

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 25 January 2023

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Margaret Notley (Mayor), Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Teresa Callaghan, Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, John Duncan, Bret Facey, Alex Farquharson, John Gardner, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Chris Howells, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence CC, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Maureen McKay, Lin Martin-Haugh, Adam Mitchell CC, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Anne Wells and Tom Wren.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 7.00pm
End Time: 8.30pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Mayor welcomed Councillor Conor McGrath to his first Council meeting following his success at the recent Bedwell Ward by-election. The Leader of the Council added his welcome and congratulated Councillor McGrath on his successful election.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Myla Arceno (Deputy Mayor), Adrian Brown and Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, OBE.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 14 DECEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 14 December 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor, subject to the following amendment:

- Minute 13 – Questions from Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders

Question (A) from Councillor Bret Facey re: fuel poverty in Stevenage - the addition as a new first sentence in the answer to Councillor Facey's supplementary question of the words:

“The Executive Portfolio Holder for Communities, Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Council confirmed that the Kenilworth Close Scheme would deliver a new community centre as part of its final phase, due to commence in late 2023/2024.”

3 TRIBUTES TO FORMER COUNCILLOR/ALDERMAN BRIAN HALL AND NICK PARRY (FORMER CHIEF EXECUTIVE)

The Mayor paid tribute to former Councillor / Alderman Brian Hall, who had served as Leader of the Council from 1968 to 2006, and who had passed away recently. In September 1996, he was made an Honorary Freeman, the highest honour that a Borough Council could award. He was awarded the title of Honorary Alderman in July 2007.

The Mayor had been joined by a number of Members and Officers at Brian's funeral on 17 January 2023. She commended Baroness Taylor for stepping forward to cover for the funeral Celebrant who had been stuck in traffic and was unable to attend the service.

The Leader of the Council and a number of other Members spoke in tribute to former Councillor / Alderman Hall.

The Mayor then paid tribute to Nick Parry, former Chief Executive of the Council, who had also passed away recently. Nick had started with SBC as Head of Planning, and subsequently became Director of Environmental Services. In 2005 he took on the role of Strategic Director (and Deputy Chief Executive). Within a few short years, Nick was appointed to the role of Chief Executive, a position he held until his retirement in 2015.

The Leader of the Council and a number of other Members spoke in tribute to Nick Parry.

The Council stood to observe a minute's silence in remembrance of former Councillor / Alderman Hall and Nick Parry.

4 FINAL HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET SETTING AND RENT REPORT 2023/24

The Council considered a report seeking approval to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Rent Setting for 2023/24.

In moving the motion, the Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development (Councillor Jeannette Thomas) advised that rent levels were usually set using the formula CPI +1%. For 2023/24 this would have resulted in an increase of 11.1%. However, along with other housing stock holding local authorities in Hertfordshire, the increase for 2023/24 would be 7%, in recognition of the current cost of living crisis and the cap set by the Government.

The Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development stated that the average 2023/24 rent for Low Start Shared Ownership (LSSO) properties would be £128.75; for social properties £110.78; and for affordable properties £180.65. Comparing 3-bed Council properties with the private sector showed that private sector rents were on average 114% higher (£283.78 compared to Council rents of £122.41).

The Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development commented that, unlike

rent levels, service charges were charged at actual or cost recovery levels. For 2023/24, they would be increased based on higher inflationary figures and changes in usage. 61% of tenants would have no increase, as they did not use the services, and 29% would have increases of below £2.50 per week. However, a significant minority were facing increases above this amount, with 6% facing an increase of over £20 per week. This was mainly due for those that were part of communal heating schemes, and the consequent additional costs of utilities. The current cost of living crisis and the increased cost of utility supplies had had a dramatic impact on services charges, and the Council would need to monitor/review these costs ongoing, and there remained the possibility of Government intervention as part of its Spring 2023 Budget

In seconding the motion, the Executive Member for Resources, Transformation & ICT (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd) advised that the 2023/24 projected HRA Budget would contain a surplus of £1.792Million. At the end of that year, the HRA's balance would be £29.170Million. This balance needed to be held to repay the borrowing that was required when the Government offered the Council the opportunity to purchase its housing stock in 2012; and also for borrowing associated with the Council's 30 year HRA Business Plan.

The Executive Member for Resources, Transformation & ICT advised that the utilities costs for 2022/23 had also risen, but were not known about when the budget was approved, and hence it was recommended that these increased costs/charges were passed on to tenants for the final 6 weeks of 2022/23.

The Executive Member for Resources, Transformation & ICT explained that borrowing of £10.2Million was planned for 2023/24 to fund the building of more new homes for those on the Council's waiting list, with further borrowing of £32.4Million in subsequent years. The borrowing would take place when the Chief Financial Officer considered the time would be right. Total cost of interest on all loans for 2022/23 and 2023/24 was forecast to be £7.3Million and £8.6Million, respectively. The growth and services pressures for 2023/24 totalled £2.458Million, as set out in the report

The Executive Member for Resources, Transformation & ICT confirmed that the Chief Financial Officer was content with the projected level of balances, and that the budget proposed was robust, whilst noting that for future years an updated HRA Business Plan would be developed later in the year.

The following points/questions were raised during the debate on the motion:

- a request for a report regarding the feasibility of a deposit scheme for tenants entering a new or refurbished Council property;
- future HRA budget reports should set out a breakdown of the number and type of homes owned by the Council within the background section;
- Paragraph 4.7.5 of the report – additional resource for fencing repairs and confirmation of what caused the backlog of works;
- Paragraph 4.7.6 – Tree Surveys for Tenanted Gardens – who would pay (the Council or the tenant) if works were required to trees in tenants' gardens?;
- Paragraph 4.7.13 – Repairs Complaints Officer – who would respond to

- Members' complaints on housing issues and how would the process operate?:
- Paragraph 4.7.16 – Damp and Condensation Customer Support Officer – why was the officer only being employed for 18 months, and did the Council wait for Government advice and the tragic case in Rochdale before addressing this issue?; and
 - Paragraph 4.17 – Consultation – what consultation had happened or would happen with Council tenants?.

The Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development agreed to provide a full written reply to the points/questions raised, but responded initially as follows:

- although she was unaware of such schemes being operated by any other social housing provider, she agreed to the request for a report on the feasibility of a tenants' deposit scheme, and requested that this report be submitted to the Community Select Committee;
- repairs on void properties were re-charged to the previous tenants, assuming that they could be found;
- during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Council was undertaking emergency housing repairs only (which excluded fencing), and this had contributed to the backlog of fencing repairs;
- No decision had yet been taken on the responsibility for paying for any work required to trees in gardens following the Tree Surveys;
- Stock Condition Survey information was used to inform work on Decent Homes and the Council's MRC Investment Programme;
- Damp and Condensation Customer Support Officer – a Team was put in place in 2017 after a thorough review by the Community Select Committee. Having attended a recent ARCH meeting, a significant number of other local authorities across the UK had damp and mould issues in their housing stock, and were struggling due to the lack of qualified staff available to cover all of the work required. This was also an issue for the private sector.

In reply to a Member's question regarding the £1.2Million figure for Corporate and Democratic Costs included in the Budget, the Strategic Director (CF) stated that these included the HRA's contribution towards the holding and service of committee meetings, the cost of which was apportioned between the HRA and General Fund budgets.

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

1. That HRA rent on dwellings be increased, week commencing 3 April 2023 by 7% which is an average increase of £7.24 for social rents, £11.82 for affordable rents and £8.42 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52-week year). This has been calculated in line with the Government's change to rent policy announced in the Autumn Statement as set out in Paragraph 3.3 of the report.
2. That the 2023/24 HRA budget set out in Appendix A to the report be approved.
3. That the 2023/24 growth options, as set out in Section 4.7 of the report, be approved.

4. That the 2023/24 Fees and Charges, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be approved.
5. That the 2023/24 service charges be approved.
6. That the minimum level of reserves for 2023/24, as shown in Appendix C to the report, be approved.
7. That the Rent Increase Equalities Impact Assessments, appended to the report in Appendix D, be noted.
8. That the increase to the 2022/23 Working Budget of £1,436,500 to fund the pressures detailed at Paragraph 4.3 of the report, be approved.
9. That the increase in tenant service charges to recover increased utility costs for the last 6 weeks of 2022/23, as set out in Paragraph 4.3.5 of the report, be approved.
10. That it be noted that, due to the current volatility of the market, utilities charges will be kept under close review throughout 2023/24.
11. That the contingency sum of £400,000, within which the Executive can approve supplementary estimates, be approved for 2023/24 (increased from £250,000 for 2022/23), as detailed in Paragraph 4.16.5 of the report.

5 APPOINTMENT OF INTERIM MONITORING OFFICER

[Prior to the consideration of this item, Mr Simon Pugh (Interim Borough Solicitor) withdrew from the meeting.]

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

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that Mr Simon Pugh be appointed as the Council's Interim Monitoring Officer, with immediate effect and until further notice.

MAYOR