

#Save the National Glass Centre Briefing Document

6th April 2024 <https://savethengc.art.blog/>



"The arts are vital to health, creativity and generate a lot of wealth."

"We must pass on our historic crafts & skills to future generations."

"Art in all its forms matters, it makes us better humans."

"We are new to the area however going to watch glass being blown is an amazing experience. If I were younger I would have enrolled at the university for a course. We take all our family and friends to see the amazing work when they come to stay."

"...we need to retain such places for future learning."

"I saw this on Facebook and love all kinds of glasswork... I'm in the USA but I support you all ..."

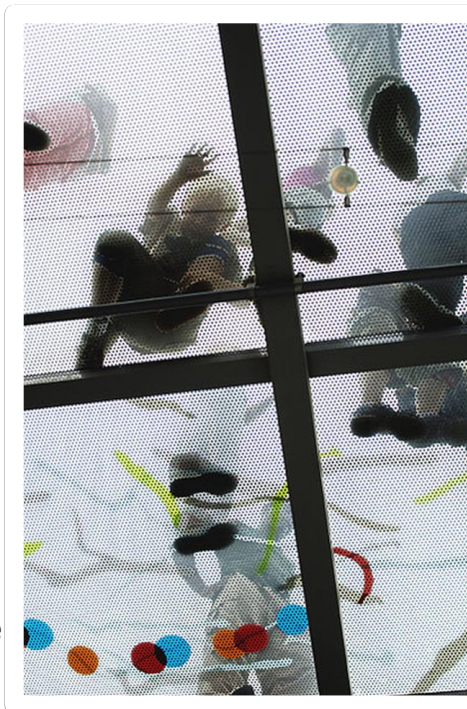


"It's the jewel in Sunderland's crown"

"As a parent and was a child minder, I have spent a lot of time with the children at the glass centre. It never got boring and the kids loved it as well as the adults. Watching the glass blowing was always a treat and would be a shame to see this disappear. There are not many 'cheap' days out for families anymore, and this one was special."

"National Glass Centre is a facility of excellence unmatched in the UK"

"Culturally very important"



See further Petition Comments at
<https://savethengc.art.blog/>

"I am an archaeologist with a specialist interest in the beginning of glass-making in Egypt and Mesopotamia in the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. and the spread of glass to prehistoric Greece. The National Glass Centre in Sunderland should absolutely not be closed, both for the sake of glass studies and for the sake of Sunderland."

"It's part of our regional identity and national heritage"

"As we try to change the past we inevitably create a future that's devoid of history! Why can't we have both? It's a truism that the past influences our future. The younger generation needs it more than at anytime. Our politicians support stuff that's giving away money for useless projects every day! THE PAST SHAPES OUR FUTURE. Nuff said."

"J'aime les oeuvre d'art en verre. Je veux encourager les artistes!"

"Arts matter"

"It makes me proud, I take everyone there that visits me, it really makes me sad that soon it won't be there, I think it should be saved no matter what it costs, it's why people come to Sunderland to visit THE NATIONAL GLASS CENTRE. It's part of our heritage."

"...truly an international destination for makers..."

"The Shipbuilding and much of the heavy industry that created the wealth and indeed the 'heart' of the city has gone... why would we want to lose the National Glass Centre? A cultural space that was built to enhance the City and celebrate Glassmaking, another Sunderland heritage industry?"

National Glass Centre Briefing Document

The National Glass Centre is...

- Still remarkably true to its original remit offering regeneration and the possibility of a new future in a post-heavy industry city.
- A much-treasured public asset with a huge amount of embodied public funds involved in its creation and maintenance.
- An outstanding example of architecture, well suited to its location in an area of worldwide historical and cultural significance.
- A complex and multi-functional visitor attraction and creative making space.
- A highly successful educational establishment, with academic courses up to PhD level, school level educational experiences and popular, open access creative courses available to the public.
- Responsible for the development of highly talented creatives who go on to have local and worldwide careers in the Arts.
- International in its reach with strong bonds with the glass making hotspots around the world.
- Free to all and accessed by a wide range of people.
- Vital to creatives with its facilities used by a wide range of artists from hobby level to international artists like Sir Anthony Gormley, Magdelene Odundo and Ryan Gander.
- Intrinsically linked into a wider creative and heritage economy, supporting and developing the next generation of creatives.
- A hub and first port of call for queries about glass that often links together people requiring specialist knowledge and expertise with those able to assist.
- Fundamentally linked to the “Roker Riviera” visitor economy north of the river, as the “world class cultural asset” drawing in 230000 visitors per annum in its heyday, before the building was damaged by the University (UoS). No city can afford to lose that number of visitors.
- The host to two of the five assets overseen by Sunderland Culture, the NGC (National Glass Centre) and NGCA (Northern Gallery for Contemporary Arts).
- Well supported by ACE, Arts Council England and heritage and cultural organisations.

The University of Sunderland...

- Shows scant regard for its responsibility to always act with a duty of care towards people, the staff, students, visitors and locals.
- Doesn't want the NGC to continue as a building or an entity.
- Hasn't taken sufficient care over the building or business model.
- Has never got to grips with owning and maintaining the building.
- Is mismanaging the process of change it initiated.
- Doesn't want to bear the liability of correcting the previous mismanagement of the building.
- Doesn't want “the burden” of the civic responsibility of ownership.
- Is struggling with obtaining best value in its procurement procedures and then basing decisions on the biased evidence produced.
- No longer wants to run creative courses.
- Is stepping back from its responsibilities and ignoring the protections that it put in place as a Founding Partner of Sunderland Culture.
- Is making decisions about today and for now and not for future generations.

The way forward – the NGC needs people who can,

- Restructure and overhaul the business model.
- Repair the building and increase its sustainability so that it can “wash its own face”.
- Build relationships with outside partners with heritage visitor attraction expertise.
- Strengthen the educational offer.

1 Introduction: The National Glass Centre (NGC) was opened in 1998 by Prince (now King) Charles amid great fanfare giving the City of Sunderland, and the wider community an iconic building on what had been derelict land for some years. It was an outstanding example of what could be done using Heritage Lottery funding, bringing new life to what had previously been the beating heart of the shipyards. Sunderland as a city and the whole North East had lost its shipbuilding and coalmining heritage some time ago, but at least we still had glass making as our last heritage industry. That was until the University of Sunderland (UoS) announced the closure of the NGC building last year, and more recently announced that the glass and ceramic courses run by the UoS would be 'taught out' from this year so there would be no new student intake, even though, as we understand it, the courses were fully subscribed.

This is a devastating blow to the city. Just as we should be this year celebrating 1350 years of glass making on the Wear we are now coming to terms with losing a heritage, cultural and educational facility which is much loved by the community. What seems to be being overlooked is that the building was created as a community asset, not for the benefit of the UoS. Indeed, when Sunderland entered the competition to be the most recent City of Culture, the NGC was proudly put forward as the jewel in the crown of the bid. How quickly things change. Unless the UoS reverses its decision, Sunderland is set to lose its one international cultural asset.

A petition has been set up which already has over 33 000 signatures from all over the world, but the majority from the local community, which indicates the deep affection which is felt for the building within such a still deprived area. The petition has gathered more momentum since the announcement regarding the ending of the glass and ceramics courses was made, and we expect this to continue.

2 Remedial Costs to repair the NGC building: (See attached spreadsheet): The UoS's mantra has been that to repair the existing building will cost £45m. This is the only figure that is mentioned, and as we understand it, was the only figure presented to the Board of Governors to enable them to make the decision regarding the closure. We believe the figure to be vastly inflated to a level where any potential investors would be put off. Having gone through the cost estimate in detail we raised many items with the UoS, via our MPs, however they would not engage with us. There were undoubtedly issues due to thermal movement when the building was first designed but a project to deal with this was carried out in 2013, where better extraction from the furnaces was installed and more fresh air was ducted into the building. The £45m projected cost allows for all this work to be ripped out and reinstalled after only 10 years!

It should also be noted that the building is mainly a concrete structure so there should be no need to carry out any work on this, and, of course, the foundations are already in place. It therefore seems incongruous that the cost to carry out remedial works to the building is so high, particularly when, to put it in context, the construction costs for the new Culture House building in the centre of the city have been reported as £25m. This is for a brand-new state of the art building complete with foundations, structure and state of the art mechanical, electrical and IT systems, much more advanced than the NGC building. We believe that the Option 2 cost of £14m is much nearer the mark for any refurbishment works, whilst noting that the cost plan for this option has a healthy allowance for contingencies and risk, (see attached spreadsheet).

3 Managed decline of the building: It has been evident for some years that the maintenance of such a high-profile public building has not been to the standard one would expect. Indeed, this was confirmed by the UoS's head of estate services after the 2013 refurbishment. Since then, matters appear to have got worse, although the Vice Chancellor has refuted this. We stand by our view as something as simple as repairs to the paintwork on the structure have clearly not been carried out for many years, if at all since the building was constructed. It would be expected that a maintenance regime would be in place to repair all the steelwork on a regular basis as the building is in such an exposed location. To test this out we requested, under an FOI request, access to the operation and maintenance manual which would specify

how often this work should be done. We were informed that there isn't an O&M manual for the building! If that is really the case, then it is unsurprising that maintenance of the building has suffered.

It has become apparent very recently that even more damage has occurred under the UoS's watch. In October 2023 one of the glass panels on the south elevation above the main entrance door slipped from its position. This was not in a storm as has been reported by the UoS. In October 2022 one year prior to the panel slipping, the UoS decided to remove the corroded steel brise soleil (solar shading) and maintenance structure from the outside of the building. We believe that this structure was giving lateral support to the glazed façade and its removal caused the panel to slip due to wind loading. For a period of a year the public were allowed the usual access to the façade, in its altered state, and to walk, cycle and run adjacent to it as the right of way outside is part of the National Cycle Route No. 1 and a big draw for visitors. We have been in touch with Building Control and discovered that the brise soleil was removed without Building Control approval, and the UoS has now designated the river facing glass facade as a "dangerous structure". This shows a complete lack of understanding of and maintenance to the building. After six months the UoS is now in the process of securing the facade to make the building safe enough for contractors to inspect and assess it, but it has not stated how it will repair the damage.

All the above has clearly affected visitor numbers as the partially open building now looks in a state of decay and many people think it has already closed. This gives even more ammunition to the UoS that they need to shut the building. We believe that the building can thrive, however, with an enthusiastic forward-looking team supported by the local community and working with a new Business Plan.

4 Relocating the NGC: The UoS has stated in the press that they are actively looking to relocate the NGC to a site, so far undefined, on the other side of the river. Culture House has been mentioned numerous times. This is not a suitable location for the NGC as Culture House is a clean environment and not designed to accommodate glass making equipment in it. The most there would be is an exhibition of Sunderland glass similar to the exhibits in the city's museum. This would be a shadow of what the NGC gives the community currently. As for glass making, there is no declared venue for where this would relocate. If one inspects the furnaces currently located in the NGC it is impossible for a similar set up to be found in the city, and to now build, or convert a building to take furnaces would be nonsensical when there is a perfectly good set up at the NGC. Anything that the UoS proposes will be a pale imitation of what we already have. It would also mean that the NGC is not in one place but is spread around the city. If this is the intention, we believe it would be much less of an attraction for visitors.

In all this nothing has been said about a new location for the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art (NGCA) which is currently housed alongside the NGC galleries. Has the UoS just decided to forget about this cultural asset it owns?

5 Impact on Sunderland Culture: Sunderland Culture is a charity which looks after five cultural venues across the city, the NGC and the NGCA being two of these. The UoS is one of the Founding Partners of the charity. The actions of the UoS in closing, or best case, severely degrading the offering, could expose Sunderland Culture to risk as its sole function as a charity is to act 'for the public benefit'. The potential loss of two out of five of the charity's assets (the NGC and the NGCA) diminishes its ability to carry out its remit under what The Charities Act 2011 calls the 'public benefit requirement'. The closure of the NGC and NGCA would meet the requirements for what the Charity Commission describes as a reportable 'serious incident'. It should also be noted that glass making in the city is one of the Charitable Objects of Sunderland Culture. The UoS's cavalier attitude in closing these venues may well lead to the total collapse of Sunderland Culture, affecting five venues, a model which has been praised highly in the past by the Arts Council England as the way cultural assets should be managed. Is the UoS aware of its responsibilities in this regard? It seems not.

6 Potential funding streams and backing: The UoS has stated that there are no benefactors willing to put money into the NGC. We believe that this is because they are put off by the £45m cost which is the UoS's mantra. As stated above, we believe a much lower figure would allow the venue to continue. We have looked at available funding streams and, although discussions are at an early stage we believe that there are bodies out there who would be willing to offer expertise and give funds to the venue for the right reasons and with a forward-looking, sustainable Business Plan. The offering at the NGC has reduced substantially over recent years. With the right, enthusiastic, forward-thinking management we believe the future of the NGC would be bright. We are developing a Business Plan to show what can be possible.

7 Behaviour of the UoS: We believe that the behaviour of the UoS regarding this matter has been appalling. There was no consultation with staff or students or the public prior to the decision being made. Where we have raised questions, these have been dismissed in a condescending way. We also believe that the Board of Governors were only given one option when making the decision to close the building and the glass and ceramic courses. We wrote to the Board of Governors prior to the meeting where the decision was made, however, we are unsure whether the points we raised were discussed at the meeting and we await a response from the Chair of the Board of Governors.

Another disgraceful example of the way the UoS appears to have no regard for its responsibilities to staff and students is the case of a course applicant from Spain who wanted to start a glass course next academic year and had very recently spent a lot of money travelling to Sunderland to be interviewed for a course which the UoS Executive knew wasn't going to exist! She spent money on flights, hotels and had given notice on her accommodation in Spain. Nine days after her interview and place offer, she found out that the course had been cancelled via Instagram. No one from the UoS had the decency to inform her in person. This is a prime example of the reputational damage being done to the UoS, and more widely, to the City of Sunderland by the high-handed way in which decisions are being made, without adequate consultation or examination of potential options. This is not the only case we have been made aware of that demonstrates a lack of duty of care.

8 Sustainability: In the face of the climate crisis, we believe it to be totally unjustifiable to build a new building to replace a facility that you already have. The greenest building you will ever own is the one you're in now. Has the UoS considered the embodied carbon produced by building a new facility for the NGC and that which will be produced by the subsequent demolition of the existing facility? It seems not. The recent government decision to refuse planning permission to the proposed Marks and Spencers' redevelopment of the store in Oxford Street should send a message out to all bodies that refurbishment of existing buildings must be the preferred option rather than demolishing and rebuilding, particularly in the case of a specially designed building such as the NGC.

9 The Future: Change needs to happen. The current situation and the struggles the UoS has with owning and looking after the NGC cannot continue. Many in the local community would like to see a constructive, people orientated change that values the opinions of locals rather than a continuation of the narrative of decline and decay perpetrated by the UoS. We believe that the NGC can be re-envisioned as a sustainable, future facing organisation that could be a flagship for visitor economy led Levelling Up in Sunderland. Whilst Sunderland Council's initiatives on the south side of the river will lead to growth and a revitalising of the city centre, a re-invigorated NGC will balance the offer to visitors on the north side of the Wear with the new bridge linking the developments and improving access.

Throughout our campaign and transition into a Community Benefit Society we continue to be astounded by the enthusiasm, commitment and passion shown by so many people and organisations who are willing and able to offer support, expertise and funding. Our main requirement now is for influence to be brought to bear on the UoS and for a negotiated process to commence. We eagerly await your views and expertise on how we should proceed further.

National Glass Centre Remedial Options

Review of Costings Associated with 'Roof Feasibility Report'

Basis:

'Roof Level Feasibility Report' dated 08.07.22

Produced by :
GSS Architecture with input from
Kyoob - MEP Consultant
JC Consulting - Civil & Structural Eng

Note: Original Design Life of Elements

Concrete - 100 years
Steel - 60 years
Insulated Glazing - 30 years
Joint Sealants - 10 years

Cost Estimate associated with Roof Feasibility Report dated 21.09.22

Produced by:
Identity Consult

Option from GSS Report	Description	Identity Consult Estimate	Comments
Option 1	'Do nothing' option: UoS maintains building in current state resolving issues as they arise	£2.4m	Not recommended & not considered further
Option 2	Roof Replacement: Replace existing solid and glazed roof Repair steelwork paint finish Replace glazing to south façade Install PVs to roof Minor mechanical & electrical works	£14m	Construction costs - £6.5m Fees, contingencies, risk and inflation costs - £5m VAT - £2.3m Grants for PVs may be available
Option 3 Note: This is Option 4 in the Identity Consult Report	Vertical Extension: Single storey extension to the roof over the north side of the building Replace existing solid and glazed roof Repair steelwork paint finish Replace glazing to south façade Install PVs to roof Minor mechanical & electrical works	£72.3m	Too expensive & not considered further
Option 3* Note: This option is not shown in the GSS Report	Roof, Envelope + M&E replacement Basis for this cost estimate is unknown as it does not form part of the GSS Report. UoS has been asked for the background to this option but has so far been unable to provide it	£45m	Construction costs - £21.2m Uplift for Net Carbon Zero - £3.25m Fees, contingencies, risk and inflation costs £16m VAT - £7.5m

The £45m figure from the Identity Consult cost estimate (their option 3) is the figure the UoS always refer to. It is not clear what this figure is based on as the GSS Report does not detail this option.