

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Thursday, 12 December 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Autun Room - Autun Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair)(Chair), Andy McGuinness (Vice-Chair),
Forhad Chowdhury, Alistair Gordon, Ellie Plater CC, Nigel
Williams and Jade Woods

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.30pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chair opened the meeting with a minute silence and reflection in memory of Councillor Graham Snell. The Chair added that Councillor Snell had served on the Environment and Economy Select Committee for a number of years and had been a good natured and valued contributor to the Committee.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Julie Ashley-Wren, Leanne Brady, Sarah Mead and Claire Parris.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - 12 NOVEMBER 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment and Economy Select Committee meeting held on 12 November 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 SKILLS REVIEW - INPUT FROM STEP 2 SKILLS HCC ADULT LEARNING & TRAINING SERVICE

At this juncture the Chair introduced Matt Partridge, Chief Executive (Stevenage Borough Council) and Advisory Board Member (Step2Skills), Daryl Jedowski, Corporate Policy and Performance Manager, and Carol Richardson, Enterprise and Skills Partnership Officer.

The Chair opened the meeting by providing an overview of recent developments at the national level relevant to the committee's ongoing work on the local skills agenda. A recent Government White Paper, Getting Britain Working, outlined proposed reforms aimed at aligning employment and career support services more effectively. Key challenges identified included limited collaboration between Jobcentre Plus and employers, insufficient outcomes from the National Careers Service, and overly centralised and compliance-focused employment support.

Proposed national service developments included:

- Greater integration of employment support with skills and careers advice.
- Stronger partnerships with local employers and embedding the principle of localism.
- Enhanced digital offerings to improve accessibility.
- A personalised approach to employment support, with reduced reliance on sanction targets.

The Chair highlighted ongoing pilot schemes in locations such as Wolseley and East Kilbride, as well as the importance of Skills England working collaboratively with local authorities, businesses, and education providers. This aligned with Stevenage's proactive work on its local skills agenda, which positioned the town well to meet future employment needs.

The Chair asked the Chief Executive a question regarding their involvement with the Step2Skills programme.

The Chief Executive explained that they had been a member of the Step2Skills advisory board for approximately five years, having joined after volunteering at a Hertfordshire Chief Executives meeting to fill a vacancy. They highlighted the importance of the programme to Hertfordshire and Stevenage residents, emphasising the board's diverse representation, which included members from local Further Education colleges, Hertfordshire County Council Children's Services, the district council, the voluntary and adult education sectors, and programme delivery partners.

The Committee heard that the board's role was to provide strategic direction and oversight, acting as a "critical friend" to the Step2Skills senior team, led by their Head of Service. Although the board did not have decision-making authority over budgets or operational actions, it reviewed strategies and policies, offering feedback that was frequently incorporated into adjustments.

The Chief Executive praised the Step2Skills team for their exceptional commitment and vocational passion for their work and highlighted their efforts in Stevenage, including career fairs and other initiatives, which aligned with the town's priorities.

The Chair asked the Chief Executive about Step2Skills' efforts to support individuals in bridging the gap into employment.

In response, the Chief Executive outlined several local challenges faced by Stevenage residents, including:

- Median annual earnings in Stevenage being lower than Hertfordshire and national averages.
- Lower pupil attainment levels across educational stages compared to Hertfordshire and England averages.
- A lack of technical and niche skills required for certain roles, compounded by recruitment challenges in specific sectors such as aerospace and STEM.

- Gaps in soft skills such as communication and administrative capabilities.
- Barriers such as high living costs, limited transport accessibility, and inflexible working hours, particularly affecting roles like adult social care.

The Chief Executive highlighted the competitive local job market, noting that while Stevenage was positioned well due to its diverse sectors, recruitment challenges persisted. They gave the example of Glaxo Smith Kline's £1 billion investment in the area which was expected to generate 4,000 jobs over the next decade. The Chief Executive commented on the importance of equipping local residents with the skills and qualifications needed to secure those opportunities.

The Committee heard that Step2Skills played a significant role in addressing those issues, focusing its efforts on areas with higher deprivation and lower educational attainment, such as Stevenage, Broxbourne, and Watford. The Chief Executive advised Members that the programme's impact was limited by its reliance on external funding, which required ongoing bidding for government grants, such as the Multiply project.

The Chief Executive informed the Committee that while Step2Skills could not address all challenges alone, it collaborated with other organisations like the Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal and Mission 44 to prepare residents for meaningful employment.

The Chair asked the Chief Executive for more information about the Multiply Project, noting its practical approach.

The Chief Executive explained that the project focused on improving adult numeracy skills across the UK. Funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, it specifically supported adults who lacked a GCSE grade C (or grade 4) in mathematics, helping them to enhance their numeracy skills.

Locally, the Multiply programme had been operating at the Bedwell Community Centre, providing accessible opportunities for Bedwell residents to improve their skills and boost their employability.

The Chair reflected on the challenges within the local economy, particularly the disconnect between job vacancies and local employability. While efforts focused on high-level technical roles in life sciences and engineering, there remained a need to address gaps in other sectors. The Chair expressed hope that national policies, such as the Government's proposed reforms, alongside local initiatives, would help shift the situation in the coming years.

The Chief Executive highlighted the role of the Senior Skills Framework, which was approved earlier in the year. That framework prioritised sectors like life sciences and engineering as part of Stevenage's broader skills strategy. The Committee heard of ongoing efforts to expand successful local models, such as the Stevenage Works initiative, into wider sectors.

The Chief Executive commented on collaboration with organisations like JobCentre Plus, further education colleges, and the Stevenage Works Board to strengthen local

partnerships and improve pathways into employment. Those measures aimed to tackle skills shortages, fill local vacancies, and better align the labour market with employer needs.

Members asked questions related to funding. In response, the Chief Executive advised that while the programme was supported by some core funding from Hertfordshire County Council, a large portion of its budget came from external sources such as the Multiply programme and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Despite the reliance on external pots, the programme's significant role in adult skills development made it a crucial service.

A Member noted that while the government's white paper on skills development was promising, it fell short without proper funding to back it up. Members emphasised that without investment in training resources, staff, and supportive environments, the programme's potential would be limited.

The Committee heard of structural changes within Hertfordshire Futures, as Step2Skills recently moved from the Adult Social Care division to Hertfordshire Futures. This shift was seen as a positive move for improving alignment with broader county-wide economic growth initiatives. However, the Chief Executive commented about the risk of Step2Skills losing its unique identity and purpose within the broader structure of Hertfordshire Futures, stressing the importance of maintaining its focus on adult skills and re-skilling.

The Chief Executive highlighted the use of different platforms such as the Hertfordshire Opportunities Portal and local colleges, which could make it difficult for residents to navigate. They suggested that the Council could take on a role as a "navigator" to help residents understand and access the right resources for training and employment. The Chair also highlighted the need for timely and accurate careers information, not just for young people, but also for adults who may be looking to re-skill or shift careers.

Members commented on the impact on funding should Hertfordshire adopt a unitary authority model. The Chief Executive noted that the government was pushing for the mayoral model by offering financial incentives and powers, which could be hard for local authorities to resist. However, they acknowledged that the upcoming devolution white paper would likely offer further clarity on this topic.

Responding to a question regarding the potential for Stevenage Works to expand into additional employment sectors such as social care, health and green skills, the Chief Executive advised the Committee that green skills were already part of the town's skills framework, though the capacity to fully develop this area was still growing. It was noted that the success of the construction sector within Stevenage Works could serve as a model for other industries, but significant resources would be required to scale it up.

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager added that that STEM education should be linked to green skills, as the government promoted a clean energy future. Stevenage's geographical location was seen as an advantage for connecting to these growing sectors, particularly in life sciences, space, defence, and advanced

manufacturing.

The Chair asked the Chief Executive a questions regarding increasing local aspirations, particularly among young people, by broadening their horizons and helping them believe in their potential.

The Chief Executive shared an example from Autolyst, a local life sciences company, which worked to engage young people in career opportunities. Several success stories were shared, including one of a young woman who, despite struggling at school, now had a successful apprenticeship with a life sciences business. This success story exemplifids the importance of raising self-belief among young people and showcasing diverse career opportunities.

The Chief Executive highlighted the importance of connecting the various players in the skills landscape—such as local government, universities, colleges, and programmes like Step2Skills—to ensure that individuals knew where to turn for support and opportunities. While there were many good examples of successful interventions, they acknowledged the need to better communicate and celebrate these achievements to inspire others.

Members commented that, while much of the discussion had centred on young people, there is also a need to focus on adults looking for a career change or those seeking a second or third chance. This includes people who may be in their 30s and 40s, potentially with limited opportunities or direction in their career.

The Chief Executive responded by highlighting that programmes such as Step to Skills were working to support people of all ages, including those seeking to re-enter the workforce or change their career path. They mentioned an inspiring example of Ukrainian refugees in St Albans, whose energy and commitment to learning English and securing jobs in the UK demonstrated the drive of people at various stages of life. The Chief Executive underlined that skills development was not just about younger generations, but about providing support for people at different points in their lives.

Members asked questions regarding how the Council could support both disabled individuals and employers, ensuring that there were fewer barriers for disabled people seeking employment.

The Chief Executive responded by highlighting the role of Hertfordshire Futures, which worked with employers who had inclusive, disability-friendly policies. They acknowledged the broader value of diversity in the workforce, emphasising the importance of disability inclusion, particularly in local government services, which could have a positive impact on both employees and service users.

Responding to a question regarding a shared services model, the Chief Executive noted that while other areas in Hertfordshire may be more affluent, Stevenage had specific challenges that required tailored local responses. The Committee heard that the local approach in Stevenage was about addressing those unique needs, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all model. This was key to shaping policies that worked for Stevenage's specific demographic, which differed from other areas.

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager added that the development of a strong local agenda and the ability to influence county-level decisions meant that Stevenage could now have a more significant voice in shaping policies that affected its community, especially as national policy evolved.

4 **DRAFT REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SKILLS REVIEW**

The Committee reviewed the initial draft of the Skills Review Report and its recommendations.

Members emphasised the importance of addressing neurodiversity within training recommendations, suggesting a more holistic and personalised approach to training, ensuring a mix of hands-on and classroom-based options to cater to diverse learning styles. Peer-to-peer mentoring and improved outreach to individuals between contracts or not actively engaging with traditional job-seeking avenues were also discussed.

Members commented about the feasibility of lobbying for extended funding for weekend childcare, given staffing and operational challenges faced by providers. Alternative suggestions included promoting workplace childcare facilities through partnerships with local employers and rethinking youth service provision to alleviate reliance on early years settings.

Members advocated for raising awareness of the value of early years education as a career choice, addressing perceptions of it as a secondary career option, and linking this with the expansion of qualifications like T Levels.

Members encouraged a focus on recommendations within the council's direct influence, such as expanding Stevenage Works and improving collaboration among local education providers. Concerns were expressed about recommendations overly reliant on national policy changes, such as funding models for post-16 education.

Members highlighted the need for independent, objective careers advice, along with suggestions for a local careers centre to provide guidance free from educational institution bias. Members also discussed the council's role in providing quality work experience placements and modelling best practice in skills development.

The Chair and members expressed appreciation for the contributions and feedback, noting the importance of refining recommendations to focus on achievable, impactful actions.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR