

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Thursday, 20 March 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Rob Broom (Chair), Andy McGuinness (Vice Chair),
Julie Ashley-Wren, Leanne Brady, Forhad Chowdhury,
Alistair Gordon, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater CC,
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 Councillor Sarah Mead.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 UPDATE ON THE TREE & WOODLAND STRATEGY AND THE GREEN SPACE STRATEGY

The Chair introduced the item by providing an overview of the evening's topics, focusing on updates to the Tree & Woodland Strategy and the Green Spaces Strategy. They emphasised the importance of green spaces, not only for their aesthetic value but also for their crucial role in supporting physical and mental health, biodiversity, and carbon capture in urban environments.

The Chair framed the session as a discussion about the management of woodlands and green spaces, with an emphasis on community engagement and collaboration with stakeholders to enhance and maintain these areas, underscoring the importance of involving the community in the planning and management of green spaces and highlighting the benefits of collaborative efforts in achieving sustainable and effective outcomes.

The Chair invited officers to present to the Committee.

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager advised the Committee public engagement had included online consultations and in-person sessions, receiving around 400 responses. The strategies would undergo revisions in April and May 2025, aiming for Cabinet approval in June 2025, with final publication in Summer 2025.

The Arboriculture and Conservation Manager outlined the draft 10-year plan for the Tree & Woodland Strategy, reflecting best practices and stakeholder consultations.

Key highlights of the presentation included:

Benefits of trees:

Wildlife, climate change mitigation, health.

Success story:

Creation of three micro woodlands with a £36,000 grant from Defra.

Miyawaki Woodland Project:

High initial survival rate of trees, with natural die-off over time.

Strategy themes: expanding canopy cover, volunteer programs, management plans, biodiversity, and climate resilience.

Historic Environment and Tree Preservation:

Importance of protecting old trees, especially oak and ash.

Replacement policy for tree removal: 3:1 ratio, potentially increasing to 21:1 for significant trees.

Tree Selection and Maintenance:

Careful selection of tree species to avoid infrastructure damage.

Review process: 10-year strategy reviewed every five years, with interim updates every two years.

Members asked a number of questions, covering a number of topics, which were answered by Officers as set out below:

Resource Constraints:

Officers acknowledged historical budget cuts but noted recent funding successes and hopes for future funding.

Tree interception rates and their impact on the urban water cycle:

Officers advised they would follow up on the technical question.

Tree Planting in Streets:

Officers advised of careful planning and species selection to minimise issues.

Balancing Tree Planting and Park Space:

Officers emphasised the need to balance tree planting with future park space demands for sports, noting the importance of shaded spaces in parks.

Tree Removal for Energy Generation:

Officers reassured that trees were not removed solely for energy generation and emphasised planting fast-growing species for biomass.

Tree Replacement in Developments:

Officers explained the replacement policy and ongoing challenges with developers.

Wildfire Risk:

A Member commented about increasing wildfire risk and the need for specific action plans. Officers acknowledged the need for future planning and collaboration with the county council.

Community Projects with Felled Trees:

A Member inquired about reusing felled tree material for community projects. Officers mentioned providing wood chip or logs to schools and community groups.

Ecological Value of Trees:

Members emphasised considering the ecological value of trees when planting new ones.

Officers discussed diversifying tree species to enhance ecological benefits.

The Chair thanked the Arboriculture and Conservation Manager for their presentation and invited the Environmental Policy and Development Manager to address the Committee.

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager presented an overview of the draft Green Spaces Strategy, which outlined a 10-year plan for the development, management, and enhancement of Stevenage's green spaces. The presentation reflected the outcomes of the Winter 2023 public consultation and aligned with the approach taken in the Tree and Woodland Strategy. Key highlights of the presentation included:

Consultation Insights:

81% of respondents rated Stevenage's green spaces as good or excellent, though this dropped to 55% among younger people.

Top valued features included trees, cleanliness, and wildlife-friendly areas.

Concerns raised included safety at night, loss of green space to development, and the importance of maintaining any new facilities.

Strategic Themes and Actions:

Our Community: Focused on accessibility, improved communication and signage, stakeholder consultation, and developing a suite of safety measures in partnership with relevant agencies.

Our Environment: Aimed to enhance biodiversity, protect habitats, and work with partners to improve waterways and nature areas.

Our Spaces: Emphasised inclusive play, health and well-being through varied physical activity opportunities, maintenance standards, and increased partnership working to expand provision and usage.

Future Opportunities:

Proposals included exploring a multi-use wheeled sports facility and supporting inclusive design for children and young people with disabilities.

The “Share with Care” principle was noted as a possible solution for shared pedestrian and cyclist routes, albeit with recognition of potential conflicts.

Implementation Considerations:

While 63% of consultation respondents supported the proposed actions, some requested shorter timescales. The strategy remains ambitious yet realistic, taking into account available resources.

The Environmental Policy and Development Manager concluded with a commitment to regular review and adaptation of the strategy to reflect evolving community needs and funding availability.

Members asked a number of questions, covering a number of topics, which were answered by Officers as set out below:

Resident Engagement and Communication:

It was acknowledged that community engagement in parks required improvement, particularly in reaching disengaged or hard-to-reach groups.

Suggestions included making better use of community centres, partnerships with the voluntary sector, and refining social media targeting.

Officers emphasised that current engagement methods (e.g. in-person events, online surveys, children's artwork) had some success but further work was needed.

Members commented about fragmented communication and the need for consistent updates on what actions have resulted from resident feedback.

Officers agreed on the need to develop a more robust and inclusive communication strategy going forward.

Green Space Development and Facilities:

Members praised the potential of Stevenage parks and suggested incorporating maps and visuals in final documents to showcase facilities and improve public awareness.

Specific reference was made to Chells Park, where Members commented on a lack of pathways limits usability. Officers confirmed that circular and accessible walkways were being explored.

Funding and Commercial Opportunities:

The Committee discussed exploring diverse funding avenues:

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) was highlighted, with Stevenage noted as the first authority in Hertfordshire to receive and implement BNG funding.

Additional funding was expected from West of Stevenage development (approx. £2.5 million).

External bids and partnerships (e.g. franchising mobile cafes) were also noted as promising routes.

Monetisation ideas such as naming rights for parks or commercial activities were raised. Officers advised that these required careful balance to protect public interests.

Members commented on inequity in enforcement of commercial licensing (e.g. outdoor fitness groups). Officers acknowledged the need to distinguish between small local operators and larger commercial entities and agreed to review the current licensing framework.

Toilets and Amenities

Access to toilet facilities was cited as a key factor in encouraging longer and more inclusive use of parks.

Officers recognised the issue and agreed it should be a priority, noting both cost and antisocial behaviour as challenges.

Alternative models were discussed, including shared-use commercial facilities (e.g. café with public toilets) as seen in other authorities.

Future Opportunities for Scrutiny

The Committee proposed a future review topic focused on enhancing park facilities through commercial partnerships and infrastructure development, using examples such as Stanborough Lakes for comparison.

It was suggested that Select Committee scrutiny could support strategic planning and public value enhancement.

The Chair thanked the Environmental Policy and Development Manager for their presentation.

3 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

4 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

5 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR