

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## COUNCIL MINUTES

**Date: Wednesday, 15 July 2020**

**Time: 7.00pm**

**Place: Virtual (via Zoom)**

**Present:** Councillors: Jim Brown (Mayor), Michelle Gardner (Deputy Mayor), Doug Bainbridge, Sandra Barr, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Adrian Brown, Teresa Callaghan, Laurie Chester, David Cullen, Michael Downing, Alex Farquharson, John Gardner, Jody Hanafin, Liz Harrington, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Lizzy Kelly, Graham Lawrence, John Lloyd, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Lin Martin-Haugh, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, John Mead, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Margaret Notley, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Sharon Taylor OBE CC and Jeannette Thomas.

**Start / End** Start Time: 7.00pm  
**Time:** End Time: 10.21pm

### 1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Sarah-Jane McDonough and Tom Wren.

There were no declarations of interest.

The Mayor invited the Chief Executive to outline the proposed process for voting at the meeting.

The Chief Executive reminded Members that the method of voting at the previous Council meeting was somewhat laborious. With that in mind, an alternative method of voting had been identified that still allowed transparency, but which took less time.

The Chief Executive advised that the method proposed was that, when a vote was taken, the starting point would be to assume that everyone was voting for the motion or amendment. If a Member or Members chose to vote against or abstain they would be asked to raise their virtual hands. The number of votes and abstentions would be totalled and the outcome announced. With this approach there would be no calling out of Members' names.

The Chief Executive stated that to adopt this new voting method, Members needed to agree to suspend the relevant temporary Standing Order that was agreed at the previous Council meeting.

It was moved, seconded and (following a roll call) **RESOLVED** that temporary

Standing Order 22 be suspended to allow the above revised method of voting, as outlined by the Chief Executive.

## 2 **MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS**

The Mayor wished his predecessor, Councillor Simon Speller, an early happy birthday, as he would be turning 70 on 16 July 2020. Members joined the Mayor in sending Councillor Speller birthday wishes.

The Mayor advised that 2020 was the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of an elected Council in Stevenage, a milestone he felt should be recognised.

The Mayor stated that many events had been cancelled and fundraising opportunities lost as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, he, the Mayoress and Deputy Mayor had been involved in a number of activities (many of them virtual) since commencing his term of office, including:

- Checking one of the Stevenage Cycling Festival routes – he hoped that it would be possible to hold some form of festival in August, even if virtually;
- Helping with the launch of the Stevenage Museum's 100 Favourite Objects project;
- Joining the Youth Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture for the appearance of the Stevenage Day banner in King George V Playing Fields, in order to publicise the virtual Stevenage Day;
- Supporting Bike Week (6 - 14 June 2020) – 85 local people had cycled (virtually) from Stevenage to San Francisco;
- Supporting the Black Lives Matter event on 7 June 2020;
- One of many lining the streets at the funeral of Bill Pilgrim, a well-known local activist who had been a trustee of the Stevenage Irish Network, Vice-Chair of Age Concern, and involved in numerous other local activities. The Mayor also paid tribute to Alan Millard, a former Chairman of North Hertfordshire District Council and long-time photographer for the Comet newspaper, who had also passed away recently;
- Helping out with a fundraising event at Stevenage Haven;
- Visiting the Indoor Market to give the stallholders a boost;
- Marking the 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the National Health Service;
- Attending a photo call for the reopening of outdoor gyms and play areas;
- Visiting the SG1 Radio station to witness a Stevenage resident break the indoor World Record time for an Iron Man Challenge;
- Dropping in digitally on a Sport Stevenage Briefing and the Stevenage Sporting Futures Awards presentation; and
- Visiting the Feed Up, Warm Up project (a local food bank project).

The Mayor concluded by advising that his chosen charities for the year would be the Stevenage Community Trust, Haven First, and Sport Stevenage.

## 3 **MINUTES - 20 MAY 2020**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Council held on 20

May 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair, subject to the addition in Minute 3 – Election of Mayor – of a paragraph at the end stating “A number of Members congratulated Councillor Brown on his appointment and wished him well in his forthcoming year of office”.

#### **4 MAIN DEBATE**

There was no Main Debate.

#### **5 PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS**

There were no petitions and deputations.

#### **6 QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL**

The Council received two questions from the Youth Council. The responses to the two questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

In relation to Question 1, concerning environmental projects with which the Youth Council could be involved, the Youth Mayor asked the following supplementary question:

“Is there a Member/officer whom the Youth Council to speak to in more detail about assisting with projects within the Biodiversity Action Plan?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration replied that if the Youth Council had particular proposals then he would ensure that they were considered by officers and reported back. He or one of the officer team would be more than prepared to attend the next meeting of the Youth Council to discuss the matter.

In relation to Question 2, concerning Black Lives Matter (BLM), the Youth Mayor asked the following supplementary question:

“Could the Youth Council be directed to anyone in the Council who could assist them in the organisation of a peaceful demonstration in support of the BLM movement?”

The Portfolio Holder for Communities, Community Safety & Equalities suggested that, in the first instance, the Youth Council contact the Council’s Neighbourhoods & Communities Team for advice and assistance.

#### **7 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

The Council received three questions from the members of the public, all relating to cycling/cycleways in the Borough. The responses to the three questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

In relation to Question 1, the questioner (Tina Walker) was present in the meeting, and asked the following supplementary question:

“Would it be possible for cyclists to be involved in the planning process before a

decision was made about whether or not a planning application impacting on cycling/cycleways was suitable?"

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration considered this to be a very reasonable request. He felt that it would be possible for cycling representatives to meet with SBC Planning Officers as soon as a relevant planning application was submitted as part of the consultation process, in order to discuss pertinent cycling/cycleway issues.

In relation to Question 2, the questioner (Richard Briers) had been unable to attend the meeting, but had submitted the following supplementary question, which was read out by the Chief Executive:

"In respect of the cycleways at the Costco entrances, would it be possible for the layout and signals to be improved for cycling and other active travel?"

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration replied that when the Costco planning application was considered, the views of the Highway Authority were paramount in reaching the decision. Priority was, in fact, given to cyclists when they pressed the button on the traffic light columns. At present there were no plans in place to change this method, which had been developed to support staff entering and exiting the site at different times, and thereby to alleviate potential queueing conditions inside the site or on the highway. If UK Cycling had any alternative suggestions then they should submit these to the Highway Authority (Hertfordshire County Council).

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration asked officers to provide Mr Briers with a written response to his supplementary question.

There was no supplementary question relating to Question 3.

## **8 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE**

The Leader of the Opposition asked the following question:

"Given that the Leader was quick to distance herself from the press comments about the possibility of issuing a s114 and potential bankruptcy, is she now embarrassed that Sir Keir Starmer has prompted similar inflammatory comments in a recent front page article in the Comet?"

The Leader of the Council replied that the article on the front page of the Comet had declared the Council bankrupt, which was not the case. A s114 notice was a technical notice, issued by the Section 151 Officer if that officer felt that the Council would not meet its legal financial obligations to balance its books at the end of the financial year. No such notice had been issued for SBC and, when asked the question by the Press, the Leader advised them of that fact, but stated that this did not mean that it would not happen if the financial position did not improve.

The Leader advised that prompt action was taken by SBC in revising its Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), in order to address the difficult financial position.

She was of the opinion that the Council had found itself in this position due to the broken promise of the Government, who had advised Councils to do whatever was necessary to support their communities through the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Government would provide the funds to support them. She wondered if the Leader of the Opposition should perhaps disassociate himself from that broken promise.

The Leader continued that the estimated cost for the Council during the Covid-19 crisis up to the end of July 2020 was £5.8Million, with only £928,000 received so far from the Government. SBC had avoided cuts to services and had developed a clear financial plan via the revised June 2020 MTFs. If the further promised Government funding did not materialise action would be taken in accordance with that agreed within the revised MTFs. On 2 July 2020, the Government promised a new support package, but no details had materialised thus far, although the Government had asked for a fourth financial update return from the Council.

The Leader was of the view that Sir Keir Starmer was absolutely correct to point out the national funding gap in Council budgets of over £7.5Billion. She added that the current situation puts jobs and services at risk, and had left the public with an uncertain future as to how their local councils would be able to manage.

The Council then received updates from the relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on the following matters:

- Planning Committee and determinations;
- People's Orchards and Green Flag Awards;
- Reopening the Town Centre and Supporting Business;
- Housing Programme;
- Healthy Stevenage Partnership;
- Housing First: Response to Rough Sleepers;
- Housing online;
- Community Safety during COVID-19;
- Environmental Health during COVID-19;
- Leisure and Culture at the heart of our recovery;
- Stevenage Covid Snake;
- Stevenage Helps; and
- Business and Council Tax support.

In response to an issue raised by the Leader of the Opposition regarding the importance of County Councillors being invited to local community/residents meetings, the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods & Co-operative Working agreed with this comment. If any County Councillor had concerns that they were not receiving invitations to such meetings then he urged them to take the matter up with the Chair (s) of the respective Community/Residents Association(s).

In reply to a question raised by another Member, the Portfolio Holder for Resources confirmed that, to help households during the Covid-19 pandemic, the maximum amount of Council Tax reduction for those on Council Tax support would be £150 per person.

## 9 UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS

The Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee reported that the Committee had held its first virtual meeting under the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) Regulations 2020 on 17 June 2020. Members of the Committee were encouraged to watch the broadcast of the Executive meeting and submit written questions in advance based on the Executive reports and discussion. These questions were then circulated to the Strategic Leadership Team for written responses which were, in turn, circulated to the Committee Members before the meeting. At the meeting, the questions were verbally raised by the relevant Member and the responses were provided by officers – it was hoped that this would help those viewing the virtual meeting to better understand the discussion and the supplementary questions raised.

The Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee advised that a slightly different format had been used for the meeting of the Committee held on 14 July 2020, in that the answers to submitted questions were not provided to Members in advance, but were answered by officers at the meeting. It was intended to continue this format until face to face meetings resumed.

The Chair of the Community Select Committee reported that there was no specific update to provide to Council on the work of both select committees, other than to state that it had not been possible to meet since the start of the lockdown because of the added strain on resources that this would cause. However, it was intended to recommence the activities of these Committees in September 2020.

## 10 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

### (i) Black Lives Matter

Councillor Michelle Gardner moved and Councillor Jackie Hollywell seconded a motion (as set out in the agenda) in respect of Black Lives Matter.

In introducing the motion, Councillor Gardner spoke of various instances of racial discrimination she had experienced as a mixed race person, both growing up and in later life.

During the debate, issues raised included:

- Racism of any form, but especially systematic, had no place in society;
- It was important to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement;
- It was vital that any institutional racism in Police Forces, businesses and other organisations across the country should be addressed and eradicated through various means, including training if necessary;
- It was a time for listening to black voices, not talking over them.

The following amendment was moved by Councillor Stephen Booth and seconded by Councillor Robin Parker CC:

**“Second paragraph:**

Insert in line 2 after "minority ethnic" in brackets: "(BAME)"

**Third paragraph:**

Delete words in line 3: "in public life"

**First bulleted point:**

In first line delete word "black" and replace with "BAME"

**Second bulleted point:**

In second line delete words: "Black, Asian and minority ethnic" and replace with "BAME"

**Fourth bulleted point:**

At end of sentence add words "and that racial awareness and bias training is available to all staff in management and customer facing roles."

**Sixth bulleted point:**

In first line add after "we are" word "particularly". In second line delete word "black" and replace with "BAME"

Following debate, and upon being put to the vote, the amendment was lost.

The following further amendment was moved by Councillor Phil Bibby CC and seconded by Councillor Adam Mitchell CC:

- Bullet point 2 - Delete “To lobby government for immediate action...”, and replace with “To recognize the actions being taken by the Government and County Council...”
- Bullet point 3 - Delete “To lobby government and county council...”, and replace with “To recognize the actions being taken by the Government, County Council and Herts for Learning...”

Following debate, and upon being put to the vote, the amendment was lost.

Following further debate on the substantive motion, and upon it being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

“That Council notes with serious concern the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in America on 25th May 2020 and the systemic racism towards black people that continues to exist around the world.

Council also notes the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black, Asian and

minority ethnic people in the UK and that decisive action needs to be taken to mitigate these risks on sections of our community.

Council welcomes the decision to light the Clock Tower purple on 2nd June 2020 in commemoration of George Floyd's unnecessary death and all those who have died because of racism in public life.

Council also welcomes the progress that has been made in Stevenage over a number of years to build community cohesion and strengthen the voice of those who are marginalised, but recognises that there is more we can and must do.

That Council resolves:

- To stand in solidarity with black people in Stevenage, Britain and around the world.
- To lobby government for immediate action to address the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black, Asian and minority ethnic people in the UK including here in Hertfordshire where we will continue to work with our Director of Public Health on this issue.
- To lobby government and the county council on racial inequality in education, including recruiting more black teachers and reforming the curriculum to fully reflect British history including the history of slavery empire and colonialism.
- To ensure the Council's HR and management policies fully meet the requirements for equalities, diversity and inclusion in the recruitment and career progression of all staff.
- To establish wider community dialogue with BAME Community organisations to make clear recommendations to the Council and other public bodies of further actions required to tackle discrimination and reduce inequalities across the town.
- To work with our partners in Stevenage Together to ensure we are all listening and engaging with our black community as we plan the future of our town together."

(ii) Primett Road Car Park

Councillor Robin Parker CC moved and Councillor Stephen Booth seconded a motion (as set out in the agenda) in respect of Primett Road Car Park.

The following amendment was moved by Councillor Sharon Taylor and seconded by Councillor Lloyd Briscoe:

The addition of the following paragraph at the beginning:



“That Council welcomes the decision of Executive to implement new seating and waiting areas in the High Street, to provide help to local businesses and support safe movement, and the use of the former Waitrose Car Park for 3 hours free parking to accommodate the displaced parking spaces. Council notes the proactive work of Stevenage Borough Council and the support of Hertfordshire County Council to develop these positive solutions, supporting the reopening of the Old Town.”

And the following additions to the submitted motion:

Before ‘In’ add ‘Therefore, Council notes that’

After ‘Primett Road’ add ‘(former Waitrose) Car Park’

Following debate, and upon being put to the vote, the amendment was carried.

Upon the substantive motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

“That Council welcomes the decision of Executive to implement new seating and waiting areas in the High Street, to provide help to local businesses and support safe movement, and the use of the former Waitrose Car Park for 3 hours free parking to accommodate the displaced parking spaces. Council notes the proactive work of Stevenage Borough Council and the support of Hertfordshire County Council to develop these positive solutions, supporting the reopening of the Old Town.

Therefore, Council notes that, in the interests of helping the businesses in the Old Town, Primett Road (former Waitrose) Car Park should be made free to use for the first 3 hours, for an initial period of 6 months or until the former Waitrose building returns to retail use, whichever is the sooner.”

## 11 **QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS/PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

The Council received eight questions from the Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders. The responses to the eight questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

### (A) Question from Councillor Doug Bainbridge

Supplementary question – “What evidence can you provide to me and what has been published to demonstrate both value for money and exactly what these consultants have achieved for the people of Stevenage?”

In reply, the Portfolio Holder for Resources asked Councillor Bainbridge to send her an e-mail with some further detail in order that she could provide a written reply to the supplementary question.

(B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

Supplementary question – “Can Councillor Henry elucidate a little more on the Sport England funding and can he give a date when Stevenage Arts & Leisure Centre might be reopening?”

The Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture replied that there were many calls on Sport England funding. SBC was trying to arrange a meeting with the Regional Director in order to discuss in detail both the way that the Council works with Stevenage Leisure Limited and also the Council’s ambitions for looking at sport, leisure and health and wellbeing in the future. It was confirmed that Stevenage Arts & Leisure Centre was planning to reopen on 25 July 2020.

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC

Supplementary question – “Could the Council’s telephone service’s opening message be shortened to avoid the need to listen to over a minute of introductory remarks?”

The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Working replied that he would discuss the matter with officers and report back. He commented that the Council was committed to move away from telephony to online services, but accepted that the telephone service would continue for the foreseeable future to be a first point of contact for some residents.

(D) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

Supplementary question – “Can you tell me the accumulated estimated cost of developing the Council’s new website, and would there be training on it for Members?”

The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Working replied that it was intended that assistance for members on the public on the new website would be provided by the Customer Service Centre. As well as member training on the new website, he was keen that there was further consultation with Members on its style and content. The Council aimed to deliver the website (with a soft launch) in September 2020. He undertook to provide Councillor Snell with the estimated cost information requested.

(E) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

Supplementary question (asked by Councillor Robin Parker CC on behalf of Councillor Wren) – “What steps are being taken to ensure that the removal of trees without planning permission does not happen again?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration replied that approval was given for the removal of the trees on the Eliot Road site prior to the bird nesting season. The site was allocated for housing, and the trees were assessed as not being of major importance. It was expected that, should it be the Council’s

view in any negotiations on planning applications, then the removal of any trees could be offset by the planting of new trees elsewhere. He and officers would look into the processes to ensure that, when any premature agreement was given on land that the Council was about to dispose of or build on, a notice would be placed on the site explaining what was going to be removed and that approval had been given. Ward councillors would also be notified so that they could explain the position to residents.

(F) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC

Supplementary question – “Would you agree that, whilst SBC Refuse Collection staff did a fantastic job through lockdown, they were to some extent undermined by and residents frustrated by the lack of ability to get the information on collection days off the Council’s website? What is being done to ensure that such outages are reduced, both before and after the new website is introduced?”

The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Working replied that he agreed that it was unfortunate that the refuse Collection information had not been available to the community for a number of days. However, he hoped that overall in terms of IT the Council had received a fairly good response from residents during lockdown. He had participated in discussions with officers to ensure that the new website would be robust and kept up to date.

(G) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

Supplementary question – “Can you advise me whether there has been any indications from Government, or through Hertfordshire County Council, that track and tracing would be carried out by the SBC Environmental Health Team?”

The Portfolio Holder for Communities, Community Safety & Equalities replied that the SBC Environmental health Team was in the process of interpreting the latest Government guidance on track and tracing. This was a complex task, and she undertook to inform Councillor Booth as soon as the position became clearer.

(H) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

Supplementary question – “Despite SBC being one of the least populated Districts in Hertfordshire, its senior officers were amongst the most well-paid. What did SBC do differently that necessitated the payment of higher salaries?”

The Portfolio Holder for Resources asked Councillor Farquharson to provide her with the statistics he had quoted in his preamble to the supplementary question so that she could provide him with a written reply.

The Leader of the Council commented that it was difficult to make direct comparisons between local authorities as they delivered different services in different ways. SBC provided a significant proportion of direct services and

was delivering major regeneration and housing development amongst other FTFC activities, which were reflected in senior officers' salaries, whilst many other local authorities contracted out a number of their services.

## **12 ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT 2019/20**

The Council considered the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2019/20.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees during 2019/20, as set out in the report, be noted.

## **13 APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT PERSON (STANDARDS COMMITTEE)**

The Council considered a report seeking approval to the appointment of an "Independent Person", in accordance with Section 28 (7) of the Localism Act 2011.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that Dr. Robert Cawley be re-appointed as the Council's Independent Person for a further term of 4 years, with effect from 4 October 2020.

## **14 APPOINTMENT OF MONITORING OFFICER**

The Council considered a report seeking approval to the appointment of a Monitoring Officer, in accordance with Section 5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

The Mayor announced that the current Monitoring Officer (Mary Cormack) was retiring from Local Government service, and he wished her a long and happy retirement.

The Leader of the Council echoed those sentiments, and on behalf of all Members thanked Mary for her sterling service to SBC since 2017, when the Shared Legal Service with Hertfordshire County Council was established. She wished Mary the best of luck for the future.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that Simon Banks be appointed as the Council's Monitoring Officer, with effect from 20 July 2020.

## **15 REVISION TO FINANCIAL REGULATIONS (2016) AND CONTRACT STANDING ORDERS (2016)**

The Council considered a report seeking approval to proposed revisions to the Council's Financial Regulations and Contract Standing Orders.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED**:

1. That the revised Financial Regulations, as attached at Appendix A to the report, be approved.

2. That the revised Contract Standing Orders, as attached at Appendix B to the report, be approved.

## **16 AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 9 June 2020 were received and noted.

The Leader of the Council thanked the former Chair of the Audit Committee (Councillor Maureen McKay) for her effective chairing of the Committee for the past 5 years, and welcomed the new Chair (Councillor Teresa Callaghan), wishing her well in the role.

## **MAYOR**