

Meeting: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Resources

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INTERIM REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES

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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To consider the progress report and draft recommendations of the Environment & Economy Select Committee Scrutiny review of the Neighbourhood Areas.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED

- 2.1 The issue of scrutinising Stevenage's Neighbourhood Centres was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item along with other scrutiny items when it met on 13 March 2019.

2.2 Scope and Focus of the review

- 2.2.1 The Committee met on 25 June 2019 and agreed a scope for the review of the Neighbourhood areas, which it agreed should consider the following areas:

- *Establish if the facilities meet the needs of local residents?*
- *Identify any deficiencies that can be addressed by the Asset Management Strategy and Locality reviews*
- *To provide a view from Scrutiny Members on the current provision of facilities at the Neighbourhood Centres – are they fit for purpose; in a good state of repair; is the offer of shops and facilities what local residents require; do the Community Associations/Centres offer relevant facilities and activities for local needs?*
- *To scrutinise the plans to modernise and improve the offer at the Neighbourhood Centres.*

2.3 Process of the review

2.3.1 The Committee has so far met formally on four occasions in 2019-20 to undertake the review. The Committee met as follows: On 25 June 2019 to agree the scope, on 10 March 2020 to consider the evidence from the series of site visits and virtual desk top evidence gathering then on 22 September 2020 to receive an update on all of the agreed actions from the meeting in March and again on 13 January 2021 to receive an update report and to agree the interim draft recommendations of the review as it is anticipated that the Committee will need to meet again to receive input from the Head of Estates, Mark Sullivan and the Assistant Director, Housing Development, Ash Ahmed on the regeneration plans for the local neighbourhood centres. Members of the Committee and the Scrutiny Officer as well as a group of officers from Estates, Engineers, Stevenage Direct Services, Neighbourhoods, and Community Development also met informally on three further occasions to carry out a site visit on 11, 14 and 24 of February 2020.

2.3.2 The Committee received written and oral evidence from the following people:

- *Co-operative Neighbourhood Manager, Jane Konopka*
- *Neighbourhood Warden, Sue Amey*
- *Neighbourhood Warden, Lisa Ellis-Timberly*
- *Neighbourhood Warden, Kirsten Rodia*
- *Community Development Officer, Oonagh Sherlock*
- *Project Manager Co-operative Neighbourhoods, Robert Read*
- *Senior Estates Surveyor, Paul Sirrell*
- *Engineering Services Manager, Rob Woodisse*
- *Engineering Services, Steve Bentley*
- *Investment Project Manager, Andy Sowden*
- *Stevenage Direct Services, Operations Manager, Lloyd Walker*
- *Stevenage Direct Services, Kris White*
- *Snr Community Safety & Partners Officer, Catherine Davies*

3 ITERIM REVIEW FINDINGS

3.1 Conclusions of the Environment & Economy Select Committee

3.1.1 Based on the input provided to Members and from site visits to a selection of the Neighbourhood Centres the Committee have made the following conclusions.

3.1.2 Location specific actions that were identified at site visits and town wide strategic recommendations

3.1.3 The review concluded that there should be some site specific actions which would be picked up in the review that are location specific, that could be implemented relatively quickly as “quick wins” based around the case study site visits and follow up meetings and that there should be recommendations which are more strategic and town wide based on lessons learned from the review that could be transferred to the wider Co-operative Neighbourhoods Teams.

3.2 Case Studies

3.2.1 The review focused on 5 of Neighbourhood Centres around Stevenage, these included Oaks Cross, Oval, Symonds Green, Bedwell and St Nicholas. As well as these 5 areas there was a virtual survey of a further 4 areas including the Old Town, Chells, Pin Green (Hampson Park) and The Hyde.

3.2.2 The following issues were common to each area in the case studies:

- Pedestrian areas devoid of features or planters
- Paintwork peeling and the general area looking bleak
- Missing trees/shrubs in planting areas
- Fly-tipping in garage areas
- Some evidence of vandalism and graffiti
- Partner authorities not maintaining infrastructure – HCC adopted highway
- Broken missing knee rails and shrubs, which are on a long term SBC Stevenage Direct Services replacement programme

3.2.3 Site specific actions

3.2.4 As a result of the site visits and the subsequent Committee meetings where the findings were discussed, a number of actions were undertaken to rectify faults that were identified at each site which were detailed in the agenda papers considered at the meetings held on 10 March and 22 September 2020. These actions included some of the following issues with current status in brackets:

Oaks Cross

- Trees had been removed from the planters and not replaced (now actioned);
- Fly tipping at the rear of the commercial premises was an issue (reported, cleared away and being monitored);
- Unightly barbed wire around a storage area (Being addressed as part of the CRM project updates);
- Possible evidence of drug use in the residential area (reported to Community Safety colleagues and being monitored) ;
- The area could be enhanced by changing colours of the concrete around the centre which was all one colour and very drab;
- Half-finished painting on the wall (now actioned and complete)

St Nicholas

;

- 2 concrete planters previously situated in the Town Centre had been purchased through a Member's LCB allocation which would be installed shortly(now complete);
- A new notice board would be put up in the centre (now actioned and complete);
- The redundant telephone box had now been removed (now complete);

- There was a dispute regarding the ownership and responsibility for the damaged wall and flagstones to the rear of the community centre which was currently being looked into (now repaired and complete);
- Officers agreed to check to see if the area was included on the replacement programme for rails and shrub beds (now complete – confirmed in plans for Shrub bed replacement programme);

The Oval

- The damaged steps were dangerous and could easily result in accidents and potential claims. There was still a dispute regarding ownership and responsibility for the repairs between SBC and HCC. Strategic Director (TP) agreed to take the matter up with the appropriate officers. Councillor Callaghan also advised she would speak to the HCC Portfolio Holder responsible for highways (still not complete but continue to pursue with HCC);
- New signage and a new mural would shortly be in place (now actioned and complete);
- The flower beds would be full of wild flowers in the summer. Cllr Callaghan as Chair of the Community Garden advised that a national charity offering crocus bulbs had been approached and that these would be planted late in the year for flowers to come up early next year.(now actioned)

Bedwell

- Paint was peeling on some of the railings and a deep clean was required (still not complete but continue to pursue with HCC);;
- Graffiti on walls including the mural which needed updating (under consideration to be addressed);

3.3 Fixing problems quickly

3.3.1 The review is recommending that the Council should adopt a policy similar to the crime reduction policy of the “broken window” towards maintenance of the neighbourhood centres, advocating that small repairs and maintenance matters. Small scale timely interventions using what means are at the Council’s disposal including its current regime of routine maintenance, cleansing, repair and using existing budgets or where appropriate the use of ward Members Local Community Budgets via funding bids as well as local County Councillors LCBs.

3.4 Holding partner authorities to account

3.4.1 The review is advocating that officers should approach partner authorities/bodies to hold them to account for failure to maintain infrastructure such as the case of the broken wall at St Nicholas between a private brewery and HCC as the land was adopted highway, which has now been resolved and at the Oval the broken steps and planter retaining wall at Jessops Close near the underpass leading to the shops, which is a matter

for HCC as adopted highway to resolve and is still outstanding, despite being approached on numerous occasions by both SBC officers and Members.

3.4.2 To be able to implement this type of approach there will need to be a link made between the Council's new Co-operative Neighbourhoods model and the partner body. This would be appropriate for substantial repairs that need partner attention and this would need to be incorporated into the Council's Community Plan. Senior officers would need to make sure that the most appropriate officer, via the C&N approach, is allocated to work with the partner body to help keep a focus on the repair until it is completed.

3.5 Whole Council and Co-operative approach to maintaining Neighbourhood Centres

3.5.1 Making sure that there is a whole Council approach to maintaining the neighbourhood centres – Is the Neighbourhood Co-operative approach likely to tackle this, it is perhaps too early in the process for the Co-operative Neighbourhoods to see if these mechanisms and approach are likely to address the sort of timely interventions that Members are advocating or whether the existing resources are adequate to tackle this, so may need to be revisited at a later date to test this? If it is deemed that this is not affective, is there another mechanism that needs to be in place to deliver this?

3.6 Working with "friends of groups"

3.6.1 Engaging with "friends of" groups and residents to tap into goodwill to help with projects and to provide volunteer time. An example of this was at Oaks Cross where there is a garden project to enhance the gardens that face the poorly maintained rear of the shops. Another example is the Waste Not Want Not gardening charity who use plants that are close to their shop "sale by date" and are working at St Nicholas with local Ward Councillors, who have supported this project with their Local Community Budgets and also working with volunteers re-establishing a Christmas Tree in the planter and helping plant new plants in the new noticeboard planters and establishing a new community orchard.

3.7 Co-operative Neighbourhood Management – a town wide model

3.7.1 In addition to the community based projects and the liaison between residents, officers and local ward Members through the Co-operative Neighbourhoods approach the Council is addressing the Neighbourhood Centres strategically through the Co-operative Neighbourhood Management (CNM) which has guided the Council's Estates programme of asset management. During the review Members were made aware of an asset management strategy that is working in neighbourhood centres to maintain the Council's buildings. The programme is a tangible demonstration of the Community, Members and officers working together to enhance and maintain public realm areas of the neighbourhood centres. However, during the review it was not always clear that Members were aware of the details of the scheme taking place at Oaks Cross, so there may be a case for further

communication with ward Members so that they are aware of such schemes and can tailor any projects or LCBs to complement these programmes.

3.8 CNM a work in progress

3.8.1 Although the scrutiny review of the Neighbourhood Centres is not a review of the Co-operative Neighbourhood Management programme, the CNM is clearly a significant issue as it is the approach adopted by the Council following the ward walks with Members and the Council's Strategic Leadership Team back in 2015. Clearly a lot of progress has been made via this approach but based on the scrutiny review site visits there remains a good deal of work still to be done to meet the aspirations of the CNM programme, and perhaps it is likely to need to continue as there will always be a need for the community, members and officers to work together to find out what the needs and priorities of each area are and to keep maintaining and improving each Neighbourhood centre.

3.8.2 In addition, part of the challenge for officers will be to make sure that there is both a clearer explanation of short-term enhancements, repairs and improvements that could be made in each Neighbourhood Centre; and then a wider exploration of longer-term enhancement ideas for each Neighbourhood Centre and there needs to be a parallel focus on both.

3.9 A further town wide strategic recommendation - regeneration financed by mixed residential development centre by centre where plans are deliverable

3.9.1 At the time of writing the report the Committee were due to meet up with the Head of Estates, Mark Sullivan and the Assistant Director Housing Development, Ash Ahmed to discuss the plans to tackle the next phase of the regeneration of some of the Neighbourhood Centres. Broadly the Committee is aware that the approach of regenerating the Neighbourhood Centres would only be achieved over a very long timescale given the pressures that the Council's capital budgets are under and schemes would only happen on a case by case basis.

3.9.2 It is understood that this is a long term aspiration of the Council and will take many years to deliver and is largely predicated on the opportunity to redevelop and regenerate Neighbourhood Centres by the use of planning gain finances when and where available, the use of right to buy capital receipts for replacement social housing and in some cases partnership with private developers to rebuild residential and commercial premises to provide more accommodation both private and social which in turn provides the finances to be able to regenerate the Neighbourhood Centres public areas.

3.9.3 When Members have met with the Head of Estates and the Assistant Director Finance they will then be able to include a relevant recommendation in regard of these plans.

3.10 Establishing if the desired focus of the review had been met

- 3.10.1 The review is confident that the mechanism in use with Co-operative Neighbourhood Management that the needs and wishes of local resident are being considered as evidenced in the way residents are consulted and brought into decision making over how improvements are made to an area and the way residents are involved in community projects.
- 3.10.2 The review was unable to identify if there were any major deficiencies that the Asset Management Strategy and Locality reviews had identified and that needed to be addressed.
- 3.10.3 The review established a view from Scrutiny Members on the current provision of facilities at the Neighbourhood Centres. Regarding the neighbourhood Centres that Members visited, Members were of the view that all of the areas had a good range of shops that offer convenience shopping that residents can walk to and also there is adequate free parking provided. In terms of the condition of the public realm these are in the main looking dated and shabby with peeling paint and missing furniture and plants, so work on this continues to be a priority but some of these features are not in the Council's control such as adopted highway land that is controlled by the County Council. The Community buildings vary in their age and the offer provided at each Centre. Some of the buildings have been refurbished in the last few years or are relatively new buildings, others are much older and as such require more maintenance or replacement.
- 3.10.4 In terms of the offer provided by Community Associations Centres offer relevant facilities and activities for local needs. Members were very impressed with the offer made at the centres they visited, specifically at Symonds Green and the Oval but have stated that this was not a major strand of the review as other Member and officer reviews have provided recommendations and in-depth reviews of the offer at the Community Associations.

3.11 Equalities & Diversity issues

- 3.11.1 The main equalities and diversity consideration of the review was around the accessibility of the offer at each neighbourhood centre. All provided adequate disabled parking in the adjacent car parks. The shops are all at street level so offer wheelchair access. However, the door width is not wide enough for all wheelchairs to access and would likely only be addressed across the piece with major redevelopment of the units.
- 3.11.2 Some of the Community buildings have been retrofitted with disabled access internally such as the Community Centre at the Oval to reach the meeting rooms in the first floor and the external fire exit by means of a heavy ramp that requires placing by able bodied persons. Although the external ramp meets Disability Discrimination Act requirements it is not seen as ideal and would need to be addressed in any major reconfiguration of this building.

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 Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Working Cllr Rob Broom and Environment and Regeneration Cllr John Gardner and the Assistant Director Stevenage Direct Services, Steve Dupoy and Strategic Director, Tom Pike and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report.
- 4.2 RECOMMENDATION 1 - Small scale timely interventions using what means are at the Council's disposal including its current regime of routine maintenance, cleansing, repair and using existing budgets or where appropriate the use of ward Members Local Community Budgets via funding bids as well as local County Councillors LCBs.
- 4.2.1 Reason – This is utilising all of the routine maintenance and repair programmes by officers and Members ward interest in the area to keep on top of the Neighbourhood Centres.
- 4.3 RECOMMENDATION 2 - Approach partner authorities/partner bodies to hold them to account for failure to maintain infrastructure.
- 4.3.1 Reason – Results may be inconsistent but it is worth drawing such matters to the attention of partner organisations and the upper tier authority to, at the least, draw attention to the deficiencies and it is hoped spur them into action or provide a time line for future action or provide a reason why they can't resolve the issue.
- 4.4 RECOMMENDATION 3 - That the Co-operative Neighbourhood Management approach to addressing local issues in the Neighbourhood Centres be monitored by the Executive Member with Portfolio responsibility for Neighbourhoods and Co-Operative Working to see if this is working (perhaps with a short report back in a year to monitor progress and see if the interventions are timely and the resources are adequate to remedy problems that are identified at the Neighbourhood Centres).
- 4.4.1 Reason – This is to give time for the Co-operative Neighbourhood Management approach to become fully established before making a judgement as to whether it can address the issues at the Neighbourhood Centres.
- 4.5 RECOMMENDATION 4 - That each Neighbourhood Centre area establishes a friends group to help with projects and community gardens at each Centre.
- 4.5.1. Reason – This is an ambitious target but “friends of” groups give an invaluable focus to an area and these groups add a further layer of ears and eyes on an area.

4.6 RECOMMENDATION 5 - That when Members have met with the Head of Estates and the Assistant Director Housing Development they will then be able to include a relevant recommendation in regard of these plans.

4.6.1 Reason – to be completed once this session with the Head of Estates and the AD Housing Development has been held.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications in 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 3.11.1 & 3.11.2. There are no further direct equalities implications for this report.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Minutes of the Committee meetings held on 13 March 2019, 25 June 2019, 10 March 2020 and 22 September 2020 are available for inspection, as well as notes from the three informal site visits on 11, 14 & 24 February 2020.

APPENDICES Appendix A – Scrutiny Scoping Document
 Appendix B – Site Visits log
 Appendix C – Photos of the Site Visits