

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 14 January 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Leanne Brady, Forhad Chowdhury, Alistair Gordon, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater CC, Nigel Williams, Jade Woods and Julie Ashley-Wren

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.23pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Andy McGuinness.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 12 DECEMBER 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Environment and Economy Select Committee be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **FINAL REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SKILLS AGENDA REVIEW**

The Chair introduced the report, thanking Members and Officers, particularly the Council's Scrutiny Officer, for their contributions to the review. The Chair highlighted the importance of the recommendations, reflecting the Committee's commitment to improving skills and opportunities in Stevenage and Hertfordshire.

Recommendation 1 – Expansion of Stevenage Works

Members supported this recommendation, with particular interest in creating green apprenticeships.

The Chair emphasised the council's active involvement in delivering on-the-ground initiatives such as apprenticeships. The ambition was to see even small-scale success, such as a handful of green apprenticeships annually.

There was broad agreement among members on the importance of continuing this work.

Recommendation 2 – Upskilling

The Chair acknowledged this as an area where further action was needed, expressing a desire for broader recommendations.

Members highlighted the significant potential to upskill individuals aged late 20s to

early 40s, noting that many in this demographic still had decades left in the workforce.

Members stressed the importance of understanding barriers such as disabilities and non-academic backgrounds to better support this group.

Members proposed scoping further work in the future to explore the specific skills and training needs of this demographic.

Recommendation 3 – Promotion of the T-Level qualification for nursery childcare into the local economy

Members commented about T-Levels being used as unpaid labour during the two-year training period, potentially leading to a lack of job opportunities post-qualification. The industry may exploit this for cost-saving purposes, creating a mismatch between the number of trainees and actual jobs available.

Members suggested focusing on apprenticeships instead, as they offered paid opportunities and may be more appealing to young people. An example of personal experience of unpaid training being a negative experience was shared.

The Chair agreed on the importance of promoting qualifications for childcare but highlighted that much of this fell under the remit of Hertfordshire County Council.

Recommendation 4 – Challenge to HCC & Local Children Centres regarding providing clear accessible information on what funding is available for families for childcare.

Discussions included the importance of clear, accessible information on childcare funding and support to help parents navigate work-life balance and employment opportunities.

The Chair highlighted that much of this fell under the remit of Hertfordshire County Council but promoted the need for clear signposting from the Council to assist parents.

Recommendation 5 – Promotion of work experience opportunities

Members commented on the importance of managing students' expectations about work placements, particularly in sectors like childcare and education, to avoid setting them up for failure. It was noted that work experience placements are most valuable when students receive an accurate overview of the job role.

Recommendation 6 – Promotion of success stories from Stevenage

The Chair suggested creating a Mayor's Award for Learning to celebrate successes by college and school students where they attained excellent skills, outcomes and, as in turn, became the role models for successive years of students.

Members suggested celebrating a wide range of achievements, from academic progress to personal development, to avoid focusing only on high achievers. Proposed a focus on inclusive recognition, where progress in challenging circumstances is celebrated.

Members proposed linking the award with existing school achievement programmes and expanding it to include a borough-wide recognition event, potentially incorporating schools nominating their top achievers. Highlighted the potential for this initiative to strengthen community ties and foster aspiration.

Members suggested that the award's title could be "Mayor's Award for Progression" or "Achievement" rather than "Mayor's Award for Learning" to ensure it did not alienate non-academic students.

Members emphasised recognising low achievers who had made significant personal strides, commenting that their progress was equally valuable and often overlooked.

Recommendation 7 – Promotion of a clear local careers advice service

Members commented on a lack of comprehensive and objective careers advice services in schools due to inadequate funding and limited joined-up approaches.

Members commented that Youth Connection services had transitioned into targeted youth support, focussed on at-risk children rather than providing universal careers advice.

It was noted that companies offering work experience placements struggled with limited capacity, resource shortages, and administrative burdens such as paperwork and risk assessments.

Members suggested Officers, such as the Council's Enterprise and Skills Partnership Officer, be encouraged to collaborate with other agencies to address these challenges and improve the delivery of careers advice.

Members noted that awareness of the National Skills Service was low, acknowledging its potential but noting that many stakeholders were unaware of its existence.

Members proposed the creation of a centralised information hub on the council's website to provide accessible details about job opportunities, training, apprenticeships, and other resources. This platform would also allow businesses, schools, and colleges to contribute information.

Recommendation 8 – Commendation to North Herts College and Barnwell School for their work in promoting skills

Members praised North Hertfordshire College for its work on T-level qualifications and for creating effective learning environments to support young people.

Barnwell School was commended by Members for its mentoring programme, which was highlighted as a strong example of pupil-led support.

Members suggested the wording of commendations be revised to avoid singling out specific institutions, ensuring that the contributions to the development of skill, of all schools, were acknowledged.

Recommendation 9 – Devolved local skills strategy

The Chair advised that there was support for devolving skills strategy to local communities to better align with the specific needs of the local economy, particularly in emerging sectors such as life sciences.

Members emphasised that "one size fits all" solutions were ineffective, and localised strategies were better suited to address skill shortages.

At this juncture, the Committee held a discussion regarding insecure work.

Members commented on the prevalence of insecure contracts in industries such as construction and suggested that many workers in manual labour roles felt despondent, with limited guidance on career progression or alternative opportunities.

A lack of accessible information about qualifications, career paths, and transferable skills was highlighted as something that prevents workers from transitioning to more stable or fulfilling roles.

Members highlighted a need for targeted support to engage those in insecure roles, particularly manual labourers, by showcasing career paths and second-chance opportunities. This included highlighting potential transitions within industries (e.g., from bricklaying to business ownership) and promoting stories of success.

Members spoke of the need to address barriers such as limited access to training or fears around financial stability during career transitions.

Members suggested exploring the use of AI for job-matching tools to help individuals identify suitable roles based on their skills and aspirations although concerns were raised about potential biases within AI systems, which might disadvantage certain groups.

Members suggested encouraging students and workers to view vocational roles (e.g., construction) as viable long-term careers by illustrating progression opportunities within those sectors.

Members acknowledged that addressing insecure work could form part of a future scrutiny topic, given its complexity and relevance to the local economy. The importance of balancing innovative approaches (e.g., AI) with addressing systemic issues, such as cultural and economic biases, was noted.

During the discussion, Members proposed the following additional recommendation:

Proposed Recommendation: Collaboration with Employers to Promote Employment Opportunities

Members suggested that the Council engage with employers and recruiters in Stevenage, such as GSK, to ensure high-skilled job opportunities were widely advertised and accessible to local residents.

Members commented that many high-paid, high-skilled jobs were not visible to job seekers, as they were often gatekept by recruiters. They proposed working with companies and recruiters to address this. Members agreed that collaboration with

local businesses was essential to bridge this gap and increase awareness of available opportunities.

4 **ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee discussed the Work Programme.

During the discussion, the following topics were raised:

- **Waste and Recycling**

It was proposed that the Committee would hold two meetings on waste and recycling to explore the service in-depth, including statutory changes, climate implications, and service efficiency.

It was proposed that Members undertake site visits to the Cavendish Road Depot and "ride-alongs" with collection crews to gain firsthand insight into operations.

The Assistant Director (Stevenage Direct Services) explained that at the first meeting, officers would provide a broad overview of the service. Members could then use this overview to identify specific areas for more in-depth scrutiny at the second meeting.

- **Climate Change Progress Update**

It was proposed that the Committee would hold two meetings.

- March 2024
- November 2026.

- **Enforcement**

Members suggested the Committee allocate a meeting to parking enforcement, especially in areas with planned double yellow lining, to ensure the measures are effectively implemented and enforced.

Members commented about inadequate enforcement against fly-tipping, with calls for stronger responses and follow-ups to reduce incidents and costs.

- **Garages**

Some Members suggested a discussion on exploring the management of garages, a significant income source for the Council, including issues related to asbestos and service delivery. However, some Members questioned the necessity of this topic for scrutiny.

- **Street Scene**

Members suggested they examine hedge trimming, street cleaning, and overall maintenance of the public realm, with concerns over visibility issues and general upkeep.

- **Cycling and Active Travel**

Members discussed the need to revisit the 2019 cycling and pedestrian strategy in light of current needs and priorities. There were suggestions to

incorporate colour-coded signage on cycleways and walkways to encourage active travel and make navigation easier and more engaging.

- **Transport Accessibility**

Members suggested incorporating issues with car park availability, especially for disabled parking, and the negative impact on accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges.

Problems with the lift at Stevenage Station were discussed, which was reportedly out of order 30 times in 2024, impacting travellers reliant on it. Suggestions included escalating the matter to portfolio holders and following up on parliamentary discussions on the subject.

- **Town Centre Regeneration**

Members commented about the design and implementation of the regeneration project, including the integration of flats and shops, the loss of popular car parks, and the perceived inefficiency in the planning approach. Members suggested the need for an updated progress report on the regeneration project, avoiding repetitive information from earlier stages, and focussed on the current status and future plans.

- **Accessibility in the Public Realm**

Members proposed to address neurodiversity by creating autism-friendly spaces, better signposting, and quiet zones to support a less overwhelming shopping experience.

Members raised issues with covered walkways being repurposed by businesses, making them less accessible, and the general lack of cohesive design for accessibility in public areas.

Linking proposed items, Members suggested the Committee examine how regeneration efforts can improve accessibility in both the town centre and Old Town, ensuring inclusivity for all users.

The Chair suggested a holistic review of transportation, including cycling, pedestrian routes, and parking strategies, while addressing the impacts of reduced car parks and encouraging modal shifts to more sustainable options.

The Chair acknowledged the suggestions for future scrutiny topics and emphasised the need to ensure meaningful outcomes, with emphasis on issues affecting the public most directly.

5 **URGENT PART I 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