

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 20 October 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice Chair), Julie Ashley-Wren, Stephen Booth, Adrian Brown, Jim Brown, Matt Creasey, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Claire Parris and Lorraine Rossati.

Start / End Start Time: 6pm
Time: End Time: 8pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence or declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 20 SEPTEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Environment and Economy Select Committee held on 20 September 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

The Chair welcomed the three SBC Executive Portfolio Holders for Deputy Leader, Culture, Leisure, Children and Young People, Cllr Richard Henry; Communities, Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Council, Cllr Sandra Barr and Community Safety, Equalities, Health and Older People, Cllr Jackie Hollywell.

Executive Portfolio Holder for Deputy Leader, Culture, Leisure, Children and Young People, Councillor Richard Henry

The Committee had received a written response from the Executive Portfolio Holder for Deputy Leader, Culture, Leisure, Children and Young People, Councillor Richard Henry, to questions that the Chair had set in advance of the interview session.

The Chair asked Cllr Henry to expand on the issues that had been provided in writing.

Councillor Richard Henry made the following comments:

- In time, there would be opportunities for low carbon buildings linked to the new leisure contract.

- Regarding the cost of the utility bills for the new leisure contract, there won't be a big saving in year 1, but there would be carbon saving in future years.
- The current buildings are not at all energy efficient. A balance needs to be struck between what to do with the existing buildings regarding their medium to long term use including and a cost benefit analysis of repurposing buildings or providing a new build, and the climate change considerations were part of the mix.
- In response to a question by the Chair regarding the food offer in the leisure facilities, Cllr Henry confirmed that they would be looking for a healthy range with consideration to lower carbon too, and will seek to negotiate this into new contracts.
- In response to a question by the Chair regarding making future Stevenage Day's a more environmentally friendly day, Cllr Henry stated that they would be including an eco-audit of Stevenage day next year and would promote other climate change initiatives there, including a Green zone in the future.
- In response to a question regarding providing water fountains and more shading in parks Cllr Henry agreed that these were the sort of issues that would need to be considered as part of the ongoing impact of climate change
- officers who had been focused on the leisure contract will shift their focus onto areas like events in the park which will support climate change themes, building on initiatives such as the Bike Hub in Fairlands Valley Park.

Executive Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Equalities, Health and Older People, Cllr Jackie Hollywell.

The Committee had received a written response from the Executive Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Equalities, Health and Older People, Cllr Jackie Hollywell, to questions that the Chair had set in advance of the interview session.

The Chair asked Cllr Hollywell to expand on the issues that had been provided in writing.

Councillor Jackie Hollywell made the following comments:

- Health inequalities had come to the fore during Covid and were now present in the cost-of-living crisis and climate change is an interlinked part of this. The Council is talking to people about these issues as they try to navigate the mental health challenges that it is bringing up.
- The Council is working in partnership with the County Council and with the voluntary sector regarding addressing public health issues as these link to climate change.
- Regarding equalities – Although people from a lower socio-economic group are not officially one of the 9 protected characteristic groups of the Equalities Act, the Council considers people in poverty as a vulnerable group and who are most affected by climate change.
- The NHS has particular challenges regarding climate change, such as patients not returning medical equipment such as walking frames and crutches because of infection control, which is very wasteful and bad for the environment, as is the huge quantities of single use PPE and other medical

- dressings.
- How different equalities groups are affected is an important issue and is something we need to really consider. In the future eco audits will be really important.
 - A Member suggested that there was not a great difference between younger and older people regarding the levels of engagement on climate change; they both had people engaged and cynical about the issues. By and large older people were more likely to reuse and recycle as this was often embedded in their thought processes.
 - The extreme heat and cold really affects older people, so the Council would need to look out for vulnerable residents in this regard.

Executive Portfolio Holder for Communities, Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Council, Cllr Sandra Barr

The Committee had received a written response from the Executive Portfolio Holder for Communities, Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Council, Cllr Sandra Barr, to questions that the Chair had set in advance of the interview session.

The Chair asked Cllr Barr to expand on the issues that had been provided in writing.

Councillor Sandra Barr made the following comments:

- Councillor Barr is working with the Portfolio Holders Richard Henry and Simon Speller on healthier living options. Councillor Barr said that she is hearing young families say they can't afford to be eco-friendly.
- There will be a £15,000 grant per cooperative neighbourhood area to encourage individuals or groups to do environmental projects. St Nicks Pick a Muslim Women's Group who are divided North & South across the town were providing food teach skills to local people to cook tasty and wholesome meals for very small amounts of money. This skill was needed as many young parents have not picked up these skills from food tech at school or from their families.
- Councillor Barr is working with Community Officers and talking to them about a scheme where the public can claim food at wholesale value. Areas in town need a cultural shift to see they can recycle and can take steps to be environmentally minded in their behaviours. Councillor Barr would be looking at what she can do to get the positive messages out to people.
- Regarding whether climate change has the priority it needs across Council, Councillor Barr stated that each Portfolio Holder is looking at it relevant to their remits, so working together is very important. Outlying areas of the Town could benefit from more satellite bike repairs. There may be economic choices e.g., eat or pay for bike repair, with decisions around the former.
- Councillor Barr affirmed that Cllr Speller had previously explained the concept of the "Dragons Den" style bids for small environmental projects. This provides small pots of money to help.

It was **RESOLVED** that the interviews with the three Executive Members were noted,

4 **TREE CANOPY COVER**

The Chair welcomed the Environmental Policy and Development Manager, Julia Hill and the Arboriculture and Conservation Manager, Cristian Pinta to the meeting. The Chair asked if the cost £250 for the planting of a sapling tree was accurate?

Cristian Pinta stated that now the costs were up to £350 a tree as prices have increased due to high inflation and the rise in demand for trees, as the interest in tree planting has gone up so have the costs gone up.

Julia Hill informed Members that all Schools in Stevenage had been offered the opportunity to plant trees. All tree planting required supervision and ongoing management so that trees have a chance to become established.

In response to a question the Chair had regarding requests for tree planting for memorials, Julia Hill said that the Council tries to facilitate this where it is appropriate to plant trees, but this would be helped in the long term with a tree and woodland strategy. It's important to plant the right trees in the right place. Tree planting will be easier to promote once we have a strategy.

The Chair asked officers what is the right type of tree? Cristian Pinta stated that the honest answer is that at this moment we don't know because of the impact climate change is having, we are planting trees now that may not survive longer term. Some experts are saying plant trees that are traditionally flourishing in the climate of the South of France. However, biodiversity impacts are complicated and it's important to have a diversity of species in the local tree stock. There are various diseases to contend with such as Ash dieback, with only 20% being resistant.

Julia Hill informed Members that HCC has launched a 4-year-tree planting initiative "Your Tree, Our Future" (information on this had been sent to all ward Councillors on 28 September 2022). Over the four years 100,000 trees will be made available to residents and community groups to plant on their own land. In 2022/23 the County Council has allocated all 10 districts with 1,000 trees for distribution with residents. HCC ran the application process and in Stevenage all 1,000 trees had been taken up quickly. Distribution of the trees to those successful residents, will be from Fairlands Valley Park in December. The trees will all be 2-3-foot tall whips and all will be native species.

Julia Hill said that when the public collect their tree they will be provided with instructions re how to plant and look after it. In these circumstances it is down to residents to take the care of the tree and it was hoped that as the residents had shown the interest to request the tree that they will look after it.

A Member asked what schools had been involved in the community woodland at Fairlands Valley Park? Julia Hill stated that a number of schools had expressed an interest, but it was not easy for all of them to get to FVP for a tree planting session. 8 schools have expressed an interest to date, 1 secondary school and the rest were

primary schools. There would be a further date in January for the community to come to and plant a tree.

A Member stated that trees that provide shade in parks and open spaces will be very important as a climate mitigation, and it was not just the number of trees that was important but how large each tree species was when mature that was important. Trees can have some unintended consequences; some had been planted in Broadhall Way and had been planted in between the streetlights and the cycleways, and the foliage obscured the lights. In the report a figure of 300,000 trees had been mentioned. This seems to be more theoretical rather than practical. Trees were important but were part of a wide package of measures to tackle climate change.

A Member asked if it possible to plant the wrong trees? Cristian Pinta agreed, for instances Poplar trees grow very large and are prone to drop limbs so can be dangerous in the wrong locations. Some tree species have thorns and some trees are very large so if they are planted in the wrong area they can cause problems to urban infrastructure.

Julia Hill stated that as part of planning gain from Section 106 and CIL, the Town was receiving some biodiversity net gain funding from larger development. In the future it may be a struggle to deliver all the gain on the Council's land, but officers would seek to ensure that it was delivered within Stevenage.

A Member asked if the Council was meeting its target of planting 250 trees a year? Cristian Pinta said that currently the Council was only planting around 160 trees a year. However, these were 2 to 3 metre trees not small whips, so there is a desire to plant at the rate of the target but, at the moment, the focus is on quality tree planting over quantity. Trees need nurturing or they will fail to establish and if not looked after they will die off.

A Member asked why trees had not been planted on the A1M next to a new development rather than the very tall sound barrier? Cristian Pinta stated this was a Planning matter, but trees are good and often used in a way to screen visually and for sound but to have the same effect as the sound barrier fence there would be a need for many layers to block sound and this may not have been possible at this location.

It was **RESOLVED** that the report on the Tree Canopy Cover was noted.

5 **FOCUS ON IMPROVED RECYCLING**

Colin Littlechild, Acting Assistant Operations Manager, Stevenage Direct Services introduced the report to Members. Colin said that Officers were looking at various measures to improve recycling rates in Stevenage. A major problem with moving forward on any new recycling options, including co-mingling of recycling, is that the Council is still waiting for the Government to finalise the Resources and Waste Strategy. The Council needs to understand the outcome to determine what requirements the Government will place on local authorities.

Whatever steps the Council takes to encourage recycling it should be viewed in the

'Waste Hierarchy' terms, with 'use less' and 'reuse' being the priorities above recycling.

Julia Hill stated that the Council promotes recycling in various ways such as at Stevenage Day and going into schools to promote it. As part of waste management, the environmental team are working with the communications team on a comms plan.

Flats and recycling

Julia Hill informed Members that recycling in flat blocks is a challenge for all local authorities. There would be a pilot in 6 areas of Stevenage during 2022/23. Residents in those flats are currently being consulted to find out why they don't currently recycle and/or how we can help them recycle more. The results of this consultation will inform how we deliver improvements for these sites, for some it might be signage needed and some targeted leaflets could be produced. Part of the approach will be to invite residents to be recycling champions. Officers would support them to take on this role.

Some Members stated that they did not accept that residents in flats should not be expected to recycle and suggested that there should be an expectation on all residents to recycle. Julia Hill agreed with this; there is an expectation that all residents should recycle, but there is also recognition that those living in flats might find it more difficult.

Separation or co-mingling of recycling

A Member suggested that the separation of waste was a barrier to recycling and queried whether Stevenage was the only council in Hertfordshire that requires residents to do this? The Members asked if there had been a financial comparison done to show what the cost is per head and whether there was a net cost benefit of our approach vs other authorities in the County's approach? It was stated by a Member that Basildon has one bag for all dry recycling and that they state that there are additional costs to separate it. Who is right and who is wrong? In response Officers said they would need to see the specific details of each offer side by side to be able to adequately comment on this.

A Member asked if there had been any specific engagement with Ward Councillors in the pilot flat block? Julia Hill said that officers hadn't engaged with the specific ward Councillors so far but was open to doing so as they could help get the message out to residents in the flats who are taking part in the survey. Members asked for ward by ward % please of the outcome of the survey and pilots. Officers agreed to provide this when it was available.

A Councillor suggested that they would support less bins and was concerned that the focus should be on using less and reusing above recycling which was no 3 in the Government's hierarchy for waste. The Member suggested that flats actually use less waste compared to large properties and households. If larger household, who generate more waste recycle more, they are still creating more waste. When the Herts Waste Partnership publish their figures, they should put the amount of waste

produced per district first as the top figure then followed by the percentage of that waste that is recycled in the area.

A Member asked about data on residents' re-use of items. Julia Hill stated that measuring reuse is very difficult as it isn't data that is readily available. The Council can measure recycling as it collects and weighs it. The Council will look to promote reuse as it's a positive aspect of the waste hierarchy.

A Member asked what type of flat blocks were included in the pilot and survey? Is there a height restriction for the flat blocks included in it? Is it SBC tenants only or will it include private dwellings or Housing Associations?

A Member said that fair comparisons from one district to another was difficult as socio economic factors also have a part to play. Unfortunately, recycling, and other climate change, and other environmental considerations become a less significant issue for people to focus on if they are preoccupied with concerns about rent and food costs in low wage high inflation economy.

It was **RESOLVED** that the report on improved recycling was noted.

6 UPDATED MAPPING EXERCISE DOCUMENT FOR THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY REVIEW

The Scrutiny Officer presented Members with an updated Mapping Exercise Document for the Climate Change Emergency Review.

The Chair reminded Members that there would be an informal meeting between Committee Members and representatives of the local Friends of the Earth organisation on Monday 24 October and the next committee meeting would focus on interviews with the Hertfordshire County Council Executive Portfolio Holder for the Environment and the Chair of the Hertfordshire Sustainability Partnership on 17 November.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Mapping Exercise Document be noted.

7 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

None.

8 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

9 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR