

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 3 September 2019

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Michael Downing (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair),
Doug Bainbridge, Sandra Barr, Adrian Brown, Jim Brown,
Teresa Callaghan, Jody Hanafin and Loraine Rossati

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 6.40pm

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Stephen Booth and David Cullen.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 29 JULY 2019**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment & Economy Select Committee meeting held on 29 July 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **REVIEW OF LOCAL POST OFFICE SERVICES IN STEVENAGE**

The Chair informed the Committee that the two witnesses originally scheduled for the meeting were no longer able to attend due to work commitments and traffic problems. It was reported that the decision to review local post office services had been prompted by unsatisfactory answers to Member questions at a previous briefing on post offices in Stevenage.

The Strategic Director indicated that soon after the decision to close the Waitrose Store in Stevenage High Street was announced, the Council sought clarification on the rationale behind the decision and future plans. Waitrose representatives indicated that the company's priority was to assist workers affected by the closure and were not in a position to update regarding the use of building beyond the closure date. The representatives did not share details about plans for the in-store post office but indicated that future options would be considered by the Post Office. The Strategic Director informed the Committee that Post Office Limited was looking for a permanent solution. The Post Office was currently advertising the opportunity to operate a post office in Stevenage Old Town on the 'Run a Post Office' website. Efforts were also underway to seek suitable premises for the post office. It was reported that at the point of closure of the Waitrose store, it was unlikely that the

post office would be able to continue in the current location. There was an expectation of a break in the provision of post office services between the time of the Waitrose in-store post office closure and the opening of a new post office in the area.

Members highlighted the huge demand for post office services in the Old Town area. It was noted that elderly residents were particularly affected by post office closures due to issues such as limited internet access and limited access to other post office facilities. Availability of post office services was now a high priority issue in the area following the closure of the last High Street bank last year (2018). There was likely to be increased pressure on Symonds Green and town centre post offices as a result of the closure of the post office at Waitrose. Members pointed out the urgency to find a short-term solution given that the post office branch at Waitrose was scheduled to close on 23 October 2019. The closure of banks in the area had deprived local retail outlets of convenient facilities for cashing daily takings. It was indicated that local post offices were in a vulnerable position due to the business model of adding a Post Office franchise to an existing retail business. Members expressed concerns about potential privacy risks for customers of in-store post offices. The closure of the post office and High Street banks appeared to hamper regeneration efforts in Stevenage. Members sought clarification on the timescale for the opening of a new post office in the Old Town area. The Committee suggested alternative solutions including:

- Highlighting possible empty shop units that could be considered by the Post Office
- Whether the Post Office would consider locating with other community or local service points such as Springfield House or Stevenage Old Town Library
- Temporary post office facilities such as mobile units and portable cabins

In response to questions, the Strategic Director stated that:

- The Council had offered to liaise with Post Office Limited, local retail outlets and other stakeholders in efforts to share information to help inform the search for sites for post office services in the Old Town area
- The Council was actively liaising with stakeholders and sharing information where possible regarding the location and timescale for the opening of a new post office
- Feedback would be provided to the Post Office regarding the suggestions made by the Environment and Economy Committee in respect of possible locations for permanent and temporary uses.

It was **RESOLVED** that the review of local post office services in Stevenage be revisited in future.

4 **REVIEW OF LOCAL POST OFFICE SERVICES IN STEVENAGE - SCOPING DOCUMENT**

The Committee considered the draft Scoping Document for the review of Local Post Office Services in Stevenage. The Scrutiny Officer gave an update on an informal survey involving elderly residents of the town. The Scrutiny Officer also informed Members that several local postmasters had rejected the invitation to appear before the Committee. Members indicated that in view of the uncertainty surrounding the High Street Post Office and issues affecting other post offices there was need for a further meeting to review local post office services in Stevenage.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the draft Scoping Document is noted
2. That efforts be made to invite representatives from local post offices and the National Federation of Sub Post Offices to a future committee meeting
3. That the Old Town Business and Community Partnership be added to the list of witnesses

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR