

Meeting Council
Portfolio Area All
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STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL CORPORATE PLAN - MAKING STEVENAGE EVEN BETTER (2024-2027)

KEY DECISION

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1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To seek approval for the Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan which outlines the Council's strategic priorities for the next three years.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Council approve the new Corporate Plan – Making Stevenage Even Better.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Corporate Plan

- 3.1.1 The Corporate Plan is a key strategic document for the Council and forms part of the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.
- 3.1.2 The Corporate Plan provides a strategic link between delivery of services, the national and local policy agenda, and the Council's joint-partnership objectives. The strategic priorities inform the Council's budget setting process and direction of

travel over the next three years and the focus of Service Plans across the authority.

3.1.3 In accordance with the Council's Constitution, as a Budget & Policy Framework item the Corporate Plan was considered by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in October 2023 and January 2024. That Committee agreed the framework and content of the draft. Furthermore, the document has been considered by the Council's Executive in October 2023 and January 2024.

3.1.4 At their meeting in January 2024, the Executive signed off the draft document and recommended that it be presented to Council for approval.

3.2 Future Town Future Council

3.2.1 The previous Corporate Plan 'Future Town Future Council' (FTFC) was agreed by the Council in December 2016. In February 2021, the Council agreed to extend FTFC beyond its original 5-year term and in July 2021, the FTFC programme was consolidated into four external-facing programmes and one internal-facing enabling programme:

- Transforming Our Town
- More Social, Affordable and Good Quality Homes
- Cooperative Neighbourhoods
- A Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town
- Making Your Money Count (Enabling)

3.2.2 In June 2023, it was agreed that the significant investment in social housing (£24.6 million in 23/24) should be reflected in the FTFC priority 'More Social and Affordable Homes'. This priority was subsequently amended to 'More Social, Affordable & Good Quality Homes' for 2023/24.

3.2.3 In September 2023, it was agreed that as part of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy update and in recognition of the need to be transparent about the impact of inflationary pressures, the FTFC priority 'Making Your Money Count' should be amended to 'Balancing the Budget'.

3.2.4 In October 2023, it was agreed that a new Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan, with updated strategic priorities should be shared with residents, businesses, local community groups, and partners for a period of consultation lasting 6 weeks (23 October – 4 December 2023).

3.2.5 The strategic priorities within Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan are based upon resident, business and community group feedback provided since 2021. It builds on the long-term objectives of FTFC programmes and reflects the need to prioritise effective delivery of services in a challenging financial environment. This means using reduced resources to achieve the outcomes that matter most. Members and officers will continue to work together through the 'Transformation' programme of work, within the priority of Balancing the Budget, to introduce efficiencies that will provide a better service for residents and meet saving commitments.

4. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 The Council's key drivers have changed since FTFC was approved in 2016. The Council has faced, and will continue to face, a number of challenges and opportunities that will inform its future decision-making and resource allocation. These include:

4.1.1 Financial challenges

- The Local Government Association highlights the pressures facing local authorities, estimating that Councils in England face a funding gap of £4 billion over the next two years, following a challenging long-term financial position
- Estimates vary but National Audit Office data shows that Government funded spending power for Stevenage fell by 64.5% between 2010 to 2021. In the same time period the spending power across all English local authorities fell by an average of 49%
- Six one year only Government financial settlements have impacted the Councils ability to plan ahead with certainty, which coupled with the delay of the Government's Fair Funding Review (due in 2016), has exacerbated an already challenging financial position
- For Stevenage, a combination of these challenges coupled with inflation has led to the Council having to find cumulative savings of £14 million to meet the shortfall leading to a significant pressure on the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA)
- The HRA has been subject to changes in rent policy (e.g., 1% rent reduction 2016/17-2019/20) since the Council paid £199 million to the government for the self-financing deal. The 1% rent reduction reduced the HRA's income by circa £250m over 30 years.

4.1.2 Changes to national and local policy

- Increasing demands related to the use of services in response to the Cost-of-Living crisis i.e. homeless costs, access to benefits and support services
- In 2022/23 new legislative regulations with an increased focus on compliance were introduced (e.g., the Social Housing Regulation Act, Building Safety Act and Fire Safety Act). This has coincided with the introduction of new tenant satisfaction and tenancy management requirements in 2023/24
- The financial impact of this legislation along with, for example, associated future investments needed to fulfill waste reforms and the updated Housing Consumer Standards requirements will not be known until the full details are known later this calendar year
- There is an urgent need to improve energy efficiency in the delivery of council services, operation / maintenance of assets and social housing stock in response to the climate emergency
- The outcome of elections being held this year along with County elections next year may impact on local priorities, policies and strategies
- Whilst low levels of unemployment are good for local people they can also affect the Council's ability to recruit and retain staff
- Change in partnership landscape (Local Enterprise Partnership to form part of the County Council from April 2024)

4.1.3 Opportunities

Despite the significant challenges and difficult decisions that the Council has faced and will continue to face, the Council remains financially resilient and continues to deliver for its residents including:

- Delivery of 401 council rent and 94 private sale new homes since 2014 with 2,253 units due to be delivered over the next 30 years
- £26 million investment from 2023/24 to 2028/29 in existing and new housing stock
- Committing to investing £734 million in new housing stock and £482m in repairs, void and cyclical maintenance of existing Council homes over the next 30 years
- Delivering a number of town centre regeneration projects including the new Bus Interchange, multi-storey carpark, event Island along with the provision of new residential and commercial property
- £23.95 million business grants administered to Stevenage businesses to March 2022 (18 schemes/4375 businesses)
- £37.5 million Towns Fund funding secured from a national government competitive process to support the delivery of a number of landmark projects including the new sports and leisure hub, Heritage / museum facility and cycleway improvements
- Significant engagement with residents through the Cooperative Neighbourhoods programme, including development and implementation of Neighbourhood Plans
- Supporting the continued growth of the life science sector including the new £65 million European Headquarters for Autolus Therapeutics, a new life sciences development at the Forum (anticipated to generate economic growth of £98 million and 1,850 jobs) and the establishment of new training facility (Stevenage Innovation and Technology Centre (SITEC) at North Herts College)
- £14 million savings realised since 2010 to bridge the government funding and inflation deficit

Consultation

4.2 It is vital that the Council's strategic priorities, as set out in the Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan, reflect the challenges and opportunities the Council faces, and that these priorities are based upon the views of residents, business and local community groups. Accordingly the five strategic priorities set out in 'Making Stevenage Even Better' have been informed by responses provided through the Residents Survey (2021), the Tenants Survey (2021), and the Cooperative Neighbourhoods Resident PropTech Survey (2023).

4.3 The survey findings represented 3,000 residents views across a range of topics and provided a strong local evidence base for change.

Key priority areas identified included:

- Maintenance and appeal of local areas (e.g., littering & cleanliness, pathways and pavements)

- Safety and crime (e.g., reducing Anti-Social Behaviour, drugs and young people hanging around neighbourhoods)
- Green spaces and climate change (e.g., better parks, maintenance of green spaces, climate change activities to reduce carbon footprint and improve biodiversity)
- Provision of good local Services (e.g., council house maintenance, customer services, waste collection and recycling, satisfaction with housing repairs)
- Good local shops and facilities (e.g., diversity of retail and investment in town centre, new leisure facilities, youth initiatives and activities in neighbourhood areas to promote health & wellbeing)

4.4 To provide clarity and maintain focus, the areas identified by residents have been recategorised into five strategic priorities within Making Stevenage Even Better:

1. Transforming Our Town

- Regeneration
- Enterprise & Skills

2. More Social, Affordable and Good Quality Homes

- Building New & Sustainable Homes
- Maintaining Good Quality Homes

3. Thriving Neighbourhoods

- Clean Neighbourhoods & Green Spaces
- Community Safety
- Culture & Leisure

4. Tackling Climate Change

5. Balancing the Budget

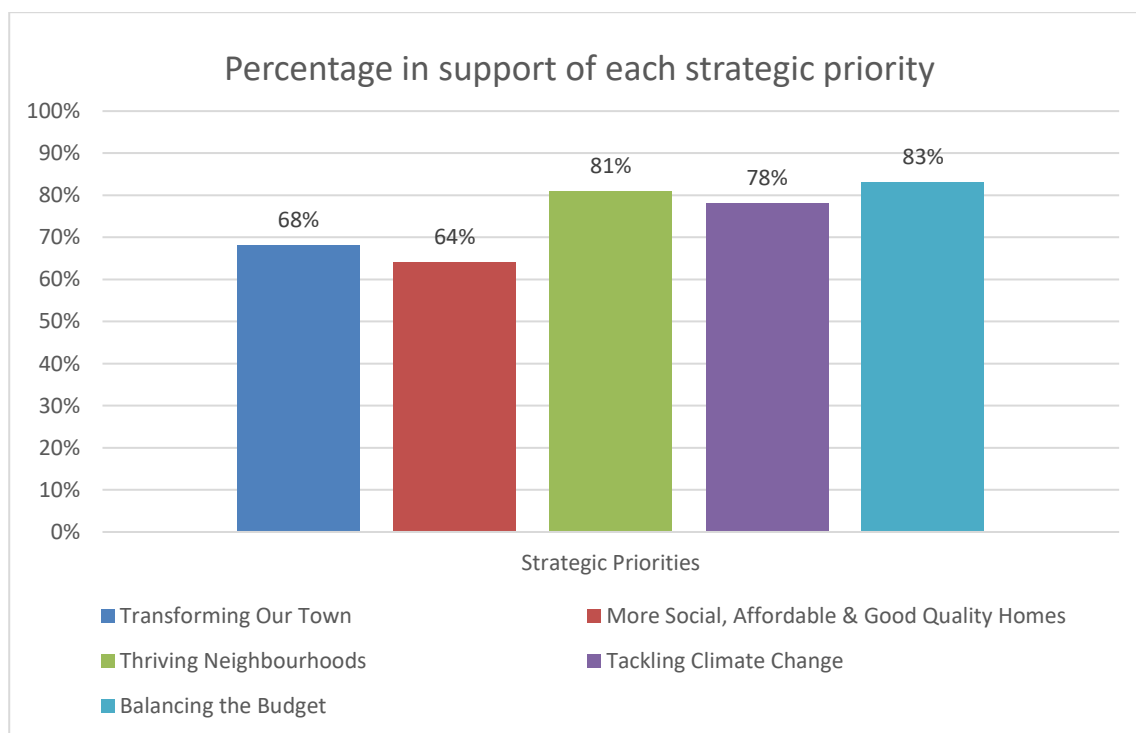
4.5 In addition to the five strategic priorities, there are three cross cutting themes. These are **Equality, Diversity & Inclusion**; **Health and Wellbeing**; and **Technology & Innovation**. The inclusion of cross-cutting themes highlights the need to raise awareness of these areas when designing and delivering services. They reflect important social benefits and demonstrate the importance the Council places on effective partnership working and existing commitments to tackle health inequalities, champion equality, and consider innovative solutions to deliver efficiencies and empower residents when accessing services.

4.6 The priorities and themes in the Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan are underpinned by outcomes (the result we want to see) and the actions we will take to get there. Presenting the information in this way, and using outcomes as a framework for actions, seeks to make the end goal meaningful to residents, businesses and the community, and our intention clear to partners involved in delivery.

4.7 During the six-week consultation period a variety of engagement activities took place to help ensure that Members, businesses, staff, community groups and residents were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposals. Respondents could either provide their views via an online survey, which could be accessed by scanning a QR code or visiting the website. They could also request a hard-copy form by email/post or come into the office to access the computers in the Customer Service Centre. Large print and translated versions were also available

upon request. Further information on the consultation activities undertaken during this period are contained within the Consultation Report (Appendix B).

- 4.8 Survey respondents were asked 15 fixed questions and given the option to complete free text responses to supplement their answers. To enhance the Council's understanding, additional thematic analysis of the free text answers was undertaken. Seventy-two residents responded to the consultation and the findings show that sixty-nine per cent (69%) of them considered the five strategic priorities identified in Making Stevenage Even Better to be representative of their priorities, with each individual priority receiving good support.



- 4.9 Of the 31% that did not agree with the proposed priorities, a range of alternative suggestions were provided including:

- Investment in the Council's existing services, e.g., the upkeep of garages, and housing repair service
- Investment in infrastructure (e.g., schools, health facilities, transport)
- Delivery of a range of youth initiatives to help tackle Anti-social Behaviour (ASB) and crime
- Investment in the town centre to help improve footfall
- Tackling climate change with a focus on the preservation, maintenance and utilisation of green spaces
- Support for local businesses, including apprenticeships specifically within growing sectors such as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM)
- Identifying alternative sources of income generation through increased commercial activities

- 4.10 It is encouraging that the alternative suggestions provided include areas of work

which the Council are already undertaking or are planning. For example, significant investment in the town centre and amenities, including work with partners to invest in infrastructure where the Council is not directly responsible (e.g. health facilities, roads, schools) will be delivered as part of the circa £1 billion Stevenage Even Better and £37.5 million Towns Fund programmes of work. The actions in each of these areas are set out under the Transforming Our Town priority. Another example, the preservation, maintenance and utilisation of green spaces, is supported through multiple activities within the Tackling Climate Change and Thriving Neighbourhoods priorities, with utilisation of green spaces a key component of the Health & Wellbeing cross-cutting theme. Youth initiatives (over and above those provided by the County Council) to tackle ASB are being implemented through the Community Safety strategic priority, and income generation through increased commercial activities is being delivered through the Balancing the Budget programme of work.

- 4.11 The consultation findings indicate a good level of local support for the strategic priorities within the Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan. Respondents advised that the priorities have the right focus and are aligned with what matters to them. It is clear however, from the alternative suggestions and feedback obtained, that the Council could further enhance its communication activities. In response, the Council intends to review its existing approach to communication and build even better communication packages to support each strategic priority. Meaningful and effective communication plays an important part in demonstrating how the Council delivers for residents, and it is critical to the success of Making Stevenage Even Better and how we demonstrate progress being made going forward.
- 4.12 Following the conclusion of the 6-week consultation period, a further opportunity to feedback was provided to the Council's Stevenage Together partners. Responses indicated clear support for the comprehensive approach outlined within the plan, with a request that additional emphasis be placed on:
- the support for residents in response to the cost-of-living crisis
 - the Council's approach to tackling health inequalities
 - Council plans to deliver personalised advice and support to residents through Customer Services.

In response to this welcome feedback the Corporate Plan has been amended to highlight the Council's existing and planned programmes of work in these areas.

- 4.13 The Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan (Appendix A) is an accessible, easy-to-read, public-facing document which seeks to clearly set-out the Council's strategic priorities through an outcome-based framework. Presenting the Council's direction of travel in this format will help ensure transparency as part of the Council's commitment to monitoring and reporting fulfillment of its priorities and how this is shared with residents, partners, local businesses, staff and community groups.
- 4.14 A detailed Plan on a Page (PoP) (Appendix C) for each strategic priority and cross-cutting theme sets out to residents where the Council will focus improvement efforts each year over the next three years. These outcomes will be supported by

key corporate performance targets, indicators and milestones to ensure performance can be monitored effectively. The Council's ability to deliver against its priorities will continue to be monitored through its robust governance and corporate performance arrangements, including the quarterly performance reporting of milestones and measures to the Executive, and the regular review of governance actions and risks as part of the wider performance framework. By taking this approach, we can continue to incorporate local and community priorities, and requirements in relation to housing performance and accountability to the Regulator of Social Housing, and the new Office for Local Government (OfLoG).

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

5.1.1 The Council has already refocused resources to support the priorities outlined in the Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan through the budgetary cycle for 2024/25. Where possible existing budgets have been identified within key service areas to fund activities. Any additional resources required to support the programme over and above that identified will be reflected as part of the financial planning and budget setting process for both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account.

5.1.2 Legal Implications

5.1.3 There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

5.2 Risk Implications

5.2.1 The risks associated with individual service areas and objectives will need to be considered through normal service planning processes.

5.2.2 A strategic risk register has been developed for the Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan to ensure risk is effectively managed across the programme. It will be monitored on a quarterly basis.

5.3 Policy and Service Delivery Implications

5.3.1 The Corporate Plan is the keystone in the Council's policy framework. It sets out the Council's strategic priorities and informs the corporate improvement and change programme.

5.3.2 The Corporate Plan impacts on all Council services, and this will be reflected in all Business Unit Service Plans for 2024/25.

5.4 Equalities Implications

5.4.1 The Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan seeks to advance equality and improve the health, wellbeing and life opportunities of residents through delivery of

key actions within the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), Technology & Innovation, and Health & Wellbeing cross-cutting themes. More broadly, a number of social determinants inherent in the 5 strategic priorities will be key factors that influence better outcomes for residents, specifically through the provision and maintenance of good quality housing; investment in green spaces and neighbourhoods; access to education/training; development of a thriving culture and leisure scene; and effective budget management to ensure ongoing statutory and discretionary service provision.

- 5.4.2 To ensure that potential impacts across Protected Characteristic (PC) groups are fully considered an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been completed. Completion of the EqIA indicates that implementation of the actions identified in Making Stevenage Even Better will positively advance equality, and where additional actions could be introduced these will be considered in the development of the EDI Action Plan 2024/25 programme of work. In addition, as part of the existing EqIA process, all individual projects, policy or service changes associated with the 5 strategic priorities and 3 cross-cutting themes will require completion of an EqIA as set out in the Council's EDI Policy (2022-2026).

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Executive Report: [Future Town Future Council](#)
- Stevenage Borough Council's Residents Survey (2021)
- Stevenage Borough Council's Tenants Survey (2021)
- Cooperative Neighbourhoods Resident Priorities Survey (2023) funded through the Proptech Engagement Fund
- Making Stevenage Even Better Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA)

APPENDICES

Appendix A - Making Stevenage Even Better 2024-2027

Appendix B – Making Stevenage Even Better Consultation Report

Appendix C – Plan on a Page Example (2024/25)