

## STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

### ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 15 December 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, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Claire Parris and Loraine Rossati.

**Start / End** Start Time: 6.00pm

**Time:** End Time: 7.18pm

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

There were no apologies for absence.

There were no declarations of interest.

#### 2 MINUTES - 17 NOVEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 17 November 2022 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

#### 3 DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENT - COST OF LIVING SCRUTINY REVIEW

A verbal presentation was given, which included:

- The draft scoping document should be considered for a scrutiny review of the cost-of-living crisis.
- There would be a focus on three elements of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis over three themed Committee meetings, these were:
  - Residents – exploring the impact on different demographics (January 2023).
  - Businesses – especially small to medium sized enterprises (SME's) highlighting energy crisis for businesses, material cost inflation, business rates (February 2023).
  - Council Services (March 2023).
- It was hoped by January that a range of people would be available to discuss their views.
- There had been discussion at a recent Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting about the effect on the Council, and this would be reviewed at the March 2023 Select Committee meeting.

The following points were made by a Member:

- The scoping document referenced SBC Lead contributors to the review, but some of the people mentioned were not SBC employees or Members, including the children centres that aren't run by SBC but were crucial.
- Vulnerable people were an important demographic group.
- Food banks weren't included on the report.

The Chair responded and agreed that children centres were crucial as they are not just for children but also had a wider social aspect. He also agreed that food banks were important, and the Council needed to concentrate on agencies that worked on cost-of-living issues. If it was necessary, this could be revisited later in the year.

A Member agreed that the work would provide a snapshot, but there was a need to act more quickly than in a space of a year. Obtaining figures for the number of those on benefits would be helpful.

The Chair commented that council tax is an indicator of hardship if people were struggling to pay. The Citizens Advice team would help the review as they would be able to share data that could be used as a comparable metric. The January Committee would be a session with 3 agencies in an hour and a half. It was important that the 3 agencies were afforded an appropriate amount of time to provide their views.

The following points were made by a Member:

- Critical areas need to be looked at first.
- Interest rates had gone up to 3.5%. There was concern about people paying rents and there was a shortage of rented properties in the town. There was a lot of pressure on home buyers and home renters.
- Talking to Human Resources would be useful but there was also a need to talk to unions and staff circles to pick up real experiences.
- A foodbank did not form part of the review, but there are other ground level organisations that could be involved in the review.

The Chair responded that there were other agencies out there, for example Spruce, the furniture recycling group who were doing excellent work in the community.

A Member commented that people with mortgages who had bought at the top of the market would likely have a fixed rate, so there was some stability.

A Member noted that schools would be a good place to look at as they tended to pick up on that demographic. People that worked in schools, such as teaching assistants, did not tend to qualify for universal credit but didn't earn enough to fully support themselves.

The Chair stated that these issues could be asked to the Citizens Advice team to get more information on. This review needed to focus on local issues. All Members had strong views on national topics, such as the welfare system, but the review should be focused on what was happening in Stevenage and what can be done locally.

A Member referred to the Equality Act and that different groups were being affected differently.

The Chair agreed that it was important to find out what was happening within the community. Further aspects like this could be reviewed later in the year.

A Member commented that summer 2023 would be an appropriate time to review the work on cost of living.

A Member commented that prices were not going down and wages weren't going up at the same rate of inflation. There would be a difference between earnings and outgoings for the foreseeable future. The Council needed to do winter planning for next winter in the summer of 2023, like colleagues in the Health service do.

#### 4 **DRAFT REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY**

A verbal presentation was given, which included:

- The draft report and recommendations should be considered of the Environment and Economy Select Committee's review of the Council's response to the climate emergency.
- The report was a comprehensive record of what the Committee had covered, including most recently the conversations with HCC and the Youth Council.
- The possibility of future opportunities to involve Rothampstead Research in Harpenden on food growth and agriculture.

A Member commented that there needed to be at least one item on climate change at each Select Committee meeting to track the review's progress.

A Member asked when the review would next be looked at in 2023. It should be mentioned in the report that the Climate Change Act was in 1998 and the Council's first strategy was in 2010. It was good that there was now some data on CO2 emissions being quoted, but the annual results should be tracked so that people in the future could see what had happened.

The Chair agreed that there should be metrics that the review could readily look at.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that many Members had been involved in the review but not the overall document. It was hoped that the final report would be agreed at the January 2023 Committee meeting. This would then be submitted to the relevant Portfolio Holders, including the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Climate Change and the new Leader for a response within the statutory 2-month period. In June/July 2023 the Committee could look at what progress had been made on the recommendations. The 2018 baseline figures would be good to have in a visual format.

The Lead Officer for Climate Change responded that the data was published by the UK Government data. This data goes back to 2005. In the last climate change report, there was a graph from 2005-2020 and there was also a graph for the

contribution from different sectors. Transport data related to all vehicles. Industry, domestic and private was mainly due to energy consumption. Future reports could have further information in the footnotes and labels to make it easier to read. The Chair agreed that this would be a good idea.

A Member commented that there were concerns about how much the Council was committed to the Climate Change emergency. COVID had been an emergency, but climate change seemed a bit theoretical to some people. Now people were taking it more seriously. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Climate Change had expressed views of it not being taken seriously enough, but things are now progressing. Another concern was public involvement. There was a group of people who had always been interested in the climate emergency, but there were others who were sceptical. It still wasn't something people saw as an emergency. The Chair agreed that this should be measured in some way.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that the annual report to the Executive gave progress compared to the baseline figures. A Member suggested that there should be a graph year to year to show this.

The Lead Officer for Climate Change responded that an online platform was currently being trialled to be constantly updated on climate change progress. It would be interactive and would hopefully be launched early next year. This would be available internally and externally.

A Member commented that the Council needed to make climate change real to people and show what progress had been made. There were different approaches to affect people's behaviour and these had to be realistic. Climate change sometimes disappeared from the public's consciousness and seemed quite theoretical.

A Member commented that climate change was essential to planning development. The Local Plan would be crucial to this. The Scrutiny Office stated that there was a paragraph in the report that dealt with the importance of the Local Plan.

The Chair agreed that climate change needed to be presented in a way that people felt they could engage with.

A Member agreed that engaging with people was important but commented that the Council had been talking to a relatively small amount of the population about this. From the views of a wider cross-section of the public, such as younger people, there was an impatience for action.

A Member raised points including:

- Litter picking and biodiversity was great and led to a better environment but it didn't lead to CO2 reduction or to reducing climate change.
- There was reference to future standards of housing, but future land use was missing from the paper. If the Council continued to approve planning applications – putting things in remote retail places and separating these from where people work and live, then this would be generating more transport

journeys and emissions.

The Chair mentioned that Stevenage was a quite compact urban area and shorter journeys were easier than in rural areas, but looking at planning use could be useful as there might be ways to make shorter journeys easier for people.

A Member commented that he did not agree with the Oxford approach of dividing the town up into '15-minute neighbourhoods'.

A Member commented that he failed to see the link between litter picking and biodiversity. Litter picking was more of a visual activity and was unsure how this affected biodiversity. He also mentioned that he understood that electric buses would contribute to 70% of the Council's aim to achieve net carbon zero by 2030.

A Member commented that the buses were not very reliable, which was probably why people use their cars more.

Another Member mentioned that there was a lack of bus drivers, and that more drivers were needed to deliver a proper service.

The Chair responded to the comment regarding biodiversity and stated that Stevenage was an exemplar for biodiversity and that biodiversity does matter and hoped that other Councils saw the work that had been done. Without it the Council would be behind on climate change.

A Member commented that the electric buses may contribute 70% carbon reduction, but did not contribute to 70% of our traffic. When it came to traffic and transportation, there needed to be dialogue with the County Council, as a lot of issues were related to school journeys and there needed to be a focus on children walking or cycling to school.

A Member commented that the review document would evolve as more was learnt.

A Member made some comments which included:

- There was concern around the use of words in the report and the missed opportunities if the Council was not proactive. The report was passive in the way it had been presented.
- Engagement and consultation were not necessarily the best way forward and the Council should use co-production with anyone who was interested in solving climate change problems to design and deliver solutions. The power of the community and voluntary sectors needed to be harnessed to deliver solutions together.
- The co-production approach could be used to help people reduce energy costs. By helping people to reduce energy costs this should reflect on changing behaviours.
- In respect of the Council's plan for the fleet transformation, what was the time period and how much would it cost?
- The Council should assist people in applying for grants to start a repairs café.

The Chair agreed that people needed support from the Council and its community team with grant applications. The Council needed to keep learning about and understanding climate change and this would need to be built into the Council and Member training programme.

The Lead Officer for Climate Change responded that the full climate change data from 2018/2019/2020 could be shared.

A number of Members commented on the state of the cycle paths in Stevenage. During bad weather the roads were made safe to use but often the cycle paths were not cleared. SBC was responsible for cleaning them and HCC was responsible for maintaining them.

The Chair agreed that some cycle paths were not accessible but there were a lot of bikes at the train station every morning so they were being used quite a bit. This was the same for schools.

A Member suggested that it would be interesting to get the data from all secondary schools on bike use.

The Scrutiny Officer informed Members that there had been a scrutiny cycling review in 2010.

A Member mentioned that a significant number of people were working from home and so were not travelling to work as frequently as in the past. However, this could be offset by the fact that heating homes all day would be using increased energy from fossil fuels.

The Lead Officer for Climate Change responded to a few comments made by Members which included:

- Biodiversity was important in keeping the circle alive and trees were very important in taking up carbon. It was relevant to the climate change agenda as maintaining a healthy environment would help take up carbon.
- She clarified that the EV buses would save up to 1700 tonnes of carbon emissions.
- There was work underway to produce a plan of what vehicles would need to be replaced for the Councils vehicle fleet. The plan would include timescales and costs.
- It was important to find out why statistics were going up or down, but there were other statistics and these would be correlated to and find out why there were changes in carbon emissions.

A Member stated that there was a downside to electric vehicles, in terms of mileage. Diesel buses often travelled about 1000 miles a day, and electric were unable to cope with this level of mileage. The use of hydrogen-powered vehicles could be investigated.

The Scrutiny Officer informed Members of a pilot happening in Aberdeen of electric vehicles and the data from this would be interesting.

A Member commented that hydrogen vehicles would still produce carbon emissions. Consideration could be given to other forms of transportation, such as trams.

It was **RESOLVED**: That the recommendations set out in the report be agreed, and the comments made by Members be taken on board by officers in the ongoing Climate Change Review.

5 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was none.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

**CHAIR**