

Meeting ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area Economy Skills & Transport

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FINAL REPORT – SKILLS AGENDA REVIEW

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“The richness of life is vast, and we all some measure of it, which is why stultified dreams are the cause of so much bitterness. It’s one thing to have vague idea that a better life than the one we have is possible, quite another to equip oneself with the knowledge to fulfil it” *Respectable, Lynsey Hanley.*

FORWARD FROM CHAIR – CLLR ROB BROOM

Whilst the committee has been working on the skills agenda, the government has brought a White Paper to Parliament (26/11/24), entitled Getting Britain Working. The White Paper covers a range of future policy relevance to this local review on skills and access to work. Much of which is contained in chapter 5 of the White Paper.

This chapter outlines the need to bring employment support and careers support closer together and acknowledges the current challenges with the Job Centre Plus and the National Careers Service.

The case for change cites that too few employers are using Job Centre Plus to recruit staff. The 2022 national figure showed 14% of employers used Job Centre Plus. Job Centre Plus and the National Careers Service, have been criticised for insufficiently unlooked progression and career opportunities for claimants, with no measurable

outcomes from the Department of Works and Pensions, and the Department of Education, for effective skills guidance.

Job Centre Plus approach is considered too centralised and does not value collaboration with local partners. The employment support provided is insufficiently personalised and focussed on benefit compliance.

The following areas will guide the future development of the service:

- 1) Aligning employment support so that it works better with skills and careers advice.
- 2) Enhanced relationship with local employers.
- 3) Principle of localism embedded in new service.
- 4) A nationally enhanced digital offer, where people can access support through channels that best meet their need.
- 5) Emphasis on personalised support.

Sanctioning of welfare benefits and conditionality will remain, but there will no longer be, local or national targets setting for sanctions, as a performance indicator.

The importance of Skills England working with local authorities, businesses, and education provider, in embedding the Local Skills Improvement Plan into Hertfordshire, and more specifically Stevenage, sets a top-down direction of travel for an improved skills landscape. Much of what this review has uncovered in the past six months, whilst talking to employers, education providers, and many others who have kindly given time to the review, has also emphasised the importance of local collaboration and coordination to raising and widening the local skills base, and improving access to work. This work cannot come at a more important time, as regeneration gathers pace in Stevenage, a town which already possess the biggest employment area in Hertfordshire, and sees new private and public sector investment coming in to the town.

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To consider the report and recommendations of the Environment & Economy Select Committee Scrutiny review into the skills agenda and how the Council is working with partners to maximise the opportunities of local residents to the job opportunities in the expanding employment sectors of life-sciences, aerospace and regeneration in Stevenage.
- 1.2 To consider barriers to work more generally, and what employment support is available locally, to enable residents to access work.

2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

- 2.1 When Members considered their work programme for the 2024-25 Municipal Year at its meeting on 12 February 2024 it was agreed to include a review item on the Skills Agenda and the way the Council was promoting and working with partners to provide opportunities for local residents in employment opportunities in the growth industries in Stevenage. The Committee had received a presentation on the Skills Agenda earlier in March

2024 which had laid the ground for a main scrutiny review for the Committee in the 2004/25 Municipal Year.

2.2 **Scope and focus of the review**

2.3 The Committee met on 16 July 2024 [E&E Select Committee - 16 July 2024 - Scoping Document](#) to agree the scope for the review, and it agreed should consider the following areas:

- Enquire about existing data re Stevenage Young People destinations post 16-18 education?
- What opportunities are out there re STEM training and job opportunities including apprenticeships?
- How can more young people from Stevenage find employment in the booming sectors of life-science, space industry and regeneration?
- What are the barriers to adults retraining and re-entering into employment?

2.3 **Process of the review**

2.3.1 The Committee met formally on 3 occasions in 2024 and informally with two site visits on 27 September and 18 October to undertake the review and received input from the following groups and people on the following dates:

- 16 July 2024 – draft scoping document and PowerPoint Presentation presented by Daryl Jedowski, SBC Corporate Policy and Performance Manager.
- 17 September 2024 – Interviews with Greta Gardiner, SBC Investment Project Support Manager who oversees the Stevenage Works programme, and Charlotte Blizzard-Welch, CEO of Stevenage Citizens Advice.
- 27 September 2024 – Site visit to North Herts College Science Innovation & Technology Centre (SITEC), with input from NH College CEO, Kit Davies, NH College Executive Director Corporate Services, Lizzie Jones and NH College Deputy Principal, Keith Turner.
- 8 October 2024 - Interviews with Theresa Kilworth, (Barnardo's Children's Services), Jackie Johnson, Deputy Head at Barnwell Secondary School, Lahaina Sutherland, Stevenage Youth Mayor and Frankie Duncan, Stevenage Deputy Youth Mayor.
- 18 October 2024 - Site visit to Airbus, with input from Lucinda Williams, Jo Roberston, Head of Early Careers and Dave Ledger Senior Aerospace Engineer.
- 12 December 2024 – Interview with Matt Partridge, Deputy Chair of Step2Skills, the Hertfordshire County Council service that provides adult community learning and employment support service opportunities.

- 2.3.2 Photo from the site visit to the Airbus Mars Yard, which houses the Mars Rover.



3 REVIEW FINDINGS

- 3.1 Activity that Stevenage Borough Council is leading on regarding the Skills Agenda:
- 3.2 Background to the Council's leadership on the local skills market – The Skills Framework and establishment of Stevenage Works. The catalyst for the Council's focus on the skills agenda has been the funding provided from the Community Renewal Fund, UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Mission 44, the Charity founded by Sir Lewis Hamilton aimed at widening opportunity to diverse communities. This funding of £2.75M has been used to develop a Skills Framework for Stevenage and the Council's Stevenage Works programme, which promotes opportunity for construction and other careers linked to the Council's contracts working with contractors offering apprenticeships and other opportunities via the social value of the contracts.
- 3.3 The Stevenage Works Skills Framework has three main focuses; (i) Building Partnership to align and coordinate local partners and assets; (ii) Creating opportunities; and (iii) Embedding and enabling through backing skills opportunities via capital investment linked to the Council's regeneration plans.
- 3.4 The Stevenage Works initiative was born from a collaboration between Stevenage Borough Council, North Herts College, and Job Centre Plus in 2017/18.
- 3.5 Under Stevenage Works 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.

- 3.6 Stevenage Works has helped more than 550 individuals attend training courses and more than 180 obtaining CSCS Cards for construction site work. Some contractors assisted with CV writing and mock interviewing, contributing to upskilling efforts within the local community.
- 3.7 Many referrals to Stevenage Works come from Jobcentre Plus. However, people can self-refer, and Stevenage Works provide additional funding for vulnerable individuals. They also collaborate with organisations like Track and Step2Skills to ensure disabled and vulnerable individuals were supported through flexible apprenticeship schemes and specialised training.
- 3.8 Plans to expand Stevenage Works beyond construction, with initial discussions focussed on health and social care sectors are welcomed by Members.

Recommendation: To encourage the Council to expand the provision of Stevenage Works beyond the successes in Construction into Health and Social Care and a further development into Green Climate Change engineering industries.

- 3.9 Upskilling - Hearing evidence from the Chief Executive of Stevenage Citizen's Advice, it was acknowledged 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. Therefore, a recommendation to encourage all partners including the DWP, Citizens Advice, Step2Skills, the Council and SMEs and larger employers was needed to help lower skilled individuals obtain the skills they need to access higher skilled and higher paid roles which would directly tackle the problems associated with insecure employment from low-skilled, low-paid work.
- 3.10 There was a strong message in the evidence given by Citizens Advice that a devolved approach to skills and employment support is needed. This is consistent with the recent White Paper and SBCs strategy.
- Recommendation: To endorse this approach, and call for a strong, developing, local skills strategy.

3.11 Challenges for parents with childcare availability and costs

- 3.12 The Committee received evidence from Stevenage Barnardo's Children Centre which informed them that Parents often found the information related to government support for childcare 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.

Recommendation: To challenge HCC and local Children's Centres to provide more clear, accessible information on what funding is available for families for childcare.

- 3.13 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.
- 3.14 While no weekend childcare provision currently exists in Stevenage, it might be something that would need to be considered in the future, particularly as more parents returned to work in roles that fell outside of traditional working hours.
- 3.15 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.
- 3.16 The potential of new T-level qualifications that involved hands-on learning, could help nurseries train staff more efficiently. North Herts College should be recommended to promote this qualification.

Recommendation: To North Herts College to feedback on the amount of training available for childcare roles.

- 3.17 Secondary School perspective to the skills challenge
- 3.18 The Committee received evidence from Jackie Johnson, Deputy Head at Barnwell Secondary School who highlighted:
- 3.19 The strong partnership between secondary schools in Stevenage, specifically in sharing resources due to teacher shortages. The Stevenage 6th Form Partnership struggled to recruit and retain experienced STEM teachers which particularly affected students studying for A-Level science subjects.
- 3.20 The relationship between schools and North Herts College was slightly competitive, given that both offer post-16 programmes. Members understood the competitive nature of this sector but identified this as a clear problem, whereas all post 16 education should be working collaboratively to offer as many and varied opportunities to young people they are pitted against each other in an artificial internal education market to compete against each other for student head counts and the related funding. This is a major weakness with regards to offering the best choices for young people.
- 3.21 Barnwell School has a successful collaboration with the University of Hertfordshire, benefiting from its widening access programme. This provides financial support, enabling Barnwell to run programmes like the Brilliant Club, which helps raise aspirations by giving students access to top universities like Oxford and Cambridge. Jackie Johnson 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.
- 3.22 Regarding mentoring this is a significant focus at Barnwell School, supported by programmes like "Zero Gravity", which helped disadvantaged students

connect with undergraduates to support their university applications. The Committee thought that this was an excellent initiative.

3.23 Barnwell School has 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. Mentoring from slightly older peers, who had firsthand experience, resonated more with students than when advice came from teachers. The school is looking to create a "mentoring spiral" that could extend beyond secondary schools to include partnerships with primary schools.

3.24 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. Members heard that schools experience post covid had been that face-to-face work experience had become less accessible, which affected students' development of employability skills.

Recommendation: That SBC looks to provide a range of work experience opportunities for young people, working with local schools and colleges to ensure this happens routinely each year.

3.25 Regarding degree apprenticeships, the Committee were advised 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. This evidence is consistent with the wider picture on Apprenticeships, where industry has relabelled existing training as Apprenticeships to attract the levy funding, but overall, the access to apprenticeships has declined.

3.26 Members explored the landscape for students who weren't academically inclined or motivated, particularly those who might 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.

Recommendation: If the committee returns to skills, that support to non-academic pupils and those who are not in work or education, including care leavers, is looked at. A list of possible issues a future look at skills could consider is listed at paragraph 3.59 in the report.

3.27 Jackie Johnson, Deputy Head at Barnwell Secondary School acknowledged Members 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.

3.28 Young people perspective

3.29 The Youth Mayor expressed concerns about the lack of specialised career advisors available in Schools. Some schools are operating on one career advisor for a school size of 900 pupils and when there are vacancies schools can be left with no advisor in place for months before a replacement is recruited.

3.30 Members heard about 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.

3.31 Careers advice in some schools was limited to a single brief session and there was insufficient focus or guidance in helping students explore their career options.

Recommendation: That future working on skills, working with local and national partners, concentrates on creating a local, objective source of careers advice and signposts to this.

3.32 There was a general focus in schools on preparing students for university over apprenticeships or employment, with little information about alternative routes available. Members expressed concerns regarding the lack of specialist, in person, careers advice available for students in schools acknowledging budget constraints.

3.33 Mock interviews were useful but needed to be more frequent and it was not clear how widespread the offer was amongst local secondary schools. School's efforts to assist students with CV writing was seen as helpful, although some resources, such as Unifrog, were found to be less helpful.

3.34 Gaining relevant work experience was seen as a vital skill for young people. Members commented that there appeared to be 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 noted that the Council's website was perhaps not be a natural place for young people to find out about work experience opportunities. However, it may help parents and carers as well as students. In addition, other online platforms for information sharing could be considered by officers. Members will make a

recommendation to utilise the Council web site and promote other platforms to interested young people to employers in the area who can offer work experience.

3.35 North Herts College Site visit evidence

3.36 The college, student, employee collaboration is impressive, especially Airbus GSK, Lister Hospital and UCL. The emerging skills pipeline is being built.

3.37 The level of tech being used, the laboratory practice skills, VR Tech, and the use of industry tech in the college setting is impressive.

3.38 EV maintenance facilities /Engineering campus planned for near future, building the sustainable green skills base is welcomed.

3.39 The gaming course, and the preparation for creative opportunities was important, as well as the opening of a film facility on the Hitchin Campus. Clearly, a serious attempt is being made to develop skills for the creative as well as scientific roles in the local economy. Not being spoken about enough, or awareness being raised.

3.40 There needs to be more celebration of success, by the council, college, schools where students attain really good skills outcomes, as they in turn become the role models for successive years of students. Is this happening anywhere? We show pride in the outcomes that are being realised. Members to make a recommendation regarding promoting success stories from the local community.

Recommendation: The Mayor's Prize for Learning. In recognition of the outstanding learning achievement (14-20 years old), where students/pupils have overcome significant challenges to realise their learning goals.

3.41 FE colleges are hopeful that the new body Skills England will make a tangible link to a national and regional industrial strategy which will replace the ad-hoc approach that has been in place.

3.42 Through the college's strategy and focus to (i) support the Stevenage vision for growth and regeneration (ii) work with key industries in the region and (iii) create industry standard training, they are tangibly doing this. Autolus (a new life science company based in the centre of Stevenage focused on cancer T-cell therapies) have made a link with the college, and they are delivering their Lab Technicians Programme at the College, they were previously using a facility in Manchester. This is also creating a pipeline of potential graduate apprenticeships for Autolus from the college.

3.43 By providing Industry standard facilities and equipment the college are equipping young people with the skills they need to move straight into higher level courses, apprenticeships or employment and are responding to what employers have been saying for some time that young entrants don't have the necessary skills to be work ready.

3.44 Airbus Site visit evidence

3.45 Members undertook a site visit to Airbus and received input from with input from Lucinda Williams, Jo Roberston, Head of Early Careers and Dave Ledger Senior Aerospace Engineer.

3.46 The Airbus offer includes a comprehensive recruitment strategy including a skills mapping of the workforce. The company offers interns, apprenticeships, and graduate scheme. Airbus like to grow internal candidates and diversity was important. Alumni go into their old universities to create contacts for potential recruiting. There is advertising for direct entry to apprenticeships and for permanent roles.

3.47 Airbus stated that they are flexible on their criteria for GCSE and A Level entry. There are currently 400 applicants for level 3 & 4 Apprenticeships.

3.48 Members heard the Airbus also provide a re-skilling focus for adults. The mid-career upskill is a sponsored education programme aimed at mature adults. The programme recruits' people who have an existing 70% fit with the organisation and provide 2 years of training sponsored by Airbus to upskill the 30% that they require as an employer, the example shared was someone working in Robotics.

3.49 Degree Apprenticeships are in high demand, for 20 posts Airbus receives 6500 applications. Candidates that do not make the cut for the 20 spaces but showed good aptitude are directed to cluster up and down stream supply companies for their own employment programmes.

3.50 Airbus provides a virtual work experience programme, which had 3200 attendees in November 2021.

3.51 Airbus provides and outreach into local schools with ambassadors in the community. This is part of the company's social value with its STEM education outreach to local Secondary and Primary Schools. Airbus has an outreach to ex-service personal and is very active in employment to this cohort.

3.52 Diversity is a challenge and a focus in its recruitment of more women and from a wider ethnic background.

3.53 The biggest challenge for Airbus is keeping their current workforce open to change, new ideas and ways of working.

3.54 Input from Step2Skills

3.55 Some core funding for Step2Skills is via Herts County Council but the majority of funding comes from external national pots. Moving to Herts Futures (Formerly the LEP) is seen in a positive light by the Step2Skills team, who are pleased about this move.

- 3.56 Matt Partridge shared with Members that he has seen a huge commitment amongst the incredibly dedicated staff to provide an exemplary service to its clients.
- 3.57 For a local person it is very confusing where to go for advice and support re skills and job opportunities. Step2Skills can help signpost until a one stop shop comes in with a repositioned DWP, Job Centre Plus with a focus on skills, as profiled in the government's white paper – Getting Britain Working.
- 3.58 Step2Skills can draw on some inspirational case studies, from Autolus, GSK & Airbus to inspire young people, but more work could be done in this regard.
- 3.59 Members are aware that there is a potential “forgotten generation” of people in their late 20s and 30s who move from one low skilled job to another and have no aspiration for the future.
- 3.60 The view of Stevenage as an authority amongst its partners is that it's seen as a model local authority with regards to skills, this is largely because of the “can do” approach taken by the Council and it's the only authority in Hertfordshire who have a Skills Framework and has the largest employment area in Hertfordshire with the Gunnells wood road industrial estate.
- 3.61 Areas the review did not cover but could be a focus for the Council going forward:
- Primary School pupils – opening possible career ideas at a young age and seeing what paths there are to get there?
 - Re-skilling of mature adults 50 years and older + Local offer from North Herts College.
 - Looking at opportunities for young people no longer in education or employment, including young care leavers.
 - Inviting Job Centre Plus to attend future scrutiny once new working model outlined in Getting Britain Working White paper is embedded.
 - Looking at employment support and barriers to employment for those with physical and hidden disabilities.
 - Looking at the employment support, skills and education for those who are neurodiverse.
 - Looking at skills support to creative industries, with Stevenages proximity to London and a growing film industry in Hertfordshire.

4 REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 **Recommendation 1 – (i) Expansion of Stevenage Works** - It is recommended that the Council be encouraged to expand Stevenage Works beyond construction into the health and social care sectors. **(ii) Expansion of Stevenage Works into “Green Construction” Solar and air source heat pump technology** - It is recommended that the Council be encouraged

to expand Stevenage Works into a third iteration beyond health and social care sectors into Green Technologies.

- 4.2 **Recommendation 2 – Upskilling** - It is recommended that all partners including the DWP, Citizens Advice, Step2Skills, the Council and SMEs and larger employers should be encouraged to do this. Efforts from all partners would be needed to help lower skilled individuals obtain the skills they need to access higher skilled and higher paid roles which would directly tackle the problems associated with insecure employment from low-skilled, low-paid work.
- 4.3 **Recommendation 3 – Promotion of the T-Level qualification for nursery childcare into the local economy** - The potential of new T-level qualifications that involved hands-on learning, could help nurseries train staff more efficiently. It is recommended that North Herts College be encouraged to expand the T-Level qualification in nursery care to help train more people locally to expand the provision of trained staff.
- 4.4 **Recommendation 4 – Challenge to HCC & Local Children Centres regarding providing clear accessible information on what funding is available for families for childcare** – The funding position is currently confusing to parents so clarity would help in this area.
- 4.5 **Recommendation 5 – Promotion of work experience opportunities** - It is recommended that (i) the Council’s Business Relationship Manager works with colleagues to promote opportunities for young people to connect with local employers for work experience; (ii) That SBC offers a range of work experience opportunities for young people across the organisation, and that these are offered consistently every year to local schools and colleges; and (iii) That SBC social media is used to share local job fares, open days, and work experience opportunities.
- 4.6 **Recommendation 6 – Promotion of success stories from Stevenage-** It is recommended that members and officers consider ways to promote success stories from the local community, celebrating successes by the college and schools where students attain excellent skills outcomes, as they in turn become the role models for successive years of students, i.e. Mayors Award for Learning.
- 4.7 **Recommendation 7 – Promotion of a clear local careers advice service**
Work with partners towards a credible local careers advice service. Establishing a clear source of objective careers information which is available to pupils, students, and those wanting to re-train, or change direction. That a local link within the National Careers service is readily available, and that this reflects national standards in career entry qualifications, but also what is available in Stevenage, and wider Hertfordshire.
- 4.8 **Recommendation 8 – Commendation to North Herts College and Barnwell School for their work in promoting skills** - It is recommended that North Herts College and Barnwell School be commended for their work to promote skills to their students. North Herts College by providing Industry standard facilities and equipment the college are equipping young people

with the skills they need to move straight into higher level courses, apprenticeships or employment and are responding to what employers have been saying for some time that young entrants don't have the necessary skills to be work ready. Barnwell School are offering an excellent peer to peer mentoring to ready pupils for university applications and interviews as well as collaboration with the University of Hertfordshire through their "zero gravity" and "Brilliant Club" initiatives.

4.9 **Recommendation 9 – Devolved, local skills strategy**

That SBC along with its partners in the broadest sense (Herts Growth Board, Job Centre Plus, North Herts College, Local Secondary Schools, Local Employers) continue to work to develop a genuine, local skills strategy, which reflects local skills opportunities and challenges within the economy.

5 **IMPLICATIONS**

Financial Implications

5.1 Nothing specific in relation to the report.

Legal Implications

5.2 Nothing specific in relation to the report.

Equalities and Diversity Implications

5.3 There are specific equalities and diversity implications based on the following groups:

- Age – The review has focused predominantly on the impact of Young People, and it has also addressed to a lesser extent the impact on adults returning to employment or retraining. The Chair has indicated that any future work should focus on interventions with primary school aged children and with adults over 50 years old.
- Sex – No definitive position can be defined for the current impact on women accessing the skills opportunities via education, Schools and FE Colleges, and job opportunities in the burgeoning life science and aerospace industries in Stevenage. However, based on anecdotal evidence there appears to be some progress in attracting women to these roles but further enquiry would be needed to ascertain with any accuracy to what level women are accessing these roles.

APPENDICES

A - [Scoping Document](#)

B - [Skills Review Mapping Document](#)

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS [Stevenage Works Skills Framework - Unlocking Jobs, Skills and Opportunities for local people](#) & [Government White Paper - Get Britain Working](#)