

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 1 November 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Adam Mitchell CC (Vice-Chair), Jim Brown, Bret Facey, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Graham Snell and Forhad Chowdhury.

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 Baroness Taylor of Stevenage and Councillor Ellie Plater.

Councillor Forhad Chowdhury substituted for Baroness Taylor.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 10 OCTOBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 10 October 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 **CLIMATE CHANGE UPDATE**

The Chair introduced the Chief Executive Matt Partridge, the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) Zayd Al-Jawad, the Assistant Director (Direct Services) Steve Dupoy, and the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance Councillor Simon Speller.

The Chief Executive informed the Committee he was the Lead Hertfordshire and East of England CEO for climate change. He co-authored the report which led to the launch of the Hertfordshire Climate Change Partnership. He referenced both the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) and the Regional Climate Change Forum (RCCF).

Previously there was very limited joined up working across the districts, boroughs, and county council on climate change. Accordingly, the HCCSP was set up in 2020 to maximise the opportunities across the 11 local authorities and the Herts Local Enterprise Partnership.

There was a funding agreement set out and the HCCSP was being resourced by two part time officers. An officer group fed into the Members board. There were now over 100 Officers contributing to the broader objectives to achieve climate change targets. They were also ensuring that the partnership was connected to the right groups in Hertfordshire such as the Herts Infrastructure and Planning Partnership and the Herts Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership. The HCCSP was also working with Suffolk and Cambridgeshire Councils as well to further collaboration.

The Chief Executive added that the HCCSP was shortlisted at the LGC awards for a local government award. Unfortunately, they didn't win but the Partnership was recognised as doing good things for the County in terms of climate change and the CE was invited to present at the national Local Government Chronicle conference.

The RCCF represented 50 Councils in the Eastern region and HCCSP represented Hertfordshire at a regional level. A baseline assessment had been undertaken on what was being done in the East of England region and this led to the development of 8 priorities such as developing a regional switchboard to share information more effectively and lobbying in government circles. By collaborating together, Councils could increase resources, have a good strategy, and develop a clear plan. All Councils had agreed to put more money in to get more things done.

The Chief Executive updated the HCCSP on what was being done at a regional level. They had developed 6 action plans which included:

- Carbon reduction such as solar together which was a scheme offering solar panels at a discounted rate.
- Biodiversity such as the green spaces audit.
- Transport such as the clean air day which featured anti-idling activities.
- Water such as sustainable drainage systems.
- Behaviour changes such as focusing on communications and training.

HCCSP were looking at how they engaged with sectors and wanted to move into a coordinating role recognising that there were other organisations who could support some of the delivery. They were briefing leaders and top teams on what they were focusing on and further resourcing communication into the wider public. He noted that there was always more to be done in this area but there was a lot of positive work being done at a local level in Stevenage as well as in the County and regional levels. They were also lobbying into government circles and doing work to get things done.

A Member asked whether government lobbying had brought any projects to Stevenage. The Chief Executive advised that there was a lot to do as there were so many funding pots available. They were campaigning for the government to simplify the funding model. He also advised that match funding was challenging in some areas. For example, SBC had been successful twice on the Housing Decarbonisation Fund, however the Council had to put a lot of money in to get it match funded. Decarbonising the entire SBC housing stock to an EPC rating of C would cost £250m which SBC cannot afford. He added that the LGA had picked up climate change as one of their key priorities and were working at regional level on

how to effectively promote this to political parties and part conferences ahead of the next general election.

Members asked questions in relation to biodiversity net gain and offsetting. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the 2030 target was highly ambitious. If managed correctly, offsetting was highly beneficial especially in terms of housing. Decarbonising new houses was more effective than retrofitting older houses. In terms of biodiversity net gain within planning, it was important to be accountable to where the money from that was spent.

A Member suggested that active transport was only a component of sustainable travel and there were other areas as well. The Chief Executive agreed and advised that the HCCSP Transport plan went into more detail on sustainable travel.

Another Member asked whether the HCCSP had long term ambitions for coordination. The Chief Executive advised that the HCCSP had been delivering a range of projects and would continue to do so. They were trying to work with professionals in certain areas to support broader programme delivery.

A Member suggested that changing behaviour was difficult and asked how this would be tackled. The Chief Executive advised that they were looking at ways and means to encourage people to change. The anti-idling campaign was a good example of practical action to encourage change. He also agreed that this change wouldn't happen overnight, but advertisement and communication needed to be resourced.

Another Member asked whether the partnership was strengthening SBC or whether it was taking independence away from the Council. The Chief Executive advised that there was a lot of work being done at County level that SBC was benefitting from. The partnership was about contributing and furthering what was being done at a local level not replacing or duplicating effort. Cllr Speller added that the HCCSP was a knowledge exchange and that it was reporting on topics that SBC couldn't do by itself. This was shared equally across all the districts and was focused on the research.

A Member asked whether the meetings were public. The Chief Executive advised that they weren't public meetings, but the minutes were publicly accessible as were the action plans.

Another Member asked whether there was more SBC could do to support the changing behaviours in small and local businesses. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that big businesses were trying to help by sharing experiences of what they had done to other businesses in Stevenage. They had also offered 100 spaces for SMEs to get net zero training and advice. 100 businesses had signed up and completed this last year and they were looking at more funding to do this again.

The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) then gave a presentation on the climate change annual update of where the global and national trends were as well as SBC work programmes. There were three pathways around most of the SBC

emissions and they had developed a potential roadmap to net zero on these.

An example of one of these pathways to decarbonise Stevenage was 'fuel and fleet' and looked at the transport sector. This pathway focused on the SBC vehicles and equipment as well as the grey fleet and what were the heaviest users in emissions. It had been proposed to develop a business case to introduce HVO as a fuel type to decarbonise the fuel for the existing fleet as a transitional stage. This would decarbonise up to 80% of the emissions of the existing fleet quickly.

On a street and neighbourhood level they were working with groups with an interest in sustainable travel as well as technical people to work more cohesively and get ideas on what could be done. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) referred to the Dragons Den (Climate Change Community Fund) scheme as an example of community cooperation as local groups took charge of what climate change activities they wanted in their communities with the help of their local Councillors and SBC.

A Member asked whether Members could get clear figures and metrics that could be shared around emissions. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the metrics for the geographical area for Stevenage were nationally set. There was also a challenge on what to measure them against. It was difficult to record and measure how much carbon was being saved by each intervention and a lot of smaller things wouldn't be captured. The baseline that was used were the largest emitters within the Council and they were tracked.

Another Member asked whether it be a slow gradual process to reduce fuel emissions and get a better suited fleet. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that there wasn't currently an economically viable EV heavy duty fleet. There would be an individual assessment when the fleet was ready to replace regarding what would be the best economically. Although, this wasn't attainable for 2030, they were looking at other alternatives to progress this. Funding for the HVO fuel was subject to agreement from the Executive and Council. There would be a 20% difference overall in emissions from vehicles across the fleet (and over 80% saving in carbon for each heavy-duty fleet vehicle that uses the biodiesel fuel) and would possibly be the best option until the technology for alternative fuelled heavy fleet was developed.

A Member suggested that people needed visual aids to help them understand and encourage changes in behaviours. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that they were proposing three pathways which were being presented in a visual way to make them easier to digest. He suggested the online platform was potentially a more user-friendly way at looking at what SBC had been doing. The Chair suggested a future piece of work for the Committee to look at behavioural change.

The Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that it was important to have clarity around the fleet and heavy goods vehicle type of fleet, such as refuse vehicles, and the smaller fleet, such as vans. The smaller fleet was easier to provide electric vehicles for as costs were coming down and it was becoming more viable. The larger fleet was more difficult in terms of EV vehicles, and the sector was still

developing alternatives that might be more suitable than electric in the longer term. An example was hydrogen vehicles, however these were very costly and the infrastructure wasn't yet in place to support it.

In response to a question regarding recycling, the Assistant Director (Direct Services) advised that the Council was limited in terms of enforcement activity when recyclable materials were not placed in the relevant kerbside containers. In light of the recent Government announcements concerning 'Simpler Recycling', they were reviewing their current arrangements.

A Member asked how the largest emitting buildings, such as the leisure and swimming centres, will be used to form how planning applications were assessed, as well as the towns regeneration. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that the second pathway looked at building and assets and would target those with the highest emissions. They were working with the regeneration team for the lowest carbon emissions in the replacement of the leisure facilities and hub, as well as the other regeneration projects. For example, the wet and dry leisure facilities would be on a combined smaller floor plate and would have better usage such as heat power from the swimming pool which would contribute to a significant reduction of emissions overall. The civic hub would also have less floor space and the newer design would reduce overall emissions.

Another Member asked where the proposed trees and lakes/ponds would be located. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that he didn't have a specific number but around 4,000 were planted in Fairlands and 2500 would be planted in the new country park in the North of Stevenage development as well as three lakes. Many local authorities use ponds and lakes as a flooding measure. Cllr Speller added that they were looking at green and climate change friendly schemes such as additional wildflower meadows, but trees were really important, and they should aim to plant even more.

A Member suggested that car charging ports shouldn't be placed near cycleways for safety reasons. They also added that they needed to review cycle and walkways and regen needed to make it easier for people to walk and cycle around the town. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) noted these points.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance, Councillor Simon Speller, the gave a presentation on his portfolio area and some of the local projects taking place which included:

- Strategic partnerships were in a good place, including local businesses.
- Climate change strategy was more specific and clearer, and they were looking at ways to make it simpler and more visual so people can understand.
- They were focusing on 'bottom up' as well as 'top down' strategies as community engagement was important.
- SBC staffing and budgets now show the Councils commitment to climate change and was the only growth in the budget.
- Senior Officers and Members were doing their part.
- He believed the 2023 net zero target was achievable for SBC operations, but

not the Borough as a whole.

- There was a long way to go with Ward Members and he encouraged them to use their budgets for the Dragons Den (Climate Change Community Fund) schemes.
- There was also a long way to go with community groups, but they were making headway with local businesses and schools.
- Digital communications were crucial, and these needed to be improved.
- There was only so much that could be done at a local level without government support.
- It was easier for some people to be 'green' than others, so everyone needed to be inclusive and supportive.
- SBC progress was tangible and led in many areas within County and the region.
- His focus was on a 'bottom up' approach and community engagement and all Members were key in this.

A Member raised concerns that there weren't many wards so far that had taken part in the Dragons Den scheme. They also suggested that there should be a blueprint document giving suggestions and inspiration on what could be done to give people ideas. Cllr Speller agreed and advised that community capacity wasn't dwindling, but volunteering took up a lot of space and time people didn't have, especially in the current climate. He hoped that once people saw schemes, it would inspire others to do the same. The focus was on Officer to promote the scheme and make it known, as well as community leaders and Ward Members.

Another Member asked what interventions would contribute to the reductions of CO2 emissions and highlighted the importance of cost effectiveness. Cllr Speller advised that the cost effectiveness of the scheme will happen when it takes off, but it was a scheme of community engagement, so the community was the outcome. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that it would become clear what the costs and carbon savings were. The pathways detailed why they were targeting certain areas and looking into them in more detail, including the cost effectiveness.

The Chair thanked Officers for their contribution to the meeting.

He then introduced the Head of Climate Action, Fabian Oyarzun, and the Climate Change Programme Lead, Jennifer Bratchell, to give a demonstration of the new climate change portal.

The Head of Climate Action introduced the Kausal Watch Platform which would plan, track and measure climate actions in a more comprehensive way and was easy to use. This was in collaboration with Officers across SBC and showed who was responsible for certain actions and engaged with stakeholders to keep everyone informed.

They presented what the portal looked like and informed Members that the platform was on the website but wasn't publicly available yet, but they aimed to put it online by the end of the year. There was an indicator linked to every action and a tracker of carbon reduction.

A Member asked whether they could see figures to assess their progress towards net zero and climate change targets. The Head of Climate Action advised that the baseline was the 2018 data of SBC fuel fleet and properties. They were working to update the information but had issues doing this. They had some figures, but it couldn't include scope 3 emissions such as the supply chain, water supply, or waste management as they were not systematically produced. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) added that the baseline was established when the climate emergency was declared, and progress can be compared to this. The scope was constantly increasing therefore data couldn't be obtained for some areas. Cllr Speller suggested the Committee should spend a session on this topic as they can explore it in detail.

A Member suggested that there needed to be an updated communications strategy to get residents to go onto the site. The Chair agreed that both Officers and Members should appeal to as many people as possible to signpost and share the portal with the community.

Another Member suggested it would be helpful to compare data to other new towns. They also suggested that the font size needed to be reviewed to ensure it was accessible to all.

Members suggested that as well as the Kausal Watch Platform, Officers considered a very simple infographic display for the website which could relay simple messages that would be easy to understand and simple actions for the public to take.

4 **UPDATED E&E SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023-24**

The Chair informed Members that the next meeting was looking at policy development and pre-scrutiny of the Cycle Hire scheme. The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulatory) advised that there were some cycle groups involved in the development of the scheme and may want to attend the meeting.

A Member suggested that the Committee should look at affordability and the cost of a low-income household trying to keep a car running versus reinstating a working and reliable bus system.

Another Member suggested that the Committee should keep track of the town centre regeneration. The Chair agreed but believed it was too big to look at in the 2023/24 year and suggested it should be looked at in the next civic year. The Chief Executive added that there was another all-Member briefing on the regeneration at the end of November. They were looking at doing more of these briefings and there was a chance to ask questions over the year.

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Members noted the updated E&E Select Committee Work Programme for 2023/24.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was none.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR