

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Monday 29 July 2013

Time: 6.00 p.m.

Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors J Thomas (Chair), J Brown, M Cherney-Craw, J Hollywell, S Speller, P Stuart, H Tessier, B Underwood and S Walker.

Start / End Time Start Time: 6.00 p.m.
 End Time: 7.35 p.m.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G Clark, M Hearn and R Parker CC.

Councillor S Speller declared a personal interest at item 8.

2. MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 3 JULY 2013

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 3 July 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. PROJECT PLAN FOR SCRUTINY REVIEW OF MEMBERS' EXPENSES AND HOSPITALITY

The Committee had before it an update project plan for the review into Members' Expenses and hospitality.

In reply to a request the Committee's informal meeting was rearranged to be held at 2pm on Wednesday 7 August. The Scrutiny Officer undertook to find a venue for the meeting and to notify Members accordingly.

The Chair requested that Members unable to attend the meeting should notify the Scrutiny Officer so that the paperwork could be sent to them for comment.

It was **RESOLVED** that the revised scoping document be approved.

4. PART 1 DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee had before it the agenda and reports from the meeting of the Executive

held on 23 July together with the Notice of Decisions as published after the meeting.

This report had not been circulated to Members five clear days before the meeting nor had it been made available for public inspection. The Chair determined however that given the short period of time left before the end of the call-in period on 31 July 2013, it be considered on this occasion.

Stevenage Borough Council: Making a Difference – Annual Report 2013

The Committee was advised that the Annual Report had been made easier for the public to read and understand than in previous years.

The Committee was further advised that the Executive had added a recommendation to the Officer Report thanking those Officers involved in the delivery of the initiatives contained within the Annual Report.

4th Quarter Monitoring Report General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

The Committee was advised that both the Business Technology Centre and car parks had outperformed their estimated income targets.

In reply to a question about the potential effect of the recent court judgement against Barnet Council in respect of parking charges the meeting was advised that revenues from off-street parking were not affected however the Council was checking to ensure that its interpretation of the judgement was correct.

In reply to a request the Strategic Director (Resources) undertook to provide details of the net income from the Council's car parks.

2012/13 Capital Expenditure Outturn

The Committee was advised of the outturn position on the 2012/13 capital programme including the major contributory factors to slippage in both the General Fund Budget and the Housing Revenue Account.

General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Strategies (2014/15 – 2016/17)

The Committee was advised of the major external factors affecting the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). In real terms the Government Grant had reduced by 33% and further cuts had been confirmed, whilst the HRA had been impacted by Right to Buy sales (as a result of increased discounting) and Welfare Reforms.

Members asked a number of detailed questions about the Welfare Reform Act which were answered by the Officer and a Member expressed concern at potential levels of rent and council tax arrears following changes to the benefits system. The Strategic Director (Resources) advised the Committee that there would be a review in October and that officers were preparing a 'performance dashboard' to reflect trends and issues

in a number of indicators including rent payments and council tax collection. Early indications were that the impact of the changes was not as high as expected, but this could be because the Council had undertaken an extensive communications exercise and it was believed that, at the moment, residents were prioritising rent and council tax payments.

A Member suggested that the Council could investigate the provision of Residents' Discount Cards, as per the Kirklees example, to help those struggling financially as a result of the benefits changes.

In response to a comment regarding Priority Based Budgeting the Strategic Director (Resources) advised the meeting that engagement with Members would take place when Officers had a range of proposals to present. Actions would be tracked through the required scrutiny of budget and policy development items.

Stevenage / East Herts Shared ICT, Business Improvement, Print and Design Partnership

The Strategic Director Resources introduced a report detailing the Council's case for sharing ICT, Business Improvement and Print and Design services with East Herts Council.

In reply to Member concerns the Strategic Director Resources confirmed that the £200,000 savings identified within the report were related directly to the proposed partnership and would be made by staffing savings not filling existing vacancies, and procurement efficiencies.

It was acknowledged that much of the Council's IT provision was close to the end of its working life. Savings in investment for new equipment and software could be realised from the partnership and resilience would also be improved.

A Member commented that whilst it was good news for the Council that the print unit was to be based in Stevenage it was important to recognise that the facility was a major community asset and should continue to be regarded as such.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Part 1 Decisions of the Executive taken on 25 June 2013 be noted:

- Stevenage Borough Council: Making a Difference – Annual Report 2013.
- 4th Quarter Monitoring Report General Fund and Housing Revenue Account
- 2012/2013 Expenditure Outturn
- General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Strategies (2014/15 – 2016/17)
- Stevenage / East Herts Shared ICT, Business Improvement. Print and Design Partnership

5. URGENT PART 1 DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The following reports had not appeared on the Forward Plan that gives 28 days notice of the decision being taken:

- Stevenage Borough Council: Making a Difference – Annual Report 2013.
- 4th Quarter Monitoring Report General Fund and Housing Revenue Account
- 2012/2013 Expenditure Outturn

It was **RESOLVED** that the Chair's decision to allow them to be considered as urgent items by the Executive on 23 July be noted.

6. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

7. 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 report being in Part II, it be agreed that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

8. PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee had before it the Part II agenda and reports from the meeting of the Executive held on 23 July together with the Notice of Decisions as published after the meeting.

This report had not been circulated to Members five clear days before the meeting. The Chair determined however that given the short period of time left before the end of the call-in period on 31 July 2013, it be considered on this occasion.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Part II Decisions of the Executive taken on 25 June 2013 be noted:

- Asset Management Strategy – Supporting the Capital Programme

9. URGENT PART II DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

None.

10. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

Chair