

Meeting: COUNCIL
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ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT 2019/2020

Author – Stephen Weaver (on behalf of the Scrutiny Members) Ext.No. 2332
Lead Officer – Jackie Cansick Ext.No. 2216 – Tom Pike Ext.No.
Contact Officer – Stephen Weaver Ext.No. 2332

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To report on the work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during the 2019/20 Municipal Year and to outline the Work Programme for the three Committees for 2020/21.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the work undertaken by Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during 2019/20 be noted.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 Overview and Scrutiny's role is to operate as an independent function of the Council's decision making process, by having overview of the Council's decision making, holding the Executive to account, having the power to "call in" decisions for reconsideration and undertake internal and external scrutiny reviews.
- 3.2 The Council's Constitution requires that there be an annual report to Council on the scrutiny activity over the past Municipal Year (see Article 6.3 of the Constitution).
- 3.3 This report is a retrospective look at the scrutiny review work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the two Select Committees during the 2019-20 Municipal Year.
- 3.4 In accordance with the Constitution the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was also charged with scrutinising the Executive's proposals on Budget & Policy Framework items that go before Council for decision. In addition the Committees considered updates on Scrutiny studies that had been undertaken previously, examining the progress of recommendations and where appropriate following up on matters raised.
- 3.5 The Committees have also worked with their relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on a number of separate policy development meetings developing

policies and considering reports before their submission to the Executive. This report, however, focuses on the Committees' Scrutiny role.

4. SUMMARY OF SELECT COMMITTEE REVIEWS FOR 2019/2020

4.1 The amount of work that the two Select Committees undertook in 2019/20 was severely hampered by the addition of the General Election in December 2019 which meant valuable meeting time was lost to the pre-election period and then the early curtailment of the Municipal Year due to the Coronavirus, as well as the amount of time that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee took carrying out the review of the Council's scrutiny arrangements. This meant that the usual scheduling of monitoring and one off single meeting updates were not held as has been the case in previous years.

4.2 Each Select Committee review made formal recommendations to the relevant Executive Member, officers and external partners. The following is a summary of the outcomes of each scrutiny review.

4.2 Community Select Committee – Review of Sports & Leisure

4.2.1 In conducting this review the Community Select Committee met on 5 occasions and received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- Cllr Richard Henry, Executive Portfolio Holder for Executive Portfolio Holder(s) for Children, Young People and Leisure
- Rob Gregory, Assistant Director Communities & Neighbourhoods
- Geoff Caine, Culture Wellbeing & Leisure Services Manager
- Ryan Ansell, Sports & Leisure Development Officer
- External witness - John O'Callaghan (Herts Sports Partnership Board Member) – provide insight on the County context
- External witness – Louise Gallagher-Smith (Stevenage Sporting Futures)
- External witness – Allan Prescott – Stevenage Leisure Limited (SLL)
- External witness – Chair of Youth Council

4.2.2 Members undertook the following individual research for the review:

- Affordability and barriers – Cllrs C Parris and L Rossati
- Access – Cllrs T Callaghan and S Mead
- Local take up – Cllr S Mead
- Websites and online sports and leisure advertisements – Cllr J Mead
- Older Persons – Cllr M Notley

The review focused on the following issues:

- To check if the Council's website can be updated to include links to public and private providers of sports and leisure facilities and services
- To get a better understanding of booking arrangements for events at the Gordon Craig Theatre

- To determine the split of Stevenage versus non-Stevenage clientele at Stevenage sports and leisure facilities and events
- To assess the affordability of Stevenage sports and leisure facilities and events
- To make a comparison of Stevenage sports and leisure against offers in other similar-sized local authorities
- To ensure that event organisers use a diverse range of publicity methods including the traditional leaflets and posters and also social media platforms

Key findings of the review:

- The review surveyed users of older people's services, Members also canvassed views via a simple survey using their links to the community and the review also canvassed the Youth Council, which they took into account to direct the review
- Site visits to various SLL run and Council owned facilities were crucial to establishing what is currently working well and where there are opportunities for improvement and development in the future
- There needs to be accessibility of sports and leisure linked to health benefits – with recommendations around making more SLL run/Council owned services accessible to those on low incomes and in receipt of Universal Credit.
- Improved marketing of the council offer of sports and leisure opportunities via the website.
- Various infrastructure improvements could be made at Fairlands Valley Park, Sailing Centre, high ropes course, parking for the splash park, more 3G football pitches, extra basketball hoops and backboard stands, long term plan for a replacement running track at Ridlins athletic track.
- The SBC/SLL Innovation Group was doing well at identifying development opportunities to improve the service and make savings where possible but the review established a few more opportunities such as better liaison over cleaning at FVP and improved capture of SLL customer demographics via future payment and booking systems to inform and improve the service

4.2.3 In summary the review made specific recommendations around the following issues:

- Accessibility to sports & leisure opportunities linked to health benefits
- Using marketing opportunities including the Council's website
- Infrastructure improvements within the current offer to improve take up
- Improved liaison between SBC and SLL

4.2.4 The review will make 24 separate recommendations on the above themes. Because of the need for a limited number of formal Council Committees to meet virtually since the start of the lockdown to concentrate on responses to and then recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic, Regulations 2020, the Community Select Committee has not yet been able to meet virtually to agree the final report and recommendations. Once the report has been finalised and

agreed, the Executive Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Leisure, Cllr Richard Henry will provide a response to the review recommendations to the Community Select Committee, who will hold a virtual meeting to consider the Executive Portfolio's response.

4.3 Community Select Committee sitting as the Council Statutory Crime & Disorder Committee

4.3.1 The statutory requirement to hold an annual meeting of the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee was not fulfilled in 2019-20 due to cancellation of the scheduled meeting on 24 March 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The meeting has been routinely held in March each year as this is the most opportune time to hear about the performance of the Responsible Authority Group, SoSafe Community Safety Partnership against the Community Safety Action Plan for the current year and to look ahead at the emerging priorities for the forthcoming Municipal Year. A rescheduled meeting of the Crime & Disorder Committee will be held as soon as is feasibly possible. Members and officers have agreed that the position of the two select committees will be reviewed again in September to see if resources are available to support the Select Committees to meet and undertake their own work.

4.4 Public Health meeting with the HCC Director of Public Health

4.4.1 Members received a presentation in relation to the measures that HCC Public Health were taking in relation to the Coronavirus pandemic and answered Members questions regarding the pandemic. Due to Coronavirus the usual updates on the Healthy Stevenage Strategy 2018-2022 and the County wide and local focus for public health such as the progress dashboard for 2019/20 were deferred to be considered as early as is feasible in the 2020-21 Municipal Year. This is dependent on the availability of the HCC Director of Public Health and once the meeting arrangements have been established for the year.

4.5 Environment & Economy Select Committee

4.5.1 **Rail Station** – Although the Council does not have direct responsibility for rail, the Council has a responsibility to look after the welfare its residents including regular rail commuters and more casual rail users. It was agreed to hold a further follow up meeting with Govia Thameslink Railways and Network Rail in July 2019 following the meetings previously held in October 2018 and February 2019. Members were invited to (i) consider how the Spring 2019 timetable changes have bedded in; (ii) provide an update on the 5th Platform and Hertford loop temporary bus service and (iii) discuss the possible implications of moving of the rail signalling to York and spanning the wider works along the East Coast Main Line in support of the King's Cross remodelling project. It should be noted that there has continued to be a positive attitude of rail providers to keeping contact with the Committee.

4.5.2 Review of local Post Office services – The Committee conducted a review of local Post Office Services. This brought together local Post Office providers as well as post office users to discuss the current provision of Post Offices in Stevenage and consider their ongoing viability in collocated retail stores, and in particular focus on the loss of the Post Office from the Old Town High Street. The Committee met on two occasions 3 September and 20 November and interviewed the Director of North Thames & East Anglia National Federation of Sub Postmasters, a representative of Stevenage Old Town Business Partnership and the Manager of the Co-op at Symonds Green. Interested members of the public also attended the meeting.

4.5.3 Update on the review of Maintenance of Trees, Hedges and Shrub beds - Members considered an update on the previous scrutiny review of the Environment & Economy Select Committee into the Maintenance of Trees, Hedges and Shrub beds. In relation to shrub beds, officers advised that the Council was ahead of its planned schedule and a lot of improvements had been made to shrub beds across the Town. Members were still keen for the work on the promotion of gardening services to those residents unable to maintain their own gardens. Officers advised that this would be looked at as part of the Council's Commercial Strategy. Members were encouraged that the administration around licences to occupy had been made easier for residents to take up and that it was continuing to be amended and improved. Regarding the maintenance of trees it was noted that trees works are planned on a prioritised basis, given the Council's main duty was to carry out routine maintenance of the existing stock and to make safe the trees across the town, with more limited capacity for responses to individual and lower priority requests. Members were supportive that there would be an officer review of the existing Tree Policy in due course.

4.5.4 Review of Local Neighbourhood Centres – The Committee received an update on the review of local neighbourhood centres and some background information for the review as well as a revised scoping document when it met on 11 February to start the review. Following a series of officer and Member site visits to Oaks Cross, The Oval, Symonds Green, Bedwell and St Nicholas, the Committee met again on 10 March and discussed the findings from the site visits and formulated some early areas for action for the review to focus on these included: The majority of the neighbourhood centres visited lack any planting schemes, whether this be in raised planters or in ground level flower beds around the largely paved pedestrian areas, so Members will be recommending that some planting including small trees, shrubs and seasonal flowers and bulbs should be provided to help improve the amenity. There are specific neighbourhood centres actions that the review recorded, in general this covered issues such as replacement of missing trees in planting areas; clearing of fly-tipping; work on broken steps and retaining walls; deep cleaning of pedestrian and car parking areas; and painting of street furniture.

4.6 Overview & Scrutiny Committee

4.6.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 11 occasions to provide overview of the work of the Executive, specifically looking at all Key Decisions

made by the Executive and all Budget and Policy Framework items. In addition to these meetings the Committee also considered the following review:

4.6.2 Sitting as a Select Committee – The Overview and Scrutiny Committee sat as a Select Committee to undertake a review of the Council’s Scrutiny arrangements. The Committee met on 23 September and considered the scope for the review, received a presentation on the current arrangements and agreed a methodology for scoring local scrutiny arrangements via a self-evaluation framework, recommended by the CfPS. On 11 November 2019 the Committee considered the collated Member response to the self-evaluation scoring matrix and carried out interviews with fourth Managers and fifth tier officers. On 14 January the Committee considered draft recommendations for improvement following the feedback from the self-evaluation scoring mechanism framework, the results of a survey of the Hertfordshire Scrutiny Network and also notes from the CfPS Summary of the Statutory Guidance Symposium. The final report and recommendations will need to be brought back to Committee in the 2020-21 Municipal Year.

5.1 2020/2021 Scrutiny Work Programmes

5.1 Prior to the March 2020 suspension of Council meetings and the subsequent lockdown announced on 24 March 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the Environment and Economy Select Committee had met earlier on 10 March to agree items for its work programme as had the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 March 2020. However, it may be necessary to revisit the work programmes in the light of the Council Coronavirus recovery plan. The Community Select Committee was due to meet on 18 March 2020 to agree its work programme, but this meeting had to be cancelled and will now be held as soon as is practically possible in the 2020-21 Municipal Year.

5.2 Environment and Economy Select Committee:

The Environment & Economy Select Committee agreed to scrutinise the following issues:

- (i) Continuation of the review of Neighbourhood Centres;
- (ii) The economic and environmental impact of Covid-19 (Coronavirus) on the Town;
- (iii) Climate Change Strategy including individual issues such as recycling, grasslands, trees, transport and parks (it could be possible that this will be a dominant feature for at least two years).

As well as carrying out review work the Committee will also undertake pre-scrutiny Policy Development work in Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meetings as directed by SLT and the Executive Portfolio Holders.

5.3 Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme:

- 5.3.1 In addition to undertaking all scrutiny of Budget & Policy Framework items and decisions of the Executive, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has the capacity to undertake a “Select Committee” style meeting during the year if it so wishes. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has agreed to sit as a select Committee to consider the following items:

**Complete the Scrutiny of the Scrutiny function at SBC
Consider the impact of Covid-19 on the Councils services**

As well as carrying out review work the Committee will also undertake pre-scrutiny Policy Development work in Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meetings, as directed by SLT and the Executive Portfolio Holders.

- 5.4 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will review the Council’s Forward Plan of Key Decisions and also consider all ‘Call-in’ requests in accordance with the Council’s Constitution as well as considering any Councillors Call for Action in relation to matters relating to Resources and any Petition appeals, in accordance with the Councils Petition Scheme, regarding matters relating to Resources or of a Corporate or Council wide nature.

5.5 Scoping reviews

- 5.5.1 A schedule of meetings for the two Select Committees has been arranged for the 2020-21 Municipal Year. These meetings will incorporate the scoping of the review where Members will identify the areas they wish to cover during the review, who to interview, what evidence/background information is required and which Members will lead the questioning on a specific area, as well as undertaking site visits, where appropriate. Meetings will also be arranged to revisit previous reviews to monitor actions.

5.6 **Portfolio Holder Advisory Groups (Policy Development Meetings)**

- 5.6.1 Pre-scrutiny Policy Development meetings will continue to be undertaken as and when requested by Executive Portfolio Holders in consultation with Assistant Strategic Directors and will be referred to as Portfolio Holders Advisory Groups (PHAG). These meetings are chaired by the relevant Executive Portfolio Holder and the relevant O&S or Select Committee Members are invited to attend. Unlike regular Select Committee meetings PHAG’s are private meetings not open to the public.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Financial Implications

There is a budget of £1,500 to support study activities, site visits and specialist advice and training where necessary.

6.2 Legal Implications

Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government Statutory Guidance on Overview & Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities was published in May 2019 and Scrutiny Members should have regard to this when undertaking their Scrutiny review work and carrying out the function.

6.3 Equalities and Diversity Implications

Equalities and Diversity issues are considered at the scoping stage of each Scrutiny review with regards to questioning of witnesses and the collection of oral and written evidence. Also E&D issues are addressed in the final report for each review.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Local Government Act 2000.

Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government Statutory Guidance on Overview & Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities.

Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panels) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020.

Individual agendas and study material for each Scrutiny review undertaken by the Select Committees as described in this report are available for inspection.

The full Executive responses to the Scrutiny Reviews are available for inspection.