

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 17 September 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Forhad Chowdhury, Alistair Gordon, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Graham Snell, Nigel Williams and Jade Woods

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 Councillors Leanne Brady, Andy McGuinness and Ellie Plater.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - 16 JULY 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 16 July 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

At this juncture, the Chair announced a change in the agenda order and switched Item 3, "Stevenage Skills Agenda Scrutiny Review - Mapping Document" with Item 4, "Stevenage Skills Agenda – Interview with Stevenage Works Team".

The Chair outlined the focus of the meeting, which was a review of the skills agenda in Stevenage. The committee aimed to explore the local community's engagement with the economy and workforce development.

3 STEVENAGE SKILLS AGENDA SCRUTINY REVIEW - MAPPING DOCUMENT

The Chair introduced the Stevenage Skills Agenda Scrutiny Review – Mapping Document and highlighted upcoming site visits to SITEC at North Herts College and the STEM Discovery Centre at Airbus.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Committee noted the Stevenage Skills Agenda Scrutiny Review – Mapping Document.

STEVENAGE SKILLS AGENDA - INTERVIEW WITH STEVENAGE WORKS TEAM

The Chair introduced the guest speakers.

Greta Gardner, the Council's Investment Project Support Manager, would provide insights into the team's work with the local economy and community.

Charlotte Blizzard-Welch, CEO of Citizens Advice Stevenage, would offer a perspective on the challenges faced by individuals in the Stevenage workforce, particularly in relation to skills development and re-entering the job market.

The Chair highlighted the Committee's intent to balance discussions between advanced technological sectors (e.g., life sciences and engineering) and the broader challenges faced by various segments of the local workforce.

In addition to the guest speakers, the Chair welcomed Daryl Jedowski, the Council's Corporate Policy and Performance Manager, and Carol Richardson, newly appointed as the Council's Economy and Skills Partnership Officer.

The Investment Project Support Manager provided the Committee with an overview of Stevenage Works, which focused on delivering social value and supporting local employment through partnerships. The initiative was born from a collaboration between Stevenage Borough Council, North Herts College, and Job Centre Plus in 2017/18. It was established to ensure social value from the town's major refurbishment and regeneration contracts.

The Committee heard that the goal was to streamline job opportunities, apprenticeships, and work experience for local residents while encouraging developers and contractors to leave a positive legacy.

The Committee were advised that Stevenage Works operated as a partnership between the Council, North Herts College, and Job Centre Plus, and collaborated with contractors and developers in the area. Contractors working on large developments in the town were required to create a skills plan under Section 106, which was monitored by Stevenage Works. If they failed to meet their commitments, financial penalties were imposed, and funds were redirected to training initiatives. Regular negotiations took place with developers, ensuring they fulfilled their social value obligations, such as providing apprenticeships and engaging in community projects.

The Investment Project Support Manager informed the Committee that Contractors were expected to contribute to the community in various ways, including through:

- The provision of job opportunities, apprenticeships, and work placements.
- Local supply chain usage, ensuring money stayed within Stevenage.
- Engaging with schools, offering work experience, and providing community support.

The Committee heard an example of contractors having volunteered for a local

initiative, through the installation of a long-needed bench at Hampson Park. The Investment Project Support Manager informed the Committee that Stevenage Works had helped more than 550 individuals attend training courses and more than 180 obtaining CSCS Cards for construction site work. Some contractors had often assisted with CV writing and mock interviewing, contributing to upskilling efforts within the local community.

The Committee heard about the Community Chest Fund that collated donations from contractors and developers, which were then allocated to local community projects. A panel, comprised of contributing developers, reviewed bids and awarded funds to initiatives such as the Bedwell Rangers, who received support with purchasing team attire. All funded projects were required to provide evidence of how the money had been spent.

The Investment Project Support Manager advised the Committee that, beyond construction, Stevenage Works led on community activities, such as pond clearance projects and events at independent living schemes. In addition, contractors often sponsored local events, including Stevenage Day, and had actively supported the Council's awards programme.

Highlighting future plans, the Investment Project Support Manager informed the Committee that Stevenage Works aimed to expand beyond construction, with initial discussions focussed on health and social care sectors. The team were enhancing their communication channels whilst continuing efforts focussed on ensuring long-term sustainability and effective collaboration with local businesses.

A Member asked questions related to the figures provided in the presentation, plans to work with large developers and concerns about ensuring local recruitment, particularly for high-skilled roles. The Investment Project Support Manager confirmed that the figures regarding training numbers was cumulative, with many courses offered in partnership with North Herts College and some delivered online. Some courses from external providers had not been included in the tally. The Investment Project Support Manager advised the Committee that the Redrow site in question fell under the jurisdiction of East Herts District Council and therefore did not collaborate with Stevenage Works. They added that they were looking to pursue a partnership with Bellway, particularly for the Forster Country Park development.

A Member questioned whether the courses were mostly for younger people, and how older individuals, disabled persons, or those long-term sick were included. The Investment Project Support Manager explained that while many referrals come from Jobcentre Plus, people could self-refer, and Stevenage Works provided additional funding for vulnerable individuals. They also collaborated with organisations like Track and Step2Skills to ensure disabled and vulnerable individuals were supported through flexible apprenticeship schemes and specialised training.

A Member asked how Stevenage Works measured success, particularly given some data on outcomes was incomplete. The Investment Project Support Manager acknowledged that while not every individual's progress could be tracked, they received positive feedback and focused on ensuring local employment by holding developers to their Section 106 obligations. They added that employers were held

accountable for meeting their key performance indicators (KPIs) and were only signed off once these obligations were fulfilled.

A Member asked about ensuring good working conditions for people employed through the schemes. The Investment Project Support Manager explained that developers and contractors were bound by employment legislation, and Stevenage Works maintained regular communication with them, meeting monthly or bi-monthly to monitor progress and apprenticeships.

A Member asked how local supply chains were monitored, and whether companies are required to source locally. The Investment Project Support Manager noted that while some specialised work could not be sourced locally, contractors were evaluated on their use of local labour and goods, as well as their commitment to apprenticeships, sustainability, and green initiatives during the tendering process. She also shared that contractors were required to disclose their supply chain details to ensure compliance with these priorities. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager shared that a study conducted a few years ago in collaboration with the Centre for Local Economic Studies revealed a surprising number of local organisations benefiting from council procurements, even from those solely procured through the council. This analysis highlighted the significant positive impact on the local economy.

The Committee then received a presentation from the CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage and were informed that Citizens Advice Stevenage was a local charity that provided free, confidential advice to help local residents overcome various issues. The CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage, advised the committee that their organisation utilised data to campaign on local issues and gain insights into community challenges. These issues included unemployment, underemployment, skills gaps, and insufficient qualifications that affected job stability and financial wellbeing.

The Committee were informed that, from January to August 2024, 17% of Citizens Advice Stevenage clients had been unemployed and that, of those employed, only 50% had full-time positions.

The CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage provided the Committee with evidence of the barriers faced by adults, young families, and Universal Credit claimants. Many clients had struggled with benefits, debt and housing which impacted on their ability to focus on the search for employment. High childcare costs, and limited availability, had forced low-income parents into part-time work or out of the job market altogether. Regarding Universal Credit, new thresholds and conditions created additional barriers for claimants, sometimes worsening their situation.

Addressing the impact of low-paid work, the CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage, informed the Committee that low-skilled, low-paid jobs often led to financial instability and subsequently a higher risk of homelessness. Insecure work with fluctuating hours made it difficult for individuals to achieve stability and think about growth. The Committee heard that volunteering provided work experience and could lead to permanent employment. A significant portion of volunteers were motivated by the desire to improve their confidence and job prospects. Success stories were shared

that included people who had transitioned from volunteer roles to paid employment.

The CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage, concluded with emphasis for the need for collaborative efforts to overcome the barriers to employment and improve support systems for individuals facing job market challenges.

Members sought clarification regarding the sources of funding for Citizens Advice Stevenage and how the budget would be allocated. Specific concerns were raised about the sustainability of funding streams and any potential shortfalls. The CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage, confirmed that the project was primarily funded through a mix of government grants and external partnerships, including contributions from local businesses and charitable organisations. They assured members that the funding structure had been designed with long-term sustainability in mind, and that regular reviews would be conducted to monitor spending. A contingency fund had also been established to address any unforeseen expenses or shortfalls.

Members asked questions related to the work of the Department of Work and Pensions within the local area. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager responded that while the Department of Work and Pensions engaged in valuable work, especially through initiatives like Stevenage Works, their role was often more passive, with the Council taking the lead. He suggested that this broader, one-size-fits-all approach was not always suitable for every locality, particularly Stevenage where the issue could be framed as a tension between macro-level strategies and the need for more tailored, micro-level approaches.

Members asked about the involvement and backing of key stakeholders and specifically what types of organisations, in an ideal world, could emerge locally to help alleviate pressures and the kinds of offerings that would make it easier for local organisations to assist people, despite the broader national challenges.

The CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage, emphasised the importance of a holistic approach when supporting individuals, both in the workplace and beyond. She highlighted that people could not be compartmentalised and addressing only one aspect of their lives often failed to resolve the root cause of issues. They provided an example where an employee's productivity may drop due to unresolved personal issues, such as dealing with energy bills during lunch breaks and managing family responsibilities after work. These personal difficulties could directly impact job performance, which is why Citizens Advice Stevenage advocated for employee advice and support services to be integrated into employee engagement programmes.

The CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage, expressed a desire to see reforms in the Access to Work programme, which provided support for individuals with disabilities or health conditions. She noted that despite Citizens Advice Stevenage's willingness to provide comprehensive support to employees, budget limitations made it difficult to do so without external assistance.

The CEO, Citizens Advice Stevenage, concluded by stressing the need for multi-agency collaboration to address the full range of a person's needs, cautioning against the practice of addressing problems in isolation.

It was **RESOLVED** that the information provided would be incorporated into the scrutiny review of the Stevenage Skills Agenda.

5 **E&E SELECT COMMITTEE ACTION TRACKER**

The Chair introduced the E&E Select Committee Action Tracker.

A Member raised a query that one of the recommendations from the Bus Scrutiny item was missing from the Action Tracker. The Scrutiny Officer responded that they would look into the issue and update Members in due course.

The Scrutiny Officer informed the Committee that the Action Tracker had been designed in a digital format that included links to relevant committee documents such as previous scrutiny reviews.

Members raised concerns related to the implementation of the Stevenage Cycle Hire Scheme particularly regarding safety concerns.

A Member highlighted a bay that had been marked out near Shephall Shops in close proximity to the canyon that could encourage anti-social behaviour.

Another Member raised additional safety concerns, particularly for visually impaired individuals. It had been asked, during a previous presentation, whether the painted bays would be detectable by someone using a white stick. The response assured that the painted lines would be raised to make them locatable, but upon inspection, it had been found this was not the case. The painted bays lacked any tactile markers, making it easy for someone to walk into a bike unintentionally, especially as some bays were placed near pedestrian crossings.

The Chair acknowledged the concerns and suggested contacting the appropriate Portfolio Holders and other relevant authorities to address the issues, encouraging further input from committee members. He agreed to follow up on these matters and coordinate with those responsible for disabilities and equalities.

It was **RESOLVED** that the E&E Select Committee Action Tracker be noted and that queries regarding missing recommendations and the Cycle Hire Scheme be followed up.

6 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was none.

7 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

8 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR