



Event blog

Day Two (Wednesday 15 October 2025)

Day Two of Expo Sunderland once again saw a packed City Hall with people from across the business community coming together to listen to keynote speakers, panel discussions and participate in various roundtable sessions. Just in case you missed it, here's a quick recap:

Host, Mark Easton, expertly oversaw proceedings again with the leader of Sunderland City Council, **Michael Mordey**, welcoming guests. Michael acknowledged how inspiring day one had been and spoke about the power of partnerships saying, 'nothing happens in isolation but rather in collaboration and people believing in Sunderland's potential. It's a story that's being written together'.

Day Two focused on how to make Sunderland's heart beat stronger and the first keynote address focused on city centre activation. **Graham Thrower from the University of Sunderland** spoke of social inclusion, and how, to have social growth, you must first have growth. He said Sunderland was a 'picture of growth, investment and regeneration, and a smart city leader in global times' with a thriving digital and tech sector. He described how good news is a prerequisite to inclusivity and despite the city having some socio-economic deficits and challenges, a moment of real opportunity exists to empower local action groups and make everyone feel part of the story.

CEO of Education Partnership North East (and newly appointed FE Commissioner), Ellen Thinnesen, outlined how skills for growth, particularly construction, is not just matter of training, supply or qualifications, but a complex ecosystem that must be interconnected. She said the future of work cannot be delivered without tackling key issues noting one in five UK working adults (age 16-64 yrs) are economically inactive (9.1m people), but that Sunderland was a city turning narrative into actions too.

HISCA, the region's only construction and housing college, is one of 10 new CTECs in the UK and is convening a successful sector ecosystem as part of its learning provision. By partnering with Northumbria University, Gentoo, Valliant, VELUX, Ambion Heating and others, the facility is providing a single gateway to train future workforces, unlock industry challenges and deliver

specialist training for all trades including scaffolding, brick laying, heating and air conditioning as well as more modern methods of construction.

Samantha McClary of BCO looked at how offices are critical infrastructure and how they enable people to belong and feel part of something rather than being just places of work. She spoke of how offices enable relationships to be formed, collaborations born, and growth and ambitions realised – they're a catalyst for repopulation too making cities like Sunderland attractive and stronger. They positively impact areas, breed innovation and support further regeneration, especially when part of mixed-use schemes. Samantha highlighted how the 'workplaces of tomorrow are not the offices of yesterday' and how occupancy rates are growing.

Next, **Paul Kingsmore, CEO of Sunderland AFC**, outlined how a successful football club is great for any city, and how SAFC being back in the Premier League can be 'felt' not just at the stadium on match days but right across Wearside by its people and its communities. The reach is palpable and key areas of focus for SAFC going forward are maximising the fans' experience, being a strong city asset, extending commercial opportunities, enhancing and empowering Club operations, and future-proofing success and the 'feel good factor' both on and off the pitch. Paul highlighted that 3k new visitors (away fans) plus many global supporters come to the city every home game and this brings new revenue streams, audiences (and spend) to Sunderland. They support local businesses (hotels, restaurants etc) and that has helped SAFC create more employment opportunities for local people.

The first panel discussion focused on activation, or as someone described it, "giving CPR to the heart of a city". **Michael Brown from Altered Space** spoke of flexible community spaces for hire and how we must not rely too heavily on retail alone. Cities need to be dynamic and have a USP that excites people. He also highlighted how out-of-town schemes that were once pursued drove people away from central areas and whilst successful in their own right, repopulation (and a return) is now the focus.

Louis Lupien of TurnerWorks spoke of great things happening when people meet with more, better and diverse opportunities (ie activation). Places that are vibrant and have energy are key and we must start by looking at five things; what's working, make a plan and get ready to change it, fill the gaps, build the 'trampolines' (to reach higher), and make a place feel special.

Allison Thompson of South Tyneside & Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust described the journey of Sunderland's new eye hospital, relocated from a suburban residential area to a newly constructed building in the heart of the city. This took courage, strong partnerships and dynamic leadership as it is not the norm, but the positive payback to come will be significant for Sunderland and its high street – 'health on the high street' will become a national trailblazer with the city now having a world class hospital within minimal walking distance. Due to open in 2026, over 1k extra people will visit (the city centre) each day with 50% of patients coming from outside the area. 300 employees and 100 consultants will also spend locally.

Q&As followed asking what are the challenges for activation (and how to approach it)? One comment suggested that ‘people from the area know best and know where to find the sparks’ to create the energy and something special. Having a reason to come into the city was key and the NHS has a role to play in that too going forward to locate services beyond hospital boundaries. Feeling safe and welcome was another aspect, as well as addressing when big stores leave (and what replaces them). This supported more experience-based offers, especially around events and the nighttime economy.

The next panel looked at repopulation and four key points – importance of stakeholder support, importance of pride in place, bold actions, and the need to be brave.

Peter McIntyre of Sunderland City Council recognised the brave approach being taken currently. Having a city plan (and a partnership plan) gives confidence to stakeholders and new investors. However, Peter also acknowledged that the Council were made to look internally first as historically, attempts to reinvent the city centre had fallen short creating reduced public belief. The city had been somewhat ‘emptied out’ with little to no business community in any central district. However, major things are happening now which he explained have come, in part, from bravery as well as determination, strong investment and collaborative partners where everyone is playing to their strengths. Big change is happening, and this is also being seen by the micro-investments made by Sunderland’s own residents. It is less about single, individual projects and more about combined placemaking.

Riverside Sunderland is a flagship scheme and this, coupled with positive storytelling, could see ‘boundary red lines’ being extended to create bigger opportunities and a larger, multi-faceted site along the river.

Patrick Matheson from Knight Frank spoke of how understanding the commercial property market you’re serving is paramount and has seen Sunderland change drastically from being a ‘doughnut’ – with successful enterprise zones located on the outskirts, to one where there is fast growing interest in the city centre. This is not just about large companies moving in. It also needs to work for SMEs too, especially those already located here whereby new offices must enable their growth too.

Students and young people have a role in shaping the city’s cultural identity as **Andrea Walters from the University of Sunderland** explained. Home-grown (and nurtured) talent must be retained, not lost to other cities. As well as work and educational opportunities, young people want (and need) social connectivity too and many of the University’s physical spaces could potentially be reimaged to offer such outlets so they consider Sunderland for the long-term.

Q&As touched on the importance of stakeholders and going beyond the ‘red line’ for greater engagement. CrownWorks Studios is a prime example of this, located alongside Riverside Sunderland. Only 1% of the city’s population currently live in the centre so the right infrastructure needs to be created. Historically, when being compared to London and southern regions, the North East has never been an ‘easy sell’ to investors so constant engagement and storytelling is vital. Repopulating can also come from seeing things happen and with build will

come ambition. The office market for Sunderland has grown 30% in five years and while there is still much to do, nowhere else has seen that growth from the baseline.

The future of work was the final panel where **Toni Rhodes from Education Partnership North East** discussed the vision and delivery for HISCA. Its model could be replicated across any industry and the idea of teaching collaboratively where all trades work together on projects while learning, recognises all skills as part of a chain. This raises aspirations with companies getting involved and students connecting with employers to match and advance the skills pipeline.

Richard Williams from VELUX challenged the way homes are built with communities today being situated closer together but living further apart. There's a need to 'bring the outside in and take the inside out'. Materials used for healthy homes (and lifestyles) are key choices too (just like healthy eating). We spend 90% of time spent indoors so good design is key.

An Academy for Regional Design and Architecture is bridging pathways and open to a range of students, not just typically STEM. **Sonya Anderson of Education Partnership North East** spoke of transferrable skills regardless of background and how we can embrace AI and smart systems for students to create professional portfolios and engage in real-life projects. A pivot in the curriculum towards softer skills will create starting points for students where vocational roles, practical experiences, qualifications and mentors will prove valuable.

Dan Kerr of MawsonKerr explained the design-thinking behind HISCA and how old and new structures came together to create fit-for-purpose and practical spaces. **Grant Glendinning of Education Training Collective** spoke of how only 1/3 of FE construction students end up working in the sector, and how now is the time to grasp these opportunities. Future cities will need tech skills that are unknown today and AI as a disruptor cannot be ignored.

Q&As discussed how there is a dichotomy (ie we cannot stop training young people 'old' skills and trades as existing homes still have traditional fittings, but we must also recognise that tech will be used going forward). There is a need to train the trainer as well as the student, and ask those who drop-out of the sector after training, why?

A series of roundtables took place whereby groups discussed the future of work, city activation and repopulation. **Toni Rhodes (EPNE), Sharon Appleby (Sunderland BID) and Samantha McClary (BCO)** summarised talking points. This included how while the city is progressing, elements such as wayfinding, flow-mapping and communicating progress need to improve and become more regular. Clustering and zones where the 'right things are in the right places' will improve the offer. Communications need to use the most suited channels and methods to engage all demographics while tourists like to visit 'local hoods' and hidden gems to feel more like a local. Operating hours (accessibility day/night) should also be considered in terms of who needs what services when (the way people work may not be 9-5) giving people - a local population of 300k, the reason to live, work and enjoy the city.

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Closing audience questions included why local residents were not invited to be part of Expo Sunderland if community engagement is crucial, and how City Hall can be considered important as a hub that embraces the future and makes people feel welcome.

Day Two of Expo Sunderland was again very successful, and to close, host **Mark Easton** explained how Sunderland is clearing a bar set high and becoming a model future city. Sunderland has a story to tell, not forgetting its proud heritage, and while political storms may happen and blow in from the sea, Expo Sunderland has set its sights beyond the horizon to find that unseen destination.

We'll keep striving - Sunderland can clear that bar and achieve what we set out to achieve.

Til' the end (and till next year when we hope to see you again!).

