

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 21 October 2021

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Michael Downing (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), Doug Bainbridge, Stephen Booth, Adrian Brown, Wendy Kerby, Maureen McKay, Claire Parris and Simon Speller.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.30pm

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

Apologies for Absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Julie Ashley-Wren and Sarah Mead.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 4 OCTOBER 2021**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 4 October 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

An update was given by the Assistant Director Planning and Regulation in relation to waste from schools that there were no requirements from the County Council for schools to recycle it was a local choice.

3 **INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR ENVIRONMENT & REGENERATION - CLIMATE EMERGENCY REVIEW**

The Chair welcomed Councillor John Gardner, Environment Portfolio Holder to the meeting. Councillor Gardner had been invited to the meeting to be interviewed by Members of the Committee about the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan in relation to the relevant business units in his Portfolio area.

Councillor Gardner reiterated the Council's aim to be carbon neutral by 2030 and that it was the responsibility of the whole Council not just the Executive and the Portfolio Holders to achieve this aim. The build up to COP26, in 2 weeks time had shown that the public interest both nationally and internationally in this issue had never been higher.

The Committee was advised that the progress of the Action Plan would be reported through Executive to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and would focus on the following areas:

- Biodiversity;

- Trees;
- Waste vehicles;
- Recycling;
- Planning Policy; and
- Regeneration.

The Assistant Director Planning and Regulation gave an update on the above areas:

- **Biodiversity** – The total area of all green habitats within the Borough was 612.6 ha and there were 37 local wildlife sites; Stevenage was the only district in Hertfordshire with its own Biodiversity Action Plan; four new community orchards had been delivered since 2020 with more planned and there was positive community engagement and delivery through the Green Space Volunteers. It was noted that there were challenges with regard to Biodiversity, including no direct resource to deliver the ambitions and also around explaining to the public why actions were being taken such as the non-grass cutting of some areas to encourage biodiversity and wilding needed to be explained.
- **Trees** – Tree canopy cover in Stevenage including woodlands in 2016 was 17%; however, even when planting a new tree to compensate for the felling of an older one, a significant loss would be incurred for new trees to be established and gain vibrancy and strength would take time. Members noted the environmental, health, social and economic benefits of trees. Stevenage needs to gain a further 2% to meet the national target of 19% tree canopy.
- **Waste vehicles and recycling** - It was noted that the cost of replacing waste vehicles with electric was more than double the original cost. It was agreed that this was not economically viable currently but that it would be considered at the next large scale replacement of vehicles in 2025/26. It was noted that the Government Resources and Waste Strategy was expected in January 2022 and would change the collection methods and the way materials were recycled in the Town to increase the recycling rate. Currently, each household in Stevenage is sending 1/3 of its food shopping straight into the bin as waste, so food waste is an area that can be improved upon.
- **Planning** – climate change to be a planning consideration for all major applications. It was agreed that in acting in its full remit, the Planning and Development Committee could exert real influence in this area;
- **Regeneration** - Members were pleased to note that the SG1 Development although not carbon neutral, was significantly carbon reduced.

The Committee was advised that a new Communications Officer had been appointed at the Council to deal primarily with climate change. This would help to resolve public perception of how green the Town was.

It was agreed that the key to achieving the 2030 aim was through behavioural change and not necessarily additional measures.

In response to a question about how the Council would know if carbon neutral status had been achieved, Officers advised that high level measurement is a challenge and this was still being worked on, although key aspects for the Council to focus on had been identified through the Action Plan to help estimate the impacts.

In relation to recycling, a Member suggested that penalties for those failing to recycle should be considered although it was agreed that recycling had become less important than production in the first instance, the long term focus should therefore be on 'use less' although recycling the waste that is produced remains important. In terms of a deterrent and as a measure for behavioural change it was suggested that focusing on a 'carrot' of rewards for non-contaminated recycling may be more effective than the 'stick' of fines for non-recycling which could in turn lead to more fly-tipping. It was also noted that more products could be recycled than people were aware of.

In response to a Member's suggestion about the collection of polythene plastic waste, which could be held for a number of weeks and then collected in bulk from households by recycling vehicles the Assistant Director, Planning and Regulation agreed to take this away and discuss it with the Assistant Director for Stevenage Direct Services (SDS).

Members suggested that as a minimum a possible recommendation could be that when considering the budget the Executive considers in its discussions when making their annual budget savings that they do not cut any service area that directly links to climate change measures or mitigations.

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration stated that for local authorities to make a real impact in this area it would require large funding commitments from central government to make it happen. He remained optimistic that the public mood may significantly change and push central government to become more ambitious in its delivery to meet net zero by 2050.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for the Environment for his contribution to the meeting.

4 **UPDATED SCOPING DOCUMENT - CLIMATE EMERGENCY SCRUTINY REVIEW**

The Scrutiny Officer presented an updated scoping document detailing the additions and amendments that were suggested at and following the meeting on of this committee on 4 October 2021.

It was agreed that the Chair, Vice-Chair and Scrutiny Officer meet to prioritise the work for the review including inviting expert witnesses. It was also noted that a number of Councillors on the Committee were also Members on the Planning and Development Committee and as both Committees were looking at the subject their work could potentially be combined.

It was **RESOLVED** that the updated scoping document be agreed.

5 **DRAFT REPORT & RECOMMENDATION OF THE REVIEW INTO THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LOCAL ECONOMY AND THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE**

The Scrutiny officer submitted a report outlining the recommendations of the Committee which looked at the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the

local economy of Stevenage and on the Council's response.

The Committee had met on a number of occasions during 2021 and had interviewed many external witnesses as well as the Leader of the Council and the Portfolio Holders for Economy, Enterprise and Transport and Children, Young People, Leisure and Culture.

The Review focussed on the impact on:

- Young People;
- Self-employed;
- Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (under 250 employees);
- Large Companies (over 250 employees);
- Various protected characteristic groups including women, BAME, Disability Groups and low income;
- Private investment (planning and development activity) and
- Town Investment Plan.

A number of recommendations had been made as part of the Review. After discussion, members agreed that there could be merit in separating the recommendations out into theme areas as well as by short/medium/long term actions.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the Scrutiny Officer be requested to produce a revised set of recommendations based on the suggestion above and circulate to all Members of the Committee for their comments.
2. That a revised set of recommendations to be produced following consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee.

6 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

7 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

8 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR