

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 14 June 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), Jim Brown, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Graham Snell and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, OBE.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.33pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence.

Baroness Taylor of Stevenage declared an interest in Item 6 – Bus Service Scrutiny Review due to her being the Shadow Spokesperson for Transport in the House of Lords.

2 TERMS OF REFERENCE

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Terms of References be noted.

3 MINUTES - 23 MARCH 2023

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 23 March 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

4 UPDATE ON THE COST OF LIVING SCRUTINY REVIEW

The Chair updated Members on the Cost-of-Living scrutiny review where the Committee focused on three distinct areas of focus which were the impact on residents, the impact on businesses, and the impact on Stevenage Borough Council and its employees. The aim was to further inform Members around the agencies that were engaged in giving support to individuals and families, the challenges faced, and where those seeking support can find it.

The Committee had touched on general economic outlook, rising inflation, housing costs, food price inflation, and energy bills. There had been a desire to review the work done in the previous year to review what was needed for Winter 2023/24. The review had highlighted the positive work that SBC service teams, charities, and business support organisations carried out in the community.

The Chair introduced Sharon Bell MBE, Children Service Manager from Hertfordshire Family Services, to give a presentation on the work being carried out.

Sharon Bell informed Members the North Herts Family Centre worked with children from 0-5 but came across children of all ages through links with other services such as Family First who look at children 0-17. North Herts Family Centre offered different types of services including universal services, emerging needs which most of the services were being devoted to recently, parenting groups, and 1-1 support which offered more intensive direct support. The uptake of the 2-year funding available to parents was the highest in the Stevenage/North Hertfordshire area than anywhere else in the County which was seen as positive that parents were accessing this.

There had been 320 referrals in the last year where the main area of focus was Routine, Guidance and Boundaries. The family support service came in equally across the town, but Family First identified the most referrals came from Bedwell. This could link to where the most proactive services were to refer children. Ms Bell informed Members there had been over £4,000 in Stevenage that had gone into supporting 274 families and 487 children. This fund was linked with Bernardo's and was in addition to grants from other areas. North Herts Family Centre closely monitor who got the money and what it was put towards. They had identified money had mainly gone into heating, food vouchers and parcels, and cooking equipment. Some money also went into some furniture, as well as boxes to put clothes in as there was mould in wardrobes. This links to the issues in housing. Ms Bell identified the main issues that they were facing which included:

- Housing – this was a big issue as families had issues with damp, upsizing or downsizing, as well as landlords
- Form filling – many families struggled to access forms online and there had been a buddy system implemented to help them access this
- Cooking – a cooking with parents' course that had been running for many years wasn't working. Ms Bell suggested a cooking with kids as there was not being enough done in schools.
- Maintenance – this links back to housing, many families can't afford maintenance and don't have the skills to do it themselves
- Mental health – there had been ongoing issues with this since covid affecting both parents and children, with the cost of living only exacerbating the issue
- Education – this issue came from a meeting with Family First who identified Stevenage as the town with the highest number of referrals. They also reported that there were many children who were out of education or had poor education.

Ms Bell identified the partners that the North Herts Family Centre were working with and stated that they wished to build their relationships with the housing partners. She explained a wish list put together which included:

- Early intervention – this was key to support families before the issues became bigger

- More activities for primary ages – there were a lot of extracurricular activities for older children, such as afterschool clubs, however not many for younger children so there was a gap there
- Recruitment of volunteers – they were building volunteers well but would like to expand and meet other volunteers
- Continuation of toddler groups

The Chair then introduced Claire Norris, Service Delivery Manager from Home-Start Hertfordshire.

Claire Norris informed Members Home-Start had been identifying more issues than before. Similarly to North Herts Family Centre, housing was a big issue and they had been supporting a lot of families with this. Another issue being identified was budgeting and they had started finance projects to support families in their homes which were linked with the Money Advice unit to support training. She also agreed mental health was a big issue and families had suffered during covid and this was becoming worse with the cost of living. Ms Norris stated Home-Start mainly ran on volunteers who supported the families in their home, and they had been struggling with recruitment due to it being a 6–9-month commitment.

The Chair asked what they were doing that was making a difference. Ms Norris advised that the people offering services, such as money services, were helpful to support families. Signposting to partners also had an impact to highlight food banks, hygiene banks, pet food banks, etc. The hardship was also helpful, previously they were giving out a £50 food voucher however this was not enough, and they were now giving out £100. Ms Bell agreed and advised they had good relationships with the families, but now there were a lot of new families and the universal services were key, such as the toddler groups. Other places, such as the new family hubs that were being develop focused on early intervention which was key. She added networking was also crucial, with both partners, services, and families.

The Chair asked where the financial pressures came from. Ms Bell advised the main pressures came from rent, school uniform costs, school trips, etc. The ‘working poor’ were the most affected as many haven’t asked for help before and therefore didn’t know where to go to get support. There was work to be done around what schools were offering both free and low cost. Transport was also an issue as people were giving up cars, buses were an issue, children were walking who were often too young, or they weren’t going out at all. Many people couldn’t buy children’s passes so had to pay full fare. Ms Norris added that the people just above the benefit line were struggling the most, as well as people who had more than 2/3 children that managed before but couldn’t with more children. The Chair concluded that signposting was the most important and ensuring parents and families know what services were out there and where they could find support.

The Chair asked if there was a web solution to share this information. Ms Bell advised Hertfordshire County Council had the Herts Directory, however it was important that this information was also available on the Stevenage website as it was her view that more parents will search on the Stevenage website than Hertfordshire.

The Chair asked what the guests anticipated was needed for next year. Ms Bell advised that everything that was done in winter worked well, however accessing things was difficult, so they needed to look at things earlier. Money given to families needed to be planned carefully for those not already getting benefits and the working poor would be a need. Housing would still be an issue and in September school uniform needed to be looked at and there needed to be more work done with schools. There was a gap between schools and funding available to them, so networking was important.

A Member expressed concerns that cuts to County Council budgets could affect the youth services offered.

A few Members commented on education of children and the services offered by schools. Ms Bell advised that the reference to children's education came from a Family First meeting. They identified that the education of the children was not where it should be which could be due to children not attending, the quality of education, missed education because of covid, etc. Under 5's didn't have groups running therefor there was a gap in speech and language. They had also identified high literacy issues with parents which could also contribute. They give out equipment for families to access things online. She also added that some schools had low numbers.

Some Members asked questions regarding the volunteers. Ms Bell advised they were reliant on volunteers. The volunteers had to go through a 2-week training course which included child protection and a DBS check, and they were supervised for a period of time afterwards. Volunteers generally helped with filling in forms etc. Ms Norris advised Home Start were losing volunteers and were struggling to recruit. They asked volunteers to provide a service that was ongoing for a period of time which was a low-level family support role which people were often paid to do. They can't support all the families they received referrals for as volunteers can't support complex issues. She added that the training for volunteers was similar to North Herts Family Centre and they also included an e learning element. The volunteer managers, which were paid staff, helped write the letters to services such as housing, but families were informed it was not a guarantee.

A Member asked who referred the children. Ms Bell advised that healthcare and social teams often refer children as there was a general referral form, they can fill in which then was triaged to identify whether targeted intervention or universal services were needed.

Another Member asked whether they gave benefit support advice. Ms Bell advised that they signposted and gave support in accessing the services and advise.

The Chair thanked Ms Bell and Ms Norris for their contribution to the meeting.

5 ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023-24

The Chair presented the Work Programme for 2023-24. He informed Members the Committee had finished the work on the cost of living, but the findings of the review

will be brought back to the Committee with a report and recommendations. This year's main focus was the bus service as it was a pressing public issue and links to climate change. The Committee would also revisit climate change and the Chair would invite Councillor Simon Speller and CE Matt Partridge to update the Committee on what work was being done.

A few Members stated it was important the Committee had the data on climate change to track the progress being made and that this issue needed to come to the Committee frequently, as well as before the pre-election period in March. The Scrutiny Officer advised that the Lead Climate Change Officer had been developing a portal containing live data designed to track the Council's progress and this can be introduced to the Committee. There had been a suggestion climate change came back to the Committee twice a year, which is what had been scheduled in the work programme for ongoing monitoring.

The Chair highlighted a suggestion from Councillor Loraine Rossati to look at STEM opportunities in Stevenage. A Member agreed that Stevenage had world leading organisation but didn't have enough local residents working in them and the Council needed to look at ways to improve this.

A few Members commented on the Stevenage Climate Strategy and what the deadlines were to establish medium- and long-term goals. They asked that this should report regularly into the Executive and Environment & Economy Committee for scrutiny.

The Chair advised they would keep pushing to invite speakers to attend the Committee to take accountability. 2030 remained the goal of reaching net zero, which was recognised as challenging, and the Council would need to look at what could be achieved in the next 7 years. The actions and targets can be reviewed, and this could come back to the Committee.

It was **RESOLVED:** That Environment & Economy Select Committee Work Programme and schedule of meetings or 2023-24 be noted, and that the following items be included in the work programme:

- Completion of the Cost of Living Review report and recommendations
- Conduct a review into local Bus services as the Committee's main review
- Monitoring of the Climate Change
- STEM opportunities for Young People

6 **BUS SERVICE SCRUTINY REVIEW - DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENT**

The Chair introduced the draft scoping document for the bus service scrutiny review. He stated that more work needed to be done in terms of the bus service. He had been in contact with Hertfordshire County Council and Officers, as well as County Councillor Phil Bibby, who would be coming in to talk to the Committee. He also invited Arriva and the bus users' group to attend a meeting.

A few Members suggested looking at EV buses after the zero bus project didn't go ahead, which the Chair agreed could be built into the work stream. Another Member

added that Arriva, who were operating the zero bus project, suggested that the drop in passenger journeys were the reason given as to why the scheme was dropped in Stevenage.

A Member highlighted that the UNO bus wasn't included in the providers but was a useful link for university students in Hatfield. He suggested that comparative data should be looked at on all areas of the bus service, including running times as well as the new bus station. He also suggested the Committee could look at who should run the bus service.

The Chair suggested looking into equalities and accessibility within the bus service but was cautious of the amount of time available. A subgroup could be set up around travel and concessions, and disability access of the buses as well as the town centre from the bus station. Another Member agreed this would be good to look at as it was a big issue for bus users in terms of routes and accessibility. She also raised concerns regarding the bus ticket price caps ending.

A Member highlighted the issues with the current bus services and proposed that the review should start at looking at why the bus service was so poor and how to improve it, as this was important to many residents. Once this is established a review could then be expanded to look at the other issues, such as the expansions around Stevenage and the impact this would have on the bus service.

Another Member queried whether the bus services were similar in other towns like Stevenage. The Chair suggested bus services were equally challenging in other towns, but this review was intended to focus solely on Stevenage. Hertfordshire County Council were doing work on bus services in all areas in Hertfordshire, such as women's safety.

7 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

There was none.

8 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

9 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was none.

CHAIR