

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 23 March 2023

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, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Claire Parris and Loraine Rossati.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.49pm

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

Apologies for absence were received by Councillor Michael Downing.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - WEDNESDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 22 February 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 **COST OF LIVING CRISIS - FOCUS ON THE COUNCIL'S EMPLOYEES**

The Chair introduced the item that looked at the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis on Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) teams. He stated that the unions, Unite and Unison, offered insights into the impact by asking open questions. This item and the documents circulated before the meeting looked at the responses from both Human Resources (HR) and the unions. He highlighted that previous meetings had looked at the cost-of-living impact on both residents and businesses.

The Heads of HR, Kirsten Frew and Clare Davies, provided a written update to Members in advance of the meeting and then gave a verbal presentation and provided a summary of the responses. They stated that HR ensured signposting to financial wellbeing resources was available to staff and highlighted the dedicated area on the intranet that contained links to support and information, as well as the other resources such as the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). They advised that HR ran a series of resilience sessions, one of which focused on financial wellbeing.

The Heads of HR advised that there was a pay award of £1925 received across all

salaries in 2022/23, which was a 10% pay rise for the lowest pay band. The pay awards were negotiated nationally between the Local Government Association (LGA) and the unions. They highlighted that there were increments in pay each financial year until the employee reaches the top of the pay band.

They informed Members the EAP was a free service for staff that offered services such as financial resources, free legal advice and 6 counselling and support sessions for free. During a staff survey, 85% of respondents said they were aware of the EAP, but there had not been a big increase in users.

They advised that managers were having regular 'real conversations' which were structured around the individual and any support they needed. Members were informed that the absences related to things such as stress or anxiety were similar this year compared to last year. In terms of staff turnover there were 81 leavers compared to 78 last year. In terms of the number of vacancies, there were over 100 roles advertised. There had been challenges but these reflected the national position of the employment market. Some of these challenges had been in areas such as customer service and technical roles.

A Member suggested that there was a stigma around asking for help and this could affect the use of the resources available. The HR managers advised that a lot of the resources were anonymous, for example the EAP, and the Council didn't receive any data from this. They suggested to increase internal communications to staff to remind them that it was anonymous, and no one would know they had financial support, etc. This could help remove the stigma and reassure people no one would know they have asked for help.

Following a question regarding where data on people leaving came from and whether exit interviews were conducted. It was advised that there was an exit interview in the form of an online questionnaire which was anonymous, but there was also an offer of a face-to-face exit interview with the assistant director. The question why someone was leaving was asked in the exit interview. Many people who have a longer service often move to another public sector, whereas those with a shorter service move around. More people were moving to other sectors.

Following a question regarding pre-covid data available on the differences in absences as well as staff retention. It was advised that the difference in absence was 127 to 128 and this was instances of absences rather than the amount of people. Additionally, the number of employees gained compared to the amount lost had remained stable for the last 10 years.

Following a question about whether the Council offered any assistance to those working from home and whether it was more difficult to track support when people are working from home. Members were advised that the relationships with managers were important to determine how people wanted to work and where, as well as any support they needed and the support available to them. The Council had always had staff working in different locations to their line managers in frontline services. Communication between employees and managers working in different locations was essential and Officers continued to work to improve this. The office was always

open and available to people who wanted to come in, but ways of working had changed and nationally, roles that were completely remote had the lowest turnover. The Council did not offer an allowance for homeworking as this was something that would be negotiated and had not been agreed on that level. However, laptops and other IT equipment were offered, as well as the chance to borrow office chairs which covered health and safety concerns. Homeworking allowance was being discussed as part of the 2023 pay claim nationally between the LGA and trade unions.

The Head of HR, Kirsten Frew, agreed to circulate an employee stability index report to Members.

4 **CLIMATE CHANGE PORTFOLIO HOLDER UPDATE & RESPONSE TO THE E&E SELECT COMMITTEE CLIMATE EMERGENCY REVIEW & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Chair led a discussion on the climate emergency review and recommendations and highlighted final report recommendations.

The Chair suggested that decarbonisation of the Stevenage transport fleet was important in achieving net zero, as well as looking at the buildings and energy use. He also suggested that the new hub should be as climate friendly as possible.

Following a question from a Member as to whether there were other figures to track the progress against the baseline figure was from 2018, the Assistant Director agreed that people need to see clear evidence of progress and results. He advised that the Council worked closely with the Hertfordshire Climate Change Partnership (HCCP) and suggested data on a biannual basis.

Following a question from a Member about whether things such as the carbon footprint of the housing stock were included in the Borough Council figures or recorded as Borough area data. The Assistant Director advised that this was complicated as the buildings including their insulation levels and energy sources were included in the data for the Council but the use of the building, such as the use of heating etc, were factors influenced by the tenant. Also, it was important to look at the Councils processes and actions as well as getting networks in place to collaborate effectively on climate change.

Following a question from a Member as to whether there was a clash of priorities in reducing climate change and the budget. Members suggested that there should be a similar scheme to the warm spaces scheme during winter but for cool spaces when it was hot in summer. Following a further question regarding how many council offices had air conditioning, the HR manager responded that the new blocks have climate control air conditioning, and some older buildings have had climate control installed. The Assistant Director advised that some front-line staff were exposed to high and low temperatures and extreme weather, and there were measures in place to help mitigate the impact on staff such as weatherproof clothing or alternative working opportunities in extreme heat. The Climate Change Lead Officer also advised that as part of the HCCSP partnership, strategies for climate change adaptation were being worked on and this included operational risk.

The Chair highlighted the work going into climate change and the number of bodies outside of SBC involved in the work, as well as the SBC Chief Executives work on climate change in Hertfordshire. The Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change, Councillor Simon Speller, advised that to work with other agencies SBC needed time and people to improve the issues. SBC needed to work up the community and engage young people and listen to residents' voices.

The Chair suggested that climate change was linked to cultural change. Cllr Simon Speller advised that the senior team at SBC were onboard with climate change and were helping to progress climate change responsibilities within the Council.

The Chair highlighted the high temperatures in the summer and the many dangers to health for older residents. The Assistant Director advised there was support for workers and SBC adjusted their ways of working.

A Member suggested that air conditioning was just as bad and that the design of buildings needed to be adapted as it was being built rather than after. Cllr Speller advised that Executive Portfolio Holders Cllr Jeanette Thomas and Cllr Jackie Hollywell could give a more specific answer. Another Member asked whether HCC would be included and that certain buildings, such as classrooms, were too hot in the summer. Cllr Speller advised that schools were a Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) matter and could be raised further.

The Chair suggested that behavioural change was key to influencing the wider community and SBC should look at what the County was doing. Cllr Simon Speller brought Member's attention to community events, such as the Leys School planting in Welford Court. He suggested that behavioural insight and change needed to take place and it was specifically important in young people who could share this with their families and school networks. He added that the Stevenage Football Club were promoting community engagement and were working with the local college. Cllr Speller suggested that the Council had a role to play regarding behaviour change, but it was important to recognise that the Council had limited scope to do this work.

The Chair suggested that these processes should be reported back to the Committee and should be brought back on a regular basis. He added there was an online platform to track the climate actions SBC lead or took part in. Cllr Speller advised that training and development was important. The Climate Change Lead Officer advised the online platform was launched last week internally to track all actions related to climate change. This was still a work in progress and wasn't available to people outside SBC yet.

A Member queried the response given. Cllr Speller advised that the Portfolio Holder Advisory Groups (PHAG) and Select Committees should work together. A yearly review would be positive.

The Chair suggested training packages and working together in a collaborative and cooperative way was positive and could be used to raise awareness of climate change and issues locally.

A Member asked where climate change courses were available. Cllr Speller advised

the Local Government Association (LGA) do some work, as well as training from the individual political groups. Certain groups, as well as online resources and YouTube videos were helpful. Another Member advised that Members who were part of the LGIU had a training budget and different courses were available.

Another Member highlighted the need for data to see what works and what doesn't, then SBC can decide what training was needed.

The Chair then invited Councillor Simon Speller, Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment and Climate Change, and Veronica Chan, the Climate Change Lead Officer to give a presentation updating Members on the Dragons Den Project which included:

- Ward Members have £7,500 per ward per year, which would roll forward into the next year.
- Community Groups needed a consistently sustainable way to launch and run the green initiatives to improve their area and looked to deliver on three key criteria
 - A project that saved SBC running costs (or were at least neutral)
 - A project that brought social values to community groups
 - A project that mitigated or adapted to climate change
- Cllr Speller advised that residents should come to ward Members if they have a green idea, which made the scheme more manageable.
- There would be a Climate Change Progress Group consisting of some Members and Portfolio Holders which would be reassessed, and any Member could get involved before the panel was finalised.
- There were three sections in Baddeley Close which were proposed to be a vegetable patch and a sensory garden.
- The scheme was in partnership with Peartree School and was hopeful to have Barnwell School involved.
- The first pilot scheme should be running by July 2023.

The Climate Change Lead Officer gave an overview on how the process worked. An application form would be filled out detailing who championed the project, what support was needed (e.g., financial), and how it met the criteria. Officers would review this, and it would be sent to a panel to decide whether it should be funded or not. The whole process should take around 4-6 weeks. When residents get funding, they could start the project and would have to demonstrate evidence of its success. Cllr Speller informed Members there was no deadlines and residents can apply at any time of the year. He urged Members to look at school, groups and communities in their wards who would be interested in the scheme.

Following a question regarding where the money was going. Cllr Speller advised the timeline presented to Members was the timeline specifically for the Baddeley Close scheme, but this would be different for every scheme. The money awarded went to the items the scheme would be built around.

Another Member suggested that Officers should assess the viability and the process

needed to be made simpler. Cllr Speller advised the Climate Change Progress Group assessed the criteria and the process was easy for residents to talk to a champion. The process shown to Members was to visualise it for the Committee.

A Member asked whether a piece of land could be adopted for things such as planting flowers. Cllr Speller suggested that something small such as planting a wildflower meadow should be done informally, noting that permissions would be required if it was SBC land. These smaller initiatives don't cost much money and approval from the Council didn't need to come from the Dragons Den Scheme.

Another Member queried whether if permission for a piece of land was obtained from another source, such as HCC or the environment agency, could projects be done on this. Additionally, they asked whether tree planting was included in the scheme. Cllr Speller advised that tree planting could be done with small schemes. The Dragons Den Scheme could be done with any piece of land as long as permission was given by the landowner.

A Member asked whether it was compulsory to meet all three criteria to qualify for the scheme. Cllr Speller advised that the criteria were a guideline, not a strict rule, but they wanted groups to take part in this, not just individuals.

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Committee noted the climate emergency review and recommendations.

5 **DRAFT E&E SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023-24**

The Chair presented the draft Work Programme for the Municipal Year 2023-24 to the Committee. He suggested that an important piece of work was to look at the buses and electric buses in Stevenage. This was important for residents and for climate mitigation and was good to look at in more detail as the town had not received what was promised. He suggested this could either be done as a one-off meeting or as a larger piece of work. If it was a larger piece of work, the Committee could ask external people such as Arriva, Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), etc. to gain a more extensive response. It was noted that buses and public transport was not a matter directly in the Council's control, but invitation could be extended.

Members agreed this was a significant problem and should be scrutinised as it was in public interest. One Member suggested it was too big for a one-off meeting, but it depended on who could attend the meetings. Another Member agreed and stated that the Council needed to look at other options going forward to work towards net zero with Stevenage transport and lessons needed to be learnt.

The Chair then suggested other items to be added to the work programme. He advised that the work on the cost-of-living crisis should be completed and there would be another small piece of work on residents and the work would be summarised into a report on the impact on the local community. He suggested the work on climate change should continue (in the form of monitoring progress), and there should be a piece of work next year on employment opportunities for young people.

Members suggested that it was important that local residents should be included in roles in the growing life sciences sector in Stevenage.

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Committee noted the draft Work Programme for 2023-24 and agreed that the work programme should include:

- Buses/trains (main review item)
- Finishing the cost-of-living review (one or two items)
- Continuing the climate emergency (monitoring twice a year)
- Employment opportunities for younger people

6 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was none.

7 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

8 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR