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ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday, 16 January 2024

Time: 6.00pm,

Location: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Contact: Lisa Jerome 01438 242203

committees@stevenage.gov.uk

Members: Councillors: R Broom (Chair), A Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), J Brown, B Facey, C McGrath, A McGuinness, S Mead, C Parris, E Plater, G Snell and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, OBE CC

AGENDA

PART 1

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

2. **MINUTES - 12 DECEMBER 2023**

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 12 December 2023.

Pages 3 – 8

3. **FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BUS SCRUTINY REVIEW**

To consider the report and recommendations of the Environment & Economy Select Committee Scrutiny review into Local Bus Services following the collapse of the ZEBRA Electric Bus Scheme for Stevenage.

Pages 9 – 18

4. **DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COST-OF-LIVING SCRUTINY REVIEW**

To consider the draft report and recommendations of the Committee's Cost-of-Living review.

Pages 19 – 34

5. **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

To consider any Part 1 business accepted by the Chair as urgent.

6. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

To consider the following motions –

1. That under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

2. That Members consider the reasons for the following reports being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

7. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

To consider any Part II business accepted by the Chair as urgent.

Agenda Published 8 January 2024

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 12 December 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Autun Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), Jim Brown, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater and Graham Snell.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.40pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received by Baroness Taylor of Stevenage and Councillor Andy McGuinness

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 1 NOVEMBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 1 November 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 PRE-SCRUTINY OF THE STEVENAGE CYCLE HIRE SCHEME

The Chair introduced Officers present, as well as Jill Borchers and Tina Walker from Cycling UK, to present and speak on the item.

The Principal Planning Officer gave a presentation detailing the proposed cycle-hire scheme for Stevenage. There was a long history of cycling within Stevenage although recent data showed that only 3% of Stevenage residents cycle to work compared to around 68% driving.

The Principal Planning Officer highlighted the cycle hire scheme in Watford that was implemented in 2020. Watford had seen a 30% modal shift from car to cycling as a mode of transport to work and had over 33,000 users.

The cycle hire scheme would allow people to hire a bike for short durations. There were three types of schemes: docked, virtual, and hybrid. The proposed plans for Stevenage would be a docked scheme as it would reduce the possibility of the bikes being abandoned. The aim was to provide a public low-cost scheme that was inclusive to all and would complement the existing public transport. There would be 220 cycles with at least 45 docked stations accessible 24/7, 365 days a year. They

were also looking at a scheme that offered the option to hire bikes with or without a smartphone. She added that they were looking at additional protections, such as extra locks or two step authentication, as some degree of vandalism was likely to occur as reported with most cycle hire schemes. However, Officers took lessons learned from other Local Authorities, including close partnership with the police and further advances in technology and expected vandalism to be kept to a minimum.

The Principal Planning Officer gave Members a brief overview of the timeline which included:

- In 2019 Stevenage Borough Council commissioned a feasibility study with Transport Initiatives to explore things like the feasibility and where the docking stations could go.
- SBC requested an update to this in 2023 after COVID and took into account the new developments and explored the current market.
- In August 2023 Planning Policy Officers published a soft marketing brochure with the aim of gaining feedback. It was important that the potential suppliers aligned with the SBC vision and aims.
- During August and September 2023 there was a consultation on the cycle hire scheme. Officers aimed to make this as user friendly as possible.
- There was also an engagement event during the consultation period for business users and employers. Three suppliers attended and gave presentations of their models. There were also bikes for people to test and maps for people to show where they wanted docking locations.
- There were three surveys – a cycle hire survey, a youth survey, and a map survey which allowed people to highlight various points of interest such as locations for docking, unsafe cycle routes, lack of signage, or lack of cycle storage.
- There was a lot of data on how people travelled to work but not a lot of data on how people travel within Stevenage, therefore this was a focus of the survey.
- Across the surveys, over 50% of people provided positive responses.
- Officers were looking at behaviour change and more engagement. She added the chosen operator would also do more engagement.
- The top destination of cyclists was to leisure, with the second being to work. This aligned with the data collected from Watford. This was important as they wanted to put docking stations in the right places.
- During the feasibility study, a phased approach was identified with western docking stations being implemented first.
- The feasibility study, as well as the consultation map, would be shared with the supplier when the contract was awarded.

A Member asked some questions in relation to the surveys. In response, the Principal Planning Officer advised that there were 899 respondents in total. The survey contained an “other” option which allowed people to provide their own answer. Many of these contained people who owned a bike already so would be less likely to use the cycle hire scheme.

Ms Borchers highlighted the spread of docking stations on the proposed map from the feasibility study as some were very close together whereas others were far away. The Principal Planning Officer advised that the supplier would use the map as well as their own expertise to decide where to place the docking stations. The app would allow people to see which docking stations had bikes and whether there were spaces. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that there were a lot of docking stations contained within the town centre as there would be a lot of people using them and there would be different uses. For example, people coming to the town or others going to the train station.

A Member suggested that some people who walk might want to hire a bike. They also suggested that SBC should drive the scheme, not the supplier. The Principal Planning Officer advised that the planning team were doing as much research as possible to help the scheme. The feasibility study and the information from the consultees provided a guide. The supplier would come back to SBC with their proposals to be reviewed.

Some Members raised concerns around the potential vandalism and theft. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the virtual geofenced hire bikes were the ones that could be hacked and stolen. Docked is better in this case and was why SBC were looking at the docked hire bikes rather than the other types. If people didn't return docked bikes, they would be charged for this. The Principal Planning Officer added that operators gather a lot of intelligence and data on the bikes so they could see if anything happened and could make improvements and changes if needed. There was also a lot of communication with the police, as well as additional locks being asked for by SBC, and visible docking stations to reduce potential vandalism.

A Member suggested some docking stations should be placed where bus routes are, as well as a hybrid option so people could move where they wanted. The Principal Planning Officer advised that the supplier would gather information on design lines. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) also advised that the most issues with abandoned bikes came from dockless options which is why SBC was looking at a docked scheme. There was data collected by the supplier which looked at travel, rush hours, and routes and there was a redistribution van which made sure the bikes were in place at the start of the day and if they needed to be moved back.

Another Member asked how many residents could ride a bike and how many had passed a cycling proficiency. They also asked who would be liable if someone had an accident on the bike. The Officers advised that the liability would be with the supplier who had insurance. Ms Walker added that many adults didn't admit they needed additional cycling training, but Cycling UK did offer cycling proficiency for all. She estimated that around 60% of adults could ride a bike but this could be higher.

Some Members raised concerns around the issue with e-scooters and suggested there should be some "no go" areas especially in shopping areas. The Principal Planning Officer advised that SBC were not looking at e-scooters. The bikes could be traced, and the speed could be reduced in certain areas. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) acknowledged the issues with wheeled powered vehicles,

especially in the town centre. He added that they would look closely at the locations of the docking stations around these areas and geofencing would be looked at. The town centre was the only place in Stevenage with a bike ban but this could be looked at in all shopping areas, as well as whether the bikes could be stopped on pavements.

A Member asked whether the docking stations could be moved if they decided they were in the wrong place. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that this would be the case and they would respond to changes. The Principal Planning Officer added that they were learning a lot from Watford and getting any information that would improve the Stevenage scheme.

Some Members asked what the cost to hire was as financial inclusivity was important. The Principal Planning Officer advised that they have rough ideas from the suppliers and consultants, but costs would depend on discussions with the Council in setting the fees. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that some are £1 for 30 minutes but this would be discussed. Ms Borchers added that the scheme in Watford was £12 for the whole day, or £1 to unlock and 5p per minute. These were much cheaper than a bus fare. TfL also run similar schemes and have discounts for people such as NHS workers.

A member highlighted the large cost to the Council and suggested looking at other funding. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that they were trying to get a sponsorship deal. SBC were putting money in at the start and using the Towns Fund. There would be an option for the Council to look at pricing and there could be other ways to make it more affordable to everyone. They were also looking at the Herts County Council Sustainable Transport fund as it was improving the cycle highways.

Ms Borchers asked some questions in relation the scheme and was advised that the scheme would be a minimum age of 16+ and that 40% of people using hire schemes hired for 15 minutes or less.

A Member raised concerns on the weight of e-bikes which was around 44kg and potential accidents.

Members suggested that the scheme could come back to the Committee to be reviewed and that there should be some criteria to assess it against, such as relevance to climate change, transport poverty and modal shift. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that they could gather data over the first 6 months to a year and come back to the Committee with this.

Some Members asked whether planning permission was needed for the docking stations. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that it depended on where they were located. The individual docking locations would come through planning and checked by the Highways Authority. The plan would be taken to the Executive in early February to agree the funding and there would be a potential rollout in the summer subject to approvals.

Ms Borchers highlighted Stevenage having a lot of hills and the issues with certain

infrastructures making it difficult to access some places by bike. She added that the scheme was an opportunity to get more people on bikes and a lot of people commuting to Stevenage could benefit from it. Ms Walker also added that people who were getting the train would benefit, even if they owned a bike, so they wouldn't have to leave their own bike in the station.

A Member asked who would promote the scheme. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that promotions would be led by the operator, but SBC would support this and do some as well.

Another Member asked whether the docking stations needed a power supply, and it was advised that they did, and they also had a phone connection.

The Chair thanked Officers for the presentation, as well as Ms Borchers and Ms Walker for their contribution to the meeting.

4 **DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE'S REVIEW INTO BUS SERVICES**

The Chair expressed that the bus review was a helpful exercise and that he felt strongly about the first recommendation and that it was important to look at things like modal shift and behaviour change. He suggested the bus review should come back to the Committee and guests should be invited back annually or the portfolio holder should have regular conversations with bus operators.

Members gave opinions and suggestions on the recommendations which included:

- Real time information at bus stops should be included in recommendation 2.
- There were concerns around the switch to biodiesel and SBC should at least look at electric or other alternatives,
- It was difficult for buses to do more than 20mph in certain roads due to traffic therefore recommendation 8 should look at other options, such as bus gates.
- Regeneration of the town should be looked at as there weren't bus routes in certain areas that there will be new developments, such as St Georges Way.
- There was no mention of a spine service within the recommendations.
- Other forms of public transport should be looked at in the future.
- It was valid to challenge the current funding modal as Arriva were subject to review and weren't doing well.
- The site visit was positive and useful.
- A park and ride was suggested, especially in areas such as the football ground.
- The idea of a shuttle bus was seen as a positive.
- The bus station should offer free Wi-Fi so people could access the timetable or see where buses were.

In response to various queries, the Scrutiny Officer and Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that in terms of biodiesel, this had been trialled by Aviva but were unsure of the outcomes. A recommendation urging them to look at other options

other than fossil fuels was a positive, but it didn't have to be biodiesel, could be hydrogen or electric for example. The Scrutiny Officer agreed to include an image of a suggested electric shuttle bus to accompany Recommendation 9 (iii).

It was **RESOLVED:** That the draft report and recommendations of the Committee's review into the bus service be noted.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

A Councillor raised an issue of a diesel-powered novelty train that had been used in the town centre Event Island for a fun children's activity arranged by Town Centre Management as it seemingly contradicted to the Councils commitment to the climate emergency.

Other Members agreed and suggested a balanced needed to be struck between events, such as the use of an ice rink in Event Island last year, and the commitment to climate change.

The Scrutiny Officer and Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that it was reasonable to ask Officers to explore alternative options in terms of the train and consider the climate change implications.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR



Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Lead Portfolio Area – Economy & Transport

Date: 16 JANUARY 2024

FINAL REPORT - REVIEW OF BUS SERVICES

Author – Stephen Weaver Ext No.2332

Contact Officer – Stephen Weaver Ext No.2332

Contributors – Councillor Rob Broom, Chair of Environment & Economy Select, Lead Assistant Director supporting the Committee, AD Stevenage Direct Services, Steve Dupoy.

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To consider the report and recommendations of the Environment & Economy Select Committee Scrutiny review into local bus services following the collapse of the ZEBRA Electric Bus Scheme for Stevenage.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

- 2.1 When Members considered their work programme for the 2023-24 Municipal Year at its meeting on 23 March 2023 it was agreed to include a review item on the provision of local bus services brought about by the collapse of the Zero Emission Bus Regional Area (ZEBRA) Scheme for Stevenage. Following the decision by Arriva Bus Company not to progress with the match funding of the Government Scheme to provide a fleet of electric buses for Stevenage, Members expressed concern that this would not go ahead, with regards to the climate change impact of this decision and also on the impact on local bus users.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.3.1 The Committee met on 14 June [Agenda including scoping document - 14 June 2023](#) to agree the scope for the review, and it agreed should consider the following areas:

- Provide a focus on the state of the current bus services in Stevenage, engaging with the Bus provider Arriva, Centrebus, Hertfordshire County Council's Passenger Transport Unit, local Bus User Group BUGS
- Alternative options for zero emission buses in Stevenage. What lessons can be learned from the failed ZEBRA (Zero Emissions Bus Regional Area) scheme for Stevenage? Are there any other opportunities for future funding schemes?
- Barriers to people using public transport and ways to encourage more bus use/modal shift

2.3.2 The context of the issues facing bus services currently are as follows: Passengers are facing unreliability issues of the bus service, which is a major concern. Hertfordshire County Council are trying to encourage sustainability for the service but the combination of the issues of low passenger numbers, increased costs, a lack of drivers and an ageing fleet are all obstacles to providing a reliable service.

2.4 Process of the review

2.4.1 The Committee met formally on 5 occasions in 2023 and informally with a site visit on 29 August to undertake the review and received input from the following groups and people on the following dates:

- 14 June 2023, considered the scoping document
- 6 July 2023, received written responses to questions and data requests and carried out interviews with the HCC Director of Transport Unit and the Executive Portfolio Holder for Transport and Highways and considered a mapping document for the review
- 29 August 2023, undertook a Member site visit to Metroline TFL bus company garage in Potters Bar to view electric buses and charging infrastructure and interview the Garage Manager
- 4 September 2023, interview with Arriva Bus Company and consideration of the data Arriva shared with Members and interview with the Bus User Group for Stevenage (BUGS) and received an updated mapping document
- 10 October 2023, interviews with Herts Sight Vision Loss Charity and Irish Network Stevenage Older People's group, SBC Executive Portfolio Holder for Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe and SBC Climate Change officers regarding encouraging uptake in public transport and consideration of an updated mapping document.
- 12 December 2023 to consider the draft report and recommendations of the review

3 REVIEW FINDINGS

3.1 Conclusions of the Environment & Economy Select Committee

- 3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members conducting the review the Committee have made the following conclusions:
- 3.2 Catalyst for the review – the collapse of the Zero Emissions Bus Regional Area (ZEBRA) due to Arriva pulling out of the bid. In relation to the failure of the Zero Emissions Bus Regional Area (ZEBRA), it was noted that the funding would only have been available if a willing partner had been in place and HCC advised that Arriva had declined for commercial reasons. ZEBRA Part 2 had since been announced, but as Arriva were not a willing partner up nor had another company been identified, it would not therefore be going ahead. Arriva reason for pulling out of the scheme at the late stage was that the financial commitment was too great with passenger numbers in Stevenage still down since pre-Covid figures.
- 3.3 The weakness of the current national, commercial model for bus services- During the interview process with HCC as the relevant authority and the commercial operator Arriva it became apparent to Members that the current mechanism was lacking as the County Council commission the service but have no real power over poor performance other than to threaten withdrawal of the licence but there would need to be an alternative company to run the service, so without this the threat is hollow.
- 3.4 Unreliability issues - The unreliability of the bus services was a concern, as this was not encouraging greater patronage from occasional users. HCC were trying to encourage sustainability for the service but the combination of the issues of low passenger numbers/enhanced costs/lack of drivers and an ageing fleet were obstacles to this.
- 3.5 Scanning of passes - HCC Officers agreed to investigate the reported practice of bus drivers encouraging passengers to not scan passes in order to speed up the boarding of the bus as the scanning of the passes was vital for recording the use of subsidies.
- 3.6 Impact of Covid - Covid had a significant impact on this due to lifestyle changes, delayed operations, and the market changing. The demographics of an area is relevant. In the bigger cities the use of services has returned to pre-covid levels, but other areas have not fully recovered. Also, older people have not returned to the service.
- 3.7 Impact of Brexit - Members were informed by Arriva that an impact of Brexit has been that formerly they had employed bus drivers from Europe but following Brexit these drivers had left the employment pool which had caused a squeeze on the number of available experienced drivers. Other drivers have left the bus sector, for better paid driver vacancies. As wage inflation has increased, better paid vacancies have become available. Bus companies have lost out to other professional driver haulage roles who have

paid more to attract drivers. Domestic based drivers can earn more in London and in other driving roles. Recently Arriva have worked on making the role for drivers more attractive, with a double digit pay rise.

- 3.8 Bus timetable Information - The Arriva website was good at showing the timetable, but there was a challenge in showing what buses were actually operating in real time. The problem is compounded by the fact that the member of staff at Arriva who updates the website re delays or non-running services was also responsible for co-ordinating replacement buses/drivers attempting to alleviate the problem, so this delayed providing accurate real time information. The App worked better than the website but was now being superseded by other competitors, which Arriva were aware of and know they needed to improve this. The real time information displayed at bus stops around the Town was in the process of being upgraded. Members were of the view, however, that the extent of investment in screens to carry the information to do this by HCC was inadequate.
- 3.9 Arriva problems- running an old fleet - A further problem for the reliability of the service is running an old fleet. The average age of buses that Arriva are operating in Stevenage are 14 years old but should be just 12.5 years old. However, there were three buses that Arriva reported at the meeting had been taken out of service that were 19 years old and subsequently two had returned to service because of operational need. Running an old fleet has a detrimental impact on the reliability of buses as older vehicles are more prone to breaking down. There had been a lag in procurement of new vehicles for three years over the covid period which was having an impact on the service.
- 3.10 New Arriva Bus Depot in Stevenage – Arriva’s new Bus depot in Stevenage is seen as positive by Members, as this had shown commitment to put investment into the area as they had previously run out of two sites but this had caused difficulties. Operating out of one site was better and had been planned for a long time. Arriva suggested that Stevenage was in a good position to receive more investment as it was fundamentally a good place to operate a bus service, but this would likely be with a modern diesel not electric fleet due to the cost of purchase. The locating of a new bus servicing depot in Stevenage gives Arriva capacity to work on vehicles. However, since the cost-of-living crisis linked to the war in Ukraine access to parts was a challenge.
- 3.11 Replacement bus stops – As part of the review Members raised concern about the rate of replacement bus stops. In their view the funding for this was wholly inadequate as it equated to 2 bus stops per district being replaced each year. Concern regarding the condition of some bus stops in the Town was noted by HCC. HCC advised Members that a programme of improvements was in place, and several had been completed but it was accepted that more work was needed on others, including the installation of real time information for bus times and which routes were running.

- 3.12 Electric buses – HCC Officers advised the review that unless battery technology dramatically improved it would be more likely to see the larger vehicles replaced with hydrogen run technology in the future. The Committee were of the view that they would remain cautious about this approach as this could be flawed if the supply of hydrogen is not improved, as Members had heard from Metroline that they have 10 hydrogen run buses that were often out of service due to the erratic supply of hydrogen. Members suggested that HCC/Arriva consider the use of biodiesel (manufactured from used cooking oil) which produce 90% less CO₂ than conventional diesel and can be used in diesel engine vehicles without any modification, and with volatile costs for conventional diesel it would in time provide more stability. Overall, the technologies for Electric Buses and other non or very low fossil fuel buses are still in their infancy, and it would likely need a third generation of Electric powered buses to be designed overcoming the cost, weight, manoeuvrability and range challenges before they are likely to be available to medium sized towns like Stevenage.
- 3.13 Passenger experience – Focusing on passengers who have no choice and rely on buses to commute to work, older non drivers and students. Members received feedback from a local resident regarding the bus service, the main critique was that the service is “unreliable; expensive; non-drivers have no other options; the service had deteriorated since Brexit; buses are filthy” and another user stated that they “had to leave their home at 5am to guarantee getting to work in another town in Hertfordshire for 9am start due to the unreliability of the service”.
- 3.14 Disabled passengers experience – Herts Vision Loss provided written and in-person evidence to the review. There main areas of concern were:
- people with vision loss wanted to travel comfortably and independently
 - there was nothing visually that could tell another person they were partially sighted, therefore this contributed to the problem of using buses
 - information boards were difficult to use and should have contrasting screens at lower heights
 - The Sight Loss Council were working locally with Bedfordshire and Essex but were not yet working formally with Hertfordshire County Council
 - The colour of the buses was difficult for people with vision loss to see as pale green or pale blue buses blended into the surroundings and was almost invisible
 - The lack of real time information at bus stops was a problem
 - Many people with vision loss relied on public transport and needed access to reliable bus services to get to work or hospital appointments
 - Being aware of those with vision loss or other impairments should be included in the training drivers receive
 - Driver training is a big issue regarding the way disabled passengers are treated. The response disabled passengers experience is variable therefore more needs to be done to ensure that all drivers are properly

trained and refreshed regarding the way they engage with disabled passengers

- 3.15 What local authorities can do to support a thriving bus service – Arriva suggested that there are sometime unintended consequences of new developments. Where possible try to avoid designing in problems, allow buses to run at the speed they need to, so avoid 20mph zones for bus routes. Also traffic calming measures like chicanes and road narrowing can cause major problems for buses to negotiate.

3.6 **Equalities & Diversity issues**

- 3.6.1 The issue of equalities and diversity were partially addressed by the input provided by Herts Vision Loss, but it is recognised that there are many other disabled groups that the review did not address with the resources available to the Committee. Members are aware that there was a scrutiny review undertaken by the County Council in 2017 which had focused primarily on disabled bus users.

- 3.6.2 Bus passengers who have low incomes need to be considered carefully as they reviewed heard from users who have no other viable transport choice to commute to work and to access shops and services in their area. Therefore, it is important that the Borough Council, although without any direct responsibility or leverage regarding buses, should speak up for marginalised public transport users as bus users are often well behind the needs of car drivers and train passengers when transport is being considered.

4 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.1 That the Environment & Economy Select Committee considers the findings of the review, contained within this report and the recommendations below be presented to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy and Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe and with partners at HCC Highways Unit and Arriva Bus Company and that a response be provided within two months of the publishing of this report.
- 4.2 **Recommendation 1** - It is recommended that SBC Executive Portfolio Holder for Transport be invited to consider holding a yearly transport seminar for Stevenage bringing together the HCC transport unit and the public transport providers to hold them to account regarding the performance of their contracts with a view to champion local users' needs and bring a focus on improved performance.
- 4.3 **Recommendation 2** - It is recommended that (i) Arriva be strongly encouraged to update the real time information for bus services on their website and App, as bus users rely on this information to wait for bus services, if cancelled or delayed; and (ii) that real-time information also be included at bus stops, so passengers know when the next bus is due and also if a service is not running etc.

- 4.4 **Recommendation 3** – It is recommended that (i) to help wheelchair users and disabled and the visually impaired that some (a least two or three) of the information screens in the bus interchange be lowered and the contrast of those screens be adjusted to provide a good contrast to enable those users to be able to read the information more easily, and (ii) in addition, that a similar sign to the RNIB signage used near the ticket office at the railway station be installed at the bus interchange.
- 4.5 **Recommendation 4** - It is recommended that (i) The HCC Passenger Transport Unit and Arriva need to engage in an open and ongoing conversation with disability groups like Herts Vision Loss to help refine and shape the services, as it appeared to Members that this was not currently the case; and (ii) the use of trusted apps for those with disabilities be championed by bus providers and transport authorities at HCC.
- 4.6 **Recommendation 5** - It is recommended that Arriva should revisit their driver training regarding courtesy and care towards disabled passengers. This should be looked at based on the evidence submitted by Herts Vision Loss, who reported that their members were, on occasion, not given sufficient time to be seated when boarding or were dismissed or ignored by some drivers when asking for assistance or information about the bus route etc.
- 4.7 **Recommendation 6** - It is recommended that HCC Passenger Transport Unit and Arriva advance the roll out of audio announcement on buses as well as visual displays screens, which need to be retrofitted to all existing fleet and be provided as standard on any new fleet stock.
- 4.8 **Recommendation 7** - It is recommended that (i) In the first instance, bus companies should be encouraged to consider electric vehicles or other alternatives to move away from fossil fuels; and (ii) during the long transition to EV electric replacement buses and considering the variable supply of hydrogen, that HCC and Arriva be invited to consider using a more environmentally friendly Biodiesel which produces 90% less carbon than conventional diesel.
- 4.9 **Recommendation 8** - It is recommended that corporately the SBC Chair of Planning and Development Committee and the SBC Planning Officers be encouraged to review the delivery of planning applications which entail new or altered road schemes to make sure that there are no unintended consequences to buses using said routes involving narrowed roads or chicanes for traffic calming measures that make bus journeys slower and therefore not run to optimum journey times. If there are to be any changes made to traffic schemes these should consider such measures as bus gates.
- 4.10 **Recommendation 9** – It is recommended that regarding the new bus station interchange:
- (i) SBC, fully consider the use of the Bus Station in its new location, and the user experience. Although the interconnected nature of the new bus station

to the railway station is strong, the same cannot be said for pedestrians, and ease of access to the town centre shops. At this stage of regeneration, pedestrian access is frustrated, and without clear walkways, to and from the bus station into the town;

(ii) that clear signage for pedestrians be provided;

(iii) that the provision of a service like Shopmobility close to the bus station, for older and disabled residents, or another means of assisting older and disabled users to move from the Bus Station into the town, such as a shuttle bus*, be considered;

(iv) that SBC consider additional seating in the vicinity of the Bus Station to assist older residents, and those with disabilities; and

(v) that the provision of WiFi be considered at the Bus Interchange to help passengers access the Arriva App.

- 4.11 **Recommendation 10** – It is recommended that as part of the regeneration of the town centre strategically placed bus stops near public infrastructure will need to be provided, for example there should be a bus stop provided at the new leisure centre when this is built at the town centre gardens, St Georges Way site.
- 4.12 **Recommendation 11** – It is recommended that Arriva and HCC be encouraged to consider the provision of a spine route running from the north to the south of the town.
- 4.13 **Recommendation 12** – It is recommended that SBC via the Executive Portfolio Holder for Enterprise and Transport lobby HCC to consider different funding models for the provision of bus travel for Hertfordshire as it was felt that it was right to challenge the funding model which was not currently delivering a service that was fit for purpose.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications for this report.

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 3.6.1 & 3.6.2 There are no further equalities implications for this report.

5.4 Climate Change Implications

Climate change implications have been addressed throughout the report but specifically at paragraph 3.12 regarding electric buses.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Links to the E&E Select Committee Meetings:

[E&E Select Committee - 14 June 2023](#)

[E&E Select Committee - 6 July 2023](#)

[E&E Select Committee - 4 September 2023](#)

[E&E Select Committee - 10 October 2023](#)

*Recommendation 9 (iii) - Image of possible shuttle bus.



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Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Lead Portfolio Area – (Various) The Leader, Resources and Transformation, Co-operative Council and Neighbourhood, and Economy and Transport

Date: 16 JANUARY 2024

DRAFT REPORT - REVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To consider the report and recommendations of the Environment & Economy Select Committee Scrutiny review into the impact of the cost-of-living crisis.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

- 2.1 When Members considered their work programme for the 2022-23 Municipal Year at its meeting in March 2022 it was agreed to include a review item on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on residents.
- 2.1.1 The Environment and Economy Committee has carried out work on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in Stevenage, this has involved looking at three distinct areas, as set out in the scoping exercise which looked at the impact on Residents, Businesses, and those working for Stevenage Borough Council. The aim of the review was to increase knowledge of what was happening in Stevenage, in the current crisis, with a view to carrying learning forward to next year. There has been an attempt to ask if Stevenage is typical of the wider UK impacts and identify what groups in the community have been disproportionately impacted. There has been some learning about

the response of businesses, and the impact on the Stevenage Borough Council work force.

2.1.2 In terms of context, Stevenage is rated 117(out of 317) in the national ranking of indicators of social deprivation by local authority area. Where 1 is the most challenging. Stevenage has some ward areas, or smaller LOAs, which rate high in terms of deprivation. But there is by no means a concentration in Stevenage, with parts of Broxbourne, Hertsmere and North North Herts recording similar indicators of relative deprivation. Wage rates in Stevenage are marginally higher than the UK average. Median residents pay is listed as 28,2393 P.A before tax. (source Herts Insight 2022). Rates of employment, for people of working age, are high in Stevenage, and higher in comparison with many other districts in Hertfordshire. (Herts Insight).

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

2.2.1 The Committee met on 15 December [E&E Select Committee - 15 December 2022 - Agreed Scoping Document](#) to agree the scope for the review, and it agreed should consider the following areas:

- Residents – exploring the impact on different demographics, impact across the income deciles
- Businesses – especially small to medium sized enterprises (SME's). Highlighting energy crisis for businesses, material cost inflation, business rates
- Council – stress on services such as Housing, Rents, Customer Service Centre and pressure on staff re heating at home/travel cost

2.2.2 **Causes of the Cost-Of- Living Crisis** - The rate of energy price inflation, food price inflation, housing costs, and other price increases, has led to significant pressures on individuals, families and businesses, both nationally and in Stevenage the following data below, largely from the UK Census (ONS), highlights what has happened to energy costs, food inflation, and interest rates in recent years.

2.2.3 **Gas Price Inflation (year increase rate).** Source ONS.

Sept 21 -4% - Oct 21, 28.1 % - Apr 22, 95.5% - Oct 22, 128.9 % - Apr 23, 36.2 %

Electricity Price Inflation. Source ONS.

Sept 21 -5.8 % - Oct 21 18.8 % - Apr 22 53.5 % - Oct 22 65.7 % - Apr 23 17.3%

Food and beverages Inflation Source ONS.

July 21 -0.6% - April 22 -6.7% - Sept 22 14.6 % - Dec 22 16.9% - Mar 23 19.2%

2.2.4 **Motor fuel inflation** - falling from a high of 43.7% in July 2022, to -8.9% in April 2023. After considering inflation, average pay has fallen by 1.3% in the

last year. Gross median weekly pay in Stevenage is £537.9. moderately above the national average.

2.2.4.1 The UK general Inflation rate in Quarter 3 for 2023-24:

Oct 2023 4.7%
Nov 2023 4.2%
Dec 2023 3.9 %

This represents a significant fall in the rate at which prices are rising, from a high of 11% in 2022. (Source ONS).

2.2.5 **Interest Rates** - Base rates have increased from 0.5 % in early 2022 to 4.5 % in May 2023. The Resolution Foundation has predicted that future interest rate rises, will lead to the average monthly mortgage repayment increasing by £2,900, for those re-mortgaging. A £240 per month increase. However, fewer people are paying down mortgages than in the past. The national figure being 30% of households. In Stevenage 54.2% of owner occupiers are making mortgage payments. (Source Herts Insight), which is higher than the national average, and a cause for concern, with interest rates increasing. It is not unreasonable to assume that the numbers being drawn into a situation of financial precarity, will increase locally. This “second wave” of the cost-of-living crisis is expected to carry on through 2023, and in to 2024. The expectation is that interest rate increases will stabilise, at a higher rate than they have been for some years, and for those migrating from fixed rate mortgages, there will be increases in their monthly repayments. There are some indicators that interest rates may begin to fall in the second half of 2024.

2.2.6 **Government Support** (source citizens advice, www.gov.uk) - There is a range of government support in place including:

- **Cost Of Living Payments**, to those in receipt of low-income benefits or tax credits Spring 2023 £301 - Autumn 2023 £300 - Spring 2024 £300
- **Disability Cost of Living Payment** - £150 June/July 2023, and paid in previous year.
- **Pensioner Cost of Living Payment** - In addition to the Winter Fuel Payment 2023-24. Additional £150 or £300 paid again in Nov 2023.
- **Energy Bill Support Scheme** - Oct 2022- Mar 2023 £400 off energy bills. Non repayable.
- **Energy Price Cap** - July -Sept 2023 Ofgem price cap will be set at £2,074 per year per household. Falling from £3,280. It has fallen as low as £1,834 in recent months. However, the Energy Price Cap from the 1st January 2024 will increase to £1,928.
- **Pre-Payment Meters** - Measures in place to ensure that those on prepayment meters do not pay more for gas and electric, than those on direct debit. If nothing else, the crisis has highlighted the iniquity of consumers on very low incomes, paying more for their energy.
- **Pass Through Requirement** - Landlords are required to pass on energy price discount in rent to their tenants, where energy costs are in with the rent. Hard to enforce, and places tenants in a difficult position when challenging their landlord.

- **Household Support Fund** - Runs until March 2024 and funded by the DWP. Provides funding for families via local authority, for families not covered by other support. Those with disabilities, or those on low income, who are not eligible for other support. Carers can also be supported. Support can be in the form of vouchers, food and goods, or grants.
- **Universal Credit uplift during the pandemic** – (now discontinued) There have been other support measures in place like the £20 weekly Universal Credit uplift during the pandemic. This was direct, easy to access, and simple to administer, but this was discontinued.
- **Crisis Loans** are still available for those on benefits, but these being loans they must be paid back, and there is often little control how the repayments are scheduled, which in turn can cause further hardship.

2.3 Process of the review

2.3.1 The Committee met formally on 5 occasions in 2022 and 2023 to undertake the review and received input from the following groups and people on the following dates:

- 15 December 2022, the Committee considered the scoping document.
- 17 January 2023, presentation from Ben Threadgold, SBC Interim Head of Policy and Communities and Daryl Jedowski, SBC Corporate Policy and Research Officer on the work that SBC and partners have been undertaking to respond to the Cost-of-Living Crisis, with a focus for the meeting on the impact on local residents and interviewed SBC officers as well as Charlotte Blizzard-Welch, CEO Stevenage Citizens Advice and SBC officer Gemma Maret, Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager regarding warm spaces.
- 22 February 2023, received a presentation from the Business Relationship Manager, Mena Caldbeck on the impact of the cost of living crisis on small to medium sized businesses (SMEs) in Stevenage, and interviewed Simon Holmes, Director of Client Services and Enterprise Partnership Manager at Wenta (an independent, not-for-profit social enterprise that run the Council's Business Technology Centre (BTC)) to present on how businesses at the BTC are being impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. The Committee also interviewed the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, who had been invited to attend the meeting and join in the discussion.
- 23 March 2023, Members are invited to continue the cost-of-living review focusing on how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting the Council's employees, interviewed the Head of Human Resources and representatives of Trade Unions.
- 14 June 2023, the Committee interviewed Sharon Bell MBE, Children's Service Manager – Stevenage - North Herts Quadrant Family Support Service - Hertfordshire Family Centre Service, and also interviewed Claire Norris, Service Delivery Manager from Home-Start Hertfordshire.
- 16 January 2024, consideration of the Committee's draft report and recommendations.

3 REVIEW FINDINGS

3.1 Conclusions of the Environment & Economy Select Committee

3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members conducting the review the Committee have made the following conclusions:

3.2 SBC and local response to the cost-of-living crisis focusing on the impact on Residents.

3.2.1 **Warm Spaces Network – [evidence gathered at 17/01/23 E&E Select Committee](#). Delivered By Gemma Maret – Cooperative Working and Neighbourhoods Manager Stevenage Borough Council.**

3.2.2 Set up in Stevenage by the Neighbourhood and Cooperative Working Team. Funded in part by Hertfordshire County Council. A county wide online warm space was set up, with links to the Stevenage Borough website. A community audit took place to establish need, and partners in the community were contacted. At the time of reporting to the committee, the following groups and agencies were partners, helping to run warm spaces in Stevenage:

Vineyard Church	St Nicholas Community Centre
Time bridge Community Centre	Bedwell Community Centre
Stevenage Library	Junction Seven Creatives
St Hugh and St John Church	Stevenage Museum
Christ the King Church	Stevenage Salvation Army
Holy Trinity Church	Chells Manor Community Centre
Grace Community Centre	Stevenage Indoor Market
Millie's Café	Spruce

3.2.3 From October 2022 15 spaces were established, with ten new groups being supported to provide warm spaces. 2 further spaces were added in January. £8252 of funding provided. These warm spaces followed the following criteria: Able to host community members, being close to homes, shops and places of work. They provided and distributed refreshments, and in some cases food. They were accessible spaces to all, with activities and entertainment available.

3.2.4 **Warm Space update – December 2023**

3.2.5 For the 2023 winter, SBC are offering residents support through the provision of Community Cafes over the winter months using HSF funding. Officers held back some HSF funds this year for the winter period to fund 4 community cafes to act as Warm Spaces.

3.2.6 The feedback from last year was that residents liked the spaces as more of a social opportunity and that some people were put off by the connotations of

accessing a “warm space”, therefore, officers have used the term community café.

3.2.7 The Council currently has 2 of the 4 community cafes active, Bedwell Community Centre and Junction 7 Creatives, both offering hot beverages and snacks. Officers are looking for hosts in the South and North to complete the offer. Individual organisations who want to be part of the HCC warm spaces project are able to apply to them as per last year.

3.3 **Stevenage Citizens Advice – Charlotte Blizzard Welch- Chief Executive Officer [evidence gathered at 17/01/23 E&E Select Committee](#).**

3.3.1 Stevenage Citizens Advice is dealing with increased numbers of residents in crisis because of inflation pressures. As the CEO of Stevenage Citizens Advice said in her evidence:

3.3.2 “Inflation plays a massive part in people not having enough money to cover their basic needs.”

3.3.3 The following summary of evidence drawn from the case work Citizens Advice are seeing, is drawn from a dashboard of statistic related to the cost-of-living crisis, and a report on the cost-of-living crisis, both published by Citizens Advice in Stevenage. It is also drawn from answers given to committee:

- The Citizens Advice team have seen a doubling of the number of clients coming to them for advice on energy related matters, amongst also consistently high demand for support for rent arrears and Council Tax assistance.
- A 107% increase in energy related enquiries.
- As much as 60% of CA client in 2022, were asking for advice for the first time.
- In November 2022 CA teams saw 349 clients in one week.
- There is also high level of enquires and support being given related to those claiming or wanting to claim PIP (Personal Independence Payments). This being a source of income for those with disabilities, or long-term health conditions.
- There has been a 43% increase in enquiries from clients with long term health conditions or disabilities. This is consistent with a national picture, highlighted by reports from the Resolution Foundation, that the cost-of-living crisis is disproportionately impacting these groups.
- There has been an increase in numbers being referred to foodbanks, or other localised forms of social welfare. This is consistent with the national picture.
- The Citizens Advice team are seeing more single people, and single people with dependent children, coming for support and advice.
- Overall, there have been 8.500 individual enquires to Citizens Advice in 2022. Bedwell and the Old Town are the wards with the most enquiries last year.

- There are request for support from older people. Despite the “triple lock “of support from government in recent years, older people are being drawn in to increasing financial precarity.
- There is an increasing level of request for support from those living in private rented accommodation, as buy to let mortgage cost, are passed on to tenants. Actual homelessness is rising from a low figure during the pandemic. And request for help from those in social housing, SBC rental and housing associations remain high.
- Mental health related issues are increasingly being discussed, as either the cause of why people are in crisis, or a symptom of what may have started as a financial crisis, causing poor mental health outcomes. The Citizens Advice Team are working closely with other agencies to support clients asking for support. (Mind).
- Concern was expressed about those who cannot claim the full range of support and are Just About Managing (JAMs). There is reason to believe that pressure on this group will increase as interest rate rises impact on income.

3.4 **Stevenage Borough Council - Interim Head of Policy and Communities – Ben Threadgold.** [Evidence gathered at 17/01/23 E&E Select Committee.](#)

3.4.1 Stevenage Borough Council has adhered to a strong cooperative approach, working closely with partners in the community, to monitor and support thorough the cost-of-living crisis. This has included the following:

- Active sign posting of residents to agencies that can help in the community, via the main SBC website. There is evidence that these pages are being hit frequently.
- SBC has been central to coordinating government support. This has taken the form of discretionary housing support, with a doubling of claimant numbers.
- The SBC Council Tax Support Scheme has remained in place, with a generous level of support, comparable to other local councils. There are no plans to overhaul the system at present (Overview and Scrutiny 24/07/23). In January SBC was seeing 85.7 % of Council Tax being collected (Quarter 3, 2022-23).
- There has been 13.4 % increase in rent arrears due to Stevenage Borough Council. Most of these are in receipt benefits and have had changes in circumstances.
- SBC has been developing a “Full Financial MOT” approach to residents presenting with financial difficulties. It is not clear from the discussion of the extent of this approach, and which teams within SBC are offering this approach.
- There is active support by SBC of central government Discretionary Housing Payments and Household Support Fund, with clear support for a mainstreaming, so more can claim a continuing source of support, beyond Spring 2024.

- There is evidence of a need to address the group who are above income thresholds, for the targeted government support (JAMs just about managing).
- Coordination of local warm space initiative via the Cooperative Neighbourhood Team.
- The SADA team has seen an 88% increase in numbers reporting domestic abuse. The positive is that more people are being supported and reported, and the team and attitudes towards domestic abuse, are being shifted by its positive, and supportive approach. It is also reasonable to assume that financial pressures in some instances, will result in abusive behaviours occurring in relationships, and breakdowns in relationships can occur.

3.5 **North Herts Family Centres-Barnardo's – Children Services Manager – Sharon Bell MBE. [Evidence gathered at 14/06/23 E&E Select Committee](#)**

- 3.5.1 Early years support providers in the community were invited to committee, as the cost living crisis can fall disproportionately on families with lower incomes. The cost-of-living crisis is likely to present real challenges around everyday expenditure for some families, and by inviting these service providers, a window was opened into their work.
- 3.5.2 The North Herts Family Centres work with children from 0-5 years of age, but interact with children of all ages, because of their links to other services, such as Families First. The centres offer support to emerging needs, alongside universal services. There are 1-1 services available. Children services offer localised, support away from central benefit support. Often this support is behavioural, in terms of pastoral support, or services directed at increasing resilience. It can take the form of direct support in kind to families.
- 3.5.3 There were 320 referrals in the last year to services, (Apr-22- Mar 23.) with a high concentration of services in the following wards. St Nicholas and Martins Wood (86) Bedwell (60) Broadwater (58) Old Town Symonds Green (55) Shephall (43) 18 Chells and Manor. The biggest topic of referral was Routine, Guidance and Boundaries.
- 3.5.4 There is direct funding of families in need. A figure of £4000 was discussed as being given over to direct support to families. This has been used on heating, food vouchers and parcels and cooking equipment. Furniture has also been purchased.
- 3.5.5 The following areas were identified as challenging:
- Housing – Problematic landlords, damp, overcrowding. The need to build closer work partnership with housing providers was discussed.
 - Support with form filling, and online access.
 - Challenges around housing maintenance, lack of skills
 - Mental Health – ongoing challenges since COVID, exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

- 3.5.6 Educational attainment – children out of school, or under achieving in school. This is reported in the national picture, for levels of children who have left mainstream education, or are experiencing disrupted educational attainment, because of welfare impacts.
- 3.5.7 Support to families to enable digital inclusion for schoolwork is an issue.
- 3.5.8 The importance of early intervention was held up as good practice, in identifying a family's needs before crisis is reached.
- 3.5.9 There is a need for more activities for primary school children in the community.
- 3.5.10 Volunteer recruitment for children's centres can be problematic.

3.6 HomeStart Hertfordshire – Service Delivery Manager – Claire Norris
[Evidence gathered at 14/06/23 E&E Select Committee](#)

- 3.6.1 HomeStart are a charity that has a national profile and works with families in crisis. They are based in Bedwell, a centre from which they serve the whole of Hertfordshire.
- 3.6.2 HomeStart cited housing as a major challenge for the families they support. Budgeting support is often required, and they have started finance projects to support families. This is operated with HCCs money advice unit.
- 3.6.3 Mental health issues were also a big concern amongst their families. The situation had deteriorated with the pandemic and continued with the cost-of-living crisis.
- 3.6.4 There has been a lot of signposting to other services: food banks, hygiene banks. The value of vouchers being given out (food vouchers) has doubled to £100 vouchers, to feed families. They are seeing new families using their services. Early intervention was cited as key to supporting families. There are families using the services for the first time, many of which are working, but have not had to ask for support before. There are practical and emotional challenges for families with this.
- 3.6.5 Financial pressure varied, but they can be rent, school uniform costs, and school trips. The ability of families to afford school trips, can create significant peer pressure. Transport cost are also an issue.
- 3.6.6 HomeStart cited getting and retaining volunteers as an issue. Concern was also expressed at the complicated issues families face, and the difficulty of the volunteer support being needed for a sustained period.
- 3.6.7 Concern was expressed that information needed to be consistent about support services for families, and this was not always the case with the HCC and SBC Information offer on their respective websites.

3.7 **SBC and local response to the cost-of-living crisis focusing on the impact on *Businesses*.**

3.7.1 This is a subject that deserves a full report, and the Environment and Economy Committee's work has offered a small window into what the impacts on business has been. The environment is challenging for business, and the content below offers some indicators as to what is happening, as presented by some key stakeholders.

3.7.2 The National Support to Business - Energy Bill Relief Scheme and Energy Bills Discount Scheme. These schemes provide financial assistance to companies of all sizes, to mitigate against the cost of high energy prices. The initial scheme has been in place since 01/10/22. The level of support being adjusted downwards from 01/04/23, and for many businesses, it will end completely. The scheme is in place until April 2024. As unit costs for energy should be falling, then this should feed through to cost for business.

3.8 **Wenta Business Technology Centre – Emma Wright -Client Services Operations Manager, and Simon Holmes -Director of Client Services and Enterprise Partnership Manager. Mena Caldbeck – Business Relations Manager – Stevenage Borough Council. [Evidence gathered 22/02/23 at E&E Select Committee – link to Minutes](#)**

3.8.1 There are indicators that more businesses are seeking reasonable priced working space, as uptake at Wenta is higher, and bigger units are harder to let. A market characterised in part by downsizing., and increased working from home.

3.8.2 Wenta is resilient in support businesses, with increased uptake for virtual support to clients, use of incubator and co working space has increased., and us of platforms like Google Digital Garage.

3.8.3 The areas of support that Wenta are seeing most demand is start up support, finance funding, and business planning. But there has been a drop off in demand for start-up support in 2022-3. Pre-start use of space was 65%, but this year it is 41%. There is an historically high level of business over 5 years old in the BTC.

3.8.4 In 2023 Wenta are seeing most business support going to retail, food and drink, and entertainment and arts. 41% of businesses reported increases in the price of goods and services, this year. The co -space in the town centre has seen an increase in use since opening in 2021, and there is a lot of business activity around this.

3.9 **SBC response to the cost-of-living crisis focusing on the impact on *SBC Staff*.**

**Impact on Stevenage Borough Council Employees of the Cost-of-Living Crisis.
Kirsten Frew and Clare Davies – Darren Nicholson (Unite) Unison Stevenage**

Local Government Branch. [Evidence gathered 23/03/23 at E&E Select Committee.](#)

3.9.1 As its third area of focus the Environment and Economy Committee sought to understand the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on those employed by Stevenage Borough Council. The Committee invited responses from two Unions representing employees, Unison and Unite, and from senior managers in from Stevenage Borough's HR team. Stevenage Borough Council employees received a £1925 pay rise in November 2022, back dated to April 2022. This was approximately a 10% pay rise for employees who were on the lowest pay scale and the average SBC pay increase for 2023/24 was 5.43%, but it is important to remember that with inflation at the time running above this, wages were falling behind, or barely keeping up with inflation.

3.9.2 The Trade Unions elected to respond to the review in the form of a survey, and the HR managers, in person to the committee. The Unison Survey- sent to Unison Members to record anonymously their experience of the cost-of-living crisis. The survey is impactful, because of the stark responses that have been offered. Despite the pay increase in November 2022, several employees struggled with the following:

- Anxiety over rising bills, resulting in changed shopping habits, and not turning on heating as much, or wearing more clothes at home.
- Some respondents are consciously trying to use less electricity at home.
- Having to think about car use, and petrol costs.
- Social lives have been impacted as not as much money to go around.
- Concentrating expenditure on essentials. Consequently, a level of impact on mental health.
- Having to rethink personal budgets., especially if the only wage earner.
- Having to use heating at home more, if working from home, and this adding to costs.
- Increase in the level of personal anxiety. Some respondents said they had use counselling services, and NHS mental health support.
- Some reported following charities and support groups online to get advice about managing through the crisis.

3.9.3 SBC employees have been impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, and there are support schemes in place to help those, who's personal circumstances have become challenging in recent months. At one level, the management of staff through this challenge is an operational consideration, and not the preserve of Members. That said, wage awards in recent years have tried to address the cost-of-living crisis, and where individuals may be struggling financially a range of employee and union run schemes are in place to support them.

3.9.4 Formal support on offer to employees includes:

- Councils Employee Assistance Provider - Spectrum Life
- UNISON's There For You programme
- Unite Hardship Fund

3.9.5 It is encouraging that employee's wellbeing is considered, and that these forms are part of the routine one-to-one process for SBC teams. SBC is to be commended, if it is practising a culture of acceptance around the challenge of workforce positive mental health, and neurodiversity in the workplace. Creating safe places in organisations where these concerns can be aired, and where support and direction can be sought, is valuable, and can be key to retaining staff and supporting a return to good performance. With the pressures on families and organizations, having REAL conversations is important.

3.10 **Equalities & Diversity issues**

3.10.1 Although not one of the 9 protected characteristic groups (2010 Equalities Act) people who are on a low income are adversely affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Therefore, the focus of the local authority to directly help and signpost individuals and families most affected is the focus and direct subject matter of the review.

3.11 **Links between the cost-of-living crisis and Climate Change**

3.11.1 There are links between the cost-of-living crisis and climate change. Households who are in receipt of benefits or are on a low income are not able to respond to the challenges of climate change but are often the most directly affected. If these households could benefit from a lower demand for domestic heating and energy from better insulation/solar panels etc. then their heating bills would be reduced due to a lower demand. The Council is accessing the funding available from the Government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, to retro-fit properties, but the scale of the funding available is currently very small, and is not of the scale and quantum of funding that would be required to roll out to the whole of the Council's social housing stock of circa 8,000 tenanted properties and circa 1500 leasehold properties.

4 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 That the Environment & Economy Select Committee considers the findings of the review, contained within this report and the recommendations below be presented to the Executive Portfolio Holders including; The Leader; Resources and Transformation; Co-operative Council and Neighbourhoods; and Economy and Transport, who will liaise with partners including: Stevenage CAB; Children Centres; Homestart; Wenta BTC; and Unison & Unite Trades Unions and that a response be provided within two months of the publishing of this report.

4.2 **Recommendation 1 - Sign Posting** – (i) It is recommended that an “holistic” approach, or resident centred approach, extends across SBC service, and into the Housing Team and (ii) delivery of council services accessible via digital means be continued with traditional person to person methods still made available.

- 4.2.1 **Background and reason for the recommendation re (i) Sign Posting** - A collaborative and shared approach to the crisis is evident in the way in which Home-Start, North Herts Family Centres, The Citizens Advice Team, and teams within SBC work, when confronted with residents in crisis. The hope is that this “holistic” approach, or resident centred approach, extends across SBC service, and into the Housing Team. That those in crisis, or near to it, are directed to sources of support, and the range of practical services across the community that can help (Debt Counselling, Credit Union, CA Team, Housing Officers, MIND) to name a few. A “one front door” into this local support is important. Forums like The Stevenage Social Inclusion Partnership encourage this.
- 4.2.2 **(ii) Digital Sign Posting** - The repeated use of web sites by SBC and the Citizens Advice Team, has shown the value of digital sign posting of services to those needing them, and this is to be commended. However, the need for traditional physical outreach into neighbourhood locations is also needed. The challenge of providing services in the way people want them (digital self-serve, digital meeting, face-to face) hasn’t gone away.
- 4.3 **Recommendation 2 - Importance of Early Intervention** - It is recommended that SBC and partners continue to support residents coming forward for help by encouraging early intervention mechanisms.
- 4.3.1 **Background and reason for the recommendation re Importance of Early Intervention** - The Citizens Advice Team, North Herts Family Centres and Stevenage Borough Council all stressed the importance of early intervention, with families and individuals engaging on the brink of crisis, or soon after. This is not an easy thing for residents to do, especially if this is something that they have not had to do before. But by SBC, Citizen Advice and other agencies, continuing to provide an open door into services, and doing so in such a way that de-stigmatizing the situation, much progress has been made.
- 4.4 **Recommendation 3 – Continuation of administration of the Household Support Fund** It is recommended that if the Government make a further round of the Household Support Fund available for 2024-25 that officers carry on making this very valuable fund available to eligible local people.
- 4.4.1 **Background and reason for the recommendation re Continuation of administration of the Household Support Fund** – The household support fund offers practical support with Energy, Water, Food or other essential cost to residents. You do not need to be in receipt of specific benefits to receive this. Local Authorities have some discretion as to how they administer the scheme locally, and it has become an important source of support in the cost-of-living crisis.
- 4.5 **Recommendation 4 - Continuation of Warm Spaces** - It is recommended that the provision of warm spaces continues for 2023-24 and that the officer report from 2022-23 regarding the provision of warm spaces during this period be shared with Members.

- 4.5.1 **Background and reason for the recommendation re Continuation of Warm Spaces** – It is seen by Members of the Environment and Economy that many of the fundamental underlying economic and social challenges that were in the cost-of-living crisis were still present, although inflation is falling by December 2023 it is still high by recent decades and above the Government’s inflation target rate of 2%, so people in insecure employment that have not enjoyed inflation busting pay rises are still struggling, therefore, Warm Spaces are still necessary.
- 4.6 **Recommendation 5 – SBC frontline staff training on Cost-of-Living** It is recommended that SBC training is maintained on the cost of living across all public facing teams, especially Housing and Council Tax.
- 4.6.1 **Background and reason for the recommendation re SBC frontline staff training on Cost-of-Living** – As the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis are still being felt it is important to make sure that all frontline and public facing roles receive the necessary training.
- 4.7 **Recommendation 6 – Council Tax Arrears and Rent Arrears** It is recommended that the level of Council Tax Arrears and Rent Arrears should be recorded and disseminated, not only because of the revenue implications for SBC, but because these are indicators of the impact on family finances.
- 4.7.1 **Background and reason for the recommendation re Council Tax Arrears and Rent Arrears** – Council Tax and Rent Arrears are an area of concern to the Council as they can have an impact on Council finances, but they are also a direct indicator on the impact on local families and can act as an indicator of the number of households servicing debt.
- 4.8 **Recommendation 7 – Impact on Businesses in Stevenage** It is recommended that the Business Relationship Manager and the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy and Transport be invited to commission a report on the ongoing conditions of the business market in the town, looking at the pressures of on businesses particularly on SME’s.
- 4.8.1 **Background and reason for the recommendation re support of Business in Stevenage** - This is a subject that deserves a full report, and the Environment and Economy Committee’s work has offered a small window into what the impacts on business has been. The environment is challenging for business, and the content below offers some indicators as to what is happening, as presented by some key stakeholders.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications for this report.

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 3.10.1 There are no further equalities implications for this report.

5.4 Climate Change Implications

Climate change implications have been addressed throughout the report but specifically at paragraph 3.11.1

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Links to the E&E Select Committee Meetings:

[E&E Select Committee - 15 December 2022 - Agreed Scoping Document](#)

[E&E Select Committee 17 01 23](#)

[E&E Select Committee 22 02 23 - link to Minutes](#)

[E&E Select Committee 23 03 23](#)

[E&E Select Committee 14 06 23](#)

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