

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday 8 April 2009

Time: 7.00 p.m.

Place: Council Chamber

Present: The Mayor (Councillor M Patston), The Deputy Mayor (Councillor J Lloyd CC) and Councillors S Batson MBE DL CC, H Burrell, L Chester, B Clark, G Clark, D Clark, D Cullen, CC, M Downing CC, J Fraser, P Gallagher, J Gardner, R Henry, J Hollywell, M Hurst, B Jackson, D Kissane, L Knight, C Latif, Mrs J Lloyd, L Martin-Haugh, M Notley, R Raynor, G Snell, S Speller, L Strange, P Stuart, S Taylor CC, J Thomas, B Underwood, V Warwick and A Webb

Agenda Item:

2

In Attendance:

Start/End Time: Start Time: 7.00 pm
End Time: 8.50 pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Cherney-Craw, L Harrington, M Mason, S Myson, R Parker CC, and J Pickersgill.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - WEDNESDAY 25 FEBRUARY 2009

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 25 February 2009 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

3 MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor thanked those who had attended and supported his Charity Concert on 26 March 2009. He reported that the evening had been a great success, with lots of money raised for his charities.

In addition, the Mayor presented Councillor A Webb, Portfolio Holder for Housing, with a framed picture of the redeveloped Stoneyhall Estate. Councillor Webb thanked the Mayor and commented that she was delighted to see the completion of the redevelopment, which comprised environmentally-friendly two-bed properties with efficient insulation and rainwater-recycling. The scheme had been designed following consultation with residents and it was anticipated that the new community centre would benefit the Bedwell area as a whole. Councillor Webb expressed

thanks to Willmott Dixon for their commitment to the projects, and also thanked Members and officers, and staff from Stevenage Homes Limited.

The Mayor invited two volunteers from the Community First Responder scheme, to give a presentation on the project. The scheme had been started four years ago by the East of England Ambulance Service, to recruit and train members of the public to help paramedics by responding to incidents, particularly those where the speed of the response was critical, such as cardiac arrest. Volunteers were given training and qualifications, and provided with medical kit, including a defibrillator, each of which costs £1,600. When on duty, they would be notified of any ambulance call-outs in their vicinity. If they arrived on scene before the ambulance, their training and equipment would allow them to provide any urgent medical assistance until the ambulance crew arrived. The volunteers explained that they were trying to promote the scheme to attract other volunteers, to raise awareness and to secure funding. The Mayor thanked them for their presentation and suggested that the project might be a suitable topic for the Spotlight item at Area Committees.

Following this item, the Mayor gave his apologies as he had a prior engagement. The Deputy Mayor, Councillor J Lloyd CC, took the Chair for the remainder of the meeting.

4 MAIN DEBATE - 'WEATHERING THE STORM - RESPONDING TO THE RECESSION'

The Deputy Mayor advised the meeting that before the Council moved into the Main Debate, he proposed to move a motion regarding revised time limits for speakers.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that Standing Order 17 be amended to allow for revised time limits for speakers for the Main Debate as follows - the mover and seconder of the Motion, together with the Leader of the Council and the Leader of the Opposition be allowed up to six minutes, and up to three minutes for everyone else.

The Deputy Mayor invited Celia Twomey, Strategic Director, Stevenage Borough Council, and Marian Hurle, the Director of Stevenage Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) to give the presentation on how the Council, its partners and the community could best respond to the current economic climate.

The Strategic Director began by providing an overview of the economic situation, giving examples of those people who had been affected, and statistics detailing how the recession was likely to impact on different parts of the community.

The Council had established an Economy Task Force, as a sub-group of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), to oversee and coordinate a programme of actions to support the community; to support local businesses; to support the voluntary sector; and to consider the impact on the Council as an organisation. These actions included:

- Submission of a bid to Communities and Local Government (CLG) for funding to implement the Affordable Warmth Strategy, which comprised free or subsidised insulation to those on low income;
- Development and promotion of the Credit Union as an alternative to loan

sharks;

- Provision of financial awareness amongst children through schools;
- Development of a "no wrong door" policy, where all public and voluntary sector organisations could provide the same advice to people in debt.
- Provision of space for use by small businesses to start up and develop, in addition to services and advice to local businesses provided by WENTA;
- Continued provision of around £500,000 direct grant aid and rent-in-kind to the voluntary sector; and
- Publicity for the above schemes and other financial advice in a special edition of the Chronicle.

Marion Hurle, Director of the Stevenage Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB), reported that demand for advice had increased steadily through 2008, and had then increased dramatically in the first few months of 2009. Since January 2009, there had also been a significant growth in requests for advice by people who had been made redundant. Referrals to debt specialists had risen 300% from 53 to 150 in the last quarter. Several actions had been taken to meet this increase in demand for service, including additional opening hours, recruitment and training of additional volunteers, and improvements to the telephone service. The CAB also planned to further develop its website, and to undertake preventative work with partner agencies to improve financial awareness amongst the public. Ms Hurle thanked the Council for its help which had supported the improvements in service provision.

The Deputy Mayor thanked the Strategic Director (Community) and Ms Hurle for the presentation.

Councillor S Taylor CC then opened the debate by moving a Motion, which was seconded by Councillor S Speller. A full debate then ensued with input from the public gallery. The main points raised were as follows:

- It was acknowledged that, despite the global nature of the economic crisis, much of the impact would be local in nature. As such, there was scope for local solutions and responses.
- It was agreed that teaching financial awareness in schools would be an effective preventative measure to discourage young people from becoming reliant on debt.
- Members supported the suggestion of seeking to increase opportunities for volunteering. This would help people who had been made redundant to develop new skills, which may in turn help them find new employment.

The Motion was then put to the vote and it was **RESOLVED**:

"That the Council recognises that in the current economic climate there is a need to work in partnership with other agencies to provide support for the community and voluntary sector as well as businesses and the local economy. The Council notes the initiatives and programmes that have been implemented to address problems experienced by vulnerable people in the Town and welcomes any further ideas that would support the Town and its community at this time."

5 PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

None received.

6 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

None received.

7 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

The Deputy Mayor called on Councillor G Clark, as Leader of the Opposition, to raise one matter relevant to the Borough.

The Leader of the Opposition asked why, of the six Children's Centres in the town, four were run by the Council and two were run by schools. In response, the Leader of the Council explained that, during the process of applying to run the new centres, the Council had discovered that two schools had already developed successful applications. It was considered that all six centres were run extremely well, and in partnership with each other, providing support for children and parents.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor S Taylor, presented her update, inviting Portfolio Holders to speak on her behalf.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Councillor Mrs J Lloyd, spoke about the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter which had recently been published. Councillor Lloyd welcomed the positive comments made by the External Auditors who had concluded that the Council's overall performance was above the average for district Councils, and that the Council delivered good value for money, with sustained improvements in services compared to last year. The External Auditors had also acknowledged that the Council was working in partnership to support the community during the recession.

The Portfolio Holder for Safer and Stronger Communities, Councillor R Henry reported on the Capable Guardian awards for local heroes. On Friday 13 March five such awards had been presented to local residents in recognition of their work in tackling anti-social behaviour. Councillor Henry welcomed the award scheme and considered that it was a good example of work undertaken by the Council, Stevenage Homes Limited, the Police and the other agencies involved in the So Safe partnership.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regeneration, Councillor J Gardner, spoke about "Earth Hour" which had taken place at 8.30pm on Saturday 28 March. This event had been organised by the Worldwide Wildlife Fund, and was designed to highlight public concern regarding climate change in advance of the Global Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009, by switching off lights for one hour. Many world-famous landmarks and over 4,000 cities had taken part in the demonstration, which had been acknowledged as the largest ever demonstration of public concern about climate change.

8 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

None received.

9 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS/PORTFOLIO

HOLDERS

None received.

10 MATTER REFERRED FROM EXECUTIVE - TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY (REVISED)

The Council had before it the officer report which had been considered by the Audit Committee on 17 March 2009 and by the Executive on 18 March 2009, which recommended a revised Treasury Management Strategy. The recommendations of the Audit Committee and the Executive were set out in the agenda.

In moving the recommendations, Councillor Mrs J Lloyd commented that the current economic climate required constant changes to the Treasury Management Strategy. Councillor Lloyd also thanked the Finance team for their work in achieving the best possible return on Council investments.

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

1. That the Treasury Management Strategy, approved at the Council meeting on 25 February 2009, be amended to allow lending to partially and fully nationalised banks, as outlined in the report considered by the Audit Committee and the Executive on 17 and 18 March 2009 respectively.
2. That it be noted that, in the event of there being no Council meeting scheduled, there are arrangements in place whereby the Chief Finance Officer may make any necessary urgent revisions to the Strategy to protect Council funds.

11 COMPLETED SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE TOPIC GROUP REVIEWS DURING 2008/09 MUNICIPAL YEAR

The Council considered a report on the work of the Scrutiny Overview Committee Topic Groups during the 2008/09 Municipal Year.

The Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee, Councillor D Cullen CC, introduced the report thanking the Topic Group Chairs and the officers involved for their hard work. A full list of scrutiny topics had been identified for the 2009/10 Municipal year, which would continue to use all the resources available to the Committee.

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

1. That the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Overview Committee through its Scrutiny Topic Groups during the 2008/09 Municipal Year be noted.
2. That Council notes the changes in legislation that have a direct impact on the scrutiny function.

12 AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES - 17 MARCH 2009

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Audit Committee held on 17 March 2009 be noted.