

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 19 September 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair) (Chair), Alex Farquharson (Vice-Chair) (Vice Chair), Julie Ashley-Wren, Forhad Chowdhury, Mason Humberstone, Wendy Kerby, Conor McGrath and Carolina Veres

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 8.07pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received by Councillors Ellie Plater and John Duncan.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - WEDNESDAY 26 JULY 2023

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 26 July 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 CULTURAL STRATEGY

The Chair introduced Councillor Loraine Rosatti, Executive Portfolio Holder for Culture, Rob Gregory, Operations Director, Sam Daisley, Museum Cultural Development Officer, and Jo Ward, Museum Manager/Curator.

Cllr Loraine Rossati informed Members that there had been a lot of progress since the Cultural Strategy last came before the Community Select Committee. They were focusing on “people powered art” and “people powered culture” which aimed to lead culture, heritage and leisure for our area and our people. There was a lot of activity and creativity at the community level and there was more the Council could do to support this, but not lead. This also linked to the Councils ambitions to reduce health inequality and improve mental and physical health. Covid and the cost-of-living crisis has impacted mental health and the ability to take part in creative activities that local residents did before.

The Operations Director gave a presentation which included:

- An Arts & Culture Officer was appointed in 2018.
- They were focusing on the Stevenage story of the first new town.
- The Junction 7 Creatives were formed in 2018 to come together in an

organised way to fund creative activities.

- There had been successful funding bids in 2020 to the Arts Council and National Lottery Heritage Fund.
- The vision was to have flagship performing arts, museum and heritage facilities, creative industries spaces and hubs to attract talent, an iconic public realm arts programme, and support for wellbeing and skills development.
- The ambition was to grow the festival and event offer, protect the Gordon Craig Theatre offer to provide a good or better facility, a new museum, high quality music facilities like Old Town Live, recognising the sports heritage in Stevenage, and the Hertfordshire Cultural Education Partnership in schools.
- The priorities were to encourage more people to participate in culture, particularly looking at ways to engage people who wouldn't typically be involved.
- So far, they had mainstreamed the Cultural and Museum Officer role as they recognised the importance of the museum.
- Junction 7 Creatives had created the utilisation of Meanwhile space, so empty buildings can be used for culture, arts, and creative potential. These would eventually be commercial buildings but in the meantime can be used as a creative space.
- There had been some projects such as Battle of the Bands, New Town New Art, new bus station artwork, and adding to the Stevenage walk of fame.
- They were focusing on culture led regeneration and ensuring culture was linked within the Stevenage regeneration.

The Museum Cultural Development Officer informed the Committee that:

- They had been planning an art and heritage trail to create a safe and interesting route, both cycle and path to view points of interest. There would be different routes for different abilities/times and would be a reusable resource.
- They planned to improve cycleways, such as new murals in three underpasses near the Stevenage Football Club.
- They were using the meanwhile use policy to display artwork to encourage community pride.
- They had a working relationship with Junction 7 Creatives and had projects such as the Only Connect project which aimed to liven up the open reach and broadband cabinets and discourage tagging. Boxes on Grace Way and London Road were nominated for the pilot.
- They were using event island as a centralised venue for different events, which are important and can display diverse cultures.
- There was a central home for Stevenage Museum being designed by architects. There had been resident involvement on Stevenage Day, in person and through online surveys. This would display various art works of Stevenage history and there had been collection developments such as a long-term loan of a car driven by Lewis Hamilton.

Cllr Rossati added that they wanted to expand the opportunity for art in underpasses

and showcase photos of Stevenage taken by residents and visitors. She added that the Council was in consultation with local people to involve them in new facilities such as the museum and new sport and leisure facilities.

The Museum Manager informed Members they had received pricing for the fitting for the new museum which totalled a maximum of £2.3m. They were receiving £2m of town funding but needed to confirm how much was allocated to building costs. They were beginning to look at a fundraising strategy for this. She also added that they wanted to make the collection accessible online.

A Member agreed artwork in the underpasses was a good idea and asked whether this would be rolled out across the town. Cllr Rossati advised that this was done in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council, and they needed to contribute funding as well. They wanted to get a priority list of underpasses to work on and start funding through various means, such as grants, fundraisers, or local community budgets.

Another Member asked whether there could be work done on the skate park in Bedwell as the gates were closed. The Operations Director advised that the ownership sat with Herts County Council. They were looking at how to protect and make it accessible and there were opportunities with the new leisure centre. Cllr Rossati advised that she had met with a skateboarding advocate and was interested in looking at how we can have safe and modern facilities.

A Member asked whether there was a nomination system for designing telecom boxes. Cllr Rossati advised that this project was linked with the graffiti project with Councillor Simon Speller and the Stevenage Borough Council cleansing teams. Open Reach had been working with the Council to clear graffiti and were open to designing the boxes. They were starting small and trialling, and then would look for funding for community-based ones, such as near schools.

A Member asked whether the schemes and projects would be viewed as too town centric. Cllr Rossati advised that there had been a concentration of funds around the town centre. They were interested in people powered art across Stevenage and there were opportunities for everyone to change the town centre dynamic and be part of the solution.

Another Member highlighted the shared culture in Stevenage town and heritage and asked how the different communities would be interconnected. The Museum Manager advised that the museum often did projects and got funding to work with community groups at how stories were being told. There was an audience development plan, and the museum was reflective of the community in terms of users but there was room to do more work.

Councillor Jeanette Thomas highlighted the community involvement across the town, such as the Art in the Park, Music in the Park, Sport in the Park, and the teddy bear picnic in Pin Green.

The Chair suggested an annual photography competition of photos of Stevenage. The Chair also suggested that the promotion of STEM subjects in schools should be

extended to include the Arts as this was being overlooked, so the acronym could be STEAM subjects with the A representing the Arts. She recommended that Officers make links with A Level and Level 3 Extended Diploma Arts students about engaging them in local arts projects.

The Chair thanked the team for their presentation and for the excellent focus on cultural issues that were happening in Stevenage.

4 **PRE-SCRUTINY OF THE REVISED HOUSING ALLOCATIONS POLICY**

The Chair introduced Councillor Jeanette Thomas, Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development, Charlotte Carter, Housing Business Support, Lori Smith, Housing Supply Manager, Tracy Jackson, Operations Manager Providing Homes, and Rob Gregory, Operations Director.

Cllr Jeanette Thomas informed Members that they had been working with the community and the Committee to look at the housing allocations policy and reminded Members they had to be aware that more people wanted homes than they had homes available. Stevenage had a housing development team who also built homes to sell to build more social housing. They were also retrofitting and maintaining the existing homes as well as building more.

The Operations Manager gave a presentation on the housing allocations policy which the Council was required to have by law. The policy outlined the process for how the Council let social housing and made the best use of the stock as well as maximising access and choice for applicants. The team were looking at producing an easy-to-read guide so everyone can use it and understand the policy. The aim of the review was to respond to the increasing demand for not enough homes, ensuring the policy was clear and helping those in the greatest need.

The first proposed change was to only accept applicants onto the housing register if they had a specific housing need. This was applied to the new policy as a qualification rule. Some Members raised concerns on how this would be means tested and it was advised that this would be difficult. Another Member asked whether this would change who can access the housing register. The Committee were advised that 16-year-olds, or anyone with a suitable housing situation, would not be able to access the housing register. The Committee were aware that this would be an unpopular move for many local residents but was realistic given the reality of national policy on social housing and therefore reluctantly supported this policy change.

The second proposed change was to disqualify those with sufficient savings or incomes from applying for social housing. This was not applied to the new policy as it was resource heavy given that each application would have to be means tested if it had been applied and the question of what was 'affordable' has changed due to the cost-of-living crisis. A Member asked whether there would be a financial test once they had applied and it was advised that an affordability test was only done with affordable housing, not social. The Committee supported not applying this to the new policy as it would be unworkable without means testing each case.

The third proposed change was to introduce a New Generation scheme which would give priority to 1 bed need adults to enable the downsizing of tenants. This was not applied to the new policy as the stock levels were not sufficient to support the New Generation scheme. The team would continue to review the impact of the new allocation policy. The Committee agreed that this policy option should not be included in the new policy.

The fourth proposed change was to reduce the number of bands that applicants can be placed into. This was applied to the new policy with the introduction of Band 1, 2, and 3. A Member asked whether specific bands were related to specific housing needs. The Committee were advised that the bands would vary in housing needs, and they were creating an easy-to-read guide on the bands and the eligibility for each. Members were also advised that people had the right to review if they did not agree with what band they were put into. The Committee agreed that this policy option should not be included in the new policy.

The fifth proposed change was to remove people who had not bid within 12 months. This was applied to the new policy and Officers would communicate with people on the register about their bidding. The Committee agreed with this policy option with the caveat that there would be some exceptions to the policy if no suitable sized property was available to bid on.

The sixth proposed change was to let homes based on housing need only, removing the sharing between bands and the quota. This was applied to the new policy, but some direct allocation was needed for aids and adaptations, temporary accommodation, or leaving home for an emergency. The Committee agreed with this policy option.

The seventh and final proposed change was to change the bedroom standard to allow more household members to share. Initially it was proposed to increase the age from 16 to 21. The bedroom standard was changed to 18 for same sex in the new policy, as well as not allowing those with a 2 bed need to bid on 3 bed properties. The Committee agreed with this policy option.

There were also other proposed changes which included:

- Care leavers were able to bid on 1-bed properties and had a high priority to increase their chances of securing a property.
- Homelessness Prevention Duty – priority was given to families who could stay with friends/family for additional time.
- Adults without children with no other housing need were unable to join the register.
- Statutory Homelessness Duty – discretion was applied, and they must qualify otherwise, such as residential local connection.
- Owed Relief Duty – they had the same priority as Main Duty which would reduce the strain on temporary accommodation.

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Committee agreed the Officers suggested housing allocations policy changes as detailed in the summaries above.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

The Chair and Committee thanked Rob Gregory, Operations Director, who was leaving the Council, for his service and help to the Community Select Committee and wished him well for the future.

The Chair also invited Members to sign a book of farewell for Jim McManus, Director of Public Health for Hertfordshire, who was also leaving the Council.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR