

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Thursday 20 March 2014

Time: 6.00 p.m.

Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors J Thomas (Chair), G Clark (Vice Chair), J Brown, M Cherney-Craw, J Hollywell, R Parker CC, S Speller, P Stuart and H Tessier.

Also Present: Resources Portfolio Holder Councillor Mrs J Lloyd

Start / End Time Start Time: 6.00 p.m.
End Time: 8.15 p.m.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors B Underwood and S Walker.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 17 FEBRUARY 2014

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 17 February 2014 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. PART 1 DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee had before it the agenda and reports from the meeting of the Executive held on 18 March 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 27 March 2014, it be considered on this occasion.

3rd Quarter Monitoring Report General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

The Assistant Director (Finance) presented the report which provided an update on the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account projected 2013/2014 net expenditure and detailed the revisions to the 2014/2015 revenue budgets that had been approved by the Executive.

The Committee was advised that Housing Building Maintenance Budgets had been increased, in part, due to the bad weather, storms and flooding experienced during the winter. Additionally bad debt levels had risen in the General Fund for which provisions had been made.

Members then asked a number of detailed questions in relation to project slippage, carry forwards, training budgets and housing benefit overpayments which were answered by the Officer.

In reply to a request the Assistant Director (Finance) undertook to reformat the graphs in the report relating to debts so that when printed in black and white it would be clear what each column represented.

2013/2014 Capital Strategy Quarter Three Report

A revised table that showed unused New Building Receipts and Required HRA Funding (Paragraph 4.7.4 of the Executive Report) was circulated to the Committee.

The Assistant Director (Finance) presented the report and apologised for inconsistencies in the numbering of paragraphs.

The Committee was advised that it was intended to reconvene the Leader's Service Priority Group in the near future to review the Capital Strategy to identify ways of addressing a foreseen shortfall in funding.

In reply to a question concerning community assets it was confirmed that a review on community buildings was underway and would be presented to the Committee as part of its policy development role.

In reply to a further question the Committee was advised that the Council held a portfolio of commercial properties which generated an income for the authority. It was confirmed that the portfolio was subject to regular review.

With regards to the future purchase of Town Centre properties the Committee was advised that such properties rarely became available and in the event of doing so would be subject to a robust business case examination before consideration of purchase was entertained.

Stevenage Borough Council Balanced Scorecard for Quarter Three 2013/2014.

The Chief Executive presented the Council's Balanced Scorecard for Quarter Three. He stated that overall the scorecard presented a healthy report with scores being higher than in quarter two and at the same period last year.

The Committee was advised that the measure concerning the percentage of abandoned telephone calls to the Customer Service Centre (CSC) remained red. Calls had risen by around 22% compared to the same period last year, largely due to the welfare reforms. Additional staff had been recruited but it did take time for training to be provided.

A Member expressed concern that given the difference in service standards the CSC could be prioritising telephone calls over walk-in enquiries.

The Chief Executive undertook to provide more detail to the Committee on how enquiries were managed through the centre.

Concerns were expressed at the level of representation of Black and Ethnic Minority Groups in consultation events and it was suggested that the target could be reset in line with the Co-operative Council principles in 2014/2105 following input from Members. It was noted that the launch of the on-line portal for consultation in 2014 should result in a broader spread of respondents.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Part 1 Decisions of the Executive taken on 18 March 2014 be noted:

- 3rd Quarter Monitoring Report General Fund and Housing Revenue Account
- 2013/2014 Capital Strategy Quarter 3 Outturn Report
- Stevenage Borough Council Balanced Scorecard for Quarter 3

4. WORKPLAN FOR 2014-2015

The Committee considered proposals for its workplan for the Municipal Year 2014/2015.

The Committee was advised that as the Overview and Scrutiny meeting on 7 April had been cancelled the time slot would be used to hold a joint meeting with the Community Select Committee to consider a Policy Development item on Community Buildings led by the Head of Property and Estates and the Resources Portfolio Holder.

In response to a question the Scrutiny Officer undertook to confirm whether it would be necessary to review the Community Infrastructure Levy Charging Schedule as part of the Budget and Policy and Framework.

The Committee was of the view that SBC Media and Communications should be scrutinised as many of the issues raised in the review of the Balanced Scorecard could be linked to that topic. During the discussion it was agreed that a review of 'The Co-operative Council' branding could also be incorporated into this scrutiny study.

The Committee also expressed a desire to review Section 106 agreements and was advised that the Resources Portfolio Holder was currently engaged in a review of the system. It was suggested that the Committee could scrutinise this area once the work had been completed.

It was suggested by the Chair of the Housing Select Committee that a joint review into the Housing Business Plan could be undertaken. The availability of resource to complete such a study was debated and it was agreed that it could be added should time and officer availability permit.

There was an involved debate about the impact of redundancies and the Committee was of the view that whilst it was an important topic it did not necessarily fall within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to scrutinise.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That feedback from the Scrutiny Evaluation Questionnaire completed by Members be noted.
2. That having considered ideas put forward by individual Members from their Scrutiny Evaluation Survey and topics raised from Community Groups following canvassing of the groups through January and February 2014 the Committee determined the subject matter of its Scrutiny Studies for 2014/2015 be:
 - a. SBC Media and Communications, including 'The Co-operative Council' branding
 - b. Section 106 Funds (following the Resources Portfolio Holder's review) as a one day study
 - c. (Resource permitting) Housing Business Plan (as a joint study with the Housing Select Committee)
3. That monitoring or review of recommendations from previous studies be carried out as part of the normal scrutiny feedback process.
4. That the Policy Development work identified for the Committee in 2014/15 as listed below be noted:
 - a. Design of the 2015/2016 Council Tax Support Scheme (if required)
 - b. Looking after the town's assets – a sustainable capital strategy (timescale to be determined by the Assistant Director (Finance))
 - c. Community Buildings
5. That the Chair writes to all those Groups and individuals who have put forward suggestions for study thanking them for their interest and that they be sent details of the agreed workplan and opportunities to take part in the scrutiny work to be undertaken.

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

None.

6. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

The Committee was reminded that as the Overview and Scrutiny meeting on 7 April had been cancelled the time slot would be used to hold a joint meeting with the Community Select Committee to consider a Policy Development item on Community Buildings led by the Head of Property and Estates and the Resources Portfolio Holder.

7. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Not required.

8. PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

None.

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

None.

10. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

Chair