

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 19 January 2022

Time: 1.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

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: Councillor Phil Bibby CC (observer).

Start / End Start Time: 1.00pm
Time: End Time: 2.56pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Robin Parker CC (observer).

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 8 DECEMBER 2021

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 8 December 2021 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES

In relation to the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 24 November 2021, and in response to a question from the Chair, the Strategic Director (RP) confirmed that the Council's refuse collection and recycling vehicle fleet had remained operational throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council had sufficient flexibility to redeploy staff and/or employ agency staff in order to maintain a continued service.

In respect of the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 30 November 2021, and with regard to Neighbourhood Wardens, the Chair advised that a series of short films was soon to be launched on social media and on the SBC website highlighting the work of various front line services, such as the Wardens, Regeneration Team and Stevenage Direct Services.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Minutes of the meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees be noted:

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 24 November 2021

4 **COVID-19 UPDATE**

The Executive considered an overarching verbal update report from the Strategic Director (RP), together with a short presentation from the Corporate Policy & Research Officer, providing information concerning the Omicron variant and the latest epidemiology statistics relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Strategic Director (RP) reported on the latest Government announcement regarding the pandemic. He advised that, as from 26 January 2022, the working from home guidance would be ended; the wearing of masks would no longer be compulsory in indoor settings, including schools; and the compulsory requirement to present Covid vaccination passes prior to entry into certain venues would also be withdrawn (although this would be at the discretion of individual venue operators). He agreed to circulate the full details to Members.

The following issues were raised by Members:

- in response to a question, it was confirmed the availability of Lateral Flow Testing kits had increased nationally from 300,000 per day to over 1 Million per day (particularly via local pharmacies);
- New Nightingale Ward at Lister Hospital – the Senior Environmental & Licensing Manager agreed to raise at the next meeting of the Hertfordshire Health Protection Board the issue of whether this building would remain in situ at the hospital for other uses once the Covid-19 pandemic had subsided;
- Hospitalised Covid-19 cases – the Senior Environmental & Licensing Manager agreed to raise a request for the latest figures regarding the numbers of those hospitalised who were unvaccinated at the next meeting of the Hertfordshire Health Protection Board; and
- Pop-up vaccination centre in Bedwell Ward – Officers were requested to continue to pursue the need for this facility, and that it should be provided on both weekdays and weekends with Public Health colleagues.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Covid-19 update be noted.

5 **FUTURE TOWN FUTURE TRANSPORT STRATEGY - 12 MONTH REVIEW**

The Executive considered a report in respect of a 12 month review of the Council's Future Town Future Transport Strategy.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport reminded Members that, in October 2019, the Council had adopted Future Town, Future Transport (FTFT), a transport strategy for Stevenage. FTFT outlined the Council's approach to sustainable transport. It established the key local transport issues and opportunities that existed in Stevenage, and provided a vision and series of objectives for what would be delivered in the future.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport stated that the report

reviewed progress on FTFT between October 2020 and October 2021. He referred to highlights which included:

- Working with Hertfordshire County Council on the Stevenage Sustainable Travel Town Implementation Plan;
- Significant progress with the new Bus Interchange;
- Progress with the Station Gateway Area Action Plan and Town Deal Business Case;
- Significant progress with regeneration of the Town Centre; and
- Delivery and implementation of Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan routes.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport commented that the provision of all uncommitted Smart Motorway transport schemes (including the one proposed for between Junctions 6 and 8 of the A1(M)) had been paused for a period of 5 years until 2027, pending the collection of safety data.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport explained that the FTFT Strategy would henceforth continue to be monitored as part of the quarterly Corporate Performance reports submitted to the Executive.

The following comments were made by Members:

- the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) was requested to endeavour to arrange for meetings to take place with appropriate disability groups in order to consult them and seek their ideas on how to overcome practical difficulties experienced by them in transport-related matters;
- the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) undertook to highlight the issue of e-scooters as part of the Sustainable Travel Town initiative, with a view to urging the Government to introduce greater regulation of these vehicles, in order that they can be safely used on Stevenage's extensive cycleway network; and
- the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) was requested to ensure that disabled access issues were fully taken into consideration as part of the planning process, in order to avoid the need for the retrofitting of disabled facilities after the completion of projects; and
- the Chair clarified that the Council had been able to rebuff attempts by Hertfordshire County Council to introduce on-street parking charges in the Old Town through the Sustainable Travel Town initiative. During 2020-2022, SBC had provided time-limited free parking in the former Waitrose car park to support local businesses recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the progress with projects included within the Future Town, Future Transport Strategy be noted.
2. That it be noted that the Future Town, Future Transport Strategy will continue to be included within the quarterly Future Town, Future Council monitoring reports.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.
Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA): BUDGET SETTING AND RENT REPORT 2022/23

The Executive considered a report on the final Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Rent Setting 2022/23, for onward recommendation to Council.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the report was an update of the December 2021 draft HRA rent and budget setting for 2022/23, which had most recently been discussed at a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meeting in early January 2022.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the increase in rents was based on September 2021 CPI+1%, as set by legislation. This resulted in a 4.1% increase for 2022/23, although it should be viewed in the context of there having been a low increase in 2021/22, as CPI was only 0.5%, and the 4 years of rent reduction between 2016/17-2019/20. The Overview and Scrutiny had been advised that the 2015/16 average weekly social rent was £98.59. In 2022/23 it would be £103.07, which equated to an increase of 4.54% over 6 years, even with a 4.1% increase next year.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources explained that Social rents would be an average £103.07 per week, LSSO £120.33 and Affordable £167.57. This generated £2.1Million of rental income for the HRA. With service charge increases, there would be 270 properties which would have an increase of £5 - 5.50 per week, and the Strategic Director (CF) confirmed that 57 properties would have an increase which was over £5.50 per week.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources commented that additional growth had been added into the HRA between draft and final totalling £1.28Million, the majority of which related to the £950,000 RCCO decarbonisation bid. The HRA budget was now forecasting a £1.956Million surplus in comparison to the £3.236Million which was estimated in December 2021. The 2022/23 year end HRA balances were projected to be a £28.528Million surplus, which represented a reduction from the £29.7Million surplus previously reported. The minimum level of balances had been assessed and were £3.32Million (2021/22 £2.9Million), and in the short term balances were higher due to the need to repay debt.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People added that a comparison between HRA property rents per week and private sector rents per week showed that a three-bedroom private sector rental property costs an additional 131%, (2021/22,133%) more per week than a SBC council home and 30% more than the affordable let properties (2021/22 32%).

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That HRA rent on dwellings be increased, week commencing 4 April 2022, by 4.1% which is an average increase of £4.06 for social rents, £6.60 for

affordable rents and £4.74 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52-week year). This has been calculated using the rent formula, CPI + 1% in line with the Government's rent policy, as set out in Paragraph 4.1.1 of the report.

2. That Council be recommended to approve the 2022/23 HRA Budget, as set out in Appendix A to the report.
3. That Council be recommended to approve the 2022/23 growth options, as set out in Section 4.8 of the report, with supporting impact assessments in Appendix B. This includes new match funding for a Decarbonisation Grant application of £950,000.
4. That Council be recommended to approve the 2022/23 Fees and Charges, as set out in Appendix C to the report.
5. That Council be recommended to approve the 2022/23 service charges.
6. That Council be recommended to approve the minimum level of reserves for 2022/23, as shown in Appendix D to the report.
7. That the Rent Increase Equalities Impact Assessments set out in Appendix E to the report be noted.
8. That the contingency sum of £250,000 within which the Executive can approve supplementary estimates be approved for 2022/23 (unchanged from 2021/22).
9. That Council notes the comments from the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Portfolio Holder Advisory Group, as set out in Paragraph 4.10 of the report.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 DRAFT GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2022/23

The Executive considered a report in respect of the draft General Fund and Council Tax Setting 2022/23.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the report outlined the Government settlement for 2022/23. Due to the continuation of the lower tier grant and the one off service grant, funding was £280,000 higher than expected. However, the latter had been confirmed as being one off, but included compensation for the NI social care cost.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the report was based on a proposed 2.26% increase for 2022/23 in the SBC share of Council Tax, which equated to a £4.44 rise for a Band C property.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources explained that the Making Your Money Count (MYMC) options had reduced by £15,000, and the play service option changed to

include pop-up play going forward, but due to the configuration of staff this did mean that play centres would not be open as much during holiday times. The MYMC options were modelled on three redundancies, subject to consultation.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources commented that the December 2021 budget was £10.427Million and was now estimated to be £11.004Million, which included £420,000 of transfer of business rate gains. There were pressures of £180,000 which were on-going. Accordingly, the savings target had been increased to £810,000 for 2023/24.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources referred to the risks to projected balances shown at Paragraph 4.12.2 of the report. As balances were £232,000 above the minimum balances, the report recommended that Members approved the identification of a further £250,000 of MYMC options for the June 2022 Medium Term Financial Strategy report.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the 2021/22 revised net expenditure on the General Fund of £11,755,780 be approved.
2. That the inclusion of the 2022/23 Fees and Charges of £341,780 (Appendix B to the report) in the draft 2022/23 budget, be noted.
3. That the draft General Fund Budget for 2022/23 of £11,004,220 is proposed for consultation purposes, with a contribution from balances of £1,238,955 and a Band D Council Tax of £225.57 (assuming a 2.26% increase).
4. That the updated position on the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), summarised in section 4.14 of the report, be noted.
5. That the minimum level of General Fund reserves of £3,471,038 in line with the 2022/23 risk assessment of balances, as shown at Appendix C to the report, be approved.
6. That the contingency sum of £400,000 within which the Executive can approve supplementary estimates be approved for 2022/23 (reflecting the level of balances available above the minimum amount).
7. That the Making Your Money Count (MYMC) options, as set out in Section 4.2 and Appendix A of the report, totalling £780,945 and £39,370 for the General Fund and HRA respectively for 2022/23, be included into the Council's budget setting processes for consideration by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.
8. That the Growth options included in Section 4.4 of the report be approved for inclusion in the 2022/23 General Fund (£120,078) and HRA (£63,360) budgets.
9. That the pressures of £1,773,340 be noted, as set out in Section 4.3 of the report.
10. That a further £300,000 be approved for inclusion in the Council's 2022/23

budget setting processes to pump prime Transformation, to enable a significant contribution to the savings targets, as set out in Section 4.12 of the report.

11. That the identification of a further £250,000 of Making Your Money Count (MYMC) options for the June 2022 Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) report be approved, as set out in Paragraph 4.12.4 of the report.
12. That the business rate gains only once realised be ring fenced and used for firstly the financial resilience of the Council and, if required, be transferred to the Income Equalisation Reserve, and thereafter they be used for Regeneration or Co-operative Neighbourhood one-off spend.
13. That the 2022/23 Council Tax Support Scheme, as set out in Section 4.6 of the report, be approved.
14. That the decisions taken in Resolutions 3 to 13 above be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration, in accordance with the Budget and Policy Framework Rules in the Council's Constitution.
15. That the Equalities Impact Assessments, as set out in Appendices D and E to the report, be noted.
16. That the work of the Leader's Financial Security Group (LFSG) in reviewing the efficiency, commercial and fees and charges, as outlined in Section 4.18 of the report, be noted.
17. That key partners and other stakeholders be consulted and their views considered as part of the 2022/23 budget setting process.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

8 DRAFT CAPITAL STRATEGY 2021/22 - 2025/26

The Executive considered a report in respect of the draft Capital Strategy 2021/22 – 2025/26.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the capital growth bids received had been classified against a number of different categories, as set out in Paragraph 4.2.1 of the report, and were detailed in Appendix A to the report. These bids totalled £4.863Million over the period 2022/23 - 2025/26, £2.8Million of which fell in 2022/23.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the report recommended that all of the bids totalling £4.863Million were noted by the Executive for inclusion within the Draft Capital Strategy, subject to a review by Leader's Financial Security Group (LSFG) prior to the final Capital Strategy report being submitted to the 9 February 2022 meeting of the Executive. It was recommended that the growth bids submitted for future years, totalling £2.063Million for the period 2023/24 - 2025/26, should form part of the full review of the Strategy, at which time the capital receipts position would be reviewed again to consider the availability of capital resources.

Members noted that the report identified that the level of unused reserves at the year-end should be circa £800,000 to £1Million, excluding the £350,000 transfer. The LFSG were scrutinising the bids, including monies to fund activities related to implementation of the national waste strategy which the Council would look towards the Government to fund.

Members further noted that the report contained an update on Locality reviews in Section 4.4 and the Towns Fund in Section 4.5.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the borrowing, interest and Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) for 2022/23 for the Council, as required in the Capital Strategy, equated to a total a cost of borrowing of £314,000 in 2022/23.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the Capital Strategy also included the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme (Section 4.9) and the decarbonisation Fund growth mentioned in the HRA Budget final report. The report contained the HRA Capital Programme, which was estimated to be £64.67Million for 2022/23.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the Draft General Fund Capital Budget for 2022/23 of £31.1Million, as set out in Appendix C to the report, be proposed for consultation purposes (subject to review by Leader's Financial Security Group).
2. That the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) brings a report forward during the 2022/23 financial year setting out the Council's key capital regeneration and community asset ambitions and key land and asset disposals not currently included in the capital strategy, which could be used to meet these Corporate priorities.
3. That the Draft HRA Capital Budget for 2022/23 of £64.7Million, as set out in Appendix D to the report, be proposed for consultation purposes.
4. That the HRA Capital Budget be brought back to Executive in 2022/23 as part of the HRA Business Plan refresh.
5. That the updated forecast of resources 2022/23, as detailed in Appendix C (General Fund) and Appendix D (HRA) to the report, be approved, subject to the consultation process.
6. That the Council's investment strategy for non-treasury assets, as detailed in Appendix E to the report, be approved for consideration by the Executive.
7. That the approach to resourcing the General Fund capital programme, as outlined in the report, be approved.
8. That the funding increase requested for the Bus Station project, as set out in Paragraph 4.1.2 of the report, be approved.

9. That progress on Locality Reviews be noted.
10. That progress on the Towns Fund be noted.
11. That the General Fund growth bids identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy (Paragraph 4.2.2, table five and Appendix A to the report) be approved in principle, subject to further review work on Capital Priorities being undertaken by officers and the Leader's Financial Security Group.
12. That the HRA budget increases identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy (Paragraph 4.9.2, table ten and Appendix B to the report) be approved.
13. That the 2022/23 de-minimis expenditure limit (Section 4.11 of the report) be proposed for consideration by the Executive.
14. That the 2022/23 contingency allowances set out in Paragraphs 4.12.1 and 4.12.2 of the report respectively, be proposed for consideration by the Executive.
15. That the Executive delegation set out in Paragraph 4.12.3 of the report, allowing the Executive to approve increases to the capital programme for grant funded projects, be proposed for consideration by the Executive.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

9 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

SBC Award from Hertfordshire Public Health

The Chair was pleased to announce that the Council had been awarded £90,000 by Hertfordshire Public Health to continue its work in reducing health inequalities in the town over the coming two years. She felt that this was testament to the excellent and proactive approach the Council had taken over a number of years to improve the health and wellbeing of the Borough's residents.

The Chair commented that, as the Council refreshed its Healthy Stevenage Strategy over the coming year, this resource would help in tackling health inequalities that had been brought to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic, and to work more closely with local Primary Care Networks and the Borough's two flagship Healthy Hubs provided through the Healthy Stevenage Partnership.

The Chair expressed her gratitude to the Hertfordshire Director of Public Health, Professor Jim McManus, and his team for their ongoing commitment to District-level commissioning as a means to improving local health issues.

10 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That under Section 100A 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 reports being in Part II were accepted, and that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

11 PART II MINUTES - EXECUTIVE - 8 DECEMBER 2021

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 8 December 2021 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

12 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR