

NATIONAL GLASS CENTRE PROPOSED CLOSURE AND RELOCATION

Report of the Chief Executive to Council

7 August 2025

Council Motion

At its meeting on 25 June 2025, the Full Council debated a Motion in relation to the National Glass Centre's current location being closed and moved to a new location in Sunnyside.

The motion was debated and amended during the meeting with the eventual resolutions as below.

"This Council regrets the decision taken by the University of Sunderland to close the National Glass Centre in 2026. Preserving Sunderland's glassmaking heritage is vital to the city's cultural offer as well as the Council's economic growth ambitions.

The University has taken this decision due to what it claims are unaffordable repair costs and sustained operating losses. Council expresses concern regarding the accuracy of the cost estimates so far presented.

Council therefore resolves that the Chief Executive will write to the University's Vice Chancellor with the following questions:

- 1. What is the scale of the Centre's operating loss in the current financial year and the preceding 5 years?*
- 2. Do those losses reflect the cost incurred when structural changes were made to the Centre's main façade in 2022?*
- 3. How does the University account for the Centre's income and expenditure?*
- 4. Will the University release all documents relating to its ownership of the Centre and confirm whether that ownership is subject to any restrictions?*

Council further resolves that the Chief Executive will prepare a detailed report, to be made public within 6 weeks, with the following terms of reference:

Fully explain the proposed ownership structure of Glassworks: Sunderland.

- 1. Consider whether the National Glass Centre and Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art will continue to exist in any form following the closure of the Centre Building.*
- 2. Outline the capital and revenue cost of making Glassworks: Sunderland fully operational (i.e. the cost of relocating equipment, refurbishment, fitting out, employing staff) and how this will be funded.*
- 3. Fully explain the proposed ownership structure of Glassworks: Sunderland."*

Resolution 1

Correspondence from the Chief Executive to the University of Sunderland Vice-Chancellor

The Chief Executive wrote to Sir David Bell, Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive of the University of Sunderland, requesting responses to the above four questions.

Reply from the Vice-Chancellor to the Chief Executive

A response was received from the Vice Chancellor on 23 July 2025 expressing appreciation for the council's concerns about preserving Sunderland's glassmaking heritage and the closure of the National Glass Centre (NGC).

The response went on to highlight that the University believes there has been transparency throughout the process to date around the decision to close the NGC, in publishing documents on the university website, meetings with various stakeholders and responding to numerous Freedom of Information requests and informal requests for information. The Vice Chancellor provided the following responses to the four questions asked.

1. What is the scale of the Centre's operating loss in the current financial year and the preceding 5 years?

- Period Aug 2019 to July 2020: loss of £700,159
- Period Aug 2020 to July 2021: loss of £572,049 (reduced due to closure during the Covid-19 pandemic)
- Period Aug 2021 to July 2022: loss of £792,134
- Period Aug 2022 to July 2023: loss of £951,750
- Period Aug 2023 to July 2024: loss of £839,454
- Period Aug 2024 to July 2025 estimated loss of over £781,000 (as at end of June 2025). This is currently a forecast based on business and costs to date. The final account will not be completed until the end of the university's financial year (31 July) and finalised accounts will be completed later in 2025 as part of statutory reporting arrangements.

In summary, from August 2019 to August 2025, the operating loss for the NGC was in excess of £4.6m.

2. Do those losses reflect the cost incurred when structural changes were made to the Centre's main façade in 2022?

The façade works and other such maintenance issues that have arisen over the past five years have incurred additional capital investment (not included in the above) of £835,000.

3. How does the University account for the Centre's income and expenditure?

The NGC activities form part of the consolidated university accounts and, like other parts of the university, separate accounts are not published for the NGC. The accounts for the university are reviewed each month and audited annually by external auditors as part of the year-end process. The university accounts are published annually and available here: [Financial reports | The University of Sunderland](#).

4. Will the University release all documents relating to its ownership of the Centre and confirm whether that ownership is subject to any restrictions?

The university has previously released (under an FOI request), a redacted version of the Business Transfer Agreement relating to the National Glass Centre dated 29 April 2010. This document contains the key relevant information relating to the university's acquisition and ownership of the National Glass Centre.

A copy of this agreement, including redactions which remove personal information relating to staff, is attached to this [report](#).

Resolution 2

Glassworks Report

At this stage in the development of Glassworks:Sunderland the level of detailed information requested in the Resolution is not available. The information set out below summarises the position and can be shared in the public domain as requested in the Resolution.

Background

In February 2024, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) launched round 4 of the Cultural Development Fund (CDF). CDF is a strategic investment fund, administered by Arts Council England (ACE), which aims to unlock local growth and productivity, increase access to creativity and culture, and regenerate communities through capital investment in transformative place based creative and cultural initiatives.

The Council was approached by Sunderland Culture and collaborated on the submission of a bid by Sunderland Culture for Glassworks Sunderland - a new hub for glassmaking in the city, offering specialist facilities for artists and the public to create and produce glass art. The proposals for Glassworks Sunderland are strongly aligned with the strategic objectives in ACE's 'Lets Create' programme. The former Peter Smith Antiques building was identified as the preferred location for the facility.

Glassworks Sunderland is also well aligned with the ambition of the Sunnyside Place Strategy to activate the Sunnyside area, increase footfall, and strengthen the creative and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Current Position

On 17 January 2025, ACE announced at the Creative Industries Growth Summit held in the region that Sunderland Culture had been successful with its bid and was allocated £5m of CDF grant funding. The funding offer from ACE is subject to the production of a detailed business plan, demonstration of the required level of match funding, and execution of a grant funding agreement.

The CDF project proposal sets out to enable the creation of a new purpose built facility for people to create in glass, catalysing the emergence of a new creative cluster in Sunderland. A nationally significant centre of excellence for glassmaking, Glassworks Sunderland will connect Sunderland's 1350 years of glassmaking heritage and the city's creative future with specialist facilities to create and produce in glass. As well as safeguarding glassmaking in the city, it will also drive economic growth and support cultural regeneration and placemaking.

Former Peter Smith Antiques Building

The Council acquired the former Peter Smith Antiques Building in May 2024 to preserve its heritage and ensure an appropriate future use that was aligned with the Council's ambition for the regeneration of Sunnyside.

At the point of acquisition, the building was in a poor state of repair and was in need of intervention to prevent water ingress and further structural decay, and to provide a watertight envelope and a robust structure that would support future use.

To determine the full extent of the required interventions the Council appointed a chartered building surveying / quantity surveying practice - Ryden Levitt Bucknall – to complete a detailed condition survey and produce a schedule of essential works. The survey report identified a need to complete c.£1.7m of works including roof repairs/replacement; window repairs/replacement; removal of external vegetation and repair; concrete repairs; repair/replacement of rainwater goods; brick and masonry repairs, and mechanical and electrical replacement/upgrades. The budget estimate included project management costs and appropriate contingencies based on the level of survey and technical information available.

In April 2025 the Council, in partnership with Sunderland Culture, submitted a bid to NECA for £2.405m of UKSPF funding to deliver the essential repairs at the Peter Smith Antiques building as part of an enabling works package which will be procured by the Council with close involvement and support from Sunderland Culture.

The UKSPF bid to NECA also included an allowance to progress the design of the Glassworks Sunderland project supported through CDF4 to RIBA stage 3 and to provide

more detailed and coordinated proposals, including the preparation of and submission of a detailed planning application. The procurement of the consultant team required to deliver the RIBA stage 3 proposals will be led by Sunderland Culture (as the lead applicant and accountable body for Glassworks Sunderland under the CDF grant funding agreement with ACE), with close involvement and support from the Council via a partnership and delivery agreement for the UKSPF funding.

The forecast costs for the RIBA Stage 3 work are based on quantity surveyor advice from projects of a similar scale, nature and complexity, include appropriate contingencies and an allowance for Council input and are considered to be robust at this stage of the project.

The outcome of the UKSPF funding bid was determined by NECA in July 2025 and the grant will need to be defrayed by the 2025 / 26 financial year end.

As the lead applicant and grant recipient for the UKSPF project, the Council will be required to enter into a grant funding agreement with NECA for the full grant allocation. The Council will then enter into a partnership and delivery agreement with Sunderland Culture to passport the relevant part of the UKSPF funding, and associated funding compliance requirements.

The programme for the above enabling works package assumes that, subject to the funding being approved by NECA, the works will start on site in Autumn 2025 and complete in Spring 2026. The RIBA Stage 3 design work, including the submission of a planning application, will commence in September 2025 and complete by end of March 2026.

Completing both the enabling works package and RIBA Stage 3 proposals in 2025/26 will represent a significant milestone against the Glassworks Sunderland project approved by ACE.

Glassworks:Sunderland

Under the ACE grant funding agreement, to enable full delivery of the Glassworks Sunderland project from April 2026 to March 2028, Sunderland Culture will be responsible for the design and delivery of RIBA Stage 4 to 6 works. It is likely that the Council, as the landowner, would be asked to deliver the capital works to the building, on behalf of Sunderland Culture.

The total capital cost of the Glassworks Sunderland project approved by ACE is estimated to be £7.5m. Approval of the UKSPF funding by NECA would mean that a significant proportion of the funding had been secured, and Sunderland Culture is currently working to identify other opportunities to leverage additional funding and investment.

As part of the development phase of the ACE project, Sunderland Culture is working with the Council and other key partners and stakeholders to determine the most appropriate operating model for Glassworks Sunderland. The proposed terms of the

detailed delivery and operating model, including details of the property arrangements between the Council and Sunderland Culture will be subject to a separate Cabinet report in due course.

Subject to bridging the funding gap, developing a viable operating model and satisfying the remaining ACE grant conditions, the programme for the delivery of the main phase of Glassworks Sunderland supported by ACE would see works start on site in Autumn 2026.

Patrick Melia OBE
Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council
7 August 2025