

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 24 January 2024

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Myla Arceno (Mayor), Jim Brown (Deputy Mayor), Sandra Barr, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Forhad Chowdhury, Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Alex Farquharson, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Mason Humberstone, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence CC, Lin Martin-Haugh, Conor McGrath, Maureen McKay, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Margaret Notley, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres and Anne Wells.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 7.00pm
End Time: 8.56pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Julie Ashley-Wren, Chris Howells, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Andy McGuinness, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage and Tom Wren.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 20 DECEMBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 20 December 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

3 MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor announced that the Stevenage Motto, "The Heart of a Town Lies in its People", truly reflected the Borough's community. She paid tribute to the author of the Motto, Richard John Ingle, who had passed away aged 81 in December 2023. Richard compiled the words when he was a pupil at Barclays School. The Mayor was privileged to have attended Richard's funeral, which was a celebration of his life. He deserved great praise and recognition for compiling the town's motto.

The Mayor commented that she had attended 238 Mayoral Engagements since May 2023. Engagements such as those with Stevenage Community Trust, Stevenage Works Community Chest funds and The Betty Game Opportunities Trust were great examples of how local people were working together to help and support others by giving grants and funds to those in need. These Trusts were groups of people and

businesses in the town who had the generosity at their core. She thanked them all.

The Mayor announced that, during January 2024, she had attended a tree planting in memory of former Councillor John Gardner, the launch of Hertfordshire Covenant from all Faiths, Holocaust Memorial Day exhibition at the Stevenage Library, and visited the Covid Cobra first pillar in Grace Way, with thanks to Junction 7 Creatives and Community Development Team. She would shortly be visiting the Business Technology Centre(BTC), and thanked WENTA (based at the BTC) for their generous donation to the Mayor's charity funds.

The Mayor congratulated Sarah Pateman (Head of Community Advice and Support) for receiving the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE) for her work and services to the Victims of Domestic Abuse in Hertfordshire.

The Mayor reminded Members that Stevenage had been recognised as a Dementia Friendly Community, and a dementia badge for Councillors and staff to wear had been produced. She hoped that wearers would support the initiative with a donation to the charity.

The Mayor announced that Don Hills had also passed away recently. Don had worked as a journalist for 50 years. He was the Press Officer with Stevenage Development Corporation from 1960 to 1980 and Public Relations and Information Officer for Stevenage Borough Council from 1976 to 1992. He had the unique role of working for both authorities for few years. He and the late Margaret Ashby had also written a very interesting book on the history of Stevenage.

At the Mayor's invitation, a number of Members paid personal tributes to Don Hills.

4 COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

There were no community presentations.

5 PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

There were no petitions or deputations.

6 QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL

There were no questions from the Youth Council.

7 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

Question from Mr Jim Borchers

The Council noted that a response to the question submitted by Mr Borchers regarding the principles the Council had in place for new and existing external lighting on buildings and structures in the town with respect to wildlife and dark skies had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Mr Borchers was present at the meeting and he asked the following supplementary question:

“In view of the amount of unnecessary lighting both in the Stevenage Bus Interchange and the new Railway Station Multi-Storey Car Park (MSCP), can SBC urgently produce a Strategy document on lighting across the town so that the correct lighting can be installed in the right places, cutting light pollution whilst at the same time enabling people to move about safely?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Performance (Councillor Simon Speller) replied that he would ask officers to look at the lighting levels at the Bus Interchange and new Railway Station MSCP. He commented that lighting standards should be applied on all planning applications, with the strategy document overseeing such matters being the Stevenage Local Plan. He offered to invite Mr Borchers to a meeting with him, the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) and the Engineering Services Manager to discuss the matter in more detail.

8 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Phil Bibby CC, advised that he had received comments from Indoor Market stallholders about reduced footfall following the siting of the Bus Interchange, in particular less mobile people. He therefore asked the following question:

“What can the Council do with stallholders to improve their businesses to increase footfall and cater for those that had difficulty in walking from the Bus Interchange to the Indoor Market?”

The Leader of the Council replied that he was not aware of any evidence to support the matter raised in the question, but he and the Deputy Leader would investigate further with officers.

The Council then received updates from the relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on the following matters:

- Coronation Living Heritage Fund;
- Flat Block Recycling Pilot;
- Co-operative Neighbourhoods: Walkways Cleansing Programme;
- SBC Business Support Programme;
- Wenta; and
- Stevenage Works.

The Leader of the Opposition advised that Members had recently received an e-mail regarding the maintenance of Play Areas. The Programme had been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the consultation was being re-run. He was not sure why as Members had previously been told that 50 Play areas were to be maintained in good working order. He asked if the £1.5Million budget was sufficient to cover the

costs of the works.

The Leader of the Council replied that he would ask the Portfolio Holders for Environment & Performance and Culture, Leisure & Information Technology to investigate the matter.

9 UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS

The Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee advised that the Committee had only met once since the previous Council meeting. The Committee had primarily discussed the various Budget reports, including the final Housing Revenue Account and Rent Setting report for 2024/25. The Committee also debated “Making Stevenage Even Better”, the Council’s proposed new Corporate Plan.

The Chair of the Community Select Committee advised that the Committee had met on 8 January 2024 at which it had concluded its work on the scrutiny of the Housing Repairs Service. In that regard, the Committee had agreed 9 constructive recommendations for improvements to the Service, which had been supported by officers.

The Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee advised that the Committee had finalised its scrutiny reviews of Bus Services and the Cost of Living crisis. Looking forward, the Committee would be carrying out some work in February on its plans for the 2024/25 Civic Year, followed by a session on bio-diversity and the Climate Change Strategy, and in March would be carrying out some work relating to the Decarbonisation of the Council’s Housing stock.

10 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Impact of the Government’s Autumn Statement on Local Government Finance

Councillor Richard Henry moved and Councillor Jeannette Thomas seconded the motion set out in the agenda papers.

During the debate, Councillor Henry agreed to accept a suggested re-wording of the second paragraph of the motion from “Conservative-Liberal Democrat Alliance government” to “Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government”.

Following further debate, and upon the re-wording motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that:

1. This Council notes with deep concern the significant impact of de-funding local government by Conservative-led governments since 2010.
2. This Council recognises that local government in England has been actively stripped of funding under successive Conservative-led governments, including the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Alliance government. All English local authorities have been forced to cut spending on nearly every aspect of their services since 2010. Poorer areas have been hit disproportionately, leading to councils having to make harsh cuts, including to services such as parks,

libraries, refuse collection, and children's centres. Following the Chancellor's Autumn Statement, the Chair and leaders of the four main parties in the Local Government Association (LGA) wrote an open letter to the Chancellor warning of "low financial resilience across the sector following a 27.0 per cent real-terms reduction in core spending power¹ since 2010/11. The Local Government Association estimates that there is a "funding gap" of almost £3bn over the next two years.

3. This Council notes that since 2010, several councils have issued Section 114 notices (under the Local Government Finance Act 1988) and more look likely to follow. Both the Local Government Association (LGA) and the County Councils Network (CCN) undertook surveys of their member councils immediately after the Autumn Statement. The Local Government Association reported findings of a "growing financial crisis", with almost one in five of its members at risk of running out of funds either this year or next.
4. A report by The National Audit Office (NAO) have published data that shows Stevenage's Core Spending Power **has reduced by 64.5% in real terms** when comparing 2010/11 to 2020/21. The Council's own government funding reduced by £5.3Million to 2019/20 and the need to fund inflationary pressures has meant the Council has had to find over £14Million of savings to stay financially resilient. This Council has had to make some very hard decisions – and those decisions get harder and harder each year as we are cut to the bone. It has to stop.
5. This Council:
 - a. Condemns the reduction of funding to local government since 2010 by successive Conservative-led governments and calls for immediate action by the current Government to provide a sustainable funding model for the sector, thereby stopping this assault on local democracy.
 - b. Calls on the Chancellor to listen to the voices of the leaders of the Local Government Association (of which Stevenage Borough Council is a member) in their letter of 13 October, 2023 and, in particular:
 - Address funding sufficiency and certainty issues faced by councils.
 - Take steps to strengthen the local government workforce.
 - Strengthen councils' role in key national policy areas such as housing and net zero.

11 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS / PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

The Council received five questions from Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders. The responses to the five questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

- (A) Question from Councillor Margaret Notley re: the Council's telephone enquiry system.

Supplementary question: "Please could the Executive Member remind the Customer Services Centre Team to be mindful of those residents whose experience in contacting the Council had not been good, and challenge the Team to get telephone waiting times down even further?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure & Information Technology replied that the Council was always looking to improve the service. If the questioner had the names of specific members of the public who had experienced difficulties she would be happy to discuss those cases with the Transformation and Customer Services Teams.

- (B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness re: the Councillors' locality budget scheme.

In the absence of Councillor McGuinness, Councillor Robin Parker CC asked the following supplementary question – "Please could the split in spending between Revenue and Capital items in the SBC Councillors' Locality Budget as a whole be provided, and will there be guidelines given to councillors as to how they would be able to spend their locality budgets?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Co-operative Council & Neighbourhood Communities replied that she would consult officers and provide a written answer to this question.

- (C) Question from Councillor Bret Facey re: the payroll systems for staff and councillors.

Supplementary question: "Can the Leader of the Council guarantee that there were no other questionable use of resources (like the previous councillor payroll system) causing a small, but unnecessary, cost to the Council?"

The Leader of the Council replied that there were quirky accounting processes in most local authorities across the UK. He was pleased that the Council had taken steps to integrate councillors' payroll into the existing staff system. However, he was aware that Hertfordshire County Council had separate staff and councillor payroll systems and had no plans to change to a single system.

- (D) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC re: the effect of changes in the local media on the Council's Communications Team.

Supplementary question: "Does the Council provide all help to the Local Radio, and is the SBC studio at the rear of the Council Chamber still used and, if not, why not?"

The Leader of the Council reminded the questioner that the Labour Group had supported a Council motion submitted by his Group stressing the importance of radio as a means of communication. He was unaware of the studio mentioned in the question, but would liaise with officers to find out. He was aware that the SBC Communications Team were in regular contact with all forms of media, and did what they could to work with Local radio in publicising the Council's

work.

- (E) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC re: the impact of Right to Buy sales of the Council's housing stock on the town and residents.

Supplementary question: "Given the discounts available to tenants for Right to Buy, how are these opportunities communicated to them and how often?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development replied that all of the details on how tenants could apply for Right to Buy were available on the Council's website.

12 FINAL HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET SETTING AND RENT REPORT 2024/25

The Council considered a report seeking approval to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Rent Setting for 2024/25.

In moving the motion, the Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development (Councillor Jeannette Thomas) advised that the HRA budget had been set in line with the assumptions used in the revised 30-year Business Plan that was approved by the Executive in November 2023. The aim of the budget was to balance the needs of the existing housing stock, while allowing investment in new replacement homes for those lost under the Right to Buy system. The budget included funding for £37Million on revenue and capital works to existing homes and £29Million of investment in new housing stock for residents. These investments were part of the Council's ten-year plan to improve the maintenance of its homes and ensure that tenants had good quality, safe and sustainable homes to live-in, particularly in response to the climate crisis.

The Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development stated a key priority would be to maintain full compliance with all statutory and regulatory requirements to ensure that tenants' homes remained safe. The Council would further progress its low to medium rise flat block refurbishment programmes and would undertake further building safety and refurbishment works to the Council's five high rise flat blocks. Over the next three years of the Council's decent homes programme, 995 new kitchens or bathrooms would be installed, there would be 1,875 heating upgrades, 1,500 window or door upgrades and 1,400 properties would receive works to improve their energy efficiency with the aim for all properties to be at an energy performance rating of C by 2030.

The Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development commented that in the next 5 years the budget would contribute towards the delivery of 447 new homes in line with the Council's 5 Star promise. This was on top of the over 500 homes that the Council had delivered to date.

The Executive Member for Housing & Housing Development explained that the revenue growth included within the 2024/25 budget totalling £2.4Million would enable the Council to meet additional costs relating to void properties and support the work in clearing the current backlog of fencing repairs and replacements. Work

would continue to implement improvements to the Council's Repairs and Voids service, to ensure it offered choices to tenants and delivered cost-effective repairs and improvements. Further proposals in this regard would be presented to the Executive in due course.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development advised that additional resources had also been allocated in response to new and ongoing operational challenges, including higher levels of arrears, and the introduction of new and revised social housing standards and regulations. This would be alongside growth of £419,000 that would enable transformation projects, which would deliver service improvements and help offset pay awards and IT related pressures. As part of the Council's climate change commitment, the vehicle fleet would be switching (where possible) to *Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil* fuel from October 2024.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development commented that, as always, rent provided the main source of funding for the HRA and these had been increased by 7.7%, in line with the Government's rent setting guidelines, using September CPI plus 1%. This meant that average weekly rents would increase by £8.56 for social rents, £10.09 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes and £13.30 for affordable rents. However, due to a large reduction in utility costs, some tenants in the Council's flat blocks would see an overall reduction in their combined rent and service charges next year.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development explained that new loans totalling £37.6Million and £18.8Million were expected to be taken in the current and next financial year. However, the timing of this borrowing would be reviewed weighing up the cost and the Public Works Loan Board interest rates. The interest payable in 2023/24 and 2024/25 was estimated to be £8.9Million and £9.4Million, respectively.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated that, since the draft budget was presented to Members in December 2023, recharges between the HRA and the General Fund had been finalised. Overall, this had increased costs to the HRA by £179,000 and the HRA deficit for the year by £261,000. This would be funded from balances and adjusted in future revisions of the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

The motion was seconded by the Executive Member for Culture, Leisure & Information Technology (Councillor Loraine Rossati).

In response to various questions raised during the debate on the motion, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated:

- in relation to the decarbonisation of the Council's housing stock, the Council had to bid each time for Government funding for these works. SBC had been successful in two such bids, and work was ongoing in some of the Council's older housing stock;
- the Council did not currently benchmark its services against Housing Associations nor other local authorities with their own housing stock, although this could be

looked at in the future; and

- the corporate and democratic costs allocated to the HRA was its proportion re-charged to the General Fund.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That Housing Revenue Account (HRA) dwelling rents be increased (week commencing 1 April 2024) by 7.7%. This equates to an average increase of £8.56 for social rents, £13.30 for affordable rents and £10.09 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52-week year).
2. That the 2024/25 service charges be approved, as set out in Paragraph 4.2 of the report.
3. That the HRA budget for 2024/25, as set out in Appendix A to the report and as revised from the January 2024 draft budget report (as explained in Paragraph 4.8.1 of the report), be approved.
4. That the 2024/25 growth options, as set out in Section 4.4 of the report, be approved.
5. That the 2024/25 Fees and Charges, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be approved.
6. That the minimum levels of balances for 2024/25, as shown in Appendix C to the report, be approved.
7. That the Rent Increase Equalities Impact Assessments, appended to the report in Appendix D, be noted.
8. That the contingency sum of £400,000, within which the Executive can approve supplementary estimates, for 2024/25 (unchanged from 2023/24) be approved.
9. That the comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in Paragraph 4.10.2 of the report, be noted.
10. That key partners and other stakeholders be consulted and their views considered as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process.

13 MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES SCHEME 2024-2025 - REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL

The Council considered a report in respect of the proposed Members' Allowances Scheme for 2024/25, as recommended by the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP).

It was moved by Councillor Richard Henry and seconded by Councillor Jeannette Thomas that the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel set out in the report be agreed. In moving the motion, Councillor Henry asked that the next IRP Review should include benchmarking information with comparator authorities which, like SBC, still possessed their own Housing stock.

Following debate, and upon the motion being out to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel be noted and, subject to Members' consideration, that the findings of the report form the basis of the formal Members' Allowances Scheme for 2024/25, including:
 - with the exception of the proposal for the Majority Opposition and Minority Opposition Group Leaders set out below, the Basic Allowance and Special Responsibility Allowances remained unchanged from 2023/24, and
 - the Special Responsibility Allowances payable to the Majority Opposition and Minority Opposition Group Leaders be combined, and be re-distributed pro rata to the number of Members in their respective Groups.
2. That, in accordance with the recommendations of the Panel regarding payment of Dependant Carers' allowances, the hourly rates remain unchanged from 2023/24, but that the scheme be changed from a monthly maximum of 20 hours to a maximum of 360 hours over the year (with the Leader having discretion to increase this maximum allowance where demonstrably necessary).
3. That, in the light of Resolutions 1. and 2. above, the draft formal Members' Allowances Scheme, as shown at Appendix B to this report, be approved for 2024/2025.
4. That an Independent Remuneration Panel be reconvened in the Autumn of 2024 to consider the Members' Allowances Scheme for 2025/2026 onwards.

14 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2024/25

The Council considered a report in respect of a proposed Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25.

It was moved by Councillor Richard Henry, and seconded by Councillor Sandra Barr, that the recommendations set out in the report be approved.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the Pay Policy Statement 2024/25 set out in accordance with the Localism Act 2011 and the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.
2. That the Pay Policy Statement be placed on the Council's website.

MAYOR