

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 18 October 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Matt Creasey, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Wendy Kerby, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati and Anne Wells.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 8.11pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 12 September 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

In relation to Minute 3 (5) – Station Gateway Area Action Plan: Referred Options, the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) advised that he would arrange for a response to be provided to all Members of the Committee in the next few days in respect of the temporary blocking off of the pedestrian access from the Old Town to the train station.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

2. Minutes – Executive: 14 September 2022

Noted.

3. Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees

Noted.

4. Social Housing Decarbonisation Funding

The Committee was informed that the Executive had approved the proposed

procurement process for a £3M contract (with Wates Living via the South East Consortium Framework) to undertake decarbonisation works to 399 Council homes, in conjunction with funding awarded from a bid made by SBC to the Government for Social Housing Decarbonisation funding Wave 1. This would enable the retrofit of these Council homes to EPC C standard, and would contribute towards the Council's Climate Change ambitions.

In reply to some Members' questions, Officers responded as follows:

- the 399 homes had been selected as the EPC Rating D or below, and were in most need of improvements to their fabric, including the installation of modern insulation;
- the £3M contract comprised £1.8M Government funding and the remainder allocated by the Council;
- the meaning of the phrase "calling off", as used in the report at Paragraph 4.2, was that the Council would be essentially buying a service from a contract that was already in place; and
- the capacity issues of contractors being able to deliver such retrofitting nationally was a valid concern, and was why the Council had used call off via the South East Consortium Framework for this initial phase of decarbonisation works.

5. Climate Change Annual Update October 2022

The Committee was informed that the report to the Executive had provided an update on Climate Change work undertaken with local businesses (including WENTA) and at regional and county level, including the Solar Together programme and Energy Saving Heat Map. The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change presented to the Executive the new ways of public engagement, particularly working at local and street level.

In response to a series of Members' questions, Officers replied as follows:

- the mitigation of the impact of climate change locally (eg. flooding, allocation of more sites for food production) would be considered as part of the next phase of SBC's engagement work on the Climate Change Strategy;
- further research would be carried out in respect of the safe recycling of the small lithium batteries in disposed vaping devices;
- the street meets referred to in the report were for Members and Officers to hear from residents about local climate change issues;
- the Topic Reference Panel would consist of engagement with those with climate change specialists/interest groups. The Topic People Panel would provide engagement with those less interested in climate change matters, and would be trialled/piloted in various parts of the Borough;
- it was acknowledged that there had been a significant time lapse between the work carried out by the former Climate Change Citizens Panel and the publication of its findings. A 30 page summary had been published, and the full report had been offered to those who had participated in the work of that Panel. The intention was to re-establish a Citizens Panel (with a

- refreshed membership) in the future; and
- the Hertfordshire-wide Solar Together programme related to private housing (bulk buying of solar panels to provide a discounted cost of installation for properties participating in the programme).

6. Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) – Allocations and Governance

The Committee was advised that SBC had been applying the Community Infrastructure Levy to new developments since April 2020. The Executive had noted that a proposed review of CIL rates would take place in 2023/24, and had approved recommendations to change the responsibility for approval of CIL income of more than £75,000 from the Planning & Development Committee to the Executive, and for the allocation of £15,000 CIL monies per Co-operative Neighbourhood area per year for local infrastructure improvements.

In response to Members' questions, Officers replied as follows:

- there were certain trigger points during development periods that required developers to make CIL payments;
- discussions were ongoing with major infrastructure providers and partners, including HCC, regarding the use of CIL monies;
- CIL reporting would be fairly detailed, showing money received and where that money was spent. Due to the time lag between CIL income and expenditure, it was intended to report this information on an annual basis; and
- the allocation of £15,000 per Co-operative Neighbourhood area per year would be for physical improvements (eg) tree planting, re-greening, water course improvements. Projects would be approved by local Members, guided by officers. The aim would be to be as flexible as possible in the use of the funding for each area;

The Committee debated the £15,000 funding allocation for each Co-operative Neighbourhood area, and suggested that it would be more equitable for each of the Borough's 13 Wards should be allocated £7,500 each, meaning that the area with 3 Wards would have a total allocation of £22,500.

The Strategic Director (TP) acknowledged this point and advised that he would refer this matter back to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change. He commented that this could be included in further guidance on the use of the funding allocation that would be provided for the Community Neighbourhood areas.

7. Cost of Living crisis response

The Committee was informed that the report to the Executive had set out the national and local context for the cost of living crisis, and its impact on residents and local businesses. The report had also set out the impact on the Council and its finances, including increased costs, an increase in debt and arrears for rent, council tax and business rates, increased demand for

benefits, homelessness and other support, and reduced income from key income streams.

The Committee was advised of the steps that Stevenage Borough Council and partners had taken already in responding to the cost of living crisis and introduced a proposed action plan to further support local residents, businesses, Council employees and the Council itself. This plan would form the basis of continued discussions with partners, including through Stevenage Together, to develop a town-wide response to the crisis and co-ordinate activity to achieve maximum benefit.

The Strategic Director (RP) summarised the comments on the report made by the Executive, including the fact that a number of private sectors landlords were leaving the rented sector by selling their properties.

In reply to a Member's question, the Strategic Director (RP) stated that access to the services available to those residents without on-line facilities would be provided through the Council and partner organisations targeting such individuals via other means (such as leaflets and local noticeboards) in order to sign-post them to areas of advice and support.

In response to a further question, the Strategic Director (RP) explained that there were a number of reasons why private landlords in the rented sector were selling their properties, including increased mortgage interest rates and additional regulation surrounding the sector.

In reply to another question, the Strategic Director (RP) advised that, through the Social Inclusion Partnership, the Warm Spaces programme would explore the use of Council-owned facilities, as well as those owned and operated by other partners, to promote opportunities for people to access warm spaces outside their own homes. This matter would be considered further at a forthcoming meeting of the Member Cost of Living Working Group. In addition, Hertfordshire County Council had recently announced a small grant scheme to support voluntary sector organisations seeing to provide warm Spaces, and SBC would be working collaboratively to maximise the benefit of this to Stevenage residents.

8. Future Council 2025 Transformation Programme update

The Committee was advised that the report to the Executive had followed on from the approval of a Transformation Programme in August 2021. One of the drivers for the Programme was to improve customer service and to respond to the financial challenges faced by the Council.

The Committee was informed that the report had referred to the improvements underway in 2022/23, as well as the outline of a programme for 2023/24. The report included an update on digital improvements being made in the first phase, as well as a proposed Five-Star Customer Service programme to improve the service offered to residents.

The Committee noted that plans were being developed to implement structural changes to create larger, more resilient teams and also enable savings. There was approximately £9M staffing spend associated with the services that could be included in the next phase. To illustrate the potential impact, a 5% saving would generate £450,000. An outline of the possible team structure was set out in Appendix A to the report. A further update report to Executive was anticipated early in 2023.

In response to issues raised by Members, the Assistant Director (Digital & Transformation) agreed that options needed to be developed to ensure that services were available for all residents (including improved telephone response times). Performance in relation to telephone response times was being monitored by the Executive, although this was against a backdrop of recruitment difficulties in the Customer Service Centre. Temporary call handling staff had been employed, although 6 posts were currently vacant. This was an issue common across many customer service organisations at the current time.

Members raised the related issue of poor telephone answering behaviour amongst other customer-facing Council departments. The Assistant Director (Digital & Transformation) acknowledged that this required improvement, and commented that one of the core purposes of the programme was to ensure that staff knew the level of service that they would be expected to provide when dealing with residents, both on the phone, digitally and in person.

9. Revised Complaints Policy and new Unacceptable Behaviour Policy

The Committee was informed that the proposed revised Complaints Policy incorporated the changes required to meet the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code, in particular changing from a 3-stage to a 2-stage complaints process. The Executive had asked officers, when operating the policy, to look at distinguishing between complaints and service requests.

In respect of the Unacceptable Behaviour Policy, the Executive considered that it should be made clear that the public may have to deal with a specified officer (especially in small teams), but would have the right for the matter to be escalated to more senior officers if required. The Executive further requested that the wording in the Policy regarding behaviour on social media should be strengthened.

In response to a Member's comment, the Assistant Director (Digital & Transformation) agreed that the relatively minor aggressive or abusive behaviour (often due to frustration) should not be used as an excuse for not dealing with a legitimate complaint. Staff training on how to implement the policy would be core to its introduction.

In reply to a Member's questions, the Assistant Director (Digital & Transformation) commented that a new Digital Complaints system should make it easier for Members and officers to track complaints. The process would not rely on the use of e-mails, as information would be directly entered

into the new system. Training would be provided on the system, including options to distinguish between complaints and service requests/enquiries.

10. Council Tax Support Scheme 2023/24

The Committee was advised that the Executive had agreed that the current Council Tax Support Scheme remained in place for 2023/24. The scheme for those working aged claimants (WAC) on maximum benefit was a reduction in their liability by 91.5%, paying just 8.5% of their Council Tax bill. Elderly CTS claimants were protected by legislation, and on maximum benefit received 100% rebate.

The Committee noted that the scheme may need to be changed once more Working Aged Claimants were subject to Universal Credit, as set out in the report. However, the transition to Universal Credit had been slow to date. The scheme would therefore be looked at again in May or June 2023 to determine whether a banded scheme would be better if there had been a significantly increased move from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit. In reply to a Member's question, the Assistant Director (BM) confirmed that a banded CTS Scheme would be based on the Council Tax band levels.

11. Quarters 1 and 2 Capital Monitoring Report 2022/23 – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

The Committee was advised that the key changes to the reprofiling of the General Fund Capital Programme 2022/23 amounted to £1.902Million. The major change (£1.004Million) related to Stevenage Direct Services and the Garage Improvement Programme. This Programme was currently being developed and expenditure was anticipated during 2023/24.

In respect of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programme, the Executive was informed that the key changes to the reprofiling of capital expenditure for 2022/23 totalled £26.939Million. The main change (£26.744Million) related to New Build Housing Development, where the reported underspend was not reduced as part of the budget setting, to allow flexibility in switching from planned schemes (if delayed or still in the planning stage) and to open market acquisition. The level of capital funding for Housing Development and Housing Investment would be updated as part of the next iteration of the HRA Business Plan.

12. Urgent Part I Business – Investment Zones

The Strategic Director (TP) advised that the Government guidance on Investment Zones had been issued on 2 October 2022, with a deadline for expressions of interest of 14 October 2022. It would be for Upper Tier authorities (ie, Hertfordshire County Council - HCC) to consider the submission of expressions of interest.

The Strategic Director (TP) commented that the Executive had been informed that this would be an opportunity for Stevenage to expand its thriving STEM

city and life sciences sectors, which had already created additional apprenticeships, training and jobs in the town. It was noted that the Investment Zone prospectus was high level, and that further detail would be required in the future. Further information would be required on issues such as potential Business Rates retention and Planning liberalisation.

The Strategic Director (TP) stated that he had informed the Executive that the response and expression of interest to the Government was being co-ordinated by HCC, supported by the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). The bid would be focussing on bringing investment into the Gunnels Wood Road area of Stevenage, around Stevenage train station and several other parts of the county. He had summarised some of the incentives for occupiers should Investment Zone status be achieved. Nationally, over 100 expressions of interest had been submitted, against a reported Government estimate of up to 40.

In reply to a series of Member's questions, the Strategic Director (TP) stated:

- the incentive for local authorities is that they would retain 100% of business rates over a 25 year period for new businesses attracted to locating into the Investment Zone;
- the incentives for businesses would include discounted Stamp Duty and reduced National Insurance contributions;
- the governance of the Zone and which body held its funds was unclear in the guidance;
- there had been no indication whether or not Investment Zones would remain in the Government's plans when it made its fiscal announcement on 31 October 2022; and
- no date had been given for when the Government would announce which expressions of interest had been successful.

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

None.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

6 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 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

14. Land Disposals

The Assistant Director (Housing Development) answered a number of Members' questions regarding this item.

15. Urgent Part II Business – Accommodation for asylum seekers

The Strategic Director (TP) answered a number of Members' questions in respect of this item.

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

None.

9 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR