

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 27 March 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 and Baroness Taylor.

**Start / End** Start Time: 6.00pm

**Time:** End Time: 7.45pm

### 1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Andy McGuinness.

### 2 MINUTES - 27 FEBRUARY & 6 MARCH 2024

- a) It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 27 February 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the following addition under Item 2:

Some Members suggested that the use of bee bricks in walls, and leaving holes in fences for Hedgehogs, would assist local biodiversity.

- b) It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 6 March 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to an amendment on Page 4, Paragraph 3, where the Member was not suggesting the Police should be instructed to do anything but was making a comment on the number of unclaimed bikes that could be utilised were there avenues available.

### 3 STEVENAGE SKILLS FRAMEWORK

The Chair introduced the committee's work on the Stevenage skills framework. He highlighted the significant developments in Stevenage concerning the skills agenda, including advancements in STEM fields and the presence of leading companies such as GSK, Airbus, Autolus and MBDA. He emphasised the pressing need to address the skills gap, particularly in life sciences, to create more opportunities for the residents of Stevenage.

The Chair introduced the members of the presentation panel. Operations Director of Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership Norman Jennings, Principal and CEO of North Herts College Kit Davies, Strategic Director Tom Pike, and Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager Daryl Jedowski.

The Strategic Director expressed gratitude to the committee for allocating time in their work programme for the presentation. He acknowledged the busy schedule of the Environment & Economy Select Committee and recognised the significance of the policy and strategy under discussion and emphasised its priority in maximising benefits for the people of Stevenage.

The Strategic Director highlighted the collaborative effort involved in developing the Stevenage Work Skills Framework, involving various stakeholders such as businesses, education providers, and sector specialists and thanked the Principal and CEO of North Herts College and the Operations Director of Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership for their contributions to the project. He underscored the project's aim to address the needs of local people, including young individuals, those facing barriers, and individuals seeking career progression or stable employment.

The Strategic Director highlighted that although focusing on skills was not a traditional or statutory duty of a district or borough council, it had become a priority in Stevenage's new Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan. He emphasised the importance of aligning the local skills framework with existing policies and initiatives to maximise impact.

The Strategic Director outlined the assets in Stevenage's economy and local infrastructure, including the STEM Discovery Centre, the SITEC Innovation Centre at North Herts College, and opportunities in the life science and engineering sectors. He also acknowledged the challenges in navigating the complex skills environment and addressing issues such as unemployment and gender pay gaps.

The Strategic Director thanked the Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager for his work in securing funding and driving initiatives to benefit the community.

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager provided an overview of the funding secured over the past few years to support various initiatives related to community wealth building and improving outcomes for Stevenage residents.

He highlighted funding received from three areas:

- The Community Renewal Fund, through which £750k was secured to support community wealth-building initiatives. He explained that this funding aimed to create a more inclusive economy focused on positive outcomes for residents.
- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund through which £1m was secured focused on improving outcomes, life chances for communities and was focussed on three priority areas. People and Skills, Supporting Local Business and Communities and Places.
- Mission 44 – Pioneering Young STEM Futures which was aimed at providing opportunities for young people from underrepresented backgrounds. He highlighted the program's focus on increasing access to opportunities and providing support tailored to the needs of individuals. Phase One of the

programme is currently being delivered, with Phase Two set to begin in the new academic year.

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager mentioned ongoing initiatives, such as the Workwell project with North and East Herts Integrated Care System, aimed at helping individuals with long-term health issues or disabilities overcome barriers to employment. He emphasised that all these efforts were based on conversations with stakeholders and aimed to address key themes identified, such as providing tangible job opportunities, access to industry, and clear communication pathways.

The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager stressed the importance of recognising the diversity of sectors beyond STEM, including culture and creative industries, public services, construction and retail, in enriching opportunities for job seekers in Stevenage.

A Member asked a question related to the career pathways in STEM for young people in the next five years. The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager highlighted diverse opportunities within STEM which included Autolus as an example where various types qualifications could lead to growth opportunities, with organisations not just looking for PHD candidates from top universities, particularly as smaller organisations begin to grow.

A Member raised concerns about the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields. The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager acknowledged the generational challenges but expressed optimism about engaging young women in STEM subjects. The importance of early engagement in primary schools was emphasised, with initiatives like the Primary Science Quality Mark and the Pioneering Young STEM Futures program.

A Member sought specific examples of projects supported by the Community Wealth Building strategy. The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager provided examples, which included apprenticeships and training support for local businesses and initiatives to enhance their visibility and presence in the community. Another example was work with the Social Inclusion Partnership which looked at how the Council supported its local voluntary sector and provided support around alternative governance methods for business including co-operatives & mutual societies.

A Member asked a question related to the inclusivity and capacity of the Mission 44 program to accommodate targeted groups. The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager explained the finite nature of the program due to funding constraints but highlighted plans to scale up initiatives in the future phases to cater to a broader audience.

A Member asked a question regarding future prospects for current year seven students. The Cooperative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager acknowledged the complexity of predicting future outcomes but emphasised the importance of tracking cohorts through their education journey to assess the impact of initiatives.

A Member commented that unemployment figures shown in the presentation did not

include those who were employed on zero-hour contracts who were in effect underemployed nor did it show those employed in the shadow economy.

The Chair reiterated the importance of rigorous evaluation and quality assurance in ongoing and future initiatives. The Chair invited the Principal and CEO of North Herts College, Kit Davies, to proceed with the next presentation.

The Principal and CEO of North Herts College provided an overview of the work of the college. He highlighted its role as a general further education institution with multiple campuses and specialist centres. The college boasted a large staff and served a diverse student population, including full-time students, apprentices, and adult learners. It also operated as a schools trust and managed the STEM Discovery Centre.

The Principal and CEO of North Herts College discussed recent changes in the skills sector driven by national policies such as the Skills White Paper and the Skills Bill. These changes emphasised the importance of meeting local and regional skills needs, expanding higher technical education, and promoting lifelong learning.

The Principal and CEO of North Herts College explained the significance of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) in identifying and addressing specific skills needs within communities. The LSIP process involved collaboration with local stakeholders to develop strategies for skills development tailored to regional priorities.

The Principal and CEO of North Herts College outlined various initiatives and partnerships undertaken by the college to address local skills gaps and support economic growth. These initiatives included training programmes in collaboration with industry partners, the establishment of specialized training academies such as the NHS Healthcare Academy, which has real-life medical equipment and wards for students to work on during their fast track to degree apprenticeships, and the development of sustainable technologies and engineering campuses.

The Principal and CEO of North Herts College acknowledged the challenges faced by the further education sector, including funding disparities compared to schools, bureaucratic obstacles, and uncertainties surrounding curriculum reforms.

The Principal and CEO of North Herts College emphasised the college's commitment to delivering high-quality education and skills training that aligned with local needs and aspirations. He showcased the college's achievements and ongoing efforts to overcome challenges and drive positive change in the community. The Chair then invited the Operations Director of Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership to present to the Committee.

The Operations Director at Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) presented the LEP's perspective on the skills agenda. He advised that The LEP was a business-led organisation focused on growing the economy of Hertfordshire, which included job creation, and raising workforce skills.

The LEP had three main areas of focus: business support and enterprise, growing key sectors, and skills and employment, and collaborated with Hertfordshire County

Council and the Department for Work and Pensions to develop skills and employment strategies. The skills strategy focused on themes like supporting the future workforce, achieving full employment, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), sector development, and place-making.

The Operations Director at Hertfordshire LEP advised the Committee that LEP saw its role as a conduit, bringing together key partners to facilitate action in areas such as funding and business engagement.

The Operations Director at Hertfordshire LEP explained how the LEP operated the Hertfordshire Careers Hub in partnership with the Careers and Enterprise Company. This initiative aimed to align businesses with education and provide balanced careers advice to young people. In addition to this the LEP funded the development of Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal, which served as a centralised platform for young people to access information on careers, jobs, apprenticeships, and training opportunities.

The LEP had invested significantly in Stevenage's regeneration, including funding for initiatives like the Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst and SITEC. They also supported the STEM Discovery Centre, that aimed to inspire young people in STEM fields.

The LEP worked closely with schools and colleges in Stevenage. The LEP facilitated partnerships between education and local businesses to ensure that young people had access to relevant career pathways and opportunities. This included Generation Events that brought together young people and businesses, facilitated connections, and provided career advice and opportunities. The LEP had held several of these events across Hertfordshire, including in Stevenage.

A Member asked a question regarding the influence of employers in determining content of courses to ensure they were sector specific and relevant to the local economy. The Operations Director of Hertfordshire LEP and the Principal and CEO of North Herts College highlighted how the LEP and the College were responsive to the needs of local employers and developed course content accordingly.

A Member asked a question related to sustainable and green jobs. The Principal and CEO of North Herts College responded that the College was focussed on integrating sustainability into its curriculum and provided examples of initiatives that included hybrid and electric vehicle courses.

A Member asked a question related to the complexity of funding streams for education. The Operations Director of Hertfordshire LEP and the Principal and CEO of North Herts College elaborated on the challenges of navigating various funding sources and the administrative burden it created.

A Member inquired about English and Maths resits and the challenges associated with them. The Principal and CEO of North Herts College explained the funding obligations for providing these courses and highlighted the need for flexibility in delivering qualifications to meet students' needs.

A Member expressed concerns about equity in education, particularly regarding opportunities for students pursuing level three or apprenticeship courses. The Principal and CEO of North Herts College assured that students at all levels had access to industry-standard resources and facilities, including virtual reality technology.

A Member highlighted the importance of collaboration between educational institutions and the community to provide comprehensive support for students. The Principal and CEO of North Herts College advised of the College's efforts to collaborate with schools where they provided impartial advice and guidance to students.

The Chair thanked the presentation panel for their contributions.

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**CHAIR**