

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 29 January 2019

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Sandra Barr, Jim Brown, Michael Downing, Jody Hanafin, Michelle Gardner, Lizzy Kelly, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC and Robin Parker CC

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.35pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs J Fraser, J Mead and S-J Potter.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 13 DECEMBER 2018

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13 December 2018 are approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

Minutes of the Executive – 12 December 2018

The Committee noted the comments of the Executive.

Minutes of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees

The Committee noted the comments of the Executive.

Final Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Rent Setting Report 2019/20

The Assistant Director (Finance and Estates) gave a presentation to the Committee on the key aspects of the Final Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Rent Setting Report 2019/20.

In response to a question, the Assistant Director advised that the 2019/20 53 rent week issue could potentially result in a loss of about £110,000 to the Council per year as a result of Universal Credit regulations. This may also be impacted by Housing Benefit regulations. Local authorities have been in discussion with the Department for Work and Pensions and Ministry of Housing, Communities in a

coordinated effort to resolve the rent loss issue at a national level as this impacted on those Councils with housing. .

A question was asked regarding the charge for retrospective permissions granted. The Assistant Director stated that the charge was dependent upon the nature of work. The charge covered costs of inspections and corrective work. The charge had been introduced to act as a deterrent and to encourage residents to seek consent before carrying out building alterations.

The Assistant Director informed Members that funds had been set aside for work to fix damp and mould cases. More damp and mould cases were being resolved following restructuring of the Housing Investment team and the decision to carry out damp and mould repair work as part of the Major Refurbishment Contract. Members were informed that the Community Select Committee carried out a review on Damp and Mould in January 2017 and a revisit of the review was done in October 2018. It was acknowledged that the Council had departed from its previous position predominantly linking damp and mould to the lifestyle of residents.

The Committee highlighted cases in which the Council replaced doors and carpets that were in good conditions and passed on the costs of these repairs and alterations to the vacating tenants or estates of the deceased. The Assistant Director clarified that the Council recovered costs for damages to property or unapproved alterations carried out by a vacating tenant. The rechargeable costs were assessed on a case by case basis and in some cases, the costs were written off. It was acknowledged that there were inconsistencies in Council practice on this issue. The Assistant Director pointed out that this issue could be solved by more frequent tenancy audits and documentation (including photographs).

Council Tax Base 2019/20

The Assistant Director (Finance and Estates) provided an update on Council Tax Base 2019/20.

Draft General Fund and Council Tax Setting 2019/20

The Assistant Director provided an update on the Draft General Fund and Council Tax Setting 2019/20.

In response to a question about the disbursement of funds from the pilot, the Assistant Director pointed out that 75% of the business rates were retained in the County. Local authorities in the county had a 35% share in the funds and the County Council had the bigger share. District councils were eligible to bid for funding from the central projects budget.

The Committee asked questions regarding funding for IT. The Assistant Director (Corporate Services & Transformation) informed Members that SBC was following the current trend of investing less in physical servers and more in software solutions that can be run in the cloud (virtual servers). Funding was required to purchase licences for new products such as Microsoft 365. An IT improvement programme is

underway, with a new senior manager overseeing this programme. One element of this programme is to help move to a more proactive approach to planning upgrades, investment and changes. The Council is stabilising IT services and there was a focus on planning for the future needs from IT services.

The Strategic Director informed the Committee that the Council may need to consider making an annual provision for IT upgrades such as an annual capital budget rather than larger one-off allocations, and will need to consider the revenue implications. The Council was learning from the experience of other councils such as Milton Keynes. SBC was also consulting its IT partner (East Herts) and local government IT experts to get the best plan for SBC IT services.

The Assistant Director clarified that the increase in parking fees was effective from the first of January. The Executive had granted approval of the parking fees increase in November 2018.

It was reported that some residents had received notification of increases to Flexicare fees. The Assistant Director (Finance and Estates) acknowledged a typographical error in the report (page 158). SC18 should read "Increase contribution to support costs to £2 per week per year as part of phased support costs agreed in 2016/17". The Assistant Director clarified that tenants who started using the Flexicare service before 2003 were previously not charged for the service. Service fee increase for the ring-fenced tenants was staggered at £2 per week year. New tenants will pay £18.30 for the service for 2019/20. It was confirmed that residents who used the service were eligible for Attendants Allowance.

Draft Capital Strategy 2018/10 – 2023/24

The Assistant Director provided an update on the Draft Capital Strategy for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for the period 2018/19 – 2023/24.

Members sought clarification on funding arrangements for the bus station. The Strategic Director informed the Committee that the Council was considering a number of funding options as back up options. Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) funding was available subject to the Secretary of State approving the governance arrangements. Discussions have taken place between the LEP and government regarding this funding. The LEP had indicated that have informed government that they are willing to implement updates to the governance arrangements for Stevenage to be able to access the funding allocation. It was pointed out that revenue generation initiatives will include a café and departure fees.

Potential Impact of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union

The Assistant Director (Corporate Services & Transformation) updated the Executive on emerging national and regional issues in respect of preparations for a "no deal" exit from the European Union (Brexit). In the event of an economic downturn, a partnership response would be essential to ensure that residents and businesses were supported. It was recommended that Stevenage Together re-established the

Stevenage Economic Taskforce to co-ordinate this activity. Central government had appointed Resilience Officers and other additional resources to local authorities. Stevenage and similar-sized authorities will receive £35,000 over two years. In response to Member concerns about potential disruptions to social cohesion, the Assistant Director indicated that the Community Safety Partnership would be able to assist any residents who felt threatened. It was noted that issues related to Brexit were high on the agenda of the Council's Senior Leadership Team.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That Part 1 Decisions of the Executive are noted
2. That the Assistant Director (Finance and Estates) provides an update to Members regarding the 2019/20 53 rent week issue
3. That Assistant Director (Housing and Investment) provides a brief to Members clarifying the policy on the recharges for damages to properties
4. That the Housing Management Advisory Board (HMAB) considers the policy for recharges on damages to properties
5. That Assistant Director (Housing and Investment) provides a brief note to Members detailing the cases of retrospective permissions for building alterations
6. That the Assistant Director (Corporate Services & Transformation) provides an IT services briefing for Members
7. That Tenancy officers advise eligible residents to apply for Attendance Allowance

4 **URGENT PART I DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Stevenage Local Plan

The Strategic Director provided an update on the decision by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to place a holding direction on the Stevenage Local Plan. The Council had been in regular contact with officials from the Ministry. The last meeting was held in January 2019. It was made clear to the Ministry officials that if no positive decision was made to remove the Holding Direction on the Local Plan by 28 January 2019, the Council would have no choice other than to commence legal processes to challenge the continuation of the Holding Direction, which had been in effect since November 2017. The Council was now preparing to challenge the holding direction.

It was confirmed that the County Council was in support of the decision by Stevenage Borough Council. It was also confirmed that the local MP was not a party to the legal challenge as the case relates to the use of a Holding Direction by the Secretary of State. The Council was still hopeful of a resolution of the issue. The

Council will incur legal costs related to the holding direction; however, this is dependent on whether the court decides to hear this case. The full cost to the Council will depend on the MHCLG's response. Members were informed that a full hearing could take six to nine months and future updates would be provided in due course. A briefing note will be provided and sent to all Members regarding this issue.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the update is noted
2. That Members be given guidance on how communicate about the issue so as not to prejudice the case

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That, under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in Paragraphs 1 to 7 of Schedule 12A of the Act, as amended by SI 2006 No. 88.
2. That having considered the reasons for the following items being in Part II, it be determined that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

6 **PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Part II decisions of the Executive be noted:

- Part II Minutes of the Executive – 21 November 2018
- West of Stevenage Development

7 **URGENT PART II DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

None.

8 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR