housing on offer. It will also be central to raising demand and footfall in the area.

- 2.21 We heard about plans to develop Nile and Villiers Street into a new creative residential community, with proposals which will see the streets turned into homes with adjoining workspaces that will lend themselves to artists and creatives looking for studio-properties where they can live and work. The designs will feature modern methods of construction, low carbon and renewable energy solutions and will be surrounded by green, community spaces which will complement the public realm already existing in Sunnyside. It is anticipated that works will start on site late 2023/early 2024.
- 2.22 Sunnyside should also benefit from the new housing planned for the Riverside and Sheepfolds areas which will help to repopulate the city centre and draw in greater demand and footfall.
- 2.23 During our discussion, we heard about the importance of looking to focus interventions on a number of key spaces in Sunnyside. This would involve making the most of already available assets, encouraging local activity and working with local community groups to create cluster of activity on which to build out from.
- 2.24 We also heard that the Council has been acquiring properties in the Sunnyside area that are at risk of unsuitable development. We support this where it is appropriate. It is important that we look to increase land and property values in the area to encourage better quality use in the future.

Vibrancy

- 2.25 A key theme of the review has been the need to bring greater vibrancy and footfall into the Sunnyside area in order to secure its long term and sustainable regeneration.
- 2.26 It was noted that while a number of cafés and restaurants are operating quite successfully, there is a lack of visible activity in the area and a lack of footfall, particularly on an evening which can make the area sometimes feel unwelcoming.
- 2.27 During our review we heard about a number of measures being taken to improve this situation, through planning for more local events and festivals, building on existing events such as Pride, as well as developing more market days. It was noted that Sunnyside is an important area for the LGBT+ community in Sunderland with the organisers of Sunderland Pride having their offices and a café in the area.
- 2.28 For example, Food and Drink North East will host five Local Hero Food and Drink markets in Sunnyside throughout 2023 and Sunderland BID have applied for £250,000 of Shared Prosperity Funding (SPF) to activate Sunnyside and drive footfall to the area.
- 2.29 As part of the review, the Group met with Sharon Appleby of the Business Improvement District (BID) and discussed its contribution to the economic vibrancy of Sunnyside and the city centre as a whole. This included events such

as the Summer Food and Drink Festival and the March Restaurant Week, together with the summer programme of family activities.

- 2.30 We also feel that while quite a few hospitality businesses already have pavement licences, the concept of outdoor dining could be further encouraged where appropriate. Greater cooperation among hospitality and leisure businesses and more consistent opening hours could also help, though it was recognised that this was largely dependent on levels of demand. A further suggestion during our discussions was the introduction of themed promotions, concentrating on one or two nights a week which could encourage people to visit the area on an evening and grow the available offer.
- 2.31 Clearly, the issue of vibrancy in Sunnyside is a difficult one. The area needs more footfall to attract more retail, hospitality and leisure businesses – but it also needs a wider offer to attract such additional footfall. In many ways Sunnyside lacks a residential community. The long-term solution will be to repopulate the area and encourage the development of more, better quality housing.
- 2.32 However, in the short term we need to work with retail, hospitality and leisure businesses to improve the offer in the area by making better use of the open space and encouraging markets and local events.

Linkages with Rest of City

- 2.33 There is a need to improve the linkages between Sunnyside and the rest of the city centre. This should help to encourage greater footfall and allow the area to benefit from the regeneration initiatives taking place elsewhere. This would translate into making walkways more attractive, improving public realm, improving lighting and making the area feel more welcoming and accessible.
- 2.34 During our review there was some discussion about the options available to draw more of the student population into the area and improving its attractiveness as an evening destination – along the lines of the development of Ouseburn. It was felt that, while at the present time the area lacked a sufficient weight of attractions, it was an interesting comparison to bear in mind for the future.

Emerging Cultural Sector

- 2.35 During our review, frequent reference was made to the emergence of a growing arts and cultural sector in the Sunnyside. It was noted that a number of artists were operating in the area - though their presence was not immediately visible.
- 2.36 The area has also experienced a growing demand for space from early stage businesses and creative businesses, with a number of developments being brought forward by organisations such as Morengo Estates Ltd, which has been active in buying properties and developing them into artists' studios and space for new and growing businesses.

- 2.37 The emergence of this sector clearly has great potential to improve the Sunnyside area and transform its perception and we look forward to its further development in the future.

Leisure Offer

- 2.38 Our discussions have highlighted the importance of the leisure offer to the economic vibrancy of the city centre and therefore the future of Sunnyside. It is vital that we continue to develop the leisure offer and make Sunderland an attractive destination for people to live and work.
- 2.39 During the review, members highlighted the importance of retaining and expanding upon existing leisure and cultural amenities. Concern was expressed at the current lack of activity around the cinema area, with several businesses close by remaining vacant. This is in sharp contrast with the activity surrounding the Sunderland Empire. On a positive note, encouraging developments are taking place, including at Mackie's Corner, Pop Recs and the opening of several restaurants which should help to build regeneration of the area.
- 2.40 We also heard about further investment from British Esports in a new multi-site venue and gaming accommodation based in the Sunnyside area. Providing accommodation for up to 25 people, the fully self-contained properties will feature separate living and leisure areas, plus a cutting-edge digital performance and gaming room, kitted out with the very latest in gaming and creative technology.
- 2.41 During the review concerns were expressed about the potential loss of facilities such as the areas cinema. It was noted that the cinema now has a long term lease and that the Council own the building. We feel that the city should look to ensure a cinema is retained in the area and the Council build on its existing leisure offer and amenities moving into the future.

Masterplan for Sunnyside

- 2.42 Toward the end of the review, we heard details of a pilot project (Partnerships for People and Place) being led by the Department of Levelling Up, Homes & Communities. As part of this project, the Council has recently commissioned a consultant team, Town and Create Streets, to develop a Masterplan and vision for Sunnyside. As part of our review, the Group met with a representative from Town and Create Streets to discuss their work.
- 2.43 The Masterplan is intended to bring a collective vision for the Sunnyside area and an implementation plan that can be developed into short term actions. The project will run throughout 2023 and is intended to bring a new approach to making the right kind of change happen in the Sunnyside area. It will to be guided by the many stakeholders in Sunnyside.
- 2.44 As part of this work, there will be an assessment of property and shops in the area and what is required for their improvement. This should provide the basis for a detailed improvement plan. A working group will also be established

including the Council, public health, housing, neighbourhoods, licensing which should help to secure coordinated action and maintain momentum.

- 2.45 In order to support the Masterplan, we heard that the Council is looking to access various sources of funding and maximise what is available. For example, the Levelling Up Fund will bring in £4.5m earmarked to the Sunnyside area. Use will also be made of The Future High Street Fund and available Heritage Funds. While this does not represent a vast amount of money, it should help to provide impetus and hopefully draw in other sources of investment into the area.
- 2.46 We feel that it vital to involve and consult with the local community about the future of the area and the development of plans and strategies. If regeneration is to be sustainable, it needs to be community and stakeholder led. For example, we heard about plans to establish a community hub facility and use Nile/Villiers street as a basis for events which can tie in with Sunnyside Gardens.
- 2.47 We also heard of community-based initiatives from social enterprises based in the area such as Pop Recs, Alessa's Boutique and Sunshine Cooperative. Such initiatives can provide important building blocks to improve the perception of the area and encourage more investment.

3 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 The challenges facing Sunnyside are complex and deep rooted. The area has a high level of poverty and deprivation. Existing housing provision is often of low quality; with a high number of HMO's. The area has a concentration of Supported Accommodation, housing a number of people with complex problems and needs.
- 3.2 The area is underpopulated and this contributes to the low level of economic activity and low footfall. The area has on ongoing problem with anti-social behaviour, crime and fear of crime.
- 3.3 There is no easy or single solution to the issues facing Sunnyside. Any long-term sustainable improvement will depend on progress across a range of fronts.
- 3.4 However, there are a number of positives and opportunities. The area has the potential for improvement. It is an attractive area close to the city centre, possessing an attractive historic core. Over the years, a great deal of work and investment has gone into maintaining and improving the historic buildings. It is a small area in which resources can be targeted. It is proving attractive to social enterprise, early-stage businesses and an emerging cultural and creative services sector.
- 3.5 As a starting point, we need a long-term vision to build on these strengths and support the regeneration of the area. A vision that all partners and residents can buy into and drive forward and one that is community and stakeholder led. In regenerating the area, we need to look at what will work best given the size,

location and make-up of the area. It is important any Masterplan is ambitious - but also realistic and achievable.

- 3.6 The regeneration of Sunnyside is taking place against the backdrop of a major regeneration of the city centre with major developments such as the new at the Riverside and the new Sunderland Rail Station. We need to be clear about the role of Sunnyside as part of this overall development and the Masterplan must reflect this. It is important that Sunnyside is recognised as an integral part of the overall regeneration of the city centre.
- 3.7 Clearly, many of the immediate challenges in Sunnyside relate to the issue of anti-social behaviour. At meetings with local businesses, they highlighted the scale of the problem involved. Dealing with crime and anti-social behaviour is vital if we are to build up confidence in Sunnyside as a place to work and do business. We have also heard concerns about the impact this could have on the regeneration of the area around the new Rail Station which will be a major point of entry into the city and influence the perceptions of people traveling to the city.
- 3.8 It is therefore important for the Council and its partners to develop immediate solutions such as the recent launch of the SAIL Team. Hopefully, these will have an impact in improving levels of anti-social behaviour and the perception of the area as a safe place to live and work. Regular opportunities for liaison between local business and the Police should help to promote a common understanding of the challenges and action being taken in the area.
- 3.9 However, we also the need to look to address the deep-seated issues facing the area if we are to achieve long term improvements. Simply devoting additional policing is not sustainable in the long term.
- 3.10 There is a need to repopulate the area, in order to promote economic growth and vibrancy, encourage higher footfall and help to change its character and perception. We need to look to improve the quality of housing and diversify the housing offer. It is vital to get more people living in the Sunnyside area if we are to stimulate demand and improve vibrancy.
- 3.11 While the Council is limited in the measures it can take to tackle the number of HMO's, we must look to make best use of our licensing and regulatory powers to limit the number of HMO's where possible but also improve the quality of the offer available and support private landlords.
- 3.12 We should also look at measures to improve the quality of Supported Accommodation and diversify the housing mix. We need to ensure that people in Supported Accommodation are having their needs addressed.
- 3.13 It is also important that we have effective pathways for people with drug and alcohol issues living in the area. We need to look to avoid the situation where people are receiving no real help if we are to break the cycle. Although, it is recognised that there is no easy, short-term solution to a problem that will have considerable resource implications.

- 3.14 We heard that the Council has been acquiring properties in the Sunnyside area that are at risk of unsuitable development. We support this where it is appropriate. It is important that we look to increase land and property values in the area to encourage better quality use in the future.
- 3.15 We are also seeing growth in the cultural and creative sector which demonstrates great potential to be developed into the future. New funding and residential development should strengthen this.
- 3.16 We need to make Sunnyside as accessible as possible for visitors in terms of public realm, lighting and infrastructure and encourage more quality retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in order to bring more people into the area.
- 3.17 We need to improve the links between Sunnyside and the city centre to encourage movement between the two. More bars and restaurants will bring a greater vibrancy to the area. We need to develop a critical mass of activity to encourage people to visit and stay and think of ways of better promoting the area, perhaps through the promotion of themed nights at local bars and restaurants.
- 3.18 We need to work with the local cafés and restaurants to improve the offer and make better use of the available outdoor space, where appropriate. We need to increase footfall in the area and make sure that people feel secure and safe.
- 3.19 We need to think about where the leisure and entertainment centre in the city is located. During our study concerns were expressed about the existing leisure offer in the city. We need to build up the concentration of the leisure offer and make the city centre a more attractive destination.
- 3.20 On a positive note, we feel that there exists a growing energy and momentum around the regeneration of Sunnyside and a commitment among partners to work together and make the most of the funding and resources available. It is important that we maintain this and that the Council, its partners and the local community buy into the vision.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- That a masterplan and vision for the Sunnyside area be prepared which involves all partners and the local community;
- That an implementation plan and delivery structure is put in place to ensure joint working between the Council and its partners;
- That the Council and its partners continue to develop strategies for dealing with the immediate problem of anti-social behaviour in the Sunnyside area, including the siting of additional CCTV cameras;
- That the Council continue to investigate options for improving the quality of Supported Accommodation and improving the housing mix in the Sunnyside area over the medium and long term;
- That the Council investigate the potential of using planning and licensing regulations to work with landlords to improve the quality HMOs in the area;
- That the Council work with partners to develop more local events such as food festivals/markets and the promotion of themed nights in local bars and restaurants to bring greater footfall into the area and improve levels of vibrancy;
- That the Council consider measures to improve linkages and the public realm to encourage greater footfall into the Sunnyside area;
- That the Council look to promote the development of a leisure offer in the city and seek to ensure that existing facilities are maintained and expanded upon;
- That the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee continue to monitor progress on the recommendations set out in the report and receive further update reports

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