



ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

21 OCTOBER 2021

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

PART I

5. DRAFT REPORT & RECOMMENDATION OF THE REVIEW INTO THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY AND THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

To receive the draft report and recommendations of the Committee's review into the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the local economy and the Council's response.

Pages 3 - 38

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Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: The Leader and Economy, Enterprise and Transport

Date: 21 OCTOBER 2021

DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE REVIEW INTO THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON STEVENAGE AND THE LOCAL ECONOMY AND THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE

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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To consider the draft report and recommendations of the Environment & Economy Select Committee Scrutiny, looking at the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the local economy of Stevenage and on the Council's response.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

- 2.1 The issue of scrutinising Stevenage's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the local economic impact of the pandemic was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item along with other scrutiny items when it met on 22 September 2020.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

- 2.2.1 The scope for the review was agreed when the Committee met on 10 November 2020 ([see Link to scoping document item 3](#)). During this meeting it was agreed that the scope should include a focus on how the pandemic had affected young people, women, people from other Equalities Act protected characteristics groups such as the disabled and BAME community as well as on local businesses including the self-employed, small and medium sized enterprises (businesses who employ less than 250 employees) which is the bulk of private businesses in Stevenage and nationally (some 6 million private businesses who employ 61% of the total private business employees) and the large businesses (over 250 employees).

When the Committee met on 10 October 2020 and agreed a scope for the main review it was also agreed at that meeting to set up a sub group Chaired by Councillor Simon Speller. The sub group met informally six times from November 2020 to March 2021 and gathered evidence and reported back to the E&E Select Committee with its own report and recommendations in June 2021.

2.3 Process of the review

2.3.1 The Committee met on five occasions in 2021 to undertake the review as follows:
On 10 November 2020, 13 January, 22 June, 5 July and 13 September 2021

2.3.2 The Committee interviewed the following external witnesses:

- Adam Wood, Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership
- Helen Spencer, STEMPOINT East CE
- Judith Sutton, Area Team Manager for North Herts & Stevenage HCC YCH Services for Young People
- Kit Davies Principal and Chief Executive North Herts College
- Sean Trimble Head Teacher Larwood School Stevenage
- David Pearce Head Teacher Brandles School Baldock
- Mark Lewis Head Teacher Alleyne's Academy
- External Business witnesses from the following witnesses (Fin Divers Ltd, Westend Wi-Fi Ltd and Relton Associates Ltd)

2.3.3 The Committee were supported by the following officers:

- Mena Caldbeck, SBC Business Relationship Manager
- Steve Dupoy, Assistant Director, Stevenage Direct Services
- Tom Pike, Strategic Director
- Gareth Wall, Corporate Policy & Research Officer
- Chris Barnes Assistant Director Regeneration
- Paul Cheeman, Community Development Officer
- James Chettleburgh, Development Manager

2.3.4 The Committee interviewed Councillor Sharon Taylor, Leader of the Council and Councillor Lloyd Briscoe, Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport on two occasions at the start of the review on 10 November 2020 and near the end of the review on 10 September 2021. The Leader and Councillor Richard Henry, Executive Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure and Culture were also interviewed during the Member sub-group looking at the impact on young people.

2.3.4 The Committee are indebted to all of the witnesses including the external partners for their expert opinion and for the amount of time they provided to the review process.

3 THE COMMITTEES FINDINGS

3.1 Conclusions of the Environment & Economy Select Committee looking at the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Stevenage and the local economy

3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members the Committee made the following conclusions.

3.1.2 Impact on Young People – extensive review work undertaken by a sub group of the Environment & Economy Select Committee

As has been reported to the Environment and Economy Select Committee when it brought its report to the Committee in June 2021 (see [link 22 06 21 Agenda](#)) the

sub group undertook an extensive piece of work on the impact of the pandemic on young people. This work included input from the CE of STEMPOINT East, Area Team Manager HCC YCH Services for Young People, CE North Herts College, Head Teachers from Thomas Alleyne Academy, Brandles School and Larwood School. The report and findings of the sub group provided evidence on the following issues affecting young people:

- Focus on NEETs (not in employment, education or training) in Stevenage in February 2021 there were 87 16 to 18 year olds from a cohort of two thousand and nineteen young people who were classified as NEET
- The need to change the narrative around young people away from what has been missed and how much catch up is required due to Covid-19 towards what can partners do to mitigate these loses
- Help for the cohort of students who are labelled reluctant learners. It was established that this group of young people would need a particular focus
- The need for soft learning experiences to be provided which had been lost during the pandemic
- The importance of the STEM Discovery Centre at Airbus to young people in Stevenage as a place of discovery
- Digital poverty - There isn't a measure of levels of digital poverty that the review was able to define but Members have supported many students in digital poverty via their LCBs with a total of £6,376 during the 2020-21 Municipal Year
- Work experience - The sub group were of the view that this could be an area of real benefit for young people because of the tangible confidence it brings but has been severely hampered because of the pandemic. The sub group made a strong plea for all partners to pull together to make this a reality for school leavers during 2022
- Summer of positive experiences – Unfortunately this wasn't achievable in 2021 but the sub group were very keen that partners would work together to plan the suggested events/opportunities for Summer 2022
- The sub group provided the E&E Select Committee with 4 case studies these included (i) Waste Not Want Not environmental project with Brandles School linking young people with special educational needs to work experience (ii) Alleyne's Academy work as a Herts Careers Hub School with links to the STEM Centre and Air Bus (iii) HCC YCH Services for Young People working in micro areas (sub-neighbourhoods) to reach pre-NEET young people; and (iv) Brandles School providing a foodbank – social outreach being the link to families and carers of marginalised young people - [case studies](#)
- Generation Stevenage Skills for Employment – In December 2020, Generation Stevenage brought together Stevenage's world-class employers to showcase the exciting career opportunities available to young people across science, technology, engineering, math's (STEM) and healthcare. Several hundred young people from Stevenage and the nearby towns joined an online forum to hear directly from employers MBDA, GSK, Airbus, NHS, Cell and Gene Therapy Catapult and Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst on what it is like to work within their sectors. The session provided an opportunity for young people to: find out more about these cutting-edge businesses; To hear from graduate employees and apprentices on their experience of working at the above organisations; To learn more about the skills you need to succeed and how you can apply for local jobs and apprenticeships – [Link 13 09 21 Agenda](#)

- Job Centre Plus – Young People Kick Start Campaign. Up to September 2021 there had been 107 Kickstart schemes provided so far for Stevenage, resulting in 8 job offers. As of 10 September 2021 there were 86 live vacancies with 36 employers. Officers were still waiting to hear from JCP regarding the top 5 employers & for sector data

3.1.3 Impact on self employed

During the review Members heard from self-employed businesses who had gone through major challenges because of the pandemic but thanks to the Government Loans on offer to support businesses which had been administered by the Council the small self-employed businesses had taken the opportunity to recalibrate their business offer to the demands of their market and survived and in some cases become stronger as a result of it, sadly some businesses did not fare so well. [Link - 13 09 21 Minutes](#)

3.1.4 Impact on Small to Medium sized Enterprises (up to 250 employees)

Linked to the findings for the self-employed Members heard from SME's based in Stevenage who employ local people. Their experience was similar and the examples the Committee met had benefited from being based at the Council owned Business Technology Centre (BTC) run by Wenta, who provided support and advice to these businesses as well as receiving timely advice and signposting from the Council's Business Support Manager. [Link – 13 09 21 Minutes](#)

3.1.5 Impact on large sized companies (over 250 employees)

The review received a written submission from a large sized company based in Stevenage who shared that whilst they saw an early drop-off in turnover, helped by the Government Loans they were able to make strong gains over the last 6 months (April to Sep 2021). Various adjustments needed to be made to the business due to the lockdowns but overtime, coupled with savings in their running costs meant they are now in a positive position and growing and exporting internationally.

3.1.6 Impact on various protected characteristic groups including Women, BAME, Disability Groups and in addition the low incomeed

Throughout the review it was not possible to receive Stevenage based data for the impact of the pandemic on Women, BAME, Disability groups and the low incomeed. However, Members were provided with the available national data on these groups. There data suggested that all of these groups had been adversely affected by the pandemic with regards to health, social and economic impacts. [Link – 13 January 2021 Agenda item 6](#) and [Link – 13 September 2021 item 3](#)

3.1.7 Impact on private investment (planning and development activity)

Members received two reports from the Planning Development Manager, the first in January 2021 and then September 2021. These indicated that although there was an initial downturn in planning applications as a result of the lockdowns this has since been replaced with a surge in both major and minor planning applications, so it is clear that there is still a high level of confidence in investing in Stevenage following the pandemic. [Link](#)

3.1.8 Impact on Town Investment Plan

At the time the review began there was rightly concern from Members what the impact of the pandemic might have on the important Town Investment Plan so this was included in the focus of the review and when this item was considered in January the decision from Government hadn't been made. Link to 13 January Agenda paper. [Link to 13 January Agenda paper](#) However, by the time the Committee revisited this issue in September 2021, the Stevenage Development Board had developed a Town Investment Plan which it had submitted to Government as part of the Towns Fund Deal. In March 2021 the Government announced that Stevenage was to be awarded up to £37.5m of funding. Link to Executive report 15 September 2021 [Link to Executive report 15 September 2021](#)

3.1.9 On the ground support – Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal (HOP)

The review considered what on the ground support what is being offered to local people. Members were informed that the main conduit to support people was the Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal (HOP) which provides a one stop Skills resource to support employers, residents and students access a wide array of resource and support including details of current job and volunteering opportunities, as well as details of sectors currently recruiting. HOP also provides support for employers to upskill staff and careers and skills-related guidance and educational resources for students to make informed career decisions in order to support Hertfordshire with a pipeline of talent. <https://www.hopinto.co.uk/>

3.1.10 Grants provided to local business administrated by the Council

Members were very impressed with the work that SBC finance team had been doing since the beginning of the pandemic administering grants to local businesses, which involved working at pace but also carrying out adequate fraud protections to make sure that the right funds made its way to genuine local businesses, as some local authorities were quick to administer the grants but had subsequently been criticised by Government for not having carried out sufficient checks. In addition, Members heard that the provision of Grants from Government and the way they were administered by the Council had been very well received from the local businesses who were interviewed by the Committee. [Grants - report to Executive Dec 2020](#) & [Item 2 Minutes 13 September 2021](#)

3.1.11 CITB (Construction Industry Training Board) / Stevenage Works

In 2020, Stevenage Borough Council, together with North Herts College, Job Centre Plus, and a number of our construction partners, were able to secure £300k of funding from CITB over a three-year period for Hertfordshire's on-site construction experience training hub. When added to the match funding, this presents a circa £450k investment in skills and training. The aim of the fund is to get people 'site ready' for construction jobs – through a mix of learning & an onsite experience placement, so that after completion, employers can be more certain someone is ready to hit the ground running, leading to successful job starts and sustained jobs for local people. [Link Item 6 Supplementary Agenda](#)

3.1.12 Evidence from the sessions with the Leader, Cllr Sharon Taylor and Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, Cllr Lloyd Biscoe

The Leader, Cllr Sharon Taylor and the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, Cllr Lloyd Biscoe met twice with the E&E Select Committee to get the Executive's corporate view on an number of questions that

were detailed in the agenda for 13 January 2021 ([See link - 13 January 2021](#)) and 13 September 2021 ([See link - 13 Sep 2021](#)). In September E&E Select Committee Members were provided with response to their questions on:

- The economic impact of Covid on the Council by September 2021
- Details of the help being offered to the lower skilled via WENTA at the Business Technology Centre
- The latest progress with the Community Reassurance Cell re help for BAME, Disability Groups, Young People and low incomed
- Information on how many SBC staff have been directly involved in supporting the public health response to the pandemic
- Figures for redundancies
- Support for local businesses
- Lessons learned for future responses to emergencies/flexible workforce

A comprehensive response was provided to all of these issues and are appended to the report at Appendix A

3.2 Conclusion

3.2.1 The economic outlook for Stevenage and Hertfordshire looked in part bleak back in November 2020 when the review interviewed Adam Wood, Hertfordshire LEP, at that time it appeared that there could be 80,000 to 100,000 job losses which fortunately did not materialise largely due to the extension of the furlough scheme up to the end of September 2021 but this outlook was also tempered by the view of the Leader, Cllr Briscoe and the LEP that Hertfordshire was very well placed to bounce back quicker than other areas due to its fundamental economic factors such as skilled workforce and its geography. Also the repurposing of town centres to bring in residential living and associated business are the future for town centre developments as traditional retail focused high streets struggle, which Stevenage was a prime example of and was well ahead of other towns both new towns and older traditional towns in this regard.

3.2.2 The review established that the Council including its Members and officers adapted very well during the pandemic showing agility to change gears and focus on services that directly responded to the need such as housing officers focusing on the response to homelessness provision; Revenue and Benefits support for businesses via government grants; the Stevenage Helps community outreach; and support from SBC staff for the vaccination programme at Robertson House. All of this was achieved at the same time as moving vital regeneration projects along which will provide stimulus and investment for Stevenage's recovery plan. The review wishes to put on record its thanks to all Members and Officers of the Council for the way it adapted, kept its core offer going and provided many adaptations to meet the community need during the pandemic.

3.2.3 Overall outlook for the future of the town is positive. However, there are acute issues for local government due to the funding settlement which are problematic so any optimism about the future of the town needs to be tempered with the Council's ability to move forward positively due to these funding constraints. During the interview session with the Leader and Cllr Lloyd Briscoe confidence about the future was qualified, the Leader stated that the town was in an amazing position to take advantage of all of the opportunities that were happening economically through the Towns Fund Deal and the wider regeneration programme but socially and for the Council there were still challenges that lay ahead to the business model and

traditional funding settlements. The Leader favoured more devolved budgets to local government as the pandemic had proved that local government can and does step up to the plate when it is called upon.

3.2.4 Impact on Young People

3.2.5 Through the evidence provided by the sub group it was evident to the Select Committee that there is a need to support young people who have been adversely affected by the pandemic both psychologically and economically. The economic affect starts at school through a lack of access to relevant work experience for year 11 students. There are a number of projects and schemes that are looking to address this issue for young people including the Kick Start Campaign, Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) funding, Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal (HOP) as well as the Generation Stevenage event and opportunities for training and employment that are arising from the various Town's Deal projects. All of these endeavours will provide opportunities for local young people. In line with the national situation, there are numerous opportunities available to school leavers and young people but they are largely in traditionally low skilled, insecure employment. However, there is still a need to address the issues raised by the sub group including the provision of wider work experience opportunities as the numbers and need are greater than the opportunities on offer.

3.3 Equalities & Diversity issues

3.3.1 The review made specific reference to the following protected characteristic groups:

- Age (specifically younger people)
- Gender (focusing on the impact on women)
- Ethnicity (focusing on the impact on BAME - Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic)
- Disability

3.3.2 As detailed in the report the review had a specific focus on how the pandemic has affected young people. There was less of an in depth focus on the impact on Women, BAME and the disabled but national and some local data was shared with Members that suggested that these protected characteristic groups had been adversely affected by the pandemic (as detailed at 3.1.6)

4 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 That the Environment & Economy Select Committee agrees the draft conclusions of the report as well as the recommendations below and that these will in due course be presented to the Leader and the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport and the Assistant Director Stevenage Direct Services, Steve Dupoy and Strategic Director, Tom Pike and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report.

4.2 That the Executive support, with whatever means are at its disposal (in kind buildings/officer time/ promotion via LCB funding), the efforts of STEMPOINT East to provide some hands on events in 2022 of STEM sessions looking to promote and build "science capital" in young people. These events would not be billed as STEM, but aimed at young people who don't identify themselves as a STEM student. Possible venues could be the STEM Centre at the Air Bus site, NH College PE

Department, Canyon's Scout building and the environmental charity Waste Not Want Not.

- 4.3 That the Executive Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods & Co-operative Council, Children, Young People, Leisure and Culture and Communities, Community Safety and Equalities be asked to consider the work of the sub group which promoted the case study of partners working in micro areas (sub-neighbourhoods – the case study is based on work that Judith Sutton HCC YCH is doing at the Oval project with 8 or 9 Young People who would be in danger of becoming NEET) to reach pre-NEET young people, and that the AD for Communities & Neighbourhoods meet up with the interested parties from HCC YCH, STEMPOINT and NH College to explore what role SBC could do to roll out to other outreach opportunities as mentioned in the case study to identify young people/families to help those families with encouragement towards careers and employment in general. The sub group suggested possible micro ward areas in Bedwell, Shephall and Martins Wood, where further work could be identified. In addition some HCC and SBC Local Community Budget funding could be targeted at a short term project to extend this initiative.
- 4.4 That the Executive Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods & Co-operative Council, Children, Young People, Leisure and Culture and Communities, Community Safety and Equalities be asked to consider the case study of Brandles School example of their foodbank outreach to vulnerable families and to ask these Executive Portfolio Holders to provide examples of where they are already doing this type of outreach through the Co-operative Neighbourhood Management or other programmes and to consider situations where the Council could reach out to vulnerable families to help their young people access services and opportunities.
- 4.5 That the Executive Portfolio Holders for Economy, Enterprise and Transport and Children, Young People, Leisure and Culture should work with partners, including schools, the third/voluntary sector and employers, both large and small, who identify their social responsibility, to seek funding sources and a project lead/project manager to establish a local work experience project for Stevenage school leavers in 2022 to enable them to find local employers who can offer work experience. As detailed in the report this is of great value to young people who often struggle to find good work experience opportunities and when done successfully like the Brandles Waste Not Want Not case study, gives students who struggle at school an invaluable confidence boost and in some cases could lead to employment. This should go forward as a recommendation for the Executive to consider for 2022, with initially Council pump prime funding and external funding identified along with a project lead.
- 4.6 That the Executive Portfolio Holders for Economy, Enterprise and Transport and Children, Young People, Leisure and Culture be asked to consider the case study of the Herts Careers School Hub that all partners work together to establish how funding can be found to assist the STEM Centre to secure its future funding.
- 4.7 That the Leader and Executive Portfolio Holder for Communities, Community Safety and Equalities be asked to lobby HCC and partners via the Covid-19 Community Reassurance Cell to check that they carry out a revised impact assessment on the impact on BAME, Disabled and Young People, looking at all ten districts not just the County as a whole, as Stevenage had particular challenges with disabled, BAME and young people, who in many cases stated the pandemic in a deficit position and were in danger of this being further compounded, and that the impact assessment leads to direct initiatives to address any gaps in provision for these groups.

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications in this report. Any funding for the near horizon recommendations would need to be covered within Members Local Community Budgets and for far horizon recommendations then funding bids would need to be submitted into the budget process.

5.2 Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications for this report.

5.3 Equalities Implications

The Equalities implications have been addressed within the report at paragraph 3.11.1; 3.11.2. and 3.11.3 There are no further direct equalities implications for this report.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A – Notes of the interview session with the Leader and Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, September 2021

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS – Notes of the sub group:

1. 15 02 21
2. 26 02 21
3. 08 03 21
4. 16 03 21
5. 30 03 21
6. 31 03 21

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Follow up questions with the Leader and Executive Portfolio Holder for, Economy, Enterprise and Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe – With written responses from various officers

As part of its review of the economic impact of Covid-19 the E&E Select Committee has stated that they wish to invite the Leader and Councillor Briscoe to revisit the issues and questions touched upon when they were interviewed in January 2021. The following questions are based on the responses provided and discussion at the time:

- (i) What is the economic position of the Council now (Summer 2021) due to Covid-19?

Information provided by Clare Fletcher, Strategic Director: The 4th quarter monitoring report identified that the impact of COVID on the 2020/21 budget was a net pressure of £2.4Million, assuming that majority financial impacts would be pandemic related. (see also the outturn report at item 6 of the [August Executive](#)).

In the current year the impact from COVID and including homelessness increased costs is estimated to be a net cost of £1.4Million (after funding is taken into account), with a further £1Million in 2022/23.

These assumptions have been built into the MTFS report to the September Executive, which includes;

- 'Making Your Money Count' target of £2.14Million over the period 2022/23-2024/25.
- An assessment of the minimum level of balances for the General Fund including COVID risks £3.46Million for 2022/23

The impact of COVID has increased the financial risk to the Council and this has been recognised within the MTFS report. The General Fund balances are currently projected to be £240K above the minimum level recommended by the CFO. However the impact on the Council's finances will require close monitoring to give an early indication if the actual position is worse or more longer lasting than anticipated.

During the interview with the Leader and Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, the Leader stated that the Executive would be keeping a close eye on the budget and will continue to monitor it including areas like fees and charges. At the beginning of the pandemic parking income was down to just 17% of its usual levels which had now increased to 35%. It was not known what levels these might rise to in the future. There was a £350,000 overspend on temporary accommodation due to dealing with rough sleepers and continued to be a challenge. The Leaders Service Priority Group would be meeting soon to look at areas for savings but covid on top of 10 years of cuts to central government funding settlements was making savings hard to find.

The Leader mentioned a Stevenage Together Health Summit a daytime event on zoom 16 September (2.30pm to 4.30pm) which Members are welcome to join which will be looking at the impact of Covid on health and the recovery. Officers will circulate the zoom codes to those Members of the E&E who would like to attend.

- (ii) In terms of those who had been labelled as “low skilled” in academic qualifications but potentially “highly skilled” in other ways, what work has WENTA and the BTC been doing to address this cohort (it was identified that both WENTA and BTC would be addressing this)?

Information provided by Mena Caldbeck, SBC Business Relationship Manager:
Wenta as part of its support programme to the business community provide a number of free training programmes and events to upskill businesses and their employees to learn new skills or improve existing skills. This includes on a number of subject areas including ‘starting a business’ to ‘social media’, ‘websites’ and ‘finance’.

Serco are the delivery partner for Herts LEP and provide the Skills Support for the Workforce (SSW) programme to provide small and medium-sized business with fully funded recognised accredited qualifications, bespoke flexible training courses and learning pathways to enhance employees’ skills and increase business competitiveness. The programme also supports businesses with qualifications in functional skills in English, Maths and ICT to support those with low academic skills in English and Maths to support employees.

During the interview with the Leader and Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, Councillor Briscoe noted a Members question on whether Serco were providing skills towards driving instruction for heavy goods vehicles. Cllr Briscoe said he would endeavour to find out if they did? Regarding drivers, adult social care and hospitality there is a national shortage of applicants to all of the vacancies so getting these young people into these areas was much needed. Members mentioned that Wenta and the BTC are skilled at meeting the hi-tech entrepreneurial industries but there could be a provision imbalance and structural gap for more hands on roles that Covid has exposed and Members don’t want to see another left behind generation, so the provision has to meet the needs and current skills of these young people. The Leader added that there were tremendous opportunities coming up through the major projects from the Towns Deal and the regeneration projects in Community Wealth Building via the Stevenage Works Projects which can provide a double dividend of meeting the need for the project through public money and at the same time offer training and employment to local people.

- (iii) What progress has the Community Reassurance Cell had with drawing up its action plan to address the effects of the pandemic on a number of groups including the low income, the young, people with disabilities and BAME communities?

Information provided by Rob Gregory, AD Communities & Neighbourhoods

(updated 7th September): The community reassurance cell has been contacted for an up-to-date position of the cell's workstream. Once this position is known it will be shared with members of the committee. From a recent meeting of Hertfordshire Leader's Group, it is expected that a further Community Impact Assessment will be undertaken. Cllr Taylor has requested that this Assessment is more localised than the 2020 Assessment, and with targeting for particular parts of our community where there is potential for greater adverse impacts, such as among young people, those with disabilities, those on lower incomes and those within BAME communities.

There are a number of workstreams emerging across the county in relation to groups who have been adversely affected by the pandemic, this includes targeted work with BAME communities through the Volunteer and People Assistance Cell and closer joint working with Children's Services on issues relating to children and families.

During the interview with the Leader and Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, the Leader stated that colleagues at HCC were looking at a revised impact assessment which would start in September and could take a couple of months to complete and the challenge was to look at this for all ten districts not just the County as a whole, as Stevenage had particular challenges with disabled, BAME and young people, who in many cases stated the pandemic in a deficit position and were in danger of this being further compounded.

- (iv) When the E&E Select Committee met with you in January it was acknowledged about the work that various departments at the Council such as Revenue and Benefits and Planning & Regulation, Business Support are doing in terms of business support with access to government grants and advice and the work of Environmental Health to support retail and with contact tracing, and Communities officers as Covid-19 Marshals, and various SBC officers as Vaccine Centre Marshals, not to mention all of the flexibility and work that many Members and officers are doing to tackle the pandemic and support our community. Is it possible to say how many officers are still directly engaged in front line duties supporting the Council's response to the pandemic?

Information provided by Kirsten Frew, Senior HR and Transformation Manager:
Since the pandemic began, SBC officers have been redeployed across services to support our frontline Covid-19 response. Varying numbers of staff have been redeployed at any given time depending on the frontline service delivery demands, for example when Stevenage Helps undertook initial welfare calls to those shielding within the town, upwards of 20 officers were redeployed that week to ensure all calls were completed during the timescales required by HCC.

In December of 2020, SBC alongside colleagues from HCC were asked to support resourcing the launch of one of the country's first max vaccination centres at Robertson House in Stevenage in partnership with Hertfordshire Community Trust. 4 staff were redeployed full time to the vaccination centre – these were staff who had been employed by SBC in Community Transport but

who were unable to carry on in their Transport role due to the service being closed, so when they were made redundant they were able to gain direct employment with HCT, so that's a real success story. In addition a further 60 SBC staff volunteered to take on hours supporting the vaccination centre in addition to their roles with SBC. At the end of August 2021, 20 individuals were still undertaking shifts at the vaccination centre and the involvement of those SBC staff came to a close at the end of August 2021.

At the end of August 2021, we had in post:

*3 Covid-19 Marshalls
2 Covid response officers (track and trace)
2 Specialist Support Officers for Covid-19 testing.*

In response to a challenge from a Member on (i) the challenge of getting routine housing repairs carried out (ii) the need to look at the wider need and provision for Community Transport and (iii) the challenge to keep the SBC staff able to keep volunteering post pandemic, the Leader stated that the Council was doing all it could to get back to normal but there were bumps in provision and officers were looking at this closely in particular a project on call handling through the Customer Services Centre. Events like the pandemic can have a long tail with staff affected by the work and response they have provided. The Leader favoured an accessible Community Transport model that was tailored to specific needs of the client base rather than a 'take it or leave' business model. The Leader supported the need to make policies attractive to encourage staff to keep volunteering through the Council's own Corporate Social Responsibility through its co-operative approach.

- (v) Members were concerned back in January about the potentially high numbers of redundancies that could be seen in Hertfordshire as a result of the pandemic, can you share the latest figures for redundancies now that the furlough scheme is coming to an end and how confident are you about the future direction of the local economy in Stevenage?

Mena Caldbeck, Business Relationship Manager – *“I have been chasing the DWP on the redundancy support item v). With regard to the latter, they are chasing internally”*

It was agreed that the review could pick this up later when there was some up to date data to look at.

- (vi) In terms of supporting our local business community what can the Council and its partners do to make Stevenage a business friendly destination? And is there anything that the Council and its partners can do to help create employment?

Information provided by Mena Caldbeck, Business Relationship Manager:
Provide access to fair procurement and prompt payment terms to suppliers – which it does and under Community Wealth Building, there is greater emphasis on buying local and supporting local suppliers

Access to support, resource and tools to aid recovery and resilience – this is being undertaken through Herts Growth Hub and Wenta at the BTC (Business Technology Centre)

Focus on supporting small businesses to grow and flourish (Wenta/Herts Growth Hub) with initiatives

Promoting and showcasing businesses through a number of platforms and access to established networks

Simplification of administration and regulation – currently working with all regulators across Herts through Better Business For All and activities there

Supporting a skills brokerage service to match skills required by employers

...and is there anything that the Council and its partners can do to help create employment?

SBC can provide a wide array of suitable accommodation for businesses to start, grow and invest into.

Wenta at the BTC to provide business support advice and guidance to encourage start-up and growth

Skills development and growth to support start-up, business expansion of business to further create employment – BTC,

Access to funding from partners/other sources to support early stage start-up and those businesses aiming to grow

Supporting innovation and growth with access to support from partners at Innovate East/University of Herts

Cllr Taylor – “In addition to this I’m sure that it would be of interest to the Committee the following summary of the positive economic news that Stevenage has had recently as would the work that is going on in relation to the Town Fund generally and on skills in particular.”

Information provided by Mena Caldbeck, Business Relationship Manager:

In terms of positive economic news, we have seen the investment by M&S at one of Stevenage’s well established retail parks.

Stevenage has also received national recognition recently for two of its key world class industries and assets, firstly, with the unveiling of the new Airbus ‘Orbit’ building, by the Prime Minister. Secondly, activities at the Science Park and in particular, The Cell and Gene Therapy, a key anchor and of global significance has been recognised by government as instrumental for the UK Life Sciences Vision for the next 10 years. Furthermore, Stevenage has also been outlined to support GSK’s ambitions to provide Europe’s largest science park campus in partnership with the local council, the LEP, and Stevenage Development Board, to further support the cluster and early stage life science companies, providing additional investment and jobs.

Furthermore, Stevenage, through Stevenage Development Board has also been successful in being awarded £37.5m from central governments Towns Fund, to support innovation and the further growth of its world class business community, which includes the expansion of its skills base to support its science based industries, as well as secure investment to support key assets for regeneration.

Information provided by Chris Barnes, AD Regeneration:

The Stevenage Towns Fund programme provides a once in a generation chance to transform the town, and providing opportunities for local people is at the heart of this. The proposals include:

- A new Sitech skills centre, offering a range of qualifications in science, technology and innovation for learners of all ages, to equip our residents for the skills needed to work in the industries that are growing in Stevenage, and promote the employment of local people*
- Delivery of the nine Towns Fund projects in partnership with Stevenage Works, to ensure the construction phases provide training and employment opportunities for local people throughout the lifecycle of the programme*
- Delivery of a wide range of projects, including national heritage centre, life sciences centre, Sitech, Sports & leisure and others which will provide short-term and long-term skills & employment opportunities within Stevenage Borough Council*

During the interview with the Leader and Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, the Leader stated that the Town Fund Deal nine projects were a huge boost to Stevenage, with unprecedented venture capital investment in Cell and Gene industries as well as construction jobs boost and the Air Bus Orbit Building. Stevenage was the only town mentioned in the Government's Life Science Strategy. Other positives were the benefits to be derived from the nine Towns Deal £37M funding and the newly opened Co-space work space in the Town Square.

Members stated that there were still challenges with connectivity between the Junction 7 business such as Glaxo and the Air Bus site, with work required to upgrade junction 7 of the A1M. It was acknowledged that there had been delays, but that partners were now all working together to make sure these improvements happen.

- (i) What lessons have been learnt about the Council's ability to respond to events like this, particularly given that there is potential for pandemics to become a recurring feature of life in the future? Are you still confident about the Council's long term resilience to keep responding to the Covid-19 pandemic as it stretches into two years?

Information provided by Tom Pike Strategic Director:

I am deeply proud of the efforts of Stevenage Borough Council in responding to the devastating impacts that Covid-19 has had in our community. This has been an incredibly stretching 18 months, which will leave a legacy that lasts

decades. There are many examples of the extraordinary efforts of Councillors, Officers and partners in tackling some of the worst effects of the pandemic.

Our teams have shown great flexibility to be able to put in place vital services like Stevenage Helps, to reach those in need and meet their needs, to expand our homelessness provision and scale up our response and offer to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We have seen many redeployments across different service areas, keeping vital operational services such as our waste and recycling service operational and managing a very high level of demand, as well as supplying vital capacity to help open one of the first mass vaccination centres in Robertson House.

The Revenues and Benefits service has worked under real pressure and at pace, to put in place a raft of new funding packages for businesses to help support them to continue to operate, showing determination as well as flexibility.

We have worked very closely with partners such as Public Health, to put in place shared Outbreak Plans and manage local contact tracing to help respond to the outbreak as effectively as possible. This partnership approach will be vital in future incidents, as no single public body has the resources or scope to tackle a challenge of this magnitude on its own.

Finally, we have been able to continue vital work to prepare for the recovery, from securing £37.5m Town Deal funding, to building new Council homes, continuing the next phases of our regeneration programme, and creating local jobs and opportunity through our shared approach to community wealth building and vital projects like Stevenage Works.

This flexibility and commitment brings many positive lessons learned for the future, and our ability to prepare and respond at pace to some of the most challenging circumstances.

I would also add that there have been vital lessons for Government through this pandemic, with the early stages of the response being highly centrally managed, sometimes inhibiting our efforts through challenges such as a lack of data on known cases, or lack of data on those with known vulnerabilities, delay in issuing guidance, and funding uncertainty not just for the Council but other partners and businesses too.

As a trusted local voice, residents and businesses have looked to us for urgent and effective support at key moments in the pandemic, and local government has been able to demonstrate local knowledge, relationships, trust and flexibility to respond well - with government now recognising this vital role - from Outbreak Management, to contact tracing, to support for vulnerable people.

The Council, as with many other partners, has been under real pressure over the last 18 months, requiring very close management of the services on offer, and the financial position.

Officers have conducted internal reviews and most recently an audit of our Covid-19 response and arrangements, noting the great flexibility shown, the leadership,

direction and support shown by Members, and efforts to work with partners to tackle some of the worst effects of this pandemic.

There are clearly some limitations and challenges ahead though. While some of our Covid-19 costs have been met Government, by no means all costs have been covered. A fair funding settlement will be vital for the Council and for all of local government, to help us marshal the most effective local recovery, but to remain prepared for future challenges. Without that, we would run the risk of diminishing the vital role that local Councils can play in supporting communities through the challenges ahead.

During the interview with the Leader and Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, the Leader stated that she gave a qualified yes to this question. Yes the town was in an amazing position to take advantage of all of the opportunities that were happening economically but socially and for the Council there were still challenges that lay ahead to the business model and traditional funding settlements. The Leader favoured more devolved budgets to local government as the pandemic had proved that local government can and does step up to the plate when it is called upon.

Climate Change E&E Updates

Cllr John Gardner Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration

- **Biodiversity**
- **Trees**
- **Waste vehicles**
- **Recycling**
- **Planning Policy**
- **Regeneration**

Biodiversity - background

Page 22



Stevenage is just 2,598ha.

The total area of all green habitats within the Borough is 612.6 ha (23.57%).

Stevenage has 37 Local Wildlife Sites.

Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2022 focusses on the most important sites, ie those sites that:

- have greatest biodiversity value
- at risk of being lost if no work undertaken.

97 actions for delivery to woodlands, grasslands, aged hedgerows, wetlands and neighbourhood nature.

Biodiversity Successes

- Partnership with Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust
- Positive community engagement
- The only district / borough in Herts with own BAP
- Biodiversity Net Gain
- Delivery of four new Community Orchards since 2020
- Additional Local Wildlife Sites as result of grassland management regime
- Demand for pollinator / wildlife friendly management practices
- Delivery through Green Space Volunteers
- Support external accreditation success



Challenges

- No dedicated resource to deliver / capacity to deliver
- Good practice vs public perception
- Biodiversity Net Gain

Trees



Background

- Around 30,000 trees (not including woodlands)
- Around 50% of the town's present tree population is made up of Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*).
- Tree canopy cover in Stevenage, including woodlands, (in 2016) was 17%.
- Diminished tree stock levels.
- Even when planting a new tree to compensate for the felling of an older one, a significant loss is incurred.

Benefits

Environmental:	Health:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce the 'greenhouse' effect by taking up carbon dioxide from the air, using the carbon to build wood and releasing the oxygen.• In urban areas, trees help to moderate the local climate: providing shade from sun in summer, shelter from rain, and reducing wind speeds.• By providing food and shelter for wildlife trees can help increase biodiversity and bring nature into the heart of our towns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most trees have a positive impact on the incidence of asthma, skin cancer and stress related illness.• The urban tree-scape improves public health, promotes relaxation and emotional well-being, and can thereby help to reduce healthcare costs.• Desk workers who can see nature from their desks experience 23% less time off sick and reported greater job satisfaction.
Social:	Economic:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can reinforce local character, distinctiveness and identity of an area, and provide a 'sense of place'.• Involvement in tree planting and care can bring people together, building a stronger sense of ownership and develop civic pride.• Tree lined streets can help to improve road safety by giving the impression of narrowing which encourages slower driving.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trees can increase property values by 7-15%• Can also help to provide an environment that is conducive to economic growth and in attracting investment.• Create a positive perception of a place for potential property buyers

Successes and Challenges

- Amenity Tree Management Policy
- Policy 21: All new developments will support new tree planting, either directly or through planning contributions, equivalent to a minimum 20% tree canopy cover at maturity.
- £30k funding bid to Urban Tree Challenge Fund
- Funding for replacement tree planting.
- Around 50% of the town's present tree population is Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*).
- Legacy of historical tree planting
- Conflicting demands



Waste

Page 29



- Alternate weekly collection service to 37,788 houses & flats
- Refuse and recycling collection delivered to 600+ Stevenage businesses
- Bulky waste and assessed collection services
- 16 bring bank sites
- Clinical waste collection service
- Own fleet of refuse vehicles
- New fleet – including Euro 6 engines

Successes

- Stevenage Transfer Station included as part of the HCC disposal contract.
 - Saving over 83,000 miles p.a. being travelled
- 70% of all general waste to Energy from Waste
 - Generates enough to power 36,000 properties
- UK processing
 - Glass to Re-Melt
 - Fibre to Mill
 - Plastics via MRF to re-processing
- Volumes increased during pandemic though all services maintained
- Waste Policy agreed in 2020

Alternatives

- Fleet replacement programme
 - Next large scale replacement due 25/26
 - Demo's of smaller electric vehicles
 - Electric hand tools in use
- Considerations of alternate fuels for example Gas to Liquid
- Is the technology ready? Are we ready?
- £420k for equivalent refuse vehicle that costs £180k
- £62k for caged tipper versus current £23k
- Infrastructure requirements

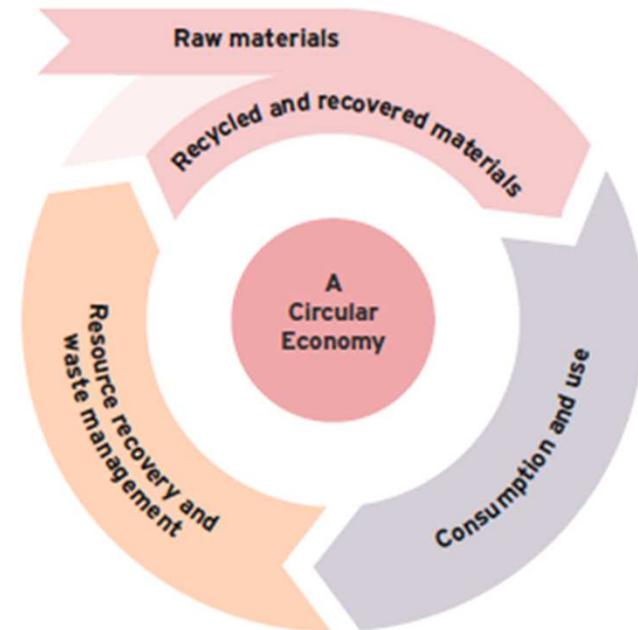
Challenges / Opportunities

- Communal bin storage facilities to flat blocks
 - Recycling offering
 - Contamination
- Resources & Waste Strategy
 - Expected January 2022
 - Biggest change to the industry since the introduction of the Environmental Protection Act 1990

Resources & Waste Strategy

Consistency

- Proposals for collecting a core set of dry materials for recycling from households (including flats). All householders can expect the same materials to be collected for recycling
- Proposals for separate weekly food waste collections from households (including flats) from 2023 /24 supported by new burdens
- Free fortnightly garden waste collections
- Proposals on improving quality by source separating dry recycling materials in collections, especially paper and glass



Resources & Waste Strategy

Deposit Return Scheme

- DRS would see a deposit added to the price of drinks in in-scope drinks containers at the point of purchase, which would be redeemed when consumers return their empty drinks containers to designated return points.

Extended Producer Responsibility

- Proposes that funding to meet the costs of managing packaging wastes are transferred from central government and local taxpayers to businesses.
- 'Polluter pays' principle and extend producer responsibility for packaging, ensuring that producers pay the full costs of disposal for packaging they place on the market

Resources & Waste Strategy

What does this mean for SBC?

- Introduction of separate food waste collections
- Dedicated resource in place to manage programme for delivery
- Implementation i.e. planning, recruitment, communications
- Cost – vehicles, labour, caddies
- Tipping / Processing (HCC)
- Responsibility for materials, Alternative Financial Model (AFM) ?
- Change to collection methods?
- Opportunity for an increased recycling rate

Planning

- A Planning consideration for all major applications
- Station Gateway Area Action Plan – zero carbon developments?
- Biodiversity Supplement Planning Documents (SPD) Net Gain £££
- EV, Sustainable Transport SPD – approach
- Sustainable new neighbourhood, connected to town centre. New town principles.
- Revising sustainability policies in new 2023

Regeneration

- Zero carbon partners- MACE
- Zero gas SG1
- New low carbon Hub
- Local suppliers
- Investment in improving existing buildings in the town centre, North Block , North of Queensway

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