



Event blog

Day One (Tuesday 14 October 2025)

Delegates from business, industry and local government came to City Hall for the launch of this year's Expo Sunderland – Delivering the Future City conference, in collaboration with the **BCO** and our headline partner **The University of Sunderland**.

Expertly hosted once again by former BBC Home Affairs correspondent, **Mark Easton**, an array of expert speakers working across the built environment discussed everything from infrastructure, regeneration, planning and transport, to skills, funding and garnering community pride, topics of significant importance to Sunderland and the wider North East region.

So just in case you missed it, here's a recap as it happened:

A warm welcome by **Cllr Michael Mordey, Leader of Sunderland City Council**, got Expo Sunderland 2025 underway followed by host, Mark Easton, describing how Sunderland is transforming into a model future city. He described how 'there is real ambition to make Sunderland a place that the world looks at', building a place where its people feel proud.

There is a shared commitment and over the last year, Sunderland has transformed at pace (not least on the football field!) with the opening of Sheepfolds Stables and HISCA, to celebrating the soon-to open Keel Crossing - a new and landmark infrastructure project.

Go back two months ago and the city showed it can do it right by hosting the Rugby World Cup with 000's of supporters descending on the city. Sunderland was described by organisers as a 'northern institution' and the passion of a proud city was evident.

The first of several keynote speakers was **Pat Ritchie, CEO of Homes England** who described how the organisation is working closely with Sunderland City Council to help kickstart major projects. Sunderland is realising its ambitions to double the city

centre's population with Riverside Sunderland being a flagship development where ambition and collaboration meet. £30m funding will unlock 1k new homes and this is a model as to how national and local agencies can work together to bring positive change enabling local leaders to have the tools and flexibility to shape places.

Pat also detailed how a £30bn social and affordable homes strategy has also created a 'national housing bank' (fund) allocating £16bn over 10 years. It will launch in April 2026.

Henry Kippin from the North East Combined Authority spoke of how the city is putting its head above the water to create positive change, and that is why devolution works. The £4.2bn deal (the biggest per head in the country) has already invested £1bn in major projects encouraging more investment through certainty for investors. NECA has a mission to deliver, and recent announcements include a new AI growth zone, the creation of a Child Poverty Reduction Unit (and strategy), the launch of the NE Carbon and Nature Marketplace, £25m for creative industries and £70m towards the NE Investment Fund. These wider regional opportunities directly feed into Sunderland.

Cllr Michael Mordey – Sunderland City Council Portfolio Holder (Key Cities Network) detailed how there are 24 mid-size cities across the UK driving forward innovation, inclusion and growth including Sunderland. A new report being published by Government will highlight the vital role cities like Sunderland can play and how they can deliver more, but central to this is handing more power back to local leaders. Planning, land availability as well as finance were all cited as barriers to delivery across all regions, with deeper structural reforms needed to unlock homebuilding. New homes must be built for those who need it the most.

Tim Heatley from Capital & Centric outlined the future for High Street West and how any regeneration must be people focused (building it is the easy part!). He backed Sunderland as having 'big success on its way' with planners/developers needing to 'meet the neighbours' to find out what makes Sunderland, Sunderland? From its urban past pre and post war to creating a new interesting city, there is a need for vibrant commercial spaces, residential neighbourhoods, green active landscapes and streetscapes as part of a long-term approach.

Panel discussions followed covering, amongst other topics, planning reform and delivery. **Andrew Taylor (Vistry), Riette Oosthuizen (HTA Design), Dominic Waugh (Pegasus) and Niall Durney (FaulknerBrowns)** discussed the benefits of strategic planning and the need for strategic oversight and higher focus to be at local level to give clarity for authorities to deliver. Sunderland was seen as exemplar and advanced in this regard. Whilst the planning system may be slow, it also depends on people and

partners to make schemes work and face any challenges too. Good public/private sector collaboration and partnership is therefore key to progress and when proactive, can de-risk the planning process.

Comments included how ‘big ambitions need to have big collaborations’ and ‘big ambition-thinking is happening in the city and North East region’. Discussion also focused on how the viability of long-term projects must look beyond good design too and create sustainable places that have character and aspiration. Sunderland was seen to be going beyond the rule book for its vision and leadership.

Topics also touched on the importance of community engagement and how local voices must be heard as part of any regeneration and development process. Places that build long term stewardship add social value and engage all audiences and we must place more faith in people to take ownership of where they live, creating ‘softer’ community spaces.

Tracy Harrison (Northern Housing Consortium), Yolande Barnes (UCL), James Reid (Miller Housing) and Joanne Gordon (Gentoo) sat on the housing panel and discussed social housing needs, land supply, availability and the need for a Local Plan, investment in existing housing stock and why we must stop viewing homes as single use assets (numbers-driven) but more by the environmental, economic and social values they offer. Viability is also key with a need to deliver quality as well as quantity, and Sunderland City Council’s vision and leadership are enabling that to take place.

A community creation panel with **Tom Chance (NCLTN), Pete Swift (Planit), Susan Fulton (Gentoo) and John Nordon (Igloo Regeneration)** discussed what ‘community’ actually is (and means) with agreement that it’s the people that make a place. They make communities ‘tick’ and are decision makers too. Hendon’s Back of the Map CIC was cited as a great example of having done this. Nurture is also crucial to a community and how pockets of space (eg green spaces) create social cohesion, value and better mental health. Involving the community through democratically elected representatives can also reach those not often heard but who’s voices are important – Gentoo residents take part in consultation groups at Board level to encourage greater participation, feedback and transparency. ‘Meeting places’ in communities was also discussed and what that means for different people.

The afternoon started with discussion around resilience **with John Saunders (1energy), Julie Kjestrup (VELUX), Hayley Cormick (Useful Projects)** outlining what this means in wider contexts. From climate change and energy networks to having a blueprint for healthier homes of the future (the city is leading the way on this at Riverside

Sunderland), resilience is also a city that adapts and how people understand that, especially when on a personal level. Do we reframe conversations away from climate change and more towards the consequences (eg homes not flooding, better lifestyles, cost efficiencies)?

Finally, the transport and infrastructure panel saw **Rachael Hurdman (Arup)** discuss Keel Crossing and the Metro expansion to Washington as crucial components for connection. **Phil Blythe from DARE (Newcastle University)** spoke about decarbonising transport infrastructure and possible dilemmas that could be created because of that, while **Heather Jones (NECA)** outlined public transport improvement plans and how this must reach all areas (coastal, town/cities and rural). **Mark Wilson (Sunderland City Council)** spoke of how transport is an 'enabler' and how over the next 2-3 years, Sunderland will see 20kms of extra infrastructure such as cycleways. Tech is also an integral tool to manage traffic flow, capacity and patterns.

Host Mark Easton described, like in Chinese medicine, places need 'blood flow' and Keel Crossing is providing just that. Accessibility is vital and makes people feel more part of their community. Modes of travel (and cost), whether public transport, on foot or cycling is also a strategic consideration for the city and wider region and could potentially see automated solutions being introduced.

To finish, roundtables events covered Expo Sunderland's main focus areas for day one including design and planning, housing, transport, and community engagement with further in-depth discussion producing many ideas and talking points.

A very successful day was wrapped up by our host who closed by saying any overriding challenges can be overcome by having three key pillars which are:

- strategic insight (the big picture)
- attention to detail (the small stuff)
- stamina – just keep going!

Thank you to all sponsors and here's to an equally successful day two at Expo Sunderland.

Thank you to our Partners



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