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COUNCIL

8 MARCH 2023

SUPPLEMENTARY AGENDA

PART I

10. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS / PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

Answers to questions submitted by Members to Committee Chairs / Portfolio Holders are attached.

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Supplementary Agenda Published 3 March 2023

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MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Questions to Portfolio Holders / Committee Chairs

(A) Question from Councillor Bret Facey

“Do you believe apprenticeships play an important role in the aspirations and future prospects of Stevenage’s young people?”

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd / Lloyd Briscoe):

Apprenticeships help individuals to gain the skills and experience they require to be successful in their chosen profession. Stevenage Borough Council relaunched its apprenticeship programme and since 2017 has provided more than 74 opportunities to individuals to gain qualifications in their chosen subject alongside working to gain practical experience across a range of services such as finance, customer services, community development and human resources. The HR team have attended school apprenticeship events and local job centre career fairs to promote apprenticeship opportunities, in addition to advertising opportunities on the internet and social media.

Apprenticeship opportunities have not only supported the individuals undertaking the apprenticeship, but also the Council’s succession planning with many apprentices choosing to remain in the Council’s employment at the end of their training period and progressing into key roles such as Regeneration Project Officer, IT Service Desk Manager and Corporate Events Manager. Apprenticeship opportunities are now available from NVQ 2 through to Master’s degree level so support not only school leavers, but also lifelong learning aspirations in the workplace and are key in helping all age groups achieve their career aspirations.

We are also deeply proud of our ground-breaking ‘Stevenage Works’ programme, alongside local construction companies, North Herts College and Job Centre Plus, through which over 200 young people have gained skills and experience to secure work in the construction industry.

We have a number of businesses in the town providing opportunities to local young people and we are delighted to be working with the organisers of the second Generation Stevenage to support this. The first Generation Stevenage event was held virtually in 2020 and over 400 young people attended to receive an insight into pursuing a career in STEM (Science, technology, engineering and maths). Generation Stevenage takes place on Wednesday, 24 May 2023 at Knebworth Barns and will outline key unique opportunities to connect local employers to local talent. This includes showcasing apprenticeships, work placements and jobs for graduates and school leavers. The event aims to attract over 500 students aged 15-18 and will support circa 50 local employers.

In addition, over the next two years we will be taking forward activities which were highlighted in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund submission. This includes projects which invest in training and opportunities for local people, to help improve life chances and provide opportunities. As part of our Local Investment Plan, we have committed to supporting people to get into education, training, employment and qualifications throughout the life of the programme.

(B) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren

“Why has the Council not restarted its periodic leaseholders’ engagement forums?”

Answer (Councillor Jeannette Thomas):

The leaseholder forum meetings were ongoing until March 2020 when the Covid pandemic commenced. Post what is hopefully the worst of Covid we, along with many other customer-facing organisations, were also impacted by some reluctance in community members to engage in person as personal concerns over health impacts were still quite high.

At the moment, much of our engagement from residents and community members is on a transactional basis. However, moving forward there is a lot of work going on in the background with a new “Working Co-operatively to give Residents a Voice” strategy and working groups being developed. This will be focused on supporting and growing resident engagement and will include leaseholders.

All past groups are being reviewed and a new engagement structure will be launched in line with our responsibilities as part of the Social Housing White Paper and the delivery of Resident Satisfaction Measures from April 2023 with the first reports due in summer 2024. We expect to be able to share more information concerning these developments in the coming months.

This new approach will also align with the Co-operative Neighborhoods’ Programme to include engagement with communities and residents who do not typically have reason to contact us or are unsure how best to do so.

One of the aims of the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme is to provide area-based structures through which the Council engages with residents on what matters to them, their ambitions for the future, and co-production of the plans to realise them.

This will:

- meet the specific service and legal requirement relating to the Council’s housing portfolio overall.*
- offer alternative solutions for giving customers the opportunity to discuss issues affecting them including estate walkabouts or estate/area meetings.*

- offer other possible solutions such as individual Service focus groups including leaseholders to discuss performance, costs and future ideas.

(C) Question from Councillor Graham Snell

“Does the Council have plans to raise revenue by selling advertising space in and around the New Bus Interchange, including the Walkway between the Town Centre and the Bus Interchange?”

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):

In line with the ambitions around income generation as set out in the Co-operative Commercial and Insourcing Strategy, the Council has let two commercial premises within the New Bus Interchange building and has plans to sell advertising space within the building too. Subject to appropriate advertisement consent being granted by the Local Planning Authority, digital screens will be installed inside the building in the coming months. If the digital screens prove to be effective, the walkway between the Town Centre and Bus Interchange may also be used in future for advertising purposes. This will be subject to planning regulations and ensuring that the surrounding public realm remains a high-quality environment.

(D) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC

“SBC’s response to questions/queries/complaints on the Your Say system, for both Members and the public, has been a complete shambles now for at least 2 months. The new ‘system’ was started with no consultation about its design or requirements with either members or the public and no prior information was supplied to either. Responses from SBC bear no reference to the original issue and so get referred back by members to SMT for a proper answer. As they are meaningless, they are then deleted. All this is a complete waste of staff and Member time and resources. Responses to the public therefore are delayed or lost.

- Why was the new ‘system’ introduced by officers?
- Why was there no consultation with Members about it?
- Why was no prior information supplied to Members?
- When will managers revert to the previous system (which worked well) or consult with Members and the public on a new fit-for-purpose system and then introduce it?”

Answer (Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd):

- Why was the new ‘system’ introduced by officers?

A new system was required for several reasons:

- *to meet the new regulatory requirements from the Housing Ombudsman that could not be delivered through the existing system,*
- *the existing complaints system ran on old technology that is no longer supported by the supplier, and*

- *a new system would enable customers to log complaints for themselves online and reduce the need for officers to re-type information from emails, thereby improving the customer experience and officer efficiency.*

(b) *Why was there no consultation with Members about it?*

Member input to the complaints policy was sought through the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group held on 8th September 2022, and an invite to this was sent to all Members of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Discussion was centred on policy changes needed, including the need to meet new regulatory requirements from the Housing Ombudsman. However, the session did also touch on the need to change the system used to support and operate complaints. The report on the complaints policy went to Executive on 12th October 2022, and then onto Scrutiny to review the decision of the Executive.

(c) *Why was no prior information supplied to Members?*

All Members were invited to a Member training session at the start of November 2022. The session did discuss a range of the changes being made and provided pointers for Members on how they could direct customers or follow up on case work. It did not explicitly show or demonstrate the new messages Members would receive. In hindsight this was a missed opportunity for which officers apologise. At the Modern Member Programme session last year during the complaints session officers did highlight that further changes would be made, and provided pointers for Members on how they could direct customers or follow up on case work.

Further training can be arranged for any Members on the new ways of working if they would find it helpful.

(d) *When will managers revert to the previous system (which worked well) or consult with Members and the public on a new fit-for-purpose system and then introduce it?*

In December 2022, the old complaints system suffered an irrecoverable error which meant that officers were no longer able to update records in it. For this reason, and because of the change of regulatory requirements, we are not able to return to the previous system or way of working.

Finally, we have urgently raised with the supplier of the new system the need for them to make changes to the email response messages to add the complainant's address, which has been a frustrating element to the new system for some Members. Officers appreciate that with a large number of cases it is difficult and sometimes time consuming to understand which e-mails relate to which cases. We will be actively working with the new supplier to make further changes to the system as soon as possible.

(E) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness

“What plans do the Council have for working with the County Council to make the temporary positive changes to Lytton Way traffic flow permanent?”

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

The Council has engaged with the County Council over recent months, to highlight some of the challenges related to the Swingate exit onto Lytton Way. The County Council implemented a temporary traffic solution prior to Christmas, and will evaluate the impact of this temporary solution.

Stevenage Borough Council has been engaging with the County Council (as Highway Authority), regarding this temporary solution and regarding potential longer-term solutions. Officers will continue to engage with County Council in the weeks ahead.

(F) Question from Councillor Tom Wren

“Does the Council consider it acceptable for builders’ waste and rubble to be dumped on grass verges?”

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

The Council considers fly tipping to be a blight, and community safety officers investigate all reports of fly-tipping.

Where building materials have been left on verges following house renovations, officers will work with the resident and the contractor to arrange for them to remove the waste.

(G) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth

“Why has the children's playground located at the north end of the town centre park between the swimming centre and Harrow Court been closed? Access is limited only by padlocks to the gates and a warning notice loosely on the ground advising "Safety First" and stating that the playground is closed for essential repairs. Children can easily climb over the low surrounding fence and do so regularly to access and use the play equipment. If there is a serious safety issue involving danger to children should the site not be properly secured? Please advise what action the Council proposes to take, how long the playground has been closed and when it will reopen.”

Answer (Councillor Simon Speller):

The Town Centre Gardens play area has been closed since summer 2022, due to safety concerns resulting from the deterioration of the safety surfacing around the play equipment. Officers have received quotes for comprehensive repairs to the site, and there are also discussions taking place with Planning & the Council’s Housing Development Team regarding a comprehensive reinvestment and redesign of the play equipment. Officers will be able to report back to confirm the way forward in due course. In the meantime, the play area will continue to be inspected to ensure that appropriate signage is maintained, and items of equipment can be taken out of use if necessary.

(H) Question from Councillor Chris Howells

“Why was the junction between Lytton Way and Swingate altered necessitating the traffic management system to be installed to avoid long queues exiting Tesco's?”

Answer (Councillor Lloyd Briscoe):

Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) worked closely with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) and with other public partners, such as the LEP, to help inform the design and operation of the new bus interchange. As part of the preparation work, SBC worked with HCC Highways to consider any highways impacts or mitigation that might be required with a new bus interchange.

Pre-application discussions with HCC Highways indicated their view that a conventional ‘give way’ exit point should be incorporated into the exit from Swingate into Lytton Way. This request from HCC Highways was reflected in the planning application, and also in the representations made by HCC Highways in response to the planning application.

A temporary solution has been put in place to alleviate queuing from the Swingate exit to Lytton Way, which is welcome. The impact of this is under review by HCC and SBC to inform a more permanent solution.

(I) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC

“Given that the Council has taken hundreds of thousands of pounds out of its play services budget, does it intend to use some of that money to re-instate play areas in the wards?”

Answer (Councillor Richard Henry)

The closure of the play service was recommended at Full Council due to the need for the General Fund to make significant savings as a direct result of inflationary pressures which were not matched by increases in Government funding, together with the year on year cuts by Central Government to the Council since 2010 to the tune of £5Million.

The Council has adopted a planned approach to maintaining and refurbishing its play areas, and in February 2017 the Executive agreed an investment programme of £1.5Million across all the retained play areas.

Covid caused some delays to the delivery of this programme, and officers are now endeavouring to complete this work over the next two years.

Officers will continue to assess the condition of our play areas to inform future years’ investment requirements.

(J) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

"The long-awaited Community Centre for Bragbury End is expected to be funded using the proceeds of the Kenilworth development. Can SBC confirm that this funding will solely be used for the provision of a high quality Bragbury End Community Centre and not be diverted to other Wards?"

Answer (Councillor Sandra Barr):

The Kenilworth development project has a range of project funding sources. The provision of high-quality affordable housing is funded from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), to bring forward homes for local people including a new older people's accommodation scheme. The Kenilworth project also relies on other sources of finance to bring forward the parts of the development that aren't funded via the HRA. This funding comprises Council investment, grant funding, and sales income from market sale housing. This funding supports development of the shops, community centre and ancillary public realm consisting of highways and landscaping. You will be pleased to hear that this is project specific finance and there is certainly no plan to divert this funding away from the Kenilworth project.

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