

**STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES**

**Date: Monday 28 July 2014**

**Time: 6.00 p.m.**

**Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage**

Present: Councillors L Martin-Haugh (Chair), R Parker CC (Vice Chair)  
P Bibby, R Broom, J Brown, M Cherney-Crew, J Hollywell,  
L Harrington, C Latif and P Stuart.

Also Present: Councillor J Thomas.

Start / End Time Start Time: 6.00 p.m.  
End Time: 7.58 p.m.

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L Bell and S Walker.

There were no declarations of interest.

**2. MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 23 JUNE 2014**

With regard to Minute 3 of the last meeting concerning the Customer Service Centre, the Strategic Director (Resources) apologised as he believed the question that had been raised had been covered in the report to the Executive (Item 4 on this agenda) and undertook to clarify and follow up the question after the meeting.

A Member reminded the meeting that there had been an incomplete paragraph in the Town Centre Regeneration report. The Strategic Director (Resources) undertook to circulate the full wording of the relevant paragraph to Members of the Committee.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 23 June 2014 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**3. RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW ON MEMBERS' EXPENSES AND HOSPITALITY**

Councillor Thomas, the former Chair of the Committee, was in attendance for this item.

The Scrutiny Officer presented the Executive Member Response to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Scrutiny Review into Members' Expenses and Hospitality.

The Committee was advised that the responses had been cleared by both the Leader

and the Learning and Development Coordinator.

In reply to a question concerning the sponsorship of the Community Reception the Committee was advised that the current sponsorship agreement had ended and that future sponsorship might not be needed. This would facilitate the renaming of the event.

A Member commented that it should be noted that cuts to the Council's services began with the withdrawal of the Negative Subsidy in 2007 which was before the Government's austerity programme began. The Scrutiny Officer undertook to amend the response accordingly.

Councillor Parker made a personal comment regarding the statement in the report concerning the selection of the Mayor and expressed his disappointment that the response did not include wording to the effect that the Mayor could be selected from any political party. The view that the report should be changed to reflect this wording was not supported by the other Members of the Committee.

It was **RESOLVED** that the response be noted and that a follow up date for a review be diarised.

Councillor Thomas left the meeting at the conclusion of this item of business.

#### **4. PART 1 DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

The Committee had before it the agenda and reports from the meeting of the Executive held on 22 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 2014, it be considered on this occasion.

##### **Customer Services Centre – Review of Contacts**

It was noted that this item of business had been discussed at the Executive as a Part II item and that it had been resolved at that meeting to make it Part I.

The Committee was advised that the report had been prepared at the request of the Executive and would form the basis for a more in-depth review of the Customer Services Centre (CSC) which would generate a number of recommendations designed to improve customer service.

Key issues identified within the report were that the CSC had received in excess of 270,000 telephone calls in 2013/2104 and of those calls 10.6% had been abandoned and that 10% of customers had made over 50% of the recorded contacts (by all methods) with the Centre.

The Committee was further advised that the in-depth review would include an

examination of the use of 'self-select' telephony, encourage the use of on-line contacts and assess the requirements of the Council's most needy customers.

In response to a question concerning the need for customers to contact the CSC to make enquiries about their rent or Council Tax accounts the Committee was advised that it was not possible for customers to interrogate the website to determine account balances. A cost benefit analysis would need to be undertaken to determine the feasibility of providing this information on-line, although it was known that dealing with walk in enquiries, followed by telephone calls, were the most expensive methods of dealing with customer enquiries.

In reply to a question concerning the level of abandoned telephone calls the Committee was advised that recommendations to reduce the number would be made in the follow up report. It was noted that the use of a callback facility would only be considered if the callback could be guaranteed to the customer.

### **New Homes Bonus – 2013/14 Scheme Allocations**

The Committee was reminded that a draft of this report had already been before them at its June meeting and that the wording in the report had been amended in respect of the poppies and floral displays at the roundabouts in the town.

The Committee was advised that the Executive had added an extra recommendation to the report and had identified an amount of £26,000 for the provision of a premium park/play area at Ridlins.

In reply to a question concerning the location of the play area the Committee was advised that the Executive was fulfilling a long term commitment to the provision of a proper play space in that area and that local Members had been briefed about the decision.

In reply to a further question concerning the funding of poppy displays within the town's floral arrangements the Assistant Director (Finance) advised the Committee that she believed that the displays had been part of the yearly planting scheme and undertook to investigate and feedback to the Committee should that assumption prove to be incorrect.

### **Stevenage Borough Council – Making a Difference – Annual Report 2014**

The Committee had before it the content of the Council's draft Annual Report 2014 and was advised that the final wording would be published to the Council's website, complete with appropriate pictures to accompany the text.

In reply to a question concerning the size of the text in the report it was confirmed that the final 'Making a Difference' as displayed on the website would be fully compliant with all anti-discrimination legislation.

### **Review of Procurement Strategy**

The Committee was advised that the Executive had requested that the recommendations be strengthened to increase the opportunities for local businesses

and to ensure that the contractors used pay the living wage to staff.

In reply to a question the Committee was advised that the strategy acknowledged the legal constraints within which the Council's procurement processes operated.

### **Revised Stevenage Local Development Scheme**

The Committee was advised that the Executive had added a recommendation that the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Regeneration write to Brandon Lewis MP, Minister of State for Housing and Planning bringing to his attention how critical it was to undertake the widening of the A1(M) and that sufficient funding for these major infrastructure works should be provided by Government.

Members expressed the view that private and social housing developments should share the same entrance / egress from and to main thoroughfares and the Committee was advised that it was the remit of the Planning and Development Committee to comment on the design of applications put forward.

### **Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme**

The Committee was advised that the revised Housing Allocations Scheme, as presented to the Executive, had been extensively consulted upon and that all agreed modifications had been incorporated into the final draft of the scheme.

The Committee was further advised that the Executive had added a recommendation granting delegated authority to the Strategic Director Community to review and amend the Under Occupation Policy to allow for appropriate downsizing based on need to ensure that larger properties may be made available to those in need.

In reply to a question it was confirmed that foster children were not taken into account in the Housing Allocations Policy.

### **2013/14 Capital Expenditure Outturn**

The Committee was advised that the Executive had added an extra recommendation requesting that the Chief Executive conduct a formal review of the procurement process to ensure that the extent of the slippage was not repeated.

In reply to Members' concerns at the extent of slippage the Committee was advised that the relevant funds had been allocated to projects in both 2014/15 and 2015/16. This was due, in part, to the length of the procurement process and was the result of the cumulative impact from a number of projects. It was also stressed that no monies had been lost as a result of the slippage.

In reply to a question concerning delays to housing works caused by the procurement slippage the Committee was advised that although improvements to tenants homes had been delayed there was little or no risk, to the Council as the tenants had not been informed of dates for the works due to be carried out to their properties.

### **4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Monitoring Report General Fund and Housing Revenue Account**

The Committee was advised that all underspends had been reviewed by the LSPG and where possible savings had been extracted or built into the integrated financial

plan within the Medium Term Financial Strategy to support future capital investment plans.

In reply to a comment regarding the level of underspends the Committee was advised that they amounted to approximately 1% of the Council's gross expenditure.

#### **General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (2015/16-2017/18)**

The Committee was advised that the Executive had added two recommendations that covered concessions for local residents and training for managers on the commercialisation agenda.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Part I decisions of the Executive taken on 22 July 2014 be noted:

- Customer Services Centre – Review of Contacts
- New Homes Bonus – 2013/14 Scheme Allocations
- Stevenage Borough Council – Making a Difference – Annual Report 2014
- Review of Procurement Strategy
- Revised Stevenage Local Development Scheme
- Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme
- 2013/14 Capital Expenditure Outturn
- 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Monitoring Report General Fund and Housing Revenue Account
- General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (2015/16-2017/18)

#### **5. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORKPLAN**

The Scrutiny Officer presented an amended Scrutiny workplan for 2014/2015 and advised the Committee that following consultation with the Chair it was proposed to defer the Scrutiny Study of Media and Communications to 2015/2016.

A Member commented that the study was much needed and should be remain in the programme for the year.

The amended workplan was put to the vote and the Committee agreed to the revised workplan which included the deferment of the Media and Communications study to 2015/2016.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Overview and Scrutiny Workplan for the year 2014/2015 be agreed.

Note: Councillor Parker requested that his vote against the above decision be recorded.

#### **6. URGENT PART 1 DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

None.

**7. URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

**8. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

It was **RESOLVED** that:

1. 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. Members having considered the reasons for the following report being in Part II and determined that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

**9. PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

None.

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

The Committee was advised of an Urgent Part II decision in respect of the award of the Insurance Contracts for Stevenage Borough Council authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Committee was further advised by the Strategic Director Community of the scope of the contract and of the reason for urgency.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Urgent Part II decision authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted.

**11. URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**Chair**