

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](#) 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](#)

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 income
- 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