

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Monday, 12 February 2024

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, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Graham Snell and Baroness Dr Sharon Taylor of Stevenage, OBE.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 6.45pm

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

There were no apologies for absence received nor declarations of interest made at the meeting.

2 **MINUTES - 16 JANUARY 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee held on 16 January 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **DRAFT E&E SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2024-25**

The Chair introduced the item and explained that items suggested for inclusion in the work programme could be matters that would be suitable for a main review, a one-off update on past reviews or a one-off performance review at an individual meeting. In addition to this, the Committee would be invited to undertake a number of pre-scrutiny policy development items ahead of their consideration at the Executive.

The Chair reviewed the suggestions that Members had provided prior to the meeting and were detailed in the report at paragraph 5 and those made verbally at the meeting as follows:

Town Centre Regeneration

The Committee discussed ways that the Committee might approach such a large issue and it was agreed that it would be best to invite officers to provide an overarching presentation on the current position with the Town Centre Regeneration project and for the Committee to then settle on a thematic approach for an aspect of the project. Members suggested the following thematic options:

- Links to the skills agenda, job creation and apprenticeships in retail, hospitality and the night-time economy and construction.
- Place making
- Use of public space in the town centre

The Chair stated that he would steer away from matters that were the domain of the Planning and Development Committee.

A Member suggested that as part of the overview presentation by Regeneration Officers, that a view of what the town might look like in 10 years' time would be useful.

Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

Members suggested that as the LEP was being subsumed into the County Council a representative from HCC LEP should be invited to attend to brief Members on what impact this might have on the relationship between SBC and the LEP. It was noted that Mark Doran was the new director at HCC with responsibility for the LEP.

Climate Change/Climate Emergency

It was agreed that this would remain on the Committee's work programme as a standing item. The Chair suggested that like way this issue had been covered in 2023-24, the item should be brought to the Committee on two occasions. Once in October/November, when the Annual Scrutiny report is considered at the Executive and Council and then again in March to specifically drill down to issues of interest to Members.

The Chair stated that he would be looking for Environment and Economy Select Committee Members to lead on specific issues regarding the Climate Emergency e.g., Biodiversity, biofuels of the Council's vehicle fleet, decarbonisation of the estate and Housing Stock etc.

Tree Management

Several Members spoke in favour of scrutinising Tree Management. Members stated that the Council had not communicated this policy well to residents. The Council need to explain this better to the public to make it clear that it has little ability to be proactive given the limited resources at its disposal, but any potential review should look at what support could be given to residents who have problems with tree management. A Member suggested that a review of tree management could also look at the planning policy of 3 for 1 trees, which is an SBC policy and needs to be included in the next iteration of the emerging local plan planning policy document.

Parking enforcement

It was noted that it is hard to recruit to this position given the current salary and the difficult nature of the role, which was not a popular area to work in. Members were interested in the level of parking enforcement that was being undertaken. The perception was that very few fixed penalty notices were being issued.

Recycling

A Member strongly encouraged the Committee to add Recycling to the Committee's work programme as they had been undertaking their own informal research with residents and relevant staff regarding this issue. The Member stated that residents are very confused regarding what they should be recycling and into what receptacle items should be placed. In addition, the Refuse and Recycling operatives are finding it increasingly frustrating that recycling is often contaminated when it is collected. The Council encourages people to look at the web site for advice, but anecdotally, it is thought that by and large residents don't look at it. The Members stated that Recycling is currently confusing, and consistency was needed. The Council is currently reviewing its services in light of the Governments 'Simpler Recycling' announcements, and it is expected that an update will be brought to this meeting in due course.

Indoor Market

A Member requested that the Indoor Market be added to the work programme for a brief update at a future meeting. There was a perception amongst the market traders that the footfall had been affected since the bus station was relocated.

Fly-tipping Enforcement

A Member asked what happens around enforcement for fly-tipping? What can the Council do to deter and stop reoffenders? The Member reported that it was often the same people in same area of their ward that were repeat offenders.

Revisit the cost-of-living review.

A Member asked that the Committee revisit the cost-of-living crisis review as the pressure on household budgets had not gone away and they didn't want the Council to lose sight of this important issue. It was agreed that there should be a one-off item on the cost of living.

In response to a question on the new Planning requirement for Biodiversity net gain, the Assistant Director, Planning Policy stated that the new policy had just come into force in February 2024 so time would be needed to see what impact this has had.

A Member stated that it would be important for the Committee to be flexible and to build in some space into the work programme to be able to react to events or to a change in Government if new priorities and requirements were given to local government.

With regard to the Committee's pre-scrutiny policy development item on updates to the Council's Biodiversity Action Plan on 27 February 2024, a Member made a special request that the importance of chalk streams to the region and local area be addressed. 85% of the World's Chalk Streams, which offer unique biodiversity, are in South and East of England. It is very important that their unique status is explained to Members and to the wider public and why they are so important to biodiversity.

and the climate.

The Chair stated that with regard to the work programme he was prepared to give way on his desire to have an update new station gateway as it was not possible for the Committee to do everything on the list.

The Chair stated that he was not keen for the Committee to look at Residential Parking as a scrutiny topic, as there was no satisfactory solution open to the Council that would alleviate the need for more provision across the town which was not possible to achieve within the geography of the area or with the budgets that are available and would only lead to further raising of expectations and then disappointment for residents.

A Member suggested that it would be helpful for newly elected Members to be given an induction training session either just ahead or at the first meeting of the new Municipal Year to explain how scrutiny is undertaken in Select Committees.

It was **RESOLVED**

1. that the Scrutiny Members' feedback on ideas for improving Scrutiny be noted;
2. (i) that having considered the ideas put forward by individual Scrutiny Members, the Committee determines the matters to be added to a work programme of potential Scrutiny review items for 2024-25 as follows:
 - Town Centre Regeneration – Initially an overarching Officer presentation to be provided and then a more focused thematic approach around the local skills agenda, access to work opportunities, placemaking, night-time economy etc.
 - Offer a training session on or before the first meeting in the new Municipal Year to orientate newly elected Members regarding how scrutiny is conducted.
 - Ongoing watching brief on the Climate Emergency – continue with 2 sessions during the year in Oct/Nov to coincide with the Annual Climate Change update to Council and in March to drill down on some specific measures.
 - Invite the HCC to provide a briefing on what the impact might be to the workings of the LEP now it is being brought into the County Council.
 - Tree Management. Officers to provide a one-off performance review session on how the Tree Management Policy is explained to the public to counter the general misconceptions of what is possible within the Councils current resources.
 - Provide a one-off performance review session on Parking Enforcement with some details on the service and the number of fines administered.
 - Receive an update on the current Refuse and Recycling service and look at possible policy changes once Government Guidance is issued in this area.
 - Provide a one-off review update on the Indoor Market following up on

actions from the 2017 Scrutiny review.

- Provide a one-off review update on the current position with the Cost-of-living review.
- Biodiversity Net Gain – The Committee is considering the Biodiversity Action Plan as a piece of pre-scrutiny policy development work in February 2024 and may look to bring back future updates, if Committee time allows, including further sessions on the Tree Management Strategy and the Green Space Strategy.

(ii) that the Chair will consider the above suggestions made by the Committee and devise a draft work programme schedule that will be shared with the Committee when it meets in the new Municipal Year in June 2024, comprising a main scrutiny review item(s), one-off focused meetings or individual committee item updates.

3. that the process to carry out pre-scrutiny policy development work be noted.

4 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR