

**STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL****COUNCIL  
MINUTES****Date: Wednesday 9 October 2013****Time: 7.00 pm****Place: Council Chamber**

**Present:** The Mayor (J Pickersgill MA, MSc) and Councillors  
S Batson MBE DL CC, L Bell, P Bibby, J Brown, H Burrell,  
M Cherney-Craw, L Chester, G Clark, J Gardner, M Gardner,  
L Harrington, M Hearn, R Henry CC, J Hollywell,  
PD Kissane, C Latif, Mrs J Lloyd, M McKay, M Notley,  
R Parker CC, R Raynor, S Speller, S Taylor OBE CC,  
H Tessier, J Thomas, S Walker, V Warwick, A Webb and  
M Yarnold-Forrester.

**Also present:** ABK Mboho (Youth Mayor) and J Barnes (Youth Council).

**Start/End Time:** Start Time: 7.00 p.m.  
End Time: 10.15 p.m.

**1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R Clark, D Cullen, C Hurst, J Lloyd CC, L Martin-Haugh, J Mead, G Snell, P Stuart and B Underwood.

There were no declarations of interest.

**2. MINUTES - COUNCIL – WEDNESDAY 17 JULY 2013**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of Council held on Wednesday 17 July 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

**3. MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS**

The Mayor informed Council of a number of events that he had attended since the last Council meeting. These events included the reopening of the Chequers public house in the Old Town, undertaking a photocall at Fairland's Valley lake and attending a football match when Stevenage played, and lost to, Milton Keynes Dons.

The Mayor added that St Albans Council had challenged SBC to a Dragon Boat race in aid of the RLNI and he asked for volunteers for the challenge.

The Mayor concluded by paying tribute to Mr Arthur Bate, a Stevenage resident who

had done much to further the cause of those with disabilities, and the Chamber rose to observe a minute's silence.

#### **4. MAIN DEBATE – THRIVING FAMILIES**

Gill Gibson and Ola Sidjuwade from Children's Services at Hertfordshire County Council gave a presentation which covered the 'Thriving Families' project led by the County Council.

Gill Gibson advised Council that Thriving Families was a County Council project that had developed from the Government's 'Troubled Families' initiative. She said that the project was not easy to define but that it involved working with families that were experiencing social issues such as involvement with the police or child truancy problems.

She then explained how the project worked and concluded by detailing the issues that the scheme could help families with.

Ola Sidjuwade informed Council of the history of Thriving Families within Stevenage and outlined a number of case studies where involvement in the project had been beneficial to the families concerned.

In reply to a question Council was advised that a family could be involved with the project for up to twelve months before their case was handed over to other agencies and care providers.

In proposing the Motion, Councillor H Burrell informed Council that statistics indicated that nationally approximately 4 million children, one in three, lived in poverty. He said that the Council was working with other agencies to address a number of issues that affected families but that the problem of child poverty was a priority. He concluded by saying that early intervention was important and that education should play a vital role in showing families how to live within social boundaries. Young lives should be safeguarded and improved.

The Motion was seconded by Councillor S Walker who said that whilst researching her speech she had come across many statistics on child poverty, but ultimately just 1 child living in poverty was 1 too many. She said that the life chances of a child growing up in poverty were much reduced and asked that Council accepted the motion as a step towards reducing inequality.

The Leader said that there was no political divide at County on the topic and that the project should be well funded. Child poverty was a serious problem in the town and there were 4000 children known to be living in families with a low income. Fiscal studies had indicated that this number would increase by 30% by 2020.

There then followed a full debate which included input from the public gallery. Issues raised included:

- Support for families with difficulties appeared to depend on those families

receiving out of work benefits when those in work, but on a low income, could also benefit from the project.

- Increases in poverty levels had led to a growing gap in achievement levels between students from differing backgrounds. It was important for young people to be aspirational.
- Intervention was triggered after problems had developed. Could more be done to prevent issues arising in the first place?
- Praise was directed at the children's centres and the play groups within the town.
- The role that the Youth Council could play in supporting young people was highlighted and the County Council undertook to investigate ways to work with the Youth Council

In summing up Councillor Burrell thanked the contributors to the debate for their support for the scheme. He said that the Council had heard what had been said and would consider the comments for further action.

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

'That this Council understands in the current financial climate how difficult a time it is for many Stevenage families and specifically recognises the importance of early intervention and support for families where there are multiple issues that need to be addressed. This Council already delivers a range of services to support these families.

However, the Council recognises the need to work in partnership with other agencies and in cooperation with families to address these issues and build family resilience through multi agency target approaches.

Therefore this Council welcomes the development of the Thriving Families project in Stevenage and pledges its support through partnership to make this a success. In this way all partners can challenge the threats from those seeking employment, those involved in criminality, poor school attendance, domestic abuse, mental illness, losing a home, lack of early year's education and lack of support for those with learning difficulties and disabilities'.

The Mayor thanked the presenters for their attendance and contributions to the meeting.

## **5. PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS**

None.

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

None.

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

None.

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

The Leader of the Opposition enquired about the forthcoming changes to garden waste and cardboard recycling and asked if consideration had been given to expanding the capacity of blue boxes and providing options for those householders unable to take their cardboard recycling to the site at Caxton Way.

In reply the meeting was informed that since the introduction of the new scheme 750 requests had been received from residents for additional blue bins and that it was permissible for residents to leave larger cardboard boxes alongside the blue boxes for collection.

Council then received updates on the following:

- The Collective Energy Scheme for Stevenage residents to sign up, on a no commitment basis, to an auction that may provide access to lower gas and electricity costs.
- Wild Stevenage, a two year lottery funded programme to enable the Council to work in partnership with the Middlesex Wildlife Trust to promote the Biodiversity Action Plan
- Environmental Health action at the Maharajah Restaurant
- A Community Funding Bid from the Police Commissioner's Office
- Shared Services Implementation
- ICT Infrastructure Upgrade
- An 'Inspiring Employment' event, a job fair, organised for Stevenage housing associations in conjunction with Job Centre Plus
- A Housing Matters event held at North Herts College on 18 September for those wishing to downsize.

In reply the Leader of the Opposition commented that he was pleased to see progress with the recycling scheme and he asked how the infestation at the Maharajah had been discovered.

The Leader of the Opposition was advised that the matter had been reported to the Council by a neighbour of the restaurant.

The Leader informed Council that new properties were being allocated to tenants at a new site in Dixons next week and concluded by paying tribute to Roger Gochin who had recently stood down as the Chair of Stevenage Leisure Limited.

## **9. NOTICE OF MOTIONS**

The Mayor informed Council that the Motion detailed in the agenda papers had been withdrawn and that a new Motion had been circulated in the Chamber.

In proposing the motion the Leader recounted the tale of a local resident who would lose out, through no fault of his own, as a result of the changes introduced by the Welfare

Reform Act. She said that the resident's personal circumstances dictated that his 'extra' bedroom was a necessity and that the 'Bedroom Tax' punished the most vulnerable in society.

The Leader concluded that she had concerns that those affected would be forced to use payday loan companies and that for many the choice would be 'heat or eat' during the winter.

Councillor Webb formally seconded the motion.

There then followed a full debate which included input from the public gallery. Issues raised included:

- If tenants with disabilities were forced to move the Council would incur costs in both adapting the new property and restoring the old.
- The UN inspector was correct in her recent assessment of the British welfare state and it (the Bedroom Tax) was an attack on an individual's human rights.
- To call a realignment of benefits a 'Bedroom Tax' was to use incorrect terminology.
- It was unfair that those in overcrowded properties should subsidise those in large properties.
- Welfare spending was a major part of the Government's spending and attempts to reduce it should be encouraged.
- Pensioners are excluded.
- It was an excuse to punish the poor.
- It was questioned how the policy could be introduced without the necessary housing stock to meet the need. It was difficult to provide properties with fewer bedrooms at short notice.
- Lack of suitable stock could increase the problems coming to the attention of the thriving families project.
- Individual assessments should determine space requirements rather than a 'one size fits all' directive.

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

'This Council welcomes Labour's decision to repeal the Bedroom Tax, which will give hope to the many disabled and vulnerable people unfairly hit by the Government's cruel tax.

The Bedroom Tax hits over 400,000 disabled people nationwide. For the vast majority of those affected there is nowhere smaller for them to downsize to and those affected are faced with an average bill of £720 a year or £14 per week. This tax is not only unfair, it does not make economic sense either as it will end up costing more than it saves in higher benefit bills overall if people are pushed into the private rented sector.

This Council believes we have a responsibility to highlight the impact of bedroom tax and to agree a set of principles to offer support to tenants affected and protect them as far as possible.

Council agrees to:

- Proactively engage with tenants and offer advice and assistance
- Prevent tenants from losing their homes through sensitive debt management and rent arrears procedures
- 'Postpone' or 'suspend' any eviction action on any tenant who has agreed to move but for whom no suitable smaller property is immediately available over the next 12 months until a fuller assessment of the impacts of the Bedroom Tax and wider Welfare Reforms can be undertaken
- Identify the need for and process discretionary housing payments
- Adjust allocations and letting policies to assist tenants who wish to downsize

Our Council is also committed to protesting to Government to repeal the bedroom tax now by:

- Working with tenant organisations who call for the repeal of the bedroom tax
- Communicating the hidden cost of the bedroom tax
- Demonstrating to Government the unfairness of the bedroom tax
- Working with the Government to provide alternative strategies to address housing shortages

This Council calls on the Government to recognise the impact his tax is having on the most vulnerable in our community and to urgently consider repealing this unfair and economic tax without further delay.'

#### **10. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS / PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

None.

#### **11. MATTER REFERRED FROM THE EXECUTIVE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE – ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW 2012/2013**

Council had before it a report that had been considered by the Executive at its meeting on 2013 and the Audit Committee.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the prudential treasury indicators contained within the report be approved.

#### **12. OFFICER REPORT – MEMBER'S ALLOWANCES – REPORT OF INDEPENDENT RENUMERATION PANEL**

Council had before it a report of the Independent Panel on Members' Allowances containing recommendations for the Members' Allowance Scheme for 2013/2014.

The Leader thanked the members of the Independent Remuneration Panel for the work that they had undertaken for the review.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the recommendations of the Independent Panel be agreed and the Members, Allowance Scheme for 2013/2014 be amended in line with Appendix A of the report with effect from 10 October 2013 incorporating the 1% increase in line with staff covered by the terms and conditions of the National Joint Council for Local Government Services (NJC) as previously recommended by the Panel.

**13. OFFICER REPORT – LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 – SECTION 85**

Council was advised that as Councillor Cullen had attended the Planning Committee held on Tuesday 8 October 2013 the provisions contained within the report were no longer required. Therefore this item was withdrawn from the agenda.

**14. AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES – 9 SEPTEMBER 2013**

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the draft Minutes of the Audit Committee held on 9 September 2013 be noted.

**15. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

**16. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That, under Section 100(A) 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 1-7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by SI2006 No. 88.
2. That, having considered the reasons for the following reports being in Part II, it be agreed that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

**17. MATTER REFERRED FROM THE EXECUTIVE – ARCHER ROAD REGENERATION**

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the recommendations contained within the report be approved.

**18. OFFICER REPORT – SINGLE STATUS REVIEW – IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW PAY AND GRADING ARRANGEMENTS**

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the recommendations contained within the report be approved.

**MAYOR**