

Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr David Snowdon

Vice Chair: Cllr Melanie Thornton

Committee Members: Councillors Usman Ali, Michael Dixon, Paul Edgeworth, Heather Fagan, Helen Greener, Stephen Foster, Sean Lawes, John Price, Tony Taylor and James Warne.

During the year, the Committee's work programme has focused on a range of issues including the effect of the Covid pandemic on the local economy and the action being taken to help alleviate the situation. We have also continued to monitor progress on a range of regeneration initiatives going on in the city, many of which have continued to make good progress despite the effects of the pandemic.

In terms of the impact of Covid on the local economy, we received an update on the support provided to local businesses, many of which are administered by the Council, including the Small Business Grant Fund, the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund and the local authority Discretionary Fund. The Committee would like to place on record its thanks to all those staff within the Council who have worked tirelessly to support of the business and voluntary sectors in the city.

We also heard from the Sunderland Improvement District (BID) on their work to support local business. It was hoped that following the Covid pandemic, footfall and retail spending in the city centre should begin the process of recovery and that the proposed development of Sunderland Riverside should provide an impetus for the growth of independent retail sector.

Jonathan Walker from the North East Chamber of Commerce outlined for us the considerable long term economic challenges facing the city arising from the pandemic, as well as the UK's exit from the European Union and the nationwide downturn in the high street retail sector. However, he noted that moving forward, the Sunderland economy retained strong foundations and that many opportunities existed, particularly in the engineering, manufacturing and the software sectors.

The promotion of new business start-ups will play a significant part in securing the city's long-term prosperity. We heard about the role of the city's three business centres – the Evolve Business Centre, Sunderland Software Centre and the Washington Business Centre – in encouraging growth in expanding areas of the economy, such as IT and software and in helping to diversify the local economy. We also heard about the measures being taken to improve their operation and efficiency.

In relation to the regeneration of the city, the Committee once again received an update on the progress being made by Siglion. It is pleasing that the regeneration of the Riverside is progressing well and should deliver high quality office accommodation, together with residential, retail and leisure use.

The delivery of the Future High Street Fund Programme and the Levelling Up Fund will play a key part of the ongoing regeneration of the city centre. We heard that the Council would take a targeted approach, using the funding where it makes most

difference, in order to act as a catalyst for change. We also received an update on the upgrade to Sunderland Rail Station which should help to deliver wider connectivity for the city to national and international infrastructure and ultimately lead to an increase in passenger numbers.

An ongoing piece of work has been a Working Group set up to look at the challenges and opportunities for the regeneration of the Sunnyside area. This is an ongoing piece of work which should report back early in the next municipal year.

In terms of the development of housing in the city, we heard about the progress being made on the Council's housing strategy, including the measures to increase housing growth and maximise choice of housing, make the best use of existing housing stock and support vulnerable people to access housing. We also heard from gentoo about the challenges they face as the main provider of social housing in the city and discussed a wide range of operational issues.

The Committee received an update on environmental services and environmental enforcement. This included the effect of Covid pandemic on refuse collection, preparations for response to winter weather, fly tipping, maintenance of trees and plans for future improvements. The Committee's views were also sought on the proposed revision of the Replacement Bin policy. The Committee supported proposals to end the replacement charge in particular circumstances.

Everyone Active provided a presentation on the impact of the Covid pandemic on the delivery of leisure services in the city and future initiatives to improve access to sport and physical activity. We heard that the aim was to enable children and young people to have the best start in life and form good habits; support families and communities that are benefiting from being active and deliver a range of events and activities. Moving forward, the Committee looked forward to the growing take up leisure services in the city particularly in those areas of the city where take up was relatively lower.

The Committee received an update on the current position about the Review of Cumulative Impact Assessment; a tool for licensing authorities to limit the growth of licensed premises, both on and off trade, in problem areas. We heard that this issue would be readdressed following the impact of the Covid pandemic. Our views were also sought on the Council's Draft Statement of Principles under the Gambling Act 2005 and we referred to the limited powers available to local authorities to control problem gambling which was increasingly moving on-line.

At the start of the year, the Committee asked for an update on public transport in the city. The Committee heard about the main challenges facing public transport during the Covid pandemic and the continued challenges moving forward. This included the implications of the North East Enhanced Bus Partnership which provides a detailed partnership plan for future improvements.

The Committee also received feedback on the E Scooter pilot operated by Neuron Mobility, in partnership with the Council, which has been operating in the city for the past year. The trial is about providing the city with an environmentally friendly transport option.

The Committees was also consulted on the Draft Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) which represents long-term approach to developing local cycling and walking networks. The aim is to enable the City Council to develop a city-wide plan for cycling and walking and a programme of infrastructure improvements.

In March 2019, Sunderland City 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.

As an example of the progress being made, we also received a report on proposals for a City Heat Network for the city. The scheme involves a distribution system of insulated pipes taking heat from a mine source at the former Wearmouth Colliery and delivering heat to local buildings. The scheme should reduce the city's carbon footprint, promote energy security and deliver employment and economic growth.

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.

Councillor David Snowdon
Chair of the Economic Prosperity Scrutiny Committee