

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 17 January 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), Julie Ashley-Wren, Stephen Booth, Jim Brown, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Claire Parris and Loraine Rossati.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.29pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies were received by Councillor Adrian Brown.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 15 DECEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 15 December 2022 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair, with the following amendments:

(1) Location: *Autun Room*, Daneshill House, Danestrete

(2) Item 4 – Draft report and recommendations of the Council’s response to the climate emergency, paragraph 3.14 of the report, page 5 of the Minutes, specifically the paragraph which referred to the contribution of electric buses to a 70% carbon reduction. The first sentence of the paragraph “A Member commented that the electric buses may contribute 70% carbon reduction but did not contribute to 70% of our traffic.” should be replaced with: “*A Member observed that road transport was responsible for about 30% of CO2 equivalent emissions in Stevenage (point 3.14). While he welcomed bringing 27 electric buses to the town, he pointed out they would only contribute about a 0.6% reduction in overall emissions which emphasised how important it was to do also much more by reducing the need to travel and by encouraging modal shift to walking, cycling and public transport.*”

3 FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

The Chair made some comments on the report and stated that there needed to be a credible way of measuring what the Council was doing. Transport could be the

largest emitter at 34%, so should consider other forms of transport. He added that the topic reference groups, and topic panel groups were important and helpful, and that the behavioural change and climate change section of the report was interesting.

The Chair highlighted the 2023 review of the Stevenage Local Plan and stated that this needed to influence planning as well as looking at biodiversity and shorter journeys.

The Chair added that the training of staff and Members was a useful point. He stated that the Council needed to keep track of cleaner fuels. Finally, he commented that there was an opportunity to try and influence the greening of the hub to make it environmentally sound.

A Member commented that we needed to look at how we support residents to be cleaner and suggested a plan should be made for this.

Another Member highlighted point number 7 in paragraph 2.4.3 of the report, which referred to the increase in trees planted. He advised that there was a danger of misunderstanding the 2% gap in the Stevenage tree canopy. He stated that there were 32,000 trees in Stevenage and this 2% isn't an increase of that amount. The gap refers to the recommended tree cover for urban areas which we were 2% short of the target of a 19% tree canopy. He suggested that this should be made clearer in the report.

A Member suggested 'climate proofing' everything going forward. There are equality implications in all reports across the Council and this should be done for climate change implications. The Chair agreed with this and stated that it should be built into the audit process. The Member also asked whether the new civic hub would have a bus stop, to which the Interim Head of Policy and Communities advised it would.

A Member commented that it was still vital to ensure climate change was a priority for the Council as well as engaging with people of Stevenage.

It was **RESOLVED:** That the report and recommendations of the review into the Council's response to the climate emergency be agreed and the recommendations circulated to the Executive Portfolio Holder for a response.

4 **COST OF LIVING SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Chair introduced the cost-of-living review and stated the aim was to increase knowledge of what was happening in Stevenage and the impact on the residents. He informed Members there was strong work going on and the Council was working with a range of other agencies and was engaged in work with residents.

The Chair introduced Officers in attendance, which included the Interim Head of Policy and Communities Ben Threadgold, the SBC Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager Gemma Maret, the CEO Stevenage Citizens Advice Charlotte Blizzard-Welch, and the Deputy CEO Stevenage Citizens Advice Melanie Bel Haj.

The Interim Head of Policy and Communities informed Members of the circulated report that went to the Executive committee in December. He reminded Members that the Council declared a cost-of-living emergency in July 2022. The work that has been done in the last couple months was focused on the impact on residents, businesses, Council, and the Council's finances, and how we can work with partners to help mitigate the impacts.

The Interim Head of Policy and Communities advised that everyone was affected by the cost-of-living crisis in some way. Forecasts were predicting that unemployment rates were rising, and inflation would remain high at 10.7%, although the Bank of England had suggested there may be a drop over the coming year. The support given by the government was not long term and we have not seen the biggest impacts yet. Energy bills may dip in July and fuel prices were dropping slowly, however the optimistic forecasts do not mean people aren't still affected.

The Interim Head of Policy and Communities highlighted four key trends within the report:

- There had been a 13.4% increase in tenants who were in rent arrears. The majority of these were on welfare benefits. There are many complexities in most cases, such as changes of financial circumstances, multiple debts, etc.
- There had been an 88% increase in domestic abuse referrals between Quarter 1 21/22 and Quarter 1 22/23.
- The number of requests for support for discretionary housing had doubled since April 2022. More tenants were being refused due to changes to threshold levels set by the government. The people that were accepted were receiving less support.
- There had been a 5% reduction in the number of claimants in the Council Tax support scheme, with 85.7% of Council Tax being collected in Quarter 3.

The Interim Head of Policy and Communities highlighted what was being done to help residents. This included coordinating government support, both financial and information, to those who need it, welfare support and advice signposting, and help with managing the costs in the longer term.

The Interim Head of Policy and Communities brought attention to the information on the Council website, which provided targeted advice, campaigns, and guidance. He also advised that they were working with different agencies to capture data about cost-of-living impacts on residents and were looking at all the different problems people may face, as well as offering 'Full Financial MOTs' and highlighting the Household Support Fund. He suggested that there was a need for Government to embed this Fund in Local Government budgets going forward. He stated that the Council need to look at what work was being done, but also the impact of the work.

The Interim Head of Policy and Communities highlighted the use of the cost-of-living hub and the separate warm spaces page on the Council website. He stated there had been an increase in the interaction from the public and that people had spent more time on the page and looked at the information provided.

The Interim Head of Policy and Communities summarised the presentation and stated the Council needed to look at the implications of budget setting and how it could help residents while also managing the Council budgets. Additionally, trends and emerging issues should be tracked, as well as the impacts of the actions being taken. He advised the government should be pushed for increased and sustained funding for retrofitting and insulating homes, Discretionary Housing Payments and Household Support Funds which needed to be mainstreamed and the requirements removed. Finally, he stated that funding needed to be clearer and that there should be help to address the concerns over use of prepayment meters for the most vulnerable.

A Member suggested that there should be key milestone on the timeline graphs when referencing the increase in income figure, such as the war in Ukraine. The Interim Head of Policy and Communities confirmed that the 6.4% increase was the national figure, which was lower than the rate of inflation and demonstrated how this affected everyone. He agreed that milestones could cause spikes or changes which we could see in the last report.

A Member highlighted that benefits are often underclaimed due to the social stigma attached to needing benefits. Another Member suggested that those who earned above the limit to claim benefits, but not enough to support themselves were one of the worst affected. The CEO of Citizens Advice stated that there was a misbranding of universal credit and many were unaware they could claim. She added that Citizens Advice (CAB) were aware of a particular group of people who are referred to as JAMS – Just About Managing. CAB were collecting data for this group and could come back with information when it was available.

A Member suggested there should be a holistic approach to helping people and asked whether this was in debt management or more generally. The CEO of Citizens Advice advised that they were working in partnership with others to offer more specialised services and can direct those to the right help due to the high demand.

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager then gave a presentation regarding the Warm Spaces Network. This scheme was linked in with the Herts County Council (HCC) Warm Spaces Directory and guidelines. For a space to be a designated warm space it must comply to certain criteria:

- Available to host community members
- Close to homes, shopping areas or places of work
- A space available to provide refreshment, reduced or free
- An accessible space
- Available to provide activity and entertainment for all ages as well as access to signposting hub

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager stated that they worked with the HCC, produced a Warm Space plan, and assessed the needs within the town through a community audit regarding who could offer Warm Spaces and who needed support to offer one. She advised that there would be start-up funding as well as policies and procedures to ensure compliance with HCC requirements, which

in turn opened up access to additional funding and promotion.

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager advised Members that there were a good range of warm space partners across the town. The Council had supported 15 warm spaces in two months, 10 had been assessed to start and 5 had expanded existing offers. She stated that 2 venues were in the process of setting up in January and that £8252 of funding had been distributed to date.

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager stated that they were working to ensure that there was coverage of warm spaces across the whole town that were accessible for everyone every day of the week and looked at where the service needed to be increased. She brought Members' attention to the gaps, such as in the south of Stevenage. The warm spaces had been assisted by Community Development Officers to apply for Hertfordshire Community Foundation (HCF) funding. She stated they were offering training and support to volunteers who could offer signposting and cost of living support. They were producing an end of the season report with recommendations for next winter, as well as a toolkit to ensure a more streamlined set up.

A Member highlighted the limited number of spaces and asked whether a lot had been approached but refused. Another Member suggested some places that could be approached. The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager advised that an initial audit was completed, and a lot of spaces were approached. Some weren't interested and some didn't have the capacity. There were also issues with volunteers and Community Development Officers had to go in and help until they were on their feet. There was a need to try and cover all ages, such as younger people. For example, Geek Retreat had approached them, and funding was being worked on.

A Member asked when the end of the season was. It was advised that funding was complete in April, but they can apply and qualify for continued funding through HCF.

Another Member asked what type of demographic was seen at the warm spaces. The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager responded that there were no firm figures currently. There were reports that suggested it was often the older demographic, but whilst they had asked for feedback from partners on approximate numbers and demographics, the collection of data from partners regarding users of the warm spaces was difficult to gather as they did not request this from users to respect their privacy.

The Chair then asked Citizens Advice to comment on the cost-of-living crisis and asked what type of people they were seeing. The CEO of Citizens Advice highlighted to Members the cost-of-living dashboard and they were publishing a full cost of living report for Stevenage. She highlighted 5 key cost of living issues and the report analysed how this impacted different groups.

- There was a disproportionate impact on older people, people with disabilities and long-term health problems, social tenants, single people, and single people with dependent children.
- More younger people were coming in for crisis support and financial issues. Citizens Advice had supported 8.5 thousand unique residents.

- Citizens Advice worked with 267 clients per week, which rose to 349 in November. They were data driven and driven by the needs of the community.
- 60% of people that came in for advice in 2022 were there for the first time. The Citizens Advice website was very comprehensive so many used this, so the number of people seeking help was much higher.
- Around 14% were 'simple queries' which required a limited amount of information, the rest required more intensive support and casework.
- There was an 85% increase in women who came for help, and an 117% increase in men. This ratio was usually 40:60 men to women. Data showed that women often seek help sooner than males.
- There was a 12% increase in people under 55 and a 43% increase in people with disabilities seeking help, as well as a 20% increase in ethnic minorities. The top wards seeking help were Bedwell and the Old Town.
- The top 5 issues that CAB provided advice on were Benefits and Tax Credits, Housing, Debt, Financial Services and Capability, and Legal.
- There was a survey conducted nationally that showed the issue of people on prepayment metres. 1 in 5 households ran out of credit and spent at least 2 days or more without energy. These were often people who were disabled, elderly, or those with long term health issues. Citizens Advice have advocated for a policy asking for more protection from people being put on prepayment metres.

The CEO of Citizens Advice offered to share a report with the Committee highlighting key data that was collected. In addition, CAB also had data on the top 5 wards in Hertfordshire that CAB advised as well as the top 5 wards in Stevenage.

The Chair welcomed this information and thanked Charlotte and Melanie for attending the meeting and the work they do.

It was **RESOLVED:** That the presentation be noted.

5 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was none.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR