

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 17 October 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Forhad Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Andy McGuinness (substitute), Sarah Mead, Margaret Notley, Carolina Veres and Anne Wells.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.28pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Conor McGrath and Robin Parker CC. Councillor Andy McGuinness was in attendance as substitute member for Councillor Parker.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 26 SEPTEMBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26 September 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

2. Minutes – 26 September 2023

Noted.

3. Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees

Noted.

4. Climate Change – Annual Update October 2023

The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) reprised the slide presentation he had given to the Executive, which had included slides relating to the 9 levels for the Climate Change Strategy; a summary of the work undertaken since last year; an annual update on Greenhouse Gas emissions; the plans for decarbonising the Stevenage Transport Sector and other sectors; and

progress on the “Dragon’s Den” local environmental/green improvement projects.

In reply to a series of Member questions, the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) commented:

- the intention was to include the recycling of soft plastics as part of the Council’s own aspiration of a 0% target for sending waste to landfill or incineration;
- regarding whether or not the commitment to be net carbon zero by 2030 was still realistic, there was no complete package showing how the Council would achieve this target. The most representative graph in the report was the one at Paragraph 3.68 showing the 40 SBC sites with the highest carbon emissions. The Council was looked at schemes/business cases to redevelop and decarbonise some of these sites. This would be allied to the use of HVO fuel in the Council’s vehicle fleet to reduce emission levels. The Council had neither the legal powers nor financial resourcing to fully decarbonise everything in the Borough by 2030;
- lessons had been learnt from the 2020 Climate Change Citizens’ Panel. The more recent approach had been the Topic Reference Groups, involving those with specialist interests in Climate Change (eg. the ATLEE Group about public transport and non-car methods of travel). Further work had to be done on how to best engage with those who were not committed to the Climate Change agenda. However, some education work had been carried out, in conjunction with Council partners and local businesses, including the sharing of best practice;
- the use of HVO fuel, and its potential roll out to the whole of the SBC vehicle fleet would be the subject of a Business Case. It was hoped that it would be introduced during 2024. The makers of all of the Council vehicles had agreed that their vehicles were suitable for conversion to use HVO fuel. It was planned that the heavier vehicles would be converted first, which would reduce 90% of carbon emissions;
- the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership was looking at supporting the Council’s aspiration to send 0% waste to landfill by 2030;
- the Council’s Helston House development was an example of new build with decarbonisation way beyond that which was required by Planning legislation. As part of the Council’s 5 year review of its Local Plan, one of the two areas for intensifying policy was Climate Change, and officers would push as far as they could in terms of the Government’s planning regulations;
- engagement with SBC staff regarding decarbonising of travelling to work was ongoing, highlighting season ticket discounts for buses and trains. It had also been recognised that staff also needed to be incentivised to travel differently; and
- although not included in the list of the 40 SBC sites with the highest carbon emissions, a number of the other High Rise Blocks across the town were being assessed by the Housing Team in terms of decarbonisation.

5. Housing Allocation Policy

The Housing Operations Manager advised that the Executive had approved a revised Housing Allocation Policy. The Policy met statutory requirements and strengthened the focus on assisting those with most housing need by making the best use of the Council's limited social housing stock. This was against the backdrop of unprecedented demand on housing due to the ongoing cost of living crisis.

In reply to Members' questions, the Housing Operations Manager stated:

- in relation to overnight caring (Paragraph 4.1.4 of the report), each individual case would be looked at to ensure that the needs of applicants were met;
- the changes outlined in the Policy would be applicable from when the Policy came into force (currently planned for July 2024);
- if a housing register applicant was housed by SBC outside of the Borough, and if an opportunity had arisen, the applicant would still be eligible for social housing in Stevenage provided they met the residency connection criteria of being resident in the Borough at the time of the application and having done so for 5 of the last 7 years; and
- as stated in the report, an easy read reference guide to assist applicants would be created to accompany the Policy.

In response to a specific question raised as to the number of those on the current Housing List who would be removed from the list when the new Policy came into effect, the Strategic Director (RP) agreed to ensure that this figure was provided to Members of the Committee. It was confirmed that all such individuals affected would be contacted by the Council.

It was requested that, due to the significant number of recent personnel changes in the Housing and Investment Service, all Members of the Council be provided with the latest list of Housing Officers, together with contact details.

6. Stevenage Borough Council Corporate Plan – Making Stevenage Even Better

The Strategic Director (RP) advised that the new draft Corporate Plan outlined the future vision of the Council for the next 5 years. The document would be co-produced following a public consultation exercise running from 23 October 2023 to 4 December 2023. As the Corporate Plan was part of the Council's Budget and Policy Framework, a proposed final version would be submitted to the Executive and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in January 2024, prior to adoption by the Council.

In reply to a question concerning the single page length of the document (compared to the multi-page documents produced by other councils), the Strategic Director (RF) stated that the Plan outlined the Strategic Priority Framework, below which sat a raft of other Policies, Strategies and work

streams, all of which were reviewed regularly.

7. Co-operative Commercial and Insourcing Strategy 2023 – 2026

The Assistant Director (Finance) advised that the Executive had approved the updated Strategy and the proposed Fees and Charges for 2024/25. The cross-party Council Financial Services Group (CSFG) had considered the Fees and Charges and a majority had voted in favour of the proposed increases.

Members were concerned that the CSFG was a small group, and felt that a wider sample of Member views on the fees and charges should be obtained. The Strategic Director (CF) commented that CSFG was part of the Council's budget-setting process, and that both the Executive and the Overview & Scrutiny Committee would be provided with a further chance to look at the fees and charges in the early part of 2024.

In respect of a number of further questions, the Strategic Director (CF) replied as follows:

- insourcing of services would take place according to scalability and level of expertise. If the required level of expertise for a particular service did not exist within the Council then it was unlikely that this service would be insourced;
- the proposed increases in fees and charges reflected the Council's financial position, and had been benchmarked against those charged by other local authorities. A balance had to be struck between increases which might result in less income and those which were reasonable. In all cases, the recommended SBC increases were below the current level of inflation; and
- the fee/charge relating to Street Naming/Numbering was that charged by the Council's Engineering Team to developers of new sites for the administrative costs of formalising and registering the names/numbers of new streets.

8. Towns Funds – Programme Delivery Update

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that the report provided an update on the spend of the £37.5M Towns Fund monies allocated to the Council for 9 new projects. The Council had a role both as the main delivery body for the projects, but also as accountable body for expenditure of the Towns Fund monies.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) commented that the report contained an update on the early stages of work for a new Museum/New Town Heritage Centre. The Executive had also delegated authority to officers for the procurement of design services, via a procurement framework, for the Station Gateway and Central Core West Major Opportunities Areas (MOA).

In reply to a Member's question, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) agreed

to liaise with the Engineering Team and provide an answer as to the level of usage of the electric car charging points in the Council's Multi-Storey Car Parks.

In response to a further question, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) stated that, in terms of the proposed new Leisure Hub on St. George's Way, officers had been and would continue to participate in discussion with the HCC Passenger Transport Unit regarding the provision of bus services for the whole of the Town Centre "ring roads" (Lytton Way, Fairlands Way, St. George's way and Six Hills Way).

In view of the volume of projects (Towns Fund or otherwise) taking place or planned to take place in the Town Centre, a number of Members requested an update on the overall Regeneration Plans for the town. The Strategic Director (TP) felt that this would be best addressed via another All-Member Briefing, and agreed to investigate possible dates for this Briefing.

4 URGENT PART I DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

None.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

6 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That, under Section 100A 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 to 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, as amended by SI 2006 No. 88.
2. That having considered the reasons for the following item being in Part II, it be determined that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

7 PART II MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 26 SEPTEMBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26 September 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

8 PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

11. Part II Minutes – Executive – 20 September 2023

Noted.

12. Co-operative Commercial and Insourcing Strategy 2023 – 2026: High Level Action Plan, Insourcing Roadmap and Changes to Key Performance Indicators

The Assistant Director (Finance) advised that this item followed on from the Executive’s approval of the Co-operative Commercial and Insourcing Strategy (see Minute 3 above).

The Strategic Director (CF) answered a number of Members’ questions regarding the report.

13. Towns Fund – Sports and Leisure Hub Progression

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) reminded Members that last year the Council had engaged Morgan Sindall as its development partners for progression of the proposed new Sports and Leisure Hub facility, towards which £10M of Towns Fund monies had been earmarked. The report updated Members on the feasibility study prepared by Morgan Sindall.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration), assisted by the Strategic Director (CF), answered a number of Members’ questions in respect of the report.

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

None.

10 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR