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ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday, 27 March 2024

Time: 6.00pm,

Location: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Contact: Alex Marsh

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 - 27 FEBRUARY & 6 MARCH 2024

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the meetings of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 27 February and 6 March 2024.

Pages 3 – 14

3. STEVENAGE SKILLS FRAMEWORK

Members are invited to receive a presentation on the Stevenage Skills Framework. The presentation will be provided by Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager, Daryl Jedowski and Strategic Director, Tom Pike with input from the CEO North Herts College, Kit Davies and Norman Jennings from Hertfordshire LEP and Greta Gardiner from Stevenage Works. The Presentation will outline who the key organisations are in the local skills network and what each group provides, leading to an opportunity for Members to outline what they see as the key priorities for their community.

Presentation slides to follow.

4. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

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

5. 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.

6. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

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

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 27th February 2024

Start Time: 6:00pm

End Time: 7:40pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Members: Councillors; R Broom (Chair), A Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), J Brown, B Facey, C McGrath, A McGuinness, S Mead, C Parris, E Plater and G Snell.

The following Members were also in attendance: Forhad Chowdhury, Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Maureen McKay, Carolina Veres and Anne Wells.

Start / End Start Time: 6:00pm

Time: End Time: 7:40pm

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

Apologies of absence were received by Councillors Baroness Taylor of Stevenage OBE CC and Chris Howells

There were no declarations of interest.

2. **PRE-SCRUTINY POLICY DEVELOPMENT OF THE UPDATED BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN**

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager provided a presentation to the committee around the topic of Biodiversity, including: biodiversity in Stevenage; chalk streams and approach to environmental strategies for Tree and Woodland Management and the Green Space Strategy.

Biodiversity in Stevenage:

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager, Julia Hill and the Conservation Manager for Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust, Tim Hill explained the timeline for biodiversity in the local area which included as context: the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action plan was written by Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust (HMWT) in 1998. Stevenage Biodiversity Action Plan was created in 2005; Revision of Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan in

2006; Biodiversity Action Plan for Stevenage was reviewed in 2010 and again in 2017.

It was explained in the last 50 years 76 species became extinct in Hertfordshire; more than three species every two years, 35 were invertebrates, 26 were plants, 13 were vertebrates and two were lichens. 1,446 species are currently threatened with extinction in Hertfordshire. This includes over 1,000 invertebrates and 260 plants.

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager, Julia Hill, explained that SBC was still the only district Council in Hertfordshire with a Biodiversity Action Plan; it is understood that Three Rivers District Council now have a draft plan, but Stevenage has led the way in this area for years.

In 2011 the Council secured a joint funding bid with HMWT for a Wild Stevenage fund to support Biodiversity. This led to work to engage with local community and kick started the local Green Space Volunteers in Stevenage. More recently there has been progress by Stevenage being the first local authority in Hertfordshire to secure funding via Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) from planning permission granted for building developments in the area. In the last 13 years there has been a 1500% increase in meadow grassland with now up to 33 hectares in Stevenage. The change in grass cutting regimes has allowed wildflowers to grow up. The Council has created up to 2 hectares of new woodland at Memorial Wood and Fairlane Wood in Fairlands Valley Park. Shackledell Grassland is the only known site in Hertfordshire to find the Great Green Bush Cricket, the UK's largest insect. The Council has created 10 community orchards since 2011.

The Council doesn't have a specific identified budget to support the delivery of the Biodiversity Action Plan. Delivery is largely through Green Space Volunteers supported by SDS officers, and supported by national funding bids, and local Member support through their Local Community Budgets (LCBs).

Draft Biodiversity Action Plan:

The HMWT Conservation Manager, Tim Hill explained the objectives of the action plan is to be realistic and achievable but remaining ambitious within the capacity of Stevenage Borough Council and partners, to be compatible with and complement the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), to be accessible in language terms to the wider Stevenage community, to prioritise protecting those sites already important to wildlife and/or identifying sites that could lose potential for wildlife if works are not delivered within the next 2-8 years.

The HMWT Conservation Manager stated the natural resource of Stevenage is 130 ha woodland (5% of the borough), 448 ha grassland (17% of the borough), 10 ha wetlands (0.38% of the borough), 20 ponds 0.3 ha and 4.6km of rivers and streams. The next steps would be to receive approval via Executive Committee in July 2024, provide a ward breakdown of actions/estimated costs, establish a Nature Recovery Officer through BNG funding, further support Green Space Volunteers, look for opportunities for delivery, develop Partnerships. Potentially to consider development of a Nature Engagement Officer in future via BNG funding.

Chalk Streams:

The HMWT Conservation Manager explained Hertfordshire holds 10% of chalk streams globally. Stevenage Brook is a tributary to the river Beane, which is a chalk stream. The biggest challenge within Stevenage is that the brook is overgrown with trees which limits light accessing the brook, which in turn lack of light does not allow plants to be able to grow which would encourage insects and fish to flourish creating rich biodiverse habitats.

Environmental Strategies:

The Officer explained the timeline of the Tree and Woodland Strategy and the Green Space Strategy

- November – December 2023: Phase 1 Public Consultation
- February 2024: Focus Groups
- March – May 2024: Develop draft strategy documents
- June 2024: internal consultation on draft documents
- Phase 2 public consultation
- September 2024: finalise documents
- Autumn: draft document to Environment and Economy Select Committee
- Winter 2024/25: approval of documents by exec

It was explained the proposal for the Phase 2 consultation is to deliver 6-7 focus group sessions which will invite community participants to highlight strengths. Issues and opportunities within a range of green spaces within an area. Meetings will take place in community buildings located in each area. There will be a separate focus group for Fairlands Valley Park.

Members asked a series of questions:

A Councillor queried if it is solely based on the habitat in green spaces or are you looking at everything such as facilities and activities? It was explained the team are looking into everything such as organised team sports activity, , outdoor gym facilities or quiet spaces for relaxation.

A Councillor believed giving residents of Stevenage the opportunity to comment or give ideas at an early stage would be beneficial, instead of giving them finalised plans to comment on.

A Councillor asked if there will be a social media approach? In the original consultation it was promoted through social media and digital posters around the town centre, but officers will find a range of ways to inform people.

A Member asked about the way budgets for Biodiversity Net Gain would work. Officers stated that once a site has been identified within the S106 Agreement it is protected for 30 years and will require a management plan to deliver the works. Members asked how much control do we have of what comes our way, are we able to state we would like to use the biodiversity net gain for a specific reason or area? The Officer stated that Planning colleagues have already been stipulating that BNG be allocated within Stevenage to ensure that the local area benefits from the biodiversity gain rather than it being delivered elsewhere in the country.

A Councillor stated that they understood that losing 76 species is not good, but queried why it was not mentioned how many new species have been discovered in areas such as the return of the sparrowhawk, peregrine and red kites? Is there a natural turnaround with new species, how does the council deal with non-native invasive species? It was explained there were actually now 77 species which were extinct, but the area is gaining new species such as ravens and several species which are coming up from the south due to climate change but nonetheless losing 77 species should not be ignored due to change or loss of habitats. Through engagement with Green Space Volunteers work has been undertaken to tackle non-native species such as the Spanish Bluebell in Monks Wood and Himalayan Balsam along Stevenage Brook.

It was queried why the 1446 species were threatened? It was explained there were a combination of factors, including loss of habitat, human activity, fragmented habitats etc. HMWT were working with the Herts Natural History Society, who have records of all of the known species in the County. The HMWT were working with all of the experts to see what we can do to positively affect their habitats.

A Member asked were the Council making room for biodiversity within the local plan? The Officer explained they believe the council are.

A Member requested that thought be given to how young people could be engaged in the strategy consultation process and there was a suggestion that an approach be made to the Junior and Senior schools that are close to the Fairlands Valley site to see what their views were on the strategies. The Environmental Policy & Development Manager stated that the original consultation had been sent out via the Schools Educational Trust to provide an opportunity for young people to be heard. but they would consider this suggestion and also engaging with the Youth Council but cautioned that there

is a very small officer team delivering this work so there needed to be realistic expectations about what can be achieved.

The Chair thanked all of the contributors and stated that he was most encouraged to hear about the concept of Biodiversity Net Gain 'Green' banking.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Draft Biodiversity Action Plan and the timeline and approach for the Tree and Woodland and Green Space Strategies be noted.

3. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

None.

4. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

5. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR

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STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 6 March 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Jim Brown, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris and Graham Snell.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.20pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Andy McGuinness, Adam Mitchell, Ellie Plater, and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 12 FEBRUARY 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 12 February 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 UPDATE ON CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIONS

The Chair introduced the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) Zayd Al-Jawad, Assistant Director (Direct Services) Steve Dupoy, Head of Climate Action Fabian Oyarzun, Climate Change Programme Lead Officer Jennifer Bratchell, and the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance Councillor Simon Speller.

The Head of Climate Action presented an update to the Committee. He advised that the Stevenage Climate Action Plan Tracker was officially launched on 27 February 2024 and the launch was supported by communications via the Councils communications channels including a press release issued to The Comet and they have included it on their website.

The Climate Action Plan Tracker had been produced through a partnership with Kausal, and created an interactive, web-based portal that highlighted the projects being undertaken by the council to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve climate change resilience, and promote environmental stewardship and sustainability. The tracker could be viewed by everyone in an easy-to-understand format, detailing data in charts, figures, and diagrams and could be accessed at <https://climate.stevenage.gov.uk/>.

The Action Plan contained relevant climate actions Stevenage Borough Council was undertaking, or planned to undertake, broken down into the following eight strategic themes:

- Businesses
- Homes
- Transport
- Construction and Regeneration
- Energy and Water
- People and Awareness
- Waste and Recycling
- Biodiversity

There were 46 actions included across the 8 strategic themes and each action included multiple tasks.

The Head of Climate Action advised that the Climate Action Plan website was the priority consultation site in terms of climate action for stakeholders. The website had been presented to voluntary groups for feedback and would be promoted through official SBC Communication channels, the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector and through the work of the Council's Communities and Neighbourhoods team.

A calendar had been collated of national and international sustainability key dates which would be linked to the Council's actions to share and promote proper communications in this regard.

The Head of Climate Action advised that the Climate Change Community Fund had been created to allow for the development of community-led environmental projects with social benefits. The aim of the Climate Change Community Fund was to foster and improve a sense of community around climate focused projects to increase community engagement surrounding the topic of climate change and deliver both environmental and social benefits.

The CCCF is funded through the Community Infrastructure Levy and had supported five projects that were detailed in the report. There was £7,500 annually allocated to each ward. The funded projects supported climate action through a variety of different aspects which included avoiding waste, improving air quality, improving soil health and biodiversity, producing local food, creating habitats for wildlife and supported the physical and mental wellbeing of residents.

A Member asked a question relating to sustainability of the funding of the Climate Change Community Fund. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the funding was coming from the Community Infrastructure Levy and was ringfenced from developer contributions. There was funding committed for the next few years.

A Member asked a question regarding Biodiversity. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance responded that 4000 trees were an initial target based on the availability of suitable land and funding that was available to support

this planting. He added that the periphery of Stevenage offered an opportunity to develop a form of green belt and that he hoped to maximise the number of trees planted and welcomed pressure from the Committee to push for more tree planting utilising some of the future CIL monies. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) clarified that money received for development in the Borough in relation to biodiversity net gain would be located in the Borough where appropriate. The Impact of Development would be tested against the Council's Biodiversity Supplementary Planning Document, as such, the Council had to demonstrate that it could deliver the agreed percentage net gain planted on the ground and it would be legally bound to provide that.

A Member asked a question relating to the cost of decarbonisation of the social housing stock. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) responded that the cost was approximately £30,000 per property but that all properties were different. This provided an indication that the total cost for the Council would exceed £200m. He added that the Council targeted pots of funding from central government which the Council strategically predicted had the most likelihood of success but that most of the available funding was for small amounts relative to the total cost. In addition, it was noted that this approach was very time consuming for each local authority to bid against each other, with no guarantee of success. The Head of Climate Action added that a decision needs to be made regarding what we will understand and accept as net zero housing, distinguishing between onsite emissions reduction and some emissions difficult to abate that we will consider able to offset. Offsetting is an option that can be contentious so care would be needed when defining what a net zero house is. This is currently being worked in the context of the partial update of the Local Plan.

A Member asked a question relating to legal documentation and the wider responsibility of the Council with regards planning and housing developments. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) responded that officers were working on a revision to the Local Plan which was the best document to capture how the Council can control planning with regard to climate change measures. He advised that the Council would promote measures relating to climate change as far as was possible within the current legislation but it could be difficult to go beyond what central government was trying to promote. He added that the Local Plan included two potential development sites that were already allocated and for which the Council would be pushing for net zero. He advised that the Town and Country Planning Association principles of a 15-minute town were embedded in a lot of the Council's planning policies.

A Member asked if the Council's Climate Action Plan went far enough and whether the Head of Climate Action had been able to have as big of an impact as he hoped since taking up the position. The Head of Climate Action responded that there had been considerable positive engagement and understanding among officers regarding the Council's initiatives. However, he highlighted challenges related to working in silos and addressing sustainability comprehensively which are common in most large organisations. He stated that the focus on carbon reduction was just one aspect of the broader sustainability agenda and that the potential of utilising the new Climate Action Plan Tracker platform to showcase progress and foster engagement among officers would be beneficial. He added that the Council were looking to

establish an 'Climate Champions' group that consisted of officers from across a wide range of departments to improve cross departmental communication. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance added that climate change was a very technical topic and that the 2030 net zero target makes sense for the Council as an organisation, the big challenge was around what the Council did within the community where it needs to be an exemplary organisation.

A Member asked a question relating to solar power. The Head of Climate Action responded that the installation of solar power in homes across Stevenage had been promoted through the Solar Together scheme. He added that there had been some solar installations on Council owned buildings through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (in Council houses), and that solar was a technology that continued to be explored but that the upfront cost was a barrier. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that the majority of the Council's commercial building stock had a net zero electricity supply and that whilst solar power did have a sustainability benefit it did not always necessarily mean a reduction in carbon emissions.

A Member asked a question relating to cycle recycling schemes and stated that nationally over 15 million cycles were thrown away each year. The Head of Climate Action advised that the Council supported a bicycle recycle scheme but was unsure of any police involvement in a Member suggestion that the Police should donate stolen cycles if the owners did not come forward once they were recovered, which could help address transport poverty.

A Member asked a question relating the data included in the Stevenage Territorial GHG Emissions graph contained within the presentation. The Head of Climate Action advised that the graph was the latest version available at a territorial level. He added that the 2022 data would be available in July 2024 and that an updated graph would be circulated at that time.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance presented an update to the Committee. Strategic partnerships were in a good place. The Council worked actively within the Herts Waste Partnership, Herts Infrastructure and Planning Partnership and Herts Climate Change Strategy Partnership. The partnerships all had aspects of biodiversity and climate change however only the Herts Climate Change Strategy Partnership was focussed solely on climate change, and it worked as an information exchange.

The everyday work within future planning and planning development was supporting the Council's climate change and sustainability agendas and Members were urged to engage with officers, when they had any concerns or suggestions, at any time and not to save it for Committee meetings. Traditional communication methods should still be used alongside digital communication channels.

The Climate Change Community Fund had been a success and the work of community groups that had received funding was praised. By next year, there was hope all wards would have participated in climate change funding applications.

Waste Not Want Not were praised for their work which had recently seen them

awarded the King's Voluntary Service Award. Local litter picking groups were also praised and litter picks had continued to be well supported.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance presented an example from another authority in the form of a chart that could be used to provide a simple demonstration of the Council's current position in its move towards the net zero carbon objective. Members agreed that it would be useful to have a similar chart for Stevenage that could be shared with the public to show the Council's path to net zero.

A Member asked a question relating to community capacity. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance responded that engagement was strongest in neighbourhoods with strong community centres. Some primary schools had shown interest. He added that the officer support was available, but community capacity continued to face obstacles as residents would need to be part of a group, with a bank account.

A Member asked a question relating to Scope 3 emissions. The Head of Climate Action responded that the focus had been on procurement and that the Council had been taking part in a sustainable procurement project led by the regional climate change forum. He added that 90% of emissions for a local authority come from their supply chain. Whilst this was a well-known fact, it was still difficult to address as most organisations can only see back one step in their supply chain. The project had a diagnostic a regional level and preliminary results suggested that the Council had scored relatively well in terms of how officers are engaged with the subject. There was an upcoming workshop to work on an action plan for regional priorities. The Council had recently conducted a staff travel survey and officers were analysing the responses. There were known challenges in this area and work was needed with issues like the Council's Grey Fleet (employee's own vehicles). The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance added that big business often process mapped their supply chains rigorously to control costs. This contrasted with the public sector which has a more diffused set of stakeholders and open-ended processes making it inherently more difficult to identify, control and manage. A comparison of business supply chains and public service supply chains could be considered at a future meeting of the Committee.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance suggested that the Council could promote its corporate social responsibility to release employees for a day or two a year to work in the community focusing on environmental projects.

The Chair thanked all those who had contributed to the meeting.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Officer and Executive Portfolio Holder Presentations were noted.

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR