

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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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.