

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 8 October 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Andy McGuinness (Vice Chair),
Leanne Brady, Forhad Chowdhury, Alistair Gordon, Sarah Mead, Claire
Parris, Ellie Plater CC, Nigel Williams and Jade Woods

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 8.00pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Graham Snell.

There were no declarations of interest.

At this juncture, the chair welcomed the guest speakers in attendance, Theresa Kilworth (Barnardo's Children's Services), Jackie Johnson (Deputy Head at Barnwell Secondary School), Lahaina Sutherland (Stevenage Youth Mayor) and Frankie Duncan (Deputy Stevenage Youth Mayor). The Chair also welcomed Carol Richardson, the Council's Enterprise and Skills Partnership Officer.

2 MINUTES - 17 SEPTEMBER 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Environment and Economy Select Committee meeting held on 17 September 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the chair.

3 INTERVIEW WITH STEVENAGE CHILDREN'S CENTRE

Theresa Kilworth from Barnardo's Children's Services provided an overview of the services offered by family centres in Stevenage, specifically addressing the funding available for childcare to support parents returning to work. She highlighted the recent government funding changes, including:

- 9 to 23 months funding: 15 hours of funded childcare, increasing to 30 hours in September 2025, for families earning under £100k annually.
- Two-year-old funding: Available for low-income families or those on benefits, currently at 15 hours and increasing to 30 hours next year.
- Three- and four-year-old funding: Universal 15 hours of childcare, with an

additional 15 hours for working families earning under £100k.

Theresa outlined the available childcare facilities in Stevenage, including eight day nurseries and 81 childminders, noting gaps in provision for certain age groups in pre-schools. She emphasised the importance of sufficient childcare availability for parents looking to return to work and discussed the pressures on local childcare settings, including staff ratios, facility limitations, and the need for 7-day childcare services.

Feedback from parents indicated that the funding helped reduce the financial burden of returning to work, though challenges remained, especially for those who worked shifts or weekends. Childcare providers raised concerns about matching specific childcare needs with available spaces and highlighted difficulties in staffing and facilities.

The presentation concluded with suggestions for improving support for families, such as reviewing toddler group provisions and addressing the decreasing take-up of two-year-old funding. Theresa also mentioned the potential future need for extended childcare hours due to the increasing demands of a 24/7 work culture.

Members asked a number of questions related to:

- Information Clarity
- Funding
- Balancing Work with Childcare
- Financial Viability of Providing Services
- Challenges Faced by Settings
- Training and Reskilling

In response, the Committee heard that:

- Parents often found the information confusing, particularly when accessing funding through online platforms. Many struggled to understand what they were entitled to, and this issue was compounded for those without internet access or with limited literacy skills.
- While parents could access 15 hours of funded childcare, they often had to pay for additional hours, particularly outside term time. This led many to rely on informal family support during holidays.
- While no weekend childcare provision currently existed in Stevenage, it might be something that would need to be considered in the future, particularly as more and more parents returned to work in roles that fell outside of traditional working hours.
- While most nurseries were managing, they faced difficulties in recruitment, particularly for staff to cover opening and closing times. For most settings, the loss of just one key staff member would significantly affect their operations.
- The potential of new T-level qualifications that involved hands-on learning, could help nurseries train staff more efficiently.

Members highlighted that parents needed to apply for childcare funding several months in advance and had to regularly reapply to ensure continued support. In

addition to this, many childminders refused to take children over the age of three due to financial constraints.

Theresa acknowledged these issues adding that the process could be challenging for parents, especially when navigating various types of funding and settings that accept them. She noted that the limited number of nurseries in Stevenage, combined with the financial strain on childminders, made these pressing issues.

The Chair thanked Theresa for her contribution.

4 **INTERVIEW WITH BARNWELL SECONDARY SCHOOL ASSISTANT HEAD TEACHER - JACKIE JOHNSON**

Responding to a question from the Chair regarding collaboration, Jackie Johnson, Deputy Head at Barnwell Secondary School highlighted the strong partnership between secondary schools in Stevenage, specifically in sharing resources due to teacher shortages, such as students studying A-level Chemistry at neighbouring schools. She spoke of a Stevenage 6th Form Partnership, which fostered collaboration between sixth forms but faced challenges in recruitment, especially for STEM subjects. The relationship between schools and North Herts College was slightly competitive, given that both offer post-16 programmes.

The Committee heard that Barnwell had a successful collaboration with the University of Hertfordshire, benefiting from its widening access programme. This provided financial support, enabling Barnwell to run programmes like the Brilliant Club, which helped raise aspirations by giving students access to top universities like Oxford and Cambridge. Jackie praised the University's efforts in promoting higher education and broadening student horizons, noting that it had helped students see university as a viable path.

In response to a question regarding T-Levels, Jackie discussed challenges, particularly due to financial constraints and work placement requirements that made them less appealing compared to A Levels. She advised the Committee that Barnwell School could adopt T Levels, but their previous status as a "Requires Improvement" school had restricted them from offering this pathway to date.

The Chair asked a question related to mentoring. Jackie responded that mentoring was a significant focus at Barnwell School, supported by programmes like "Zero Gravity", which helped disadvantaged students connect with undergraduates to support their university applications.

Jackie described a "homegrown talent pipeline" where older students mentored younger ones, helping to create a supportive educational environment. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly benefited, as they often lacked parental support or role models. Jackie explained that mentoring from slightly older peers, who had firsthand experience, resonated more with students than when advice came from teachers. She envisioned a "mentoring spiral" that could extend beyond secondary schools to include partnerships with primary schools.

The Committee heard an anecdote about a student, who had faced significant obstacles but was supported through mentoring and succeeded in securing a university place. This highlighted the emotional impact and importance of providing those opportunities to students who face socio-economic challenges.

A Member posed a multi-layered question regarding the impact of mental health on a lack of aspirations in young people. Jackie responded that post-COVID mental health issues had risen, and schools faced challenges with attendance and behaviour. The Committee heard that while schools had various support networks in place, connecting with local employers, especially post-COVID, had become more difficult, particularly due to hybrid working environments. Jackie also mentioned that face-to-face work experience had become less accessible, which affected students' development of employability skills.

When asked about degree apprenticeships, Jackie advised the Committee that they were difficult to access for students with no prior industry experience, which often skewed national statistics. Apprenticeships were highly competitive, and students needed more support in preparing for the interview processes.

A Member expressed concern for students who weren't academically inclined or motivated, particularly those who chose subjects like "triple sport" because there weren't enough places in more relevant vocational courses. They pointed out the issue of students working long hours in low-paid jobs, sometimes out of necessity due to the cost of living and worried that those students lack clear pathways to fulfilling careers and often remained in jobs with limited prospects.

Jackie acknowledged those concerns, noting that schools must balance offering courses with ensuring students didn't fail due to poor subject suitability. The Committee heard of a pre-apprenticeship programme aimed at vulnerable students who would struggle with traditional academic routes, but also the difficulties of limited resources in schools. Jackie advised that while some students needed to pursue alternative qualifications or careers, it could be argued that sometimes those pathways could lead to future opportunities.

Members challenged the notion that only vulnerable students needed support, highlighting that some students simply missed opportunities because their chosen fields weren't available. Jackie agreed but stated that schools could only offer courses that were financially viable.

The Chair thanked Jackie Johnson for her contribution to the meeting.

5 **INTERVIEW WITH YOUTH MAYOR AND DEPUTY YOUTH MAYOR**

The Chair welcomed Lahaina Sutherland and Frankie Duncan, the Council's Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor.

In response to a question related to the quality of career's advice in schools, the Youth Mayor expressed concerns about the lack of specialised career advisors at their school. Until recently, there had only been one advisor for approximately 900

students, who had now left, leaving a gap in support. They emphasised the importance of encouraging students to apply for opportunities like work placements, as many felt discouraged due to competitiveness and a fear of entering professional environments. The Deputy Youth Mayor added that careers advice in their school was limited to a single brief session and agreed there was insufficient pressure or guidance in helping students explore their career options. The Committee heard that there had been a general focus on university over apprenticeships or employment, with little information about alternative routes. Members expressed concerns regarding the lack of specialist, in person, careers advice available for students in schools acknowledging budget constraints.

The Chair asked a question related to the age at which students began to consider their career options. In response, the Deputy Youth Mayor commented that there was no blanket answer available but suggested that some students would start thinking about their career options around Year 8 or Year 9 as they began thinking about their GCSE options.

In response to a question regarding mock interviews, the Youth Mayor shared that they had one mock interview in Year 12, which was beneficial but suggested that such exercises should be more frequent. They also highlighted their school's efforts to assist students with CV writing, although some resources, such as Unifrog, were found unhelpful. The Deputy Youth Mayor had not yet received any mock interview opportunities, demonstrating variability between schools. Members noted that good CV writing was a critical skill often undervalued in schools.

Responding to a question related to work experience, the Deputy Youth Mayor advised the Committee that they had been able to secure a work experience placement but noted that those opportunities should be more widely vocalised in schools. They advised that their school had been supportive in securing placements, and they planned to seek experience in a solicitor's office. However, it was mentioned that data protection could be a barrier in some industries.

In response to a question regarding exam stress, both the Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor discussed the pressures of exam preparation, mentioning the support their school offered through revision sessions and rest breaks during exams. They highlighted that more could be done to inform students about available assistance.

The Chair expressed their appreciation for the Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor for their insightful contributions and thanked them for attending the session. Members commented that there was a significant disparity in access to careers advice for young people across schools in Stevenage. It was noted that certain students missed out on opportunities due to lack of information, with one suggestion being the creation of a dedicated page on the Council's website where work experience providers, and other businesses, could share key details such as open days, work experience opportunities and application deadlines. It was also suggested that such a page could include captions from officers, from across the Council, sharing their views on the specific skills required for certain job roles.

Members also discussed the challenge of engaging young people with Council platforms, observing that young people were less likely to visit these sites. It was

suggested that involving the Youth Mayor could help promote content relevant to young people. The Enterprise and Skills Partnership Officer added that there needed to be an emphasis on finding ways to better communicate with parents to ensure they are aware of the opportunities available.

Members remarked that while young people might not naturally engage with the Council's website, an awareness campaign could help to direct them to relevant information, similar to how residents access the site for services like bin collections.

Concerns were raised about competition between schools and colleges, with examples provided where institutions withheld information about external opportunities.

A recommendation was made that the Council explore the possibility of establishing an independent body to provide careers advice, similar to Citizens Advice, which could serve as a liaison between schools, local businesses, and employers.

6 UPDATE ON THE SITE VISIT TO NORTH HERTS COLLEGE SITEC UNIT

It was **RESOLVED** that the notes of the Chair and Scrutiny Officer, of the visit to North Herts College SITEC Unit, be noted.

7 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

There was none.

8 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

9 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was none.

CHAIR