

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Thursday 23 January 2014

Time: 6.00 p.m.

Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors J Thomas (Chair), G Clark (Vice Chair), J Brown, J Hollywell, R Parker CC, P Stuart and H Tessier.

Start / End Time Start Time: 6.00 p.m.
End Time: 8.00 p.m.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors M Cherney-Craw, S Speller, B Underwood and S Walker.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 11 DECEMBER 2013

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 11 December 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. 2014/2015 DRAFT CAPITAL FORWARD PLAN AND 5 YEAR CAPITAL STRATEGY UPDATE.

The Assistant Director (Finance) introduced the report and advised the Committee of the draft Capital Programmes for 2014/2015 and of an update to the Council's 5-year Capital Strategy which was being put before the Committee in accordance with the provisions of the Budget and Policy Framework rules of the Council's Constitution.

In reply to a question concerning capital receipts and the Council's remaining assets the Committee was advised that capital receipts had, to date, been subsumed into the Council's budgets. Some ransom strip land remained but sale would be dependent on future developments coming forward. Other assets had been discussed at a previous meeting and a Part II list was available to Members if required.

In reply to a further question concerning interest rates the Committee was advised that debt costs had been built into the Medium Term Financial Strategy but as interest rates rose the Council would have to balance the cost of borrowing against the provision of services in terms of its budget.

It was **RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

4. DRAFT 2014/2015 COUNCIL TAX SETTING AND GENERAL FUND BUDGET

The Assistant Director (Finance) presented the draft proposals for the 2014/2015 Council Tax setting and General Fund Budget which were being put before the Committee in accordance with the provisions of the Budget and Policy Framework rules of the Council's Constitution..

Concerns were expressed at the proposal to reduce the Local Community Budget to £2,000 per Councillor. The Committee discussed a number of options and the implications for the savings package should the level of the allowance be increased. It was proposed that the Committee ask the Executive to set a budget level of £3,000 per Member. This proposal was then put to the vote and was carried. Councillors G Clark, J Hollywell and J Thomas voted in opposition to this proposal.

In reply to a question concerning the Council Tax Freeze grant the Committee was advised that the situation regarding previous years grants became complex with some grants being added to the funding base with others dropping out of the equation. The Assistant Director (Finance) undertook to circulate a ready reckoner to Members to clarify the position.

A Member expressed dismay that because of the current financial situation the Council seemed to be putting out negative messages. He was of the view that, despite the cutbacks, the Council continued to do good work within the town and there was a need for the Council's communications policy to reflect that fact. There was a consensus within the Committee for this view.

Another Member suggested that to reduce workload for the Customer Service Centre the Council should advertise which services were provided by the Borough and other partnership organisations, in particular the County Council and the Police Authority.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

1. The Executive be requested to revisit the savings proposals set out in the report and allocate £3,000 per Member as a Local Community Budget allowance.
2. The Executive be advised that the Committee would wish to see a communications policy adopted which emphasised the positive work carried out by the Council.
3. The Executive be advised that the Committee would wish to see a campaign which informed residents of those services provided by the Borough Council and its partnership organisations, in particular the County Council and the County Constabulary.
4. The report be noted.

NOTE: COUNCILLORS J Thomas, J Hollywell and G Clark requested that their vote

opposing item 1. above be recorded in the Minutes.

5. PART 1 DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee had before it the agenda and reports from the meeting of the Executive held on 21 January 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 29 January 2014, it be considered on this occasion.

Peer Challenge

The Committee was advised that the Executive and SMB would be meeting in week commencing 27 January to discuss the report from the Peer Challenge Team and to address the points raised therein with the formulation of an action plan.

Commitment to Carers

The Committee was advised that the Council's 'Commitment to Carers' had been agreed and adopted.

Council Tax Base

In reply to a question the Strategic Director (Resources) undertook to circulate details of the number of court cases arising as a result of Council Tax arrears and the impact of the Council Tax Support Scheme.

In reply to a further question the Committee was advised that Council Tax collection rates for the Council had remained static at 98% over the past three years.

Council Tax Support Scheme

The Assistant Director (Finance) advised the Committee that they had the opportunity to add comments to the report that would be presented to Council on 29 January.

The Committee was advised that should the Council not agree a scheme for 2014/2015 then the 2013/2014 scheme would carry forward. However there were no changes proposed to the existing scheme for the coming year.

In reply to a question it was confirmed that the transitional grant received by the Council following the introduction of the scheme in 2013/2014 was a 'one-off' payment.

The Committee did not wish to add any comments to the report.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Final Budget Proposals 2014/2015 and Rent Setting

A copy of a presentation on alternative rent strategies and the related implication had been circulated.

The Committee was advised on the pressure placed on the HRA by the higher than anticipated level of Right to Buy sales which were set to exceed forecast sevenfold. (70 sales against 10 forecast). In cash terms this equated to a rent income shortfall to the Council of approximately £171 million over the life of the plan.

The Committee was further advised that to implement a lower than recommended rent increase would have an adverse impact on the 30-year self-financing business plan which could lead to cutbacks in other areas such as new build projects or improvements to existing housing stock.

2014/2015 Draft Capital Forward Plan and 5-Year Capital Strategy Update

In accordance with the provisions of the Budget and Policy Framework rules of the Council's Constitution this item was dealt with as a separate agenda item.

Draft 2014/2015 Council Tax Setting and General Fund Budget

In accordance with the provisions of the Budget and Policy Framework rules of the Council's Constitution this item was dealt with as a separate agenda item.

NNDR Tax Base 2014/2015

The Committee was advised that the Executive had delegated authority to the Strategic Director (Resources) to approve the NNDR Tax Base 2014/2015.

The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee advised the meeting that she had agreed that call-in be waived in order for the decision regarding the approval of the tax base to meet the 31 January deadline.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the following Part 1 Decisions of the Executive taken on 21 January 2014 be noted:
 - Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback
 - Commitment to Carers
 - Council Tax Base 2014/2015
 - Council Tax Support Scheme 2014/2015
 - Housing Revenue Account Final Budget Proposals 2014/2015 and Rent Setting
 - 2014/2015 Draft Capital Forward Plan and 5-Year Capital Strategy Update
 - Draft 2014/2015 Council Tax Setting and General Fund Budget
 - NNDR Tax Base 2014/2015
2. That it be noted that the Chair indicated she would be approving a waiver from call-in for an urgent decision to be taken concerning the NNDR Tax Base 2014/2015 given the reason for urgency.

6. REPORT ON MEMBERS EXPENSES

The Committee received the draft report and recommendations of the Scrutiny Review of Members Expenses.

In reply to a question it was confirmed that Members mileage rates would be aligned with those paid to members of staff with the implementation of the Single Status agreement from 1 July 2014.

A Member commented that the report had apparently been written without consideration of the Council's Green Travel Plan and that a recommendation should be added to show that environmental impacts had been taken into account in relation to decisions concerning methods of transport utilised by Members in travelling to events.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

1. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee approves the conclusion of the review contained within the report and the recommendations below be presented to the Leader and the Strategic Director (Resources) and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report.
2. The input into the review from Stephen Hollingsworth be noted and that the use of a 'critical friend' be encouraged in subsequent reviews.
3. The real and symbolic value of the Mayor, and the level of support required to carry out this important role, be recognised.
4. That it be noted that the proposed realignment of staff and Member mileage rates under the Single Status Agreement to those advised by HMRC was being actioned.
5. The reduction in the spending on Members refreshments be noted.
6. Consideration be given to renaming 'The Community Reception' 'The Mayor's Community Reception'.
7. Any future policy regarding Mayoral transport should be supportive of a situation whereby the Mayor attending high profile civic functions should not self-drive.
8. The Committee is supportive of a Leader led review into Town Twinning activities
9. There should be more publicity to advise Members of the availability of conferences and training events to assist Member's development.
10. Members attending courses and conferences should be encouraged to share their experiences with all Members, perhaps through MMP sessions and where they consider the content to be of poor value they should be encourage to give feedback to the provider.
11. There should be (i) a review of the induction process for new Members especially with regard to expenses, allowances and support services so that new Members

are clear as their entitlement to claim for and take advantage of training opportunities and (ii) new Members induction should consider teaming new Members with a mentor.

12. All Members should have a Personal Development and Training Plan.
13. The Carers Attendance Allowance be reviewed, particularly in respect of the ability to pay family members for performing caring duties and the monthly payment cap plan.
14. Members and Member Services give due consideration to the Council's Green Travel Plan when selecting the most appropriate mode of travel to attend events.

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

The Committee was advised that an urgent Part I decision concerning hackney carriage and private hire fees and charges had been authorised by the Chair on 18 December 2013.

In reply to a question it was confirmed that the fees and charges had been set at a level which allowed the Council to recover its costs in the administration of hackney carriage and taxi licensing, although the regulations did not permit the Council to make a surplus from the scheme.

It was **RESOLVED** that the urgent Part I decision taken by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

8. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

The Committee was advised of a meeting between the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the three Chairs of the Select Committees to discuss potential topics for scrutiny studies in 2014/2015. A report back to the respective committees would be made in the March round of meetings.

Members were requested to liaise with any organisations with which they were connected to determine any possible ideas for future Scrutiny Reviews.

In reply to a question it was confirmed that the Council's website contained a link vi which scrutiny topics could be proposed.

9. 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 item of business on the grounds that it 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.

10. PART II MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 11 DECEMBER 2013

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes from the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 11 December 2013 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

11. PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

None.

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

None.

13. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

Chair