

Meeting: COUNCIL
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ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT 2020/2021

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1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To report on the work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during the 2020/21 Municipal Year and to outline the Work Programme for the three Committees for 2021/22.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the work undertaken by Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during 2020/21 be noted.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 Overview and Scrutiny's role is to operate as an independent function of the Council's decision making process, by having overview of the Council's decision making, holding the Executive to account, having the power to "call in" decisions for reconsideration and undertake internal and external scrutiny reviews.
- 3.2 The Council's Constitution requires that there be an annual report to Council on the scrutiny activity over the past Municipal Year (see Article 6.3 of the Constitution).
- 3.3 This report is a retrospective look at the scrutiny review work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the two Select Committees during the 2020-21 Municipal Year.
- 3.4 In accordance with the Constitution the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was also charged with scrutinising the Executive's proposals on Budget & Policy Framework items that go before Council for decision. In addition the Committees considered updates on Scrutiny studies that had been undertaken previously, examining the progress of recommendations and where appropriate following up on matters raised.
- 3.5 The Committees have also worked with their relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on a number of separate policy development meetings developing

policies and considering reports before their submission to the Executive. This report, however, focuses on the Committees' Scrutiny role.

4. SUMMARY OF SELECT COMMITTEE REVIEWS FOR 2020/2021

4.1 The amount of work that the two Select Committees undertook in 2020/21 was severely hampered by Covid-19. The meetings were initially delayed in starting due to the corporate focus on the pandemic and then after only a few months of the Committee's holding meetings from September to December 2020 the decision was taken following the second wave of the pandemic to suspend the support for the formal Committee meetings of the Select Committees from January until the close of the municipal year. This was so corporately the Council could prioritise and focus on resilience, business continuity, and providing support for the vaccine roll out and the public health response. However, a sub-group of Members from the Environment and Economy Select Committee were able to continue to meet informally to progress a strand of the review looking at the impact of the pandemic on young people.

4.1.1 Each Select Committee review made formal recommendations to the relevant Executive Member, officers and external partners. The following is a summary of the outcomes of each scrutiny review.

4.2 Community Select Committee

4.2.1 Once the Community Select Committee was able to hold formal meetings it met in October 2020 to sign off and complete the final report and recommendations into the review of Sports and Leisure in Stevenage, and looked at the Member Complaints Your Say System.

4.2.2 Sports and Leisure Review

The Sports and Leisure review made 24 recommendations in total, these included:

- 6 recommendations specifically around improved accessibility to sports & leisure opportunities linked to health benefits
- 9 recommendations around improved marketing opportunities and use of the website
- 6 recommendations regarding infrastructure improvements
- 3 recommendations suggesting improved liaison between SBC and SLL

As the review was undertaken before the Covid-19 pandemic a large number of the recommendations were unable to be actioned by officers but the Executive Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure and Culture welcomed the report and has stated that the review was a helpful reference point for the beginning of the process to review the Leisure Contract for 2023.

4.2.3 Member Complaints - Your Say System

4.2.4 Members had asked for this matter to be scrutinised due to the variable performance of some of the Council's back office responses to the public's service requests and then complaints during the pandemic. Members had noticed that some business units were still able to respond quickly but that other areas were being affected more acutely by the pandemic. Following the meeting with the Assistant Director (Digital & Transformation) Members concluded that (i) Members felt that they were not always kept informed of the position with complaints, once the 10 day response time target was passed; (ii) It was noted that an improved digital solution for complaints (expected to be in place by April 2021 at the latest) would help to track responses to ensure that target times were met; (iii) The Assistant Director (Digital & Transformation) undertook investigate the position with regard to Members being advised when complaints cases were closed, and agreed to bring back more information on the complaints system at a future meeting of the Committee.

4.3 Community Select Committee sitting as the Council Statutory Crime & Disorder Committee

4.3.1 Once again the statutory requirement to hold an annual meeting of the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee was not fulfilled in 2020-21 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The meeting has been routinely held in March each year as this is the most opportune time to hear about the performance of the Responsible Authority Group, SoSafe Community Safety Partnership against the Community Safety Action Plan for the current year and to look ahead at the emerging priorities for the forthcoming Municipal Year. Since the resumption of Select Committee meetings in 2021-22 Municipal Year it has still not been possible to hold the meeting as officers have advised that the data was not collected in the usual way as the Police and partners focus has been on the response to the pandemic. Officers have advised holding this meeting in March 2022 when the data will be available.

4.4 Public Health meeting with the HCC Director of Public Health

4.4.1 The focus of the meeting with the Director of Public Health was once again on the Covid-19 pandemic. Members discussed the measures that HCC Public Health were taking in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the Director of Public Health answered Members questions regarding the pandemic. Members also received an update from the Council's Health and Sports Strategy Manager on the actions and delivery of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2022. A further meeting focusing on public health will be scheduled for the 2021-22 Municipal Year focusing on the public health recovery from the pandemic, the timing of this will be dependent on the availability of the HCC Director of Public Health and once the meeting arrangements have been established for the year.

4.5 Environment & Economy Select Committee

4.5.1 Once the Environment and Economy Select Committee was able to hold formal meetings it met in September 2020 to receive more evidence and updates into its review into the Neighbourhood Centres and it met again in January 2021 to sign off the report and recommendations. The Committee also began its substantive piece of work in reviewing into the Economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Stevenage and the local economy and the Council's response, with meetings in November 2020 and January 2021.

4.5.2 Neighbourhood Centres Review

4.5.3 This review had begun in 2019-20 but had been paused due to the pandemic, but had managed to carry out a number of site visits with a large number of officer's support from the wide range of business support units that are engaged in providing services to the various neighbourhood centres around the town. Members and officers visited 5 neighbourhood centres to compile their report. The centres visited were Oaks Cross, The Oval, Symonds Green, Bedwell and St Nicholas. The review also and undertook a table top exercise review for a further 4 neighbourhood centres.

4.5.4 The review managed to highlight a number of local actions that needed to take place to improve the areas and these were taken up with officers following the site visits and a large number of these actions were completed. These included issues such as; replacement of missing trees in planting areas; clearing of fly-tipping; work on broken steps and retaining walls; deep cleaning of pedestrian and car parking areas; and painting of street furniture. In addition the review provided a more strategic look at what is needed in the various neighbourhood centres and made 5 recommendations covering issues such as:

- That small scale timely interventions be made using what means are at the Council's disposal including its current regime of routine maintenance, cleansing, repair and using existing budgets and LCBs (both SBC & HCC)
- That partner authorities/partner bodies be approached to hold them to account for failure to maintain infrastructure
- That the Co-operative Neighbourhood Management approach to addressing local issues in the Neighbourhood Centres be monitored by the Executive Member with Portfolio responsibility for Neighbourhoods and Co-Operative Working to see if this is working
- That where possible and appropriate each Neighbourhood Centre area establishes a friends group to help with projects and areas like community gardens at each Centre

- That the Head of Estates and the Assistant Director Housing Development be invited to a future meeting of the Committee to contribute to the recommendations with regard to these plans

4.5.5 The Committee received the Executive Portfolio Holder response to the review in July 2021 and agreed to monitor progress with the strategic response to Neighbourhood Centres at a future meeting and to meet with the Head of Estates and the Assistant Director Housing Development to understand the Council's plans to regenerate the neighbourhood centres.

4.5.6 **Economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Stevenage and the local economy and the Council's response**

4.5.7 The Committee started its review of the Economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Stevenage and the local economy and the Council's response with its first meeting in September 2020 and then a further evidence gathering and witness interviews in November 2020. Whilst the formal work of the Select Committees were temporarily suspended from January 2021 to the end of the 2020-21 Municipal Year it was possible for a group of Members to carry on meeting informally in a sub-group looking at the impact of the pandemic on young people. The sub-group were supported by the Scrutiny Officer and a number of partner bodies who made the time to meet with the group. The sub-group met six times from January to March 2021 and provided a report to the Select Committee in June 2021, which the Committee agreed as part of its recommendations going forward. The Committee are due to meet again in September 2021 to conclude their review and will then be making its recommendations in due course.

4.6 **Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

4.6.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 10 occasions to provide overview of the work of the Executive, specifically looking at all Key Decisions made by the Executive and all Budget and Policy Framework items and in particular monitored progress of the Council and the Executive's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to these meetings the Committee also considered the following review:

4.6.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the final report and recommendations of its review into the Council's scrutiny arrangements at its meeting in March 2021. The work had been undertaken in the previous Municipal Year when the Committee sat as a Select Committee to review and make recommendations on the Council's scrutiny arrangements.

4.6.3 The review made recommendations in 8 areas including: work programming; scoping; evidence gathering including site visits and interviews; final reports and recommendations; monitoring outcomes; pre-scrutiny; call-in arrangements; and future oversight of changes brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.6.4 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the Leader's response to the review as the lead Executive Member when it met in June 2021, all but one of its recommendations were agreed.

5.1 **2021/2022 Scrutiny Work Programmes**

5.1 Due to the impact on resources to support the scrutiny committee meetings in quarter 4 of 2020-21 (Jan – March 2021), the usual practise of canvassing Members early and bringing options to Members in February/March was not possible. As such the Committees have been provided with work programme reports to consider and agree in June/July 2021. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Environment and Economy Select Committee have both now met and agreed their work programmes for 2021-22. At the time of writing the report the Community Select Committee had not yet met and was due to consider its work programme on 15 July 2021.

5.2 Environment and Economy Select Committee:

The Environment & Economy Select Committee agreed to scrutinise the following issues:

- (i) Continuation of the review of the economic impact of Covid-19 on Stevenage and the Council's response;
- (ii) Climate Change Strategy. Initially the Committee will focus on the Council's delivery of the Climate Emergency Action Plan and then it intends to interview each Executive Portfolio Holder to find out how their strategies and forward planning are being shaped by the Climate Emergency. Some of the issues the Committee will consider include individual issues such as recycling, grasslands, trees, transport and parks (it could be possible that this will be a dominant feature for at least two years).;

As well as carrying out review work the Committee will also undertake pre-scrutiny Policy Development work in Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meetings as directed by SLT and the Executive Portfolio Holders.

5.3 Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme:

5.3.1 In addition to undertaking all scrutiny of Budget & Policy Framework items and decisions of the Executive, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has the capacity to undertake a "Select Committee" style meeting during the year if it so wishes. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee did not specifically agree to sit as a select Committee but has the capacity to do so if it required. The Committee agreed to add the following items to its work programme:

- I.T outage incidents (to remain on the Work Programme pending the output from a proposed all Member briefing seminar).
- Consider the Resident and Tenant Survey (to be directed by the Assistant Director, Community)

As well as carrying out review work the Committee will also undertake pre-scrutiny Policy Development work in Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meetings, as directed by SLT and the Executive Portfolio Holders.

5.4 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will review the Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions and also consider all 'Call-in' requests in accordance with the Council's Constitution as well as considering any Councillors Call for Action in relation to matters relating to Resources and any Petition appeals, in accordance with the Councils Petition Scheme, regarding matters relating to Resources or of a Corporate or Council wide nature.

5.5 Scoping reviews

5.5.1 A schedule of generic dates for meetings for the two Select Committees has been arranged for the 2021-22 Municipal Year, as and when specific meetings are scheduled from these dates electronic diary invites will be sent to Members on the Committee. These meetings will incorporate the scoping of the review where Members will identify the areas they wish to cover during the review, who to interview, what evidence/background information is required and which Members will lead the questioning on a specific area, as well as undertaking site visits, where appropriate. Meetings will also be arranged to revisit previous reviews to monitor actions.

5.6 **Portfolio Holder Advisory Groups (Policy Development Meetings)**

5.6.1 Pre-scrutiny Policy Development meetings will continue to be undertaken as and when requested by Executive Portfolio Holders in consultation with Assistant Strategic Directors and will be referred to as Portfolio Holders Advisory Groups (PHAG). These meetings are chaired by the relevant Executive Portfolio Holder and the relevant O&S or Select Committee Members are invited to attend. Unlike regular Select Committee meetings PHAG's are private meetings not open to the public.

6. **IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 **Financial Implications**

There are none specific to this report.

6.2 **Legal Implications**

Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government Statutory Guidance on Overview & Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities was published in May 2019 and Scrutiny Members should have regard to this when undertaking their Scrutiny review work and carrying out the function.

6.3 **Equalities and Diversity Implications**

Equalities and Diversity issues are considered at the scoping stage of each Scrutiny review with regards to questioning of witnesses and the collection of

oral and written evidence. Also E&D issues are addressed in the final report for each review.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Local Government Act 2000.

Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government Statutory Guidance on Overview & Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities.

Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panels) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

Individual agendas and study material for each Scrutiny review undertaken by the Select Committees as described in this report are available for inspection.

The full Executive responses to the Scrutiny Reviews are available for inspection.