

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## EXECUTIVE MINUTES

**Date: Wednesday, 10 June 2020**

**Time: 2.00pm**

**Place: Virtual (via Zoom)**

**Present:** Councillors: Sharon Taylor OBE CC (Chair), Mrs Joan Lloyd (Vice-Chair), Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, John Gardner, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell and Jeannette Thomas.

**Also Present:** Councillors Phil Bibby CC, Sandra Barr, Jim Brown, Laurie Chester, Michelle Gardner, Maureen McKay, Lin Martin-Haugh, Robin Parker CC and Simon Speller.

**Start / End** Start Time: 2.00pm

**Time:** End Time: 4.53pm

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

There were no apologies for absence.

There were no declarations of interest.

The Leader invited attendees to “take the knee” in silence for 8 minutes and 49 seconds, the length of time the Minneapolis Police Officer had his knee on George Floyd’s neck prior to his death from asphyxiation. As well as an act of remembrance for George Floyd, the gesture was also in support of the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

Following the conclusion of the gesture, the Leader read out the following statement produced by the Local Government Association:

“Fairness, equality and social justice flows through everything Local Government does. The diversity of our country is what brings the richness to all of our communities. Local Government stands with all of our Councils across the UK and across the world in their work to tackle racism. Local Government is wholly committed to the equality, diversity and inclusion reflecting the communities we serve, and we will do all we can to ensure we continue to be at the forefront in confronting racism and discrimination in whatever form it shows itself. It is vital that we are all part of a much-needed conversation on how we can all confront and end racism. Local Government is listening. Racism has no place in our communities. Racism has no place in our lives.”

### 2 **MINUTES - 13 MAY 2020**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 13 May 2020 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

### 3 **CORONAVIRUS RECOVERY PLAN - REVIEW OF THE MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY AND IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE COUNCIL'S GENERAL FUND REVENUE BUDGET**

The Portfolio Holder for Resources presented a report regarding a review of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy in the light of the impact of Covid-19 on its General Fund Revenue Budget.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the report identified the level of savings the General Fund already had to find of £1.7Million for the period 2021/22 - 2024/25 and the level of projected balances before any impact of Covid-19. The level of reserves was above the minimum risk assessed levels of £2.9Million, but required Financial Security savings to be found, and so doing nothing was not an option as this would use up the General Fund balances. The report did identify potential Business Rate pilot gains of £477,000 from 2019/20 as the pooling gains were being finalised.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the report also outlined the Council's proposed response to the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the General Fund. Section 4.8 of the report identified the 2020/21 loss of income and increased costs from a best, central and worst case scenario that projected a £1.88M, £4.85M or £6M loss to the General Fund. These projections far exceeded the level of funding received to date. The areas considered in the report were income losses, increased costs, business rates and council tax.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources referred to the measures the Government had taken to support businesses and councils, which included the grant schemes the Council had administered. The total funding received by the Council at the time of writing the report was £928,000 for Covid-19 related losses; £32.7M in Business Rate reliefs and grants; and £779,000 for council tax payers.

The Executive noted that, to address the shortfall between losses and grant and to ensure the General Fund balances remained resilient for any future impacts during any recovery period, a number of options to be considered for recommendation had been identified. The options were:

- (i) Reduce Revenue Contribution to Capital (RCCO) from General Fund - £1.726Million;
- (ii) Stop part of Capital Programme (and reduce RCCO) - £125,000;
- (iii) Hold a number of vacant posts - £152,000;
- (iv) Reduce the growth bids approved by utilising other resources - £49,000;
- (v) Hold expenditure budgets for some projects and utilise projected underspends on print and post £463,800;
- (vi) Use allocated reserve for Business Rates - held for funding future regeneration and FTFC bids - £455,000;
- (vii) Use 2019/20 underspends - £812,000; and
- (viii) Hold Community Neighbourhood Management (CNM) 2020/21 budget - £75,000.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the report recommended that the measures be put in place until 30 September 2020 when they would be reviewed. If the financial position improved, there was a recommended order of release of budgets, as set out in Paragraph 4.12.12 of the report. It was further recommended that the Members considered a priority order of services over the summer as a precautionary measure, in order to mitigate any risk of bringing a Section 114 Notice forward, and so as to maintain control over the services provided by the Council.

The Chair referred to the national picture regarding the finances of Local Authorities. The Government had provided £3.2Billion financial aid to the sector, although only 12% of this had been allocated to Borough/District councils. She was concerned that, despite initial Government assurances that local authorities would be fully supported financially throughout the pandemic, recent statements had revealed that there would be no reimbursement of income losses suffered by local authorities. She would continue lobbying the Government for this to be rectified.

The Chair wished to put on record the Executive's thanks to all SBC staff for the work they had carried out throughout the Covid-19 pandemic thus far and to the Finance Team for the outstanding way they had worked with officer colleagues and Elected Members to develop the package of measures which would enable the Council to respond to the financial challenges posed by the pandemic during the course of this year.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the use of earmarked Regeneration capital receipts of £1.726Million, as outlined in Paragraph 4.9.8 of the report, be approved.
2. That the changes to the Capital Programme totalling £125,000, as summarised in Paragraph 4.9.10 of the report, be approved.
3. That the holding of vacant posts totalling £152,110, as set out in Paragraph 4.9.12 of the report, be approved.
4. That the changes to the 2020/21 General Fund budget totalling £463,820, as set out in Paragraph 4.9.13 of the report, be approved.
5. That the changes to the approved growth budgets totalling £49,940, as set out in Paragraph 4.9.15 of the report, be approved.
6. That the holding of the Business Rates allocated reserve totalling £455,000, as set out in Paragraph 4.9.16 of the report, be approved.
7. That the measures set out in Paragraph 4.10.3 of the report be approved.
8. That the measures set out in Section 4.11 of the report be approved.
9. That the development of a priority list of services, as set out in Paragraph 4.12.11 of the report, be approved.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other options considered: As contained in report.*

#### **4 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE - QUARTER FOUR 2019/20**

The Chief Executive introduced a report regarding the Council's Corporate Performance for Quarter Four of 2019/20 (January to March 2020) and advised that, of the 57 Performance Indicators monitored, 44 were at green status; 3 were at amber status; 9 were at red status; and one was not available (Health and Safety compliance).

The Chief Executive explained the reasons for the amber, red and not available items, and the improvement proposals for each item.

The Chief Executive summarised a number of Future Town, Future Council (FTFC) Programme performance highlights during Quarter Four.

The Leader commended the report, which would form the basis of the Council's Annual Report for 2019/20, scheduled for consideration at the July 2020 Executive meeting. During Quarter One of 2020/21, which had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council had continued to progress its schemes and delivered on its priorities.

In terms of sickness absence, the Portfolio Holder for Resources was pleased to see the separation of long-term and short-term sickness statistics. She commented that one SBC staff member had been hospitalised during the Covid-19 outbreak, but they had recovered and were now back home. In relation to homeworking during the pandemic, she explained that a staff survey was about to be completed, with the results informing any necessary changes to homeworking practices.

In response to a Member's question, the Chief Executive undertook to supply Members with further details of the 9 performance indicators shown at red status in the report.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the delivery of priorities which form the Future Town, Future Council Programme and performance of the Council across the key themes for Quarter Four 2019/20, together with the latest achievements, be noted.
2. That actions to commence implementation of the Corporate Landlord Review, and to ensure the new approach to certification of health and safety compliance of non-domestic/non-commercial Council buildings in accordance with the compliance contract, be noted and endorsed (as set out in Paragraphs 3.55 to 3.58 of the report).
3. That the impacts of the Government directive on housing rough sleepers during Covid-19 be noted, and that improvements with non-secure tenancies be noted and endorsed (as set out in Paragraphs 3.62 to 3.67 of the report).

4. That further improvement plans for the Customer Service Centre be noted and endorsed (as set out in Paragraphs 3.92 to 3.103 of the report).
5. That the ongoing implementation of improved practices to support sickness absence management be endorsed (as set out in Paragraphs 3.116 to 3.123 of the report).
6. That issues with the letting of Council garages due to Covid-19 be recognised, and plans to improve the process of garages lettings be noted (as set out in Paragraphs 3.86 to 3.90 of the report).
7. That issues with the current relet process for sheltered voids be noted, and plans to improve be endorsed (as set out in Paragraphs 3.83 to 3.85 of the report).

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

The Chair accepted the following 3 items of urgent Part I business:

### **(1) Coronavirus Update**

The Strategic Director (TP) presented a Coronavirus update to Members which included a focus on the emerging recovery plans for the Town and the Council. He provided some key national updates, information regarding the SBC incident management structure, the Government's Recovery Plan, and the Test and Trace proposals.

The Strategic Director (TP) drew attention to the request by the Government for each area to develop a Covid-19 Local Outbreak Plan, to be finalised by the end of June 2020. Hertfordshire's Plan was to be produced by the County Council, in conjunction with local partners, including Borough/District councils.

In respect of Stevenage recovery activities, Phase 1 related to the Emergency response; Phase 2 concerned transitioning; and Phase 3 would address the beginning of recovery. He explained the various stages of each phase.

The Executive noted that the Stevenage Recovery Taskforce would be chaired by the Leader, via the "Stevenage Together Partnership", and would develop a recovery plan for the town, working with residents, businesses and crucial public service partners. An Officer Group would be established to support the Council and the Taskforce, and would provide day to day support to manage a co-ordinated Stevenage recovery response to Covid-19, both internally at SBC and externally with other partners across the town.

In response to various issues raised by Members, officers undertook to carry out the following actions:

- The Chief Executive to provide the Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture with the District Councils Network survey results revealing the parlous financial state of Local Authority Leisure Providers nationally, in advance of his imminent LGA Culture, Tourism & Sport Board meeting;
- The Strategic Director (TP) to ascertain from the local bus companies their plans regarding services and passenger capacity now that lockdown restrictions were being eased, and to supply his findings to Members;
- The Chief Executive to ensure that the Council works with the local Stevenage BAME Group to consider how the findings of the Public Health England (PHE) report on the impact of Covid-19 on the BAME community was reflected in Stevenage; and, in connection with this, the Chief Executive would check with the Hertfordshire Director of Public Health that the PHE report could be released to SBC Members;
- The Strategic Director (RP) to review the street cleansing regime with regard to the removal of glass and other debris from the Borough's cycleways; and
- The Chief Executive would notify Members when the date of the first Stevenage Recovery Taskforce meeting was agreed.

## (2) Housing First Project

The Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) gave a presentation on the Housing First Project, in the light of the MHCLG's request to all local authorities for the completion and return of a proforma by 11 June 2020 detailing their plans and proposals for supporting rough sleepers during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) advised that the MHCLG had requested councils to consider the options available; the level of support provided; and to complete housing and health care plans.

In terms of resource requirements, the Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) explained that SBC had 3 Rough Sleeper Workers, with a fourth about to join. A Flexible Housing Support Grant was available and could be directed to the Housing First project. Any accommodation would need to be supplied with provisions and fittings so that it could be used immediately on occupation. Funding would be required to support Assured Shorthold Tenancies, including a deposit and rent in advance. A Housing First Support Worker(s) to support any schemes put in place if it was chosen to not use a support provider.

The Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) stated that accommodation options included the leasing of housing stock in the Private Rented Sector; the leasing of modular homes for a fixed term period (including the identification of a suitable site for these to be located); the re-purposing of existing stock; Open Market acquisitions for conversion into Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs); supporting clients into PRS Assured Shorthold Tenancies (with appropriate support); and the building of new accommodation for the use of Housing First (thereby providing a lasting legacy).

The Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) confirmed that she would be submitting a report on Housing First to the July 2020 meeting of the Executive.

In reply to a Member's query, the Assistant Director confirmed that, in the coming weeks, the hotel facilities in Stevenage currently being used to house rough sleepers would contain only those provided with temporary accommodation by Stevenage Borough Council.

Members supported the Assistant Director's request for the extension of the block booking at the Stevenage Holiday Inn Express for a further 6 weeks for the continued provision of temporary accommodation for rough sleepers and/or those at risk of rough sleeping.

### (3) North of Stevenage Planning Application

The Chief Executive updated Members on recent developments in respect of the North of Stevenage planning application.

The Chief Executive advised that, following the Planning & Development Committee's consideration of the North of Stevenage planning application in February 2020, and the subsequent holding direction from the Secretary of State, the hold had now been lifted and the application was back with SBC for determination. This meant that both the allocation of this site for housing in the Local Plan and the application itself having been reviewed by the Secretary of State, he was now happy to let SBC determine it.

The Chief Executive stated that, in making this decision, the Secretary of State was aware of the Planning & Development Committee's resolution to grant permission. This recognition of the Local Plan allocation was very welcome, but the holding direction had delayed the process.

The Chief Executive reminded Members that, since 1 April 2020, new major developments in Stevenage were subject to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). As this was a mandatory charge, the Section 106 Agreement previously agreed by the Planning & Development Committee would need to be adjusted to reflect the CIL contribution. The Committee would therefore be required to re-consider the application. Officers had been briefing Members on the application and the expected next steps.

At the Leader's invitation, the Chair of the Planning & Development Committee (Councillor Simon Speller) commented that he was concerned that all Committee Members understood their obligations in respect of this application. A letter had been sent to them regarding the current situation. He asked that if any Members of the Committee had any doubts or misgivings then they should speak to the Planning Officers or come to him directly.

## **6 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

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 involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as

described in paragraphs 1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

2. That the reasons for the following report being in Part II were accepted, and that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

**7 ON-SITE BUILDING MATERIAL MANAGEMENT CONTRACT 2020-2025**

The Executive considered a Part II report seeking approval of a new contractual agreement for five years for the provision of building materials and a managed stores solution.

It was **RESOLVED** that the recommendation set out in the report be approved.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

**8 URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**CHAIR**