

**STEVENAGE DEVELOPMENT BOARD  
MINUTES**

**Date: Tuesday, 7 April 2020**

**Time: 10.00am**

**Place: Meeting to be held by tele-conference**

**Present:** Adrian Hawkins (Independent Chair)  
Matt Partridge (Chief Executive, Stevenage Borough Councillor)  
Councillor Sharon Taylor (Stevenage Borough Council)  
Adam Wood (Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership)  
Councillor John Gardner (Stevenage Borough Council)  
Norman Jennings (Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership)  
Kevin Cowin (Mace Developments)  
Tom Pike (Stevenage Borough Council)  
Chris Barnes (Stevenage Borough Council)  
Annie Piper (Stevenage Borough Council)  
Andrew Fisher (Barton Wilmore)  
Briege Leahy (Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce)  
Councillor David Williams (Hertfordshire County Council)  
Patsy Dell (Hertfordshire County Council)  
Martha Lytton Cobbold (Knebworth House)  
Sharon Brownlow (Catapult)  
Kit Davies (North Hertfordshire College)  
Neville Reyner (Groundwork East)  
Charlotte Blizzard Welch (Stevenage Citizens Advice Bureau)  
Malcolm Evely (Airbus)  
Karen Hillen (BEIS)  
Graeme Collinge (Genecon)

**Start / End** Start Time: 10.00am  
**Time:** End Time: 12.10pm

**1 WELCOME AND CHAIR'S OPENING COMMENTS**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, including new attendees Sharon Brownlow (attending on behalf of Catapult) and Norman Jennings (Hertfordshire LEP).

The Chair stressed that it was important for the Board to continue to meet during these strange times in order to maintain sight of the vision for Stevenage and to work together to formulate a robust Town Investment Plan (TIP) for submission to the Government.

The Chair accepted that this would be challenging, but had been encouraged by the fact that the conditions for the release of the Growth Deal 3 monies had been met at the last Board meeting, and that work would now focus on the various steps required to produce a robust TIP for Stevenage.

## **2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

The Board was advised that apologies for absence had been received from Ed Jordan (WENTA), Charles Amies (Homes England) and Stephen Ward (Catapult) (Sharon Brownlow substituting). Malcolm Evely (Airbus) had advised that, due to a clash of commitments, he would be joining the meeting late.

## **3 CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND OPENNESS**

The following potential conflicts of interest were declared:

Adrian Hawkins – Hertfordshire LEP;  
Councillor Sharon Taylor – Stevenage Borough Council; Hertfordshire County Council; and Hertfordshire LEP;  
Adam Wood – Hertfordshire LEP  
Norman Jennings – Hertfordshire LEP  
County Councillor David Williams – Hertfordshire County Council; Hertfordshire LEP; and University of Hertfordshire.

It was **AGREED** that, in order to negate the need for existing potential conflicts of interest to be declared at each meeting, a list of such interests be maintained for the Board, with only new interests needing to be declared at future meetings.

## **4 MINUTES - STEVENAGE DEVELOPMENT BOARD - 20 MARCH 2020 / MATTERS ARISING**

It was **AGREED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Stevenage Development Board held on 20 March 2020 be approved as a correct record.

## **5 JOURNEY SO FAR... LATEST UPDATE**

Chris Barnes (Regeneration Manager, SBC) gave an oral update in respect of the Stevenage Regeneration journey so far.

Chris advised that no major issues had arisen since the previous Board meeting held on 20 March 2020. The Town Square/North Block works were on hold, with the contractor reviewing the Government guidance for the construction industry to see if operations could re-commence safely and with appropriate social distancing safeguards.

Chris reported that the Queensway North scheme was still on site, operating with about a third of the usual workforce. Additional sanitising areas had been provided, and social distancing protocols were being enforced. Many of the smaller sites monitored by the SBC Housing Development Team were continuing to operate, consistent with the Government's overall desire to maintain work in the construction

sector with safe working practices in place.

In terms of emerging projects, Chris explained that SBC officers were working to ensure the pre-planning stages were completed during the lockdown period, in order that these were ready for the next stages when restrictions were lifted.

In response to a question regarding the Stevenage Bus Station project, Chris stated that the planning application had been submitted and a dialogue had continued between the Regeneration and Planning Teams. A decision had yet to be made as to a method of determining major planning applications during the lockdown period. Matt Partridge (Chief Executive, SBC) commented that this issue, together with public engagement on planning applications during the lockdown period, was one of the urgent issues for consideration by Borough Council Members and officers.

## **6 TOWN INVESTMENT PLAN PROGRESS**

Andrew Fisher (Barton Wilmore), assisted by Graeme Collinge (Genecon), gave a presentation on a baseline update of information for use in the work on producing a Stevenage Town Investment Plan (TIP). Andrew commented that this had been prepared using existing evidence bases, policies and strategies and mapping tools.

Andrew presented introductory slides highlighting some key issues; the Strategic context/profile of Stevenage; and existing policies/strategies.

The slides relating to the Housing sector concluded with the following Assets/Opportunities/Challenges:

- A strong local housing market with rising values;
- Positive on delivery with a significant number of new homes across a variety of sites, including via the town centre regeneration;
- A re-balancing of the housing stock to provide quality affordable homes, and a range of private housing including aspirational homes;
- Stevenage had consistently recorded high levels of affordable housing need and this was a Council priority, with a delivery programme in place to support this;
- Values depended on more than location, quality remained key, particularly in the town centre; and
- Significant numbers of additional homes planned for the town centre with approximately one-third consented to date.

The slides relating to the Employment Sector included the following highlights:

- Key sectors were health, manufacturing, Research & Development (R&D), logistics and retail;
- The LEP desired growth in the R&D sector had not been capitalised on in the Jobs Growth forecasts;
- Jobs growth was expected to come from B1(a/b) uses, with a reduction in expected B2 jobs;
- Key employers in Stevenage were GlaxoSmithKlein, MBDA and Airbus;
- In terms of community flows, there was low self-containment; 51% of Stevenage

residents commuted elsewhere; 54% of Stevenage jobs were taken by in-commuters; there was a highly mobile workforce, but the high value jobs appeared to be taken by people travelling in;

- In respect of GVA Growth, the Stevenage contribution to the national economy was £2.7Billion; this was approximately 6.6% of the Hertfordshire economy contribution of £40.7Billion; elsewhere, GVA growth over the 2015-18 period was significantly higher than Stevenage's +3%; and given its assets and status within the A1M Growth Area, there was an opportunity to enhance contributions from Stevenage.

The slides relating to the Retail/Leisure sector concluded with the following Assets/Opportunities/Challenges:

- The need to diversify the offer beyond retail, noting there were ageing leisure facilities with little evening / night time economy centrally;
- Relatively low vacancy rates;
- Close proximity of the town centre to public transport links;
- Challenge of enticing higher end retailers in a very difficult climate to improve the retail mix and capitalise on Stevenage's wider catchment;
- Increasing the time shoppers spend within the town centre through temporary attractions, such as pop up stores or markets;
- Exposure of current retailers given high proportion in the clothing sector;
- Modern market hall was poorly located, surrounded by service roads; and
- Leakage of expenditure to other regional town centres.

The slides relating to the Community sector concluded with the following Assets/Opportunities/Challenges:

- Arts and Leisure Centre and the Swimming Centre were increasingly popular;
- Re-development needed to improve the quality and quantity of the existing offer;
- Limited green space within the ring road - this being addressed through the SG1 Development;
- Improving pedestrian connections from the town centre across the ring road to the nearby parks & communities; and
- Ensuring greater activity in the town centre, particularly after retail hours for community uses/leisure etc.

The slides relating to the Transport/Infrastructure sector concluded with the following Assets/Opportunities/Challenges:

- All future growth scenarios for Stevenage suggested a deficit in infrastructure funding;
- Schemes must be forward-funded prior to CIL and S106 payments. Options could include elements such as: Revolving Infrastructure Fund, Bridge Financing, LEP Growth Deal;
- Strategic location relative to road and rail, with investments planned for the A1(M) and rail station;
- Links between Gunnels Wood, the town centre and Old Town could be enhanced and would be a target for future funding;

- Significant investments being made already - relocation of the bus station, 5<sup>th</sup> Platform at the Rail Station; and
- Next Phases of infrastructure investment potentially more challenging – improving the wider access and environment around the Rail Station, Gunnels Wood connectivity, upgrading of cycleways and public transport.

The slides relating to the Skills and Education sector concluded with the following Assets/Opportunities/Challenges:

- Stevenage was currently served by six secondary schools, three Special schools and two further education colleges and a training centre;
- North Hertfordshire College offered a range of Further Education courses and had been rated a “Good Provider” by OFSTED; and
- Resident-based skills and occupations evidence highlighted lower levels of higher order skills and occupations amongst Stevenage’s resident working age populations; and significantly higher proportions of lower level skills and lower order occupations were filled by Stevenage residents.

A number of slides outlined the regeneration investment in Stevenage, including the SG1 development; Queensway scheme; Town Square and North Block projects; and Bus Station re-location scheme. An interesting mapping tool provided an Investment Map of Stevenage and the surrounding area (both for completed and planned projects).

The Board considered the importance of wide engagement and consultation, both with the public and local businesses.

In terms of the next steps, these would include consolidation of the baseline position (incorporating any comments); the profiling of assets, such as the College and science sector, to provide portraits of things in place; and the drafting of a SWOT analysis to inform the focus for the Town Investment Plan.

The Chair and Board members thanked Andrew and Graeme for an excellent presentation.

The Board debated the presentation, and the following points were raised:

- The “Threats” section of the SWOT analysis should pay heed to the likely change in employment/retail dynamics post Covid-19; this was acknowledged, although would be difficult to quantify as part of the work on the TIP should the Government’s timescale for production of the TIP remain unchanged;
- Karen Hillen (BEIS) commented that the MHCLG/BEIS were in the early stages looking at all existing Growth programmes. The Team working on the Town Deal Scheme had been diverted to work on the Business Support scheme. She felt that it was highly likely that there would be a delay to the Town Deal Programme, but advised the Board to continue its work on the production of a TIP until such time as the position regarding timescales was clarified post-pandemic;
- Karen Hillen confirmed that work had commenced at Government level on a Recovery Plan, the details of which would filter down to local authorities,

- businesses and other agencies in due course;
- Andrew Fisher/Graeme Collinge undertook to do a sectoral analysis of workforce/skills;
- There had been an increase in smaller manufacturing firms in Stevenage in recent years, particularly in the Gunnelswood Road area;
- Martha Lytton Cobbold highlighted the importance of culture, heritage and leisure as a theme to consider within the plans, and agreed to provide the Chair with statistics on leisure, arts and culture organisations, available through “Visit Herts”; and
- The potential impact of Climate Change should also be drawn out through the SWOT analysis.

A specific discussion arose in respect of the correlation of the skills/attainment levels of Stevenage students and residents with those that occupied higher levels jobs in business organisations throughout the town.

Kit Davies (North Herts College) considered that there was a lack of aspiration amongst Stevenage students to progress to higher level qualifications. However, he felt that this should be addressed in some qualitative way via a dedicated programme to support students in their progression to University and Further education.

County Councillor David Williams commented that the Marriott and Nobel Schools were improving, although the HCC were continuing to encourage improved outcomes from Barnwell and Barclay Schools. It was imperative over the next 4/5 years that sufficient investment in Stevenage schools was made in order to improve attainment levels.

County Councillor David Williams further commented that an element of the issue was demographic, in that most post-war New Towns had experienced this legacy, possibly due to the fact that employment types had changed since their formation. Councillor Taylor added that the entry level for technical jobs now required higher level qualifications, and so further work would be needed to enable the ambitions of the town and its residents to reflect the opportunities available within key businesses.

Kit Davies explained that it was not simply a lack of opportunity, as North Herts College worked closely with the University of Hertfordshire and other universities, but that engagement would be needed to help encourage students and younger people (and their parents) to raise their aspirations to consider routes to access higher level qualifications to benefit their longer-term careers. Many students appeared to be content with achieving Level 2 qualifications in order to join the employment market immediately.

Sharon Brownlow (Catapult) stated that a number of science sector organisations, such as hers and of which there were many in Stevenage, welcomed local employment initiatives, though owing to some of the specialist skills and qualifications needed to join their organisations have had to look at the wider region to attract in team members. They often required Level 7 qualified personnel.

Briege Leahy (Herts Chamber of Commerce) suggested that the key organisations in Stevenage should collaborate in the production of a video for schools highlighting their work and showing students what industries they could work in, the process for applying for jobs with those companies, and the level of qualifications that they would need to attain.

Graeme Collinge (Genecon) reminded the Board that the TIP process was concerned with Capital investment proposals, and so consideration would be required as to how the skills/attainment issue could be addressed within the constraints of the TIP process.

Norman Jennings (Herts LEP) suggested that Capital investment for skills in the TIP could look at physical assets and expansion options, as had been the case with Hertfordshire LEP, Airbus and North Herts College investment in the Stem Discovery Centre.

It was **AGREED** that a Sub-Group of the Board be established to work on potential proposals to feed into the TIP submission to address the current imbalance in Stevenage between the education/aspirations/skills and qualifications of residents and students and the level of attainment and qualifications required by local businesses, especially for higher level jobs.

[Note: at the time of the meeting, volunteers to serve on this Sub-Group included the Chair, Norman Jennings (Herts LEP), Kit Davies (North Herts College), Briege Leahy (Herts Chamber of Commerce) and Malcolm Evely (Airbus).]

## **7 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PROGRAMME**

The Chair opened a discussion on the impact of Covid-19 on the TIP Programme and on organisations generally. He commented that much of the work had, of course, focussed on conditions prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and hence the full impact on the economy would not be known for some time. However, he hoped the Board Members would be able to engage in the TIP process throughout the lockdown period and afterwards.

The Chair also took the opportunity to thank all the NHS and other Key Workers who were working to keep everyone safe and provided for.

Charlotte Blizzard-Welch (Stevenage CAB) considered that it was important to maintain a watching brief on organisations and businesses that may be struggling to re-open post Covid-19.

Neville Rayner (Groundwork East) stated that 50% of Groundwork East's staff had been furloughed. The organisation had offered to local councils, including SBC, the use of its excess vehicles. Councillor Taylor thanked Neville for this offer and stated that SBC would give it some consideration.

Councillor Taylor explained that the HCC Local Resilience Forum/Strategic Co-ordinating Group was looking at Recovery plans, but was keen to keep as many major projects as possible on track throughout the lockdown period.

Matt Partridge (Chief Executive, SBC) advised that SBC was engaging with the HCC resilience cells, and had a number of local Stevenage cells operating, including a Business Liaison cell. The Government Business Grants system had commenced, administered by SBC, and over £1.5M had already been paid out to Stevenage businesses. Advice had been provided to commercial property operators, and support had been provided to WENTA/Business Technology Centre.

Adam Wood (Herts LEP) explained that, once the UK had gone beyond the immediate economic resilience and recovery stage, it would be important that the Board focussed on those projects that could be commenced or re-commenced swiftly.

It was noted that, whilst the Government wished work in the construction industry to continue, there had been problems in the supply chain of available materials for use on site.

Kevin Cowin (Mace Developments) explained that his company was in daily contact with the Government. Mace currently operated 37 sites in the south-east of England, all of which had been suspended. The Government had written to the construction sector asking contractors to remain on site where possible and providing advice on a staged re-opening of sites, with safety of workers paramount. He agreed with the earlier comment that supply chain issues would be critical in keeping sites operational.

Kevin advised that Mace had been involved in the construction of the temporary London Nightingale Hospital, and lessons had been learnt throughout that process. Safety Guidelines supplied to the construction industry were based on Public Health England advice. Within the coming week, Kevin hoped to see a number of Mace's sites safely re-opening.

## **8 ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business.

## **9 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS**

The Chair advised that the next Board meeting (also likely to be held in a teleconferencing format) would take place **at 10.00am on Tuesday, 5 May 2020.**

Future meetings were scheduled for:

- Wednesday, 3 June 2020: 2.00pm – 4.00pm
- Wednesday, 29 July 2020: 10.00am – 12.00pm
- September 2020 (date tbc)
- December 2020 (date tbc)