

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 17 June 2020

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Virtual (via Zoom)

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Sandra Barr, Laurie Chester, Michael Downing, Michelle Gardner, Andy McGuinness, John Mead, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris and Simon Speller.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.37pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Sarah-Jane McDonough.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 16 MARCH 2020

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 16 March 2020 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 PART 1 DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee considered the decisions on the following matters arising from the Executive meeting held on 10 June 2020.

Minutes of the Executive – 13 May 2020

Noted.

Coronavirus Recovery Plan – Review of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Impact of Covid-19 on the Council’s General Fund Revenue Budget

1. Theme: Financial position including consideration of Section 114 Notice

Response – The report to the June 2020 Executive set out a number of measures that were recommended to improve the resilience of the General Fund balances that were agreed by the Executive. This held or stopped some spend and diverted the use of receipts to ensure that if there was no more funding to be given by the Government, the General Fund could, after taking

these measures absorb that cost. These measures, whilst not ideal, mean the General Fund could meet a £4.8Million cost of COVID in 2020/21. These measures were to be reviewed at the end of September, thus negating the need to issue a S114 notice, as balances would be sufficient on the central scenario.

The report also set out further measures which would further improve the Council's financial position and this included:

- a future report on the disposal of land and assets identified as part of the Locality reviews to minimise the use of revenue contributions to capital;
- to commence the transformation agenda to help identify savings through new ways of working;
- setting aside any 2019/20 pilot gains up to the level of 2020/21 NDR gains of £1Million which may be lost as a result of the impact of COVID-19 and assumed in the current year to be realised; and
- approve the development of a priority list of services over the summer as a further precautionary measure, if losses and the impact of COVID-19 is financially greater than modelled.

These further measures should help the future resilience of the General Fund but it is very much going to be dependent on the depth of any recession, support from central government, changes to future LG funding models and the impact of the pandemic is monitored on a monthly basis.

In reply to supplementary questions, the Strategic Director (CF) stated:

- it would be her duty (as Section 151 Officer) to raise the issue of a potential Section 114 Notice should the Council reach a position where it had insufficient resources to meet its in-year financial commitments;
- there was now an additional step in the process, whereby the Section 151 Officer was required to inform the Government if the above situation occurred;
- should a Section 114 Notice be issued, then the Council would only be able to fund essential spend. There was also the possibility that the Government would appoint commissioners to oversee the running of the Council (as happened recently in the case of Northamptonshire County Council); and
- the issue of a Section 114 Notice was seen as an action of last resort.

2. Theme: Service prioritisation

Response - The report contained a number of resilience measures which should be considered by the Executive, these included holding budgets, as outlined in the body of the June report. A further measure recommended was the prioritisation of services, and the data to allow Members to do this needs to be collated and then the method of review to be agreed by the Executive. There are various groups, such as Leader's Financial Security Group and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee that could do this piece of work. No decisions have been taken yet, but the data is being collated to aid decision making.

The Member questioner commented that the Council's staffing structure may need to reflect the flexibility and agility of staff to be redeployed into prioritised areas of work. As well as the LFSG and Overview & Scrutiny Committee, he felt that the possible involvement of a citizens' jury in the prioritisation of services could prove to be useful.

3. Theme: Availability of data on the COVID-19 pandemic at Stevenage level to inform residents' own decision making

Response - The rate of transmission is calculated by the Government at the regional level i.e. East of England. Officers will share local data once available and recognise the importance of this to inform the community of the current position. Overall Incident Management arrangements are managed across partners at the Hertfordshire level, with the production of the Local Outbreak Plan being co-ordinated for the County as a whole, which is reflected in data sets.

The Strategic Director (TP) undertook to liaise with the SBC Communications Team regarding public messages, together with social distancing reminders, to be made available now that lockdown measures were being eased.

4. Theme: Implications of accommodating rough sleepers, and the availability of the council to continue to meet the needs of those currently in crowded situations or already awaiting rehousing

Response – The Government asked for information on all those rough sleeping accommodated by SBC during this crisis. SBC had a block booking in some local hotels to house all rough sleepers and those at risk of rough sleeping. This provision comes to an end on 19 June 2020. However it was agreed at the 10 June Executive, that SBC will continue with the booking at the Holiday Inn Express for a further 6 weeks.

A further report is being worked on by officers to bring to the July Executive outlining the Council's approach to supporting these 48 households once the hotel provision finishes. Each of the households are being assessed to determine their support needs so SBC can secure some more permanent accommodation to suit their needs. SBC has accommodated a number of families, including some with no fixed abode, into the private rented sector during this time. Subject to Member approval a Housing First approach would be considered to provide supported and move-on accommodation for this client group.

This client group will not affect those on the housing register and their ability to bid for existing accommodation. It is likely that SBC will look to purchase property on the open market and work up some shared accommodation solutions.

In response to follow-up questions, the Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) advised:

- it was not always possible to gauge when properties might become available for use as homeless/rough sleeper accommodation. The method(s) used would, in many ways, be determined by funding levels available;
- the Government had not yet indicated any plans/support funding for rough sleeper accommodation beyond 19 June 2020, although there could be information forthcoming from the National Task force set up to consider the issue; and
- that she would provide Members with a breakdown of the ward locations of the 13 homeless households in Stevenage who had recently been found accommodation via the Private Rented Sector.

In reply to financial questions, the Strategic Director (CF) stated:

- she had estimated the net cost to SBC of rough sleeper temporary accommodation so far to be £135,000, against Government support funding of £11,500;
- there was likely to be a limited impact on the Housing Revenue Account 30 year Business Plan, as the costs of emergency accommodation were attributable to the General Fund; and
- the 2020/21 allocated reserve of £455,000 relating to Business Rates gains, which it had been agreed to put on hold, would have been used to carry on the Council's transformation, digital work or regeneration pump priming.

Corporate Performance – Quarter Four 2019/20

1. Theme: Corporate Performance – website performance

General Response - The Council is investing in a new website, which will go live in September 2020. The new website will address many current issues and aims to be more accessible and user-friendly and modern. During the Covid-19 crisis, the Customer Service team and Digital Team have been working hard to rapidly adapt the offer to protect service delivery, with the website playing a key role in providing information and services to residents.

(i) Please would you explain the rating system used here?

Response - The website rating is provided through GovMetrics, a service which measures website effectiveness on a scale from -1 (worst) to +1 (best), with a score of 0 being in the middle. The score is based on website visitor feedback. Using this indicator enables SBC to benchmark with around 70 other local authorities.

(ii) Why is the target so low? It appears that we are targeting customer dissatisfaction?

Response - The average benchmark score for website satisfaction across Councils is around 0.1, so a target score of 0.2 is a good score.

(iii) Was sufficient priority given to fixing the search issues with the website?

Response - The poor performance in Q4 2019/20 was due to particular search functionality including “find my bin day” not working on 5 and 6 January 2020. The timing of this was particularly unfortunate as many people wanted to check their collection schedule with the end of the holidays, and changes due to bank holidays. Satisfaction quickly recovered to be above the target of 0.2 in February and March. The technology that provides “find my bin day” is being modernised and replaced in the new website which is due to launch in September 2020.

(iv) Are we expecting this to return to green in Q1?

Response - While this specific issue is now resolved, Q1 performance may be impacted by the changing way residents have needed to interact with the website due to Coronavirus. We’re asking our customers to do more online than ever before which may impact on satisfaction. Officers will continue to look for opportunities to develop and improve the online offer.

In reply to a supplementary question, the Strategic Director (TP) confirmed that a significant amount of work had been carried out, particularly in respect of compliance with new Government accessibility standards, to get the new SBC website project back on track. He hoped that testing of the new website would commence in the near future.

Urgent Part I Business

(1) Coronavirus Update

1. Theme: Mental health support for staff members

Response – SBC has promoted a range of mental health support packages to staff. Officers will continue to make available to staff the Employee Assistance Programme 24/7 together with our Occupational Health Service. Officers have also put in place local interventions such as virtual coffee breaks, video meetings and intranet blog posts to try and respond to some of the isolation concerns. The HR Team have also instigated virtual training on Mindfulness and Resilience and 166 employees have joined these sessions, and the feedback has been very positive. Officers have also signposted to national and local organisations who are also able to provide support, such as Mind and others.

The Employee Assistance Programme is completely confidential and provided by an external third party provider. The Council receives quarterly usage figures, due in August, and can share this information when available.

2. Theme: Risk assessments and support to vulnerable employees

Response – Individual Services have completed their own risk assessments based on a generic Covid 19 risk assessment that services have adapted to suit their needs. This includes the advice to work from home wherever possible, especially those who are classed as at risk. A staff and member welfare cell has been created to review the actions for all staff and elected members to ensure we are protecting their wellbeing. Via the group there has been communicated via blogs and through guidance to managers. Officers have captured the data on who is in both the vulnerable and shielding categories and these staff are working from home. Managers are being reminded that they should have regular contact with their teams and the feedback from the staff survey suggested that this was the case for the majority of staff. Further guidance to managers and staff will be sent out.

In response to a follow-on question, the Strategic Director (TP) confirmed that he would ensure that the Assistant Director (Neighbourhoods & Communities) makes contact with a wide selection of BAME groups across the town. In respect of Council employees, services have risk assessments in place for their operation, and ensure that support is in place such as training, guidance and PPE equipment. One to one conversations can take place with a manager or with Human Resources if any individual has concerns or would like further support in place.

(2) Housing First Project

Questions covered under the Coronavirus Recovery Plan – Review of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and Impact of Covid-19 on the Council's General Fund Revenue Budget item above.

(3) North of Stevenage Planning Application

Following the lifting of the Secretary of State's holding of this application, a Member asked if a date had been earmarked for it to be re-considered by the Planning & Development Committee, and if the Committee would be required to determine the application afresh, or would Members only be deciding on the level Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to be applied in place of the previously agreed Section 106 Agreement.

The Chair of the Planning & Development Committee commented that Members would need to consider the whole application afresh, with an open mind. Clear officer advice to Committee Members would be provided. No firm date had been agreed for when the application would be re-considered, although it was likely that it would be in September/October 2020.

4 URGENT PART 1 DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Members noted the list of urgent Part I decisions set out in the agenda authorised by the Chair of the Committee during the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

5 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

None.

6 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 Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, as amended by SI 2006 No. 88.

2. That having considered the reasons for the following item being in Part II, it be determined that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

7 PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II decision of the Executive held on 10 June 2020 concerning the On-site Building Material Management Contract 2020-2025 be noted.

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

None.

9 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

The Committee noted the officer response to a Member's question in respect of the Council's Strategic Risk Register.

CHAIR