

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 2 February 2022

Time: 2.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sharon Taylor OBE CC (Chair), Lloyd Briscoe (Part II only), John Gardner, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell and Jeannette Thomas.

Start / End Start Time: 2.00pm
Time: End Time: 3.49pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs Joan Lloyd (Vice-Chair), Rob Broom, Phil Bibby CC (observer) and Robin Parker CC (observer).

There were no declarations of interest.

2 TOWNS FUND BUSINESS CASE - NEW TOWNS HERITAGE CENTRE

The Executive considered a report seeking approval of the Towns Fund Business Case in respect of the New Towns Heritage Centre Project.

Prior to the consideration of this item, the Chair welcomed Mr Adrian Hawkins OBE (Chair of the Stevenage Development Board) to the meeting and invited him to address the Executive.

Mr Hawkins stated that a vast amount of work had gone into preparing the Stevenage Town Deal bid and, once successful, the Business Cases for the various projects. The Development Board had been involved throughout this process, and had wholeheartedly supported the two projects now before the Executive. Both facilities would be provided for the use and enjoyment of residents in the town and beyond. He thanked the SBC Officers, particularly the Regeneration Team, for their support in preparing the Business Cases for the Town Deal projects, some of which were complex.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that the New Towns Heritage Centre project involved the provision of an exciting new heritage, museum and cultural offer in the heart of the town centre, thereby replacing the existing Stevenage Museum and exploring opportunities to celebrate the unique history of New Towns like Stevenage.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration explained that the Business Case had explored an opportunity to deliver the project as part of the proposed public services hub in the Town Square, which would ensure better value for money

and create opportunities for an integrated community and cultural offer across the whole of the ground floor, spilling out into the new Garden Square. Strong stakeholder engagement had been carried out, with substantial support from the Community Select Committee and a range of local and national stakeholders.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture stated that he had been involved in the Leisure and Culture Sub-Group of the Stevenage Development Board which had inputted into the content of the Business Plan, and he thanked Martha Lytton-Cobbold (Knebworth House and “Visit Hertfordshire”) who had chaired this Sub-Group.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture explained that the Heritage Centre was a key commitment outlined in the Council’s Cultural Strategy. The “museum without walls” concept had been advocated by the Community Select Committee as part of their research into the need for a dynamic future museum offer. He welcomed the opportunity to raise the national significance of the heritage offer as a core part of the national New Towns movement, and looked forward to further discussions with the Arts Council, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England and the 21st Century Society over the coming months in order to explore match funding opportunities.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that the project was crucial towards delivering a thriving and vibrant town centre. The project was at an early stage, but he felt that the work that had gone into the Business Case was very robust, with a real focus on engagement. He referred to the three Heads of Terms conditions set out in the Business Case. At this stage of the project the Council had done all it could to meet these conditions, but there would be a continuing need to demonstrate to the Government that the conditions were being met as the project progressed.

The Assistant Director (Communities & Neighbourhoods) commented that the Museum Team was starting work on the museum programme going forward, including the “museum without walls” concept of using outdoor spaces, community centres and other community venues to share the heritage story. He reported that the Museum staff had been fully engaged in the business planning process.

The Strategic Director (CF) explained that the financial implications set out in the report were based on benchmark costs for the overall Public Sector hub building. The estimated cost of £2.9M for the Heritage Centre element would comprise £2M from the Towns Fund, with the remaining £900,000 requiring match funding. The match funding element was contained within the Council’s emerging Public Sector hub strategy. The mitigation in the report stated that there needed to be a fully costed business plan for the Public Sector hub building before there would be any expenditure of Towns Fund monies.

Upon the Chair’s invitation to speak specifically on the Heritage Centre project, Adrian Hawkins stated that it was a crucial element of delivery for the Stevenage Development Board that the Public Sector hub was brought into existence and that the Heritage Centre was placed within it. The likely benefits of the Heritage Centre to local people was exactly the type of project which was advocated by the Towns Fund programme.

The Executive supported the proposed Business Case. The following comments were made by Members:

- the existing Museum was not the most accessible of buildings and the new Heritage Centre would be a significant improvement, both in terms of its modern facilities; its co-location with the library; and in view of its town centre location as part of the Civic Hub building;
- there would be a need to involve and include the various and diverse communities in the town in the exhibition content of the Heritage Centre;
- the modern Civic Hub facility would be designed with a low or zero carbon footprint, in contrast to the various public buildings it would be replacing throughout the town; and
- the Heritage Centre should contain information regarding the industrial and social history of Stevenage, including historical information regarding the past and current businesses operating in the town.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the endorsement of the project from the Stevenage Development Board be noted.
2. That the business case for the New Towns Heritage Centre project be approved, and that authority be delegated to the Strategic Director (TP) to submit the project summary to the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing Towns Fund team on behalf of the Council (acting as Accountable Body).
3. That further engagement, building on the work of the Community Select Committee, stakeholder workshops and roundtable discussions, as set out in Paragraph 4.1.2 of the report, be endorsed, to support the development of the project.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

3 TOWNS FUND BUSINESS CASE - STEVENAGE SPORT AND LEISURE HUB

The Executive considered a report seeking approval of the Towns Fund Business Case in respect of the Stevenage Sport and Leisure Hub Project.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that the Sports and Leisure hub project would provide a new high-quality facility on the site of the existing swimming pool, comprising improved integration between sport, leisure, wellbeing, the healthy hub, spa services and the youth services currently located at Bowes Lyon House.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration commented that the project was a key component of the regeneration strategy for the town. It would provide a focal point to attract visitors as part of the town's diversification towards leisure,

culture and experience attractions, in line with the Grimsey review, as well as unlocking future regeneration opportunities in the Station Gateway, by integrating the existing leisure centre facilities into the new site.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration assured the meeting that there would continue to be a Gordon Craig Theatre in Stevenage throughout the delivery of the Transforming Our Town Programme and beyond.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration stated that the Business Case had a robust feasibility, cost plan and business model to support it, and the project formed an important part of the Council's 'offer' to attract the best operators for its new leisure contract procurement.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture advised that the Council had been considering the case for a new modern sports and leisure centre for a number of years, and hence he was delighted with the bold proposals for such a facility set out in the Business Case. The proposal was a key component of the Council's Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the aim to reduce the health inequalities experienced by a number of Stevenage residents. He welcomed the consultation and engagement work that had taken place, taking on board the views of 1,000+ residents and a multitude of sports clubs, partner agencies and community organisations.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture commented that they Council wished to make the Sport and Leisure Centre a "destination" facility and he welcomed the ambition contained in the Business Case. He hoped, in relation to Bowes Lyon House, that Hertfordshire County Council would continue to engage with SBC to develop the best offer for the town, the county and beyond.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that the project was at an early stage, but proposed a consolidation of three existing buildings onto one site in order to develop a state of the art Sport and Leisure hub, which would include swimming pool, gymnasium and flexible sports facilities, to be located on the site of the existing swimming pool and Bowes Lyon House on St. George's Way.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) explained that a robust feasibility and cost plan had been developed for the scheme, which provided a strong platform in the transition towards project delivery. Earlier work had been refreshed and updated following changes in the construction industry due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The scale of funding for the project presented a number of risks and challenges, but there was great enthusiasm amongst the Teams involved in the scheme to embrace and overcome these challenges.

The Assistant Director (Communities & Neighbourhoods) confirmed that his Team had been working closely with the Stevenage sports and leisure community to start shaping the ambition, including at a Sports Summit held in October 2021. The Team was using the Sport England framework to ensure that the future offer not only delivered a modern sports and leisure facility, but also tackled health inequality issues.

The Strategic Director (CF) stated that, of the various Town Deal projects, this project contained the largest Towns Fund financial contribution (£10M), but also required the largest financial contribution (£34M) from SBC. A funding strategy would need to be devised to enable the Council to meet that contribution, and she would bring forward this strategy for Members' consideration during the 2022/23 financial year.

The Strategic Director (CF) advised that the plethora of Towns Fund projects came with a cumulative financial risk for the Council, as set out in the report, although a series of mitigation measures were in place. A fully costed business plan would be required before any expenditure of Towns Fund monies.

The Chair invited Mr Adrian Hawkins OBE (Chair of Stevenage Development Board) to comment on this Business Case. Mr Hawkins felt that the sports and leisure facilities offered by the town to be central to bringing people together, both for their enjoyment and improvement of their lifestyle. He recognised that the proposed new Sport and Leisure Centre was a very ambitious project, but acknowledged that it was an important element of the Council's ambitious regeneration programme for the town.

Mr Hawkins took the opportunity to thank Martha Lytton Cobbold for her input into the Business Case and in championing cultural, sports and leisure improvements to the town. He accepted that the cost of providing a new facility would be significant, but believed that it would be a positive addition to the town, leading to increased footfall which would in turn benefit the struggling town centre retail sector.

The Executive supported the proposed Business Case. The following comments were made by Members:

- in response to a question about mitigation against possible cost increases due to inflation, the Strategic Director (CF) advised that such mitigation could either require the use of additional funding and/or value-engineering the project to meet the allocated budget;
- in order to attract a higher and broader level of participation, it was important that the features of the new Sport and Leisure hub facility were more extensive and up to date than those within the existing leisure facilities;
- the project would provide opportunities for individuals wishing to pursue a career in the leisure industry, as well as providing high quality facilities for those participating (at all levels) in a wide variety of sporting and leisure pursuits.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the endorsement of the project from the Stevenage Development Board be noted.
2. That the business case for the Sport and Leisure Hub project be approved, and that authority be delegated to the Strategic Director (TP) to submit the project summary to the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing Towns Fund team on behalf of the Council (acting as Accountable Body).

3. That the development of a detailed project delivery plan, including detailed funding plan and continued engagement with key stakeholders, be endorsed.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

4 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

Levelling Up White Paper

The Chair advised that this White Paper had just been published. In respect of its content, she made an initial holding statement.

The Chair stated that, whilst she welcomed the intent in the White Paper to level up areas of the country that had been left behind, and that there may be opportunities for Stevenage going forward, she had a number of concerns as to how levelling up was to be funded. In particular whether the funding would be for the long term and would genuinely address issues across the UK and not be over-focused on the north-east and north-west.

The Chair felt that it was disappointing that the proposal of the Hertfordshire Growth Board submitted in the autumn of 2021 had not been accepted as a “pathfinder” project at this stage of the levelling up process. This was particularly so, as all 11 Hertfordshire local authorities, together with the Local Enterprise Partnership and Integrated Care Service were already working constructively in a statutory committee with a clear vision for the future of Hertfordshire.

The Chair recognised that there were significant economic, health, skills and housing inequalities in Hertfordshire, which were trying to be addressed through community wealth building. However, a long term strategy was needed, with ongoing funding support from the Government, to deliver for deprived communities, including some in Stevenage.

The Chair considered that, whilst levelling up could clearly benefit Stevenage in helping to drive forward the skills agenda, especially in the science and technology sector, an opportunity for a real step towards genuine transformational devolution had been missed.

The Chair was of the view that, without a significant funding package from the Government Treasury, and a new constitutional settlement to unshackle local government from Westminster, this White Paper would not achieve the full potential of localism. She felt that what was needed at local level was a secure and sustainable package of funding and powers to enable local leaders to supercharge the economy for the benefit of residents and businesses. Powers and funding would enable investment in transport infrastructure, skills development, economic growth and secure affordable housing, as well as the health inequalities in deprived communities.

The Chair welcomed the devolution of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, but was concerned that it was to be allocated on a formula system rather than through a

bidding system. She felt that the sum available should at least match the funding that was previously delivered through European Union schemes. The ability to direct funding to where it could be used most effectively should be in the hands of local leaders and not Whitehall.

The Chair commented that real devolution of the funding would see each area allocated the resources it needed to make local projects happen. It was also the case that much of the funding had already been announced by the Government. She regretted that the White Paper had no focus on the Climate Change and digital capability agendas of local authorities.

5 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That under Section 100A 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 the reasons for the following reports being in Part II were accepted, and that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

6 LEISURE MANAGEMENT CONTRACT - PROCUREMENT STRATEGY

The Executive considered a Part II report in respect of a proposed Procurement Strategy with regard to the Leisure Management Contract.

It was **RESOLVED** that the recommendations contained in the report be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR