

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Friday, 4 March 2022

Time: 2.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sharon Taylor OBE CC (Chair), Mrs Joan Lloyd (Vice-Chair), Lloyd Briscoe, John Gardner, Richard Henry and Jeannette Thomas.

Start / End Start Time: 2.00pm

Time: End Time: 3.06pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Rob Broom, Jackie Hollywell, Phil Bibby CC (observer) and Robin Parker CC (observer).

There were no declarations of interest.

The Chair referred to the situation in the Ukraine, and the recent invasion by Russian Military forces upon the orders of the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin. She stated that it was a great tragedy, and that the thoughts of Stevenage residents were with the people of the Ukraine. Their courage, resilience and determination was admirable, and it had been incredibly moving to watch the situation worsen in recent days. At 5pm this evening (4 March), an event was to be held in the Town Square to stand in solidarity with the people of the Ukraine. Members of the town's Ukrainian and Polish communities would be attending this event, and it was hoped that they would be joined by many Stevenage residents. The Chair invited Executive Members and officers to attend the event.

2 TOWNS FUND BUSINESS CASE - GARDEN SQUARE AND DIVERSIFICATION OF RETAIL SPACE

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 Hertfordshire had the slogan "county of opportunity", and he firmly believed that Stevenage had been the town of opportunity for him and his family. For him, opportunity represented the one aspect that life provided that could be delivered by careful management, vision and investment. With this in mind, he had been delighted to have been appointed as the Independent Chair of the Stevenage Development Board.

During his career with the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), Adrian

had witnessed much effort and time expended by LEP and SBC colleagues on the outline plan for Stevenage Town Centre regeneration, including the SG1 development and the proposals for the Towns Fund projects. He was proud that the Stevenage Development Board was entirely aligned in their support for all nine projects submitted to the Government under the Towns Fund bid, which had been successful in securing the joint highest national funding award of £37.5M. He paid tribute to the Members and officers of SBC for their work in supporting the Towns Fund projects.

The Executive considered a report seeking approval of the Towns Fund Business Case in respect of the Garden Square and Diversification of Retail Space Project.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that the Garden Square and Diversification of Retail Space project involved proposals to help bring forward a new high quality Garden Square in the heart of the town centre, to bring vibrancy and activity to the town, and to help improve some of the parts of the shopping areas in Stevenage. Overall, it brought in £3.75M of Towns Deal funding, building on work such as the improvements that the Council had made to the Town Square, and supporting major regeneration projects such as the SG1 scheme with Mace.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration explained that across the UK, many town centres faced stark challenges, with the popularity of online shopping having grown significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council had a bold and positive regeneration plan, to help Stevenage become Even Better, and create a place where people work, visit, shop, live, create and enjoy. The Business Case had two elements, which both focussed on the objective to support Stevenage Town Centre to adapt to changing retail habits. This project aimed to facilitate the diversification of the Town Centre, utilising principles set out in the Grimsey Review, and the Stevenage Central Framework, to use leisure, culture, experience, food and beverage, and an exciting events programme, to create a vibrant town centre.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration commented that the first element of the Business Case was to enable and enhance the development of Garden Square, the new high quality public space, which would be the foundation for the establishment of modern food and beverage spaces, placed firmly within the heart of the town centre, and support the transition towards this ahead of the full redevelopment coming forward. The Garden Square would be a pivotal location within the town centre which a high proportion of incoming residents, workers and visitors would see when they arrived and/or through which they were likely to pass. If this location was transformed to a high standard with a strong sense of place, it could help address the look and feel of the area which currently constrained investment and footfall and this scheme would help assure the success of the new housing and commercial developments currently planned or underway.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that the second element was to invigorate currently vacant spaces and poorer retail assets to become catalysts for innovative regeneration, as shown by schemes such as Co-Space. Collectively these will help create a diverse town centre economy, which utilised retail, leisure, culture and experience as part of a high-quality environment to

attract sufficient footfall to ensure that new and existing businesses could thrive, and provide the amenities that residents, businesses and visitors needed to make Stevenage a vibrant 21st Century town.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration concluded by stating that, since work started on the Business Case, Stevenage had been shortlisted as one of 68 towns to receive support from the High Streets Task Force. The town had been shortlisted following analysis into the regional indicators of deprivation, inequality and exposure to retail change following the effect of Covid-19 on town centres and high streets. This reinforced the need for these types of interventions to bring pace and momentum as the Council worked through its regeneration plans.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) thanked MACE for their support and ideas on the Business Case. The funding would allow the Council to deliver the benefits of the SG1 Scheme and the Garden Square project quicker by making some physical changes immediately and changing the way the space was used, as well as carrying out further enabling works to speed up the programme and reduce the level of risk.

Upon the Chair's invitation to speak specifically on the Garden Square and Diversification of Retail Space project, Adrian Hawkins stated that the Business Case supported the replacement of the town's vast 1950s Bus Station with an open public space, leading to the delivery of a new Garden square and diversified retail space, and recognising absolutely that the heart of a town lies in its people.

The following comments were made by Members and officers:

- the project would follow a two stage process, with Phase 1 comprising some good quality interim works once the new Bus Interchange was opened, with a more permanent solution (Phase 2) once the wider SG1 redevelopment scheme progressed. The site would be used for community and cultural events;
- consideration should be given to the retention and possible use of the existing bus shelters for pop-up arts and crafts displays;
- it was important that a strong message was given to the public about the phased nature of the project, emphasising the timescales involved;
- it was noted that the works to deliver the Phase 2 (permanent) element of the project were programmed for 2025, although efforts would be made to bring forward this date if possible; and
- Residents would be consulted and asked to provide their ideas on the future use of the space in the Summer of 2022.

The Chair advised that there would be a formal opening of the new Bus Interchange at 2.30pm on Thursday, 10 March 2022. The Interchange would not be open for buses immediately, as training and testing would be required, although it was hoped that it would open in the Spring.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the endorsement of the project from the Stevenage Development Board be noted.

2. That the business case for the Garden Square and Diversification of Retail 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 community engagement relating to the existing bus station space and Garden Square, which are within the remit of this programme, be endorsed.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

3 TOWNS FUND BUSINESS CASE - SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY CENTRE (SITEC)

The Executive considered a report seeking approval of the Towns Fund Business Case in respect of the Science, Innovation and Technology Centre (SITEC) Project.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that the SITEC project had been allocated £5M of Towns Deal funding. The overall award of £37.5M for Stevenage, via the Town Investment Fund, recognised that the need to raise skills levels and opportunities in Stevenage was a key priority. The Investment Plan that the Stevenage Development Board and Council had formulated had identified that although the town's population had higher than average Level 1 and 2 qualifications, it had significantly lower than average Level 4 & 5 qualifications.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration stated this had meant that people were leaving education at the earliest opportunity to access paid work, but not going on to develop the qualifications and skills needed to progress to jobs with a higher salary. This was evidenced by the significant disparity between the average salary of somebody working in Stevenage compared to somebody living in Stevenage. There was also a perception amongst some residents that the "STEM" employers in the town were not accessible to them. The primary purpose of the SITEC project was to provide access to high-quality facilities which bridged the gap to higher education and removed some of the barriers to traditional higher educational attendance, resulting in a better skilled workforce that provided local employers with the required local labour supply.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration commented that the project aimed to deliver a new learning facility in the centre of Stevenage, to address the skills deficits that underpinned the gap in employment and earnings between Stevenage's residents and the high-tech businesses developing in the town. This would be achieved in partnership with key stakeholder and businesses and industries in Stevenage. As the project was at an early stage, there were still different options in relation to where and how the facility would be delivered, and a Strategic Outline Case (high-level business case) had therefore been prepared.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration explained that there was a proven and growing demand for skilled technical workers for jobs within the

engineering, technology science and health industries. The SITEC would bridge the skills gap, train the workforce of the future and stimulate job creation by providing specialisms in a variety of sectors, all of which are critical to the Stevenage area and the wider Hertfordshire and UK economy, including Engineering, Life sciences, Biotechnology, Telehealth and Telecare, Digital and Computing Innovation and Advanced Construction Skills.

The Executive noted that the project would benefit from close working with the Hertfordshire LEP Skills Advisory Board, North Herts College, other Further education providers and key local businesses to help set out the level of demand for this project, and appraise the best land options to deliver it. As an earlier stage project, it would be reported back to the Stevenage Development Board and Executive in due course with the next stage of the detailed business case.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that, as this Business Case was at an earlier stage than others, it was a Strategic Outline Case which included a number of options as to how the SITEC would be delivered. There were also a number of processes for his Team to follow to develop further the governance arrangements for the project over the next 9 to 12 months.

The Chair invited Mr Adrian Hawkins OBE (Chair of Stevenage Development Board to comment on this Business Case. Mr Hawkins stated that this project would provide the means to deliver social mobility by creating a radical change in people's lives. He felt that the creation of local employment opportunities, supporting local businesses, and providing higher incomes for those that wished to aspire to a better way of life was levelling up in action.

Mr Hawkins added that the Borough had seen the development of advanced manufacturing, life sciences technology and pharmaceuticals with various employers already based in the town. More were expected to follow, and in the next 5 to 7 years it was forecast that several thousand new jobs could be created requiring Level 3 or above qualifications. The need was therefore clear for SITEC, which would be launched to provide a clear focus for the delivery of STEM skills at Level 3 or above. It was "real world" differences to people's lives such as SITEC which he and the Stevenage Development Board were most proud to be delivering as part of the regeneration of the town.

The following comments were made by Members:

- the scheme was welcomed, and it was important that businesses were able to steer the type of training courses that would be provided by the SITEC, in order that it was the most appropriate skills development for their needs; and
- it was pleasing to note that the Stakeholder Group for the project included North Herts College, the University of Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Hertfordshire County Council, Stevenage Borough Council, and business representatives. Crucially, the SITEC would provide an interface between Stevenage residents and the international businesses located in the town, which was considered to be vital for a diverse and integrated community.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the endorsement of the project from the Stevenage Development Board be noted.
2. That the business case for the Science, Innovation and Technology Centre (SITEC) 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 it be noted that the project is at an earlier stage compared to others in the programme and will require an updated business plan and full business case to be approved prior to drawdown of funding.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

4 TOWNS FUND BUSINESS CASE - CYCLING & PEDESTRIAN CONNECTIVITY (INCLUDING ARTS & HERITAGE TRAIL)

The Executive considered a report seeking approval of the Towns Fund Business Case in respect of the Cycling & Pedestrian Connectivity (including Arts & Heritage Trail) Project.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that the Cycling & Pedestrian Connectivity (including Arts & Heritage Trail) project secured £3.5M of Towns Deal funding towards sustainable transport and culture in Stevenage, helping encourage greater use of the town's extensive cycle ways and pedestrian routes.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration commented that Stevenage benefitted from 45km of dedicated cycle routes, a testament to the vision shown in the early days of the New Town development. This proud history was matched by the Council's ambition to be a true, Sustainable Travel Town. The Council had made a number of steps in this direction, by developing a clear Local Cycling and Walking Plan (called the LCWIP) to help make the case for investments to improve these routes, and bring green and healthy travel options to the fore.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration explained that the project had two core elements. The first was to deliver a heritage and arts trail, thereby creating a quality visitor attraction showcasing the incredible heritage assets and public art across the town, together with the installation of new art features to complete the trail. The second element was the delivery of enhanced modern pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, linking new developments in the town centre with key employment areas and routes across the Town and Borough. This aimed to increase accessibility and connectivity between places so that mobility was not a barrier to opportunity; improve levels of health and wellbeing; and improve the perception and experience of places across the town centre. In turn, these improvements would contribute towards the Council's climate change goals.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture stated that in recent years there had been an increase in the number of murals painted in the local cycle network underpasses, which had generated a significant amount of interest. There was a growth in interest amongst the creative community in Stevenage regarding street art, and so the proposed Arts and Heritage Trail would be the ideal vehicle to move this onto the next level.

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture reminded Members that Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) was responsible for maintenance of the Borough's 45km cycleway network, and he hoped that as this project came to fruition the County Council would recognise that broken linkages in the network needed to be fixed and re-instated, and that the existing network needed to be properly maintained.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that this was another infrastructure project, which was vital to connecting different parts of the town. The Business Case was originally earmarked for delivery later in the Town Investment Plan programme, but a balance had been struck between retaining some flexibility on the final interventions to be delivered to enable wider public engagement and co-design, and the identification and provision of some elements at an earlier stage as a series of "quick wins".

The Chair invited Mr Adrian Hawkins OBE (Chair of Stevenage Development Board to comment on this Business Case. Mr Hawkins stated that the 45km of cycleways in the Borough was a visionary investment by the architects of the New Town, and was now part of the town's heritage for all to enjoy. The Stevenage Development Board had felt that this was a good opportunity to encourage people to cycle and walk, particularly in the light of recent increases in the cost of energy and fuel.

The Executive acknowledged that, as well as cycling, pedestrians and runners also used the Borough's cycleways, in order to improve their health and wellbeing. It was further acknowledged that the proposed Arts & Heritage Trail would also help mental wellbeing, especially important following on from the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the endorsement of the project from the Stevenage Development Board be noted.
2. That the business case for the Cycling & Pedestrian Connectivity (including Arts & Heritage Trail) 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 engagement to date with cycling user groups, and the approach for further consultation and engagement for the next stage of the project development, be noted.

4. That it be noted that this business case is in outline, and that a further update with detailed cost plans and finalised project scope will be reported to Executive within the next 18 months.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

6 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Not required.

7 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR