

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 21 February 2024

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Myla Arceno (Mayor), Jim Brown (Deputy Mayor), Julie Ashley-Wren, 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, Chris Howells, Mason Humberstone, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence CC, Lin Martin-Haugh, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Margaret Notley, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Baroness Dr Sharon Taylor of Stevenage, OBE, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells and Tom Wren.

Start / End Start Time: 7.00pm
Time: End Time: 9.00pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Mayor referred to the recent news that King Charles III had been diagnosed with cancer. She asked the Council to join her in sending King Charles and the Royal Family their best wishes for speedy recovery. Hopefully he would be well enough to recommence his royal duties in the not too distant future.

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors John Duncan, Mrs Joan Lloyd and Loraine Rossati.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 24 JANUARY 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 24 January 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

3 GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2024/25 AND CAPITAL STRATEGY 2023/24 - 2028/29

Councillor Richard Henry, Leader of the Council, introduced the proposed 2024/2025 General Fund Budget and Capital Strategy 2023/24 – 2028/29, together with final proposals for the 2024/25 Council Tax.

Prior to his introduction, Councillor Henry stated that this would be the final Council meeting attended by Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, Councillor Michael Downing

and Councillor Graham Lawrence, all of whom he was aware would not be standing for election on 2 May 2024. He thanked all three councillors for their contributions over the years, and paid tribute to Baroness Taylor's tireless work and achievements as his predecessor as Leader of the Council for 16 years. He then announced that Ian Gourlay (Senior Democratic Services Officer) was attending his last Council meeting prior to his retirement in May 2024. He thanked Ian for the support he had given to all Members during his time with the Council.

Councillor Henry, in his introduction, referred to the following:

- the royal visit of King Charles III to the Stevenage Coptic Church in December 2023;
- the challenges and pressures facing the Council, both financial and in the cost of living;
- the financial problems faced nationally by local authorities, some of whom had issued Section 114 (bankruptcy) notices;
- the National Audit Office evidenced 64.5% reduction in the Council's Core Spending Power since 2010/11;
- the continuation of the Council's plans to identify the means to improve its budgeted position by around £1 Million of savings each year;
- the scheme for a re-located Leisure Centre, incorporating wet and dry leisure facilities;
- the continuation of the Council's innovative Housing Development Programme;
- support for the investment in the ever-growing Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) industries in the Borough, through the groundbreaking Mission 44 initiative, which aimed to support local young people to access career opportunities in these industries. To help facilitate this ambition, the Stevenage Works Skills Framework had recently been approved by the Executive;
- the Arts and Culture activities, including the completion of three murals in underpasses, working in conjunction with partners. A further 22 underpasses were targeted for improvement with 4 lined up for the summer of 2024;
- again working with partners and local residents and schools, anti-graffiti projects relating to art works on electrical cabinets throughout the town; and
- a commitment to retaining a theatre in Stevenage.

Councillor Jeannette Thomas, Deputy Leader of the Council, then moved the motion, including the recommendations regarding the General Fund Budget 2024/25 and Capital Strategy 2023/24 – 2028/29 and the formal Council Tax Resolution, which had been circulated to Members.

Councillor Thomas highlighted the following points:

- despite the £1.2 Million deficit that was fixed for 2024/25, she was pleased to be able to present a balanced budget, without the need to use balances;
- this had been achieved in part through the Transformation Programme, which had realised cost savings of £331,000 and also through the Co-operative Commercial & Insourcing Strategy, which had identified income options to secure the Council an additional £661,000;
- the General Fund Budget for 2024/25 would be £12.788 Million. Current projections for showed that £638,000 of reserves may need to be used even after

- identifying another £1Million worth of savings;
- due to the Council's financial position, there was little room for budget growth, although £167,000 of recommended growth for 2024/25 had been included to fund the switch from diesel to Hydrogenated Vegetable Oil (HVO) for the vehicle fleet, which would reduce carbon emissions from the vehicles by up to 90%;
 - to balance the budget, Council Tax needed to be increased by 2.99%. This equated to an extra £6.18 per year for a Band C property, giving a total year cost of £212.68 or £4.09 per week; and
 - the Council was planning to spend £88Million on its Capital Programme for 2024/25, including £30Million on building new homes, £34Million on investing in existing Council homes, and £21Million to continue the flagship Regeneration Programme.

Councillor Henry then formally seconded the recommendations from the Executive on the General Fund and Capital Budgets, together with the formal Council Tax resolution, as set out on the paper circulated to Members.

Councillor Bret Facey moved and Councillor Phil Bibby seconded the following amendment:

‘That the £66,000 growth bid for the move to HVO fuel from diesel should not be implemented. Instead this funding should be used to support the maintenance of the playgrounds to ensure that the investment made in playgrounds is maintained and repairs can be made to our much loved play equipment.’

In moving the amendment, Councillor Facey advised that a number of the Play Areas around the Borough were in poor condition. Often, pieces of equipment would be removed and not replaced. Even when Play Areas were refurbished, the same process of steady decline occurred, with limited or no maintenance during that process.

Councillor Facey stated that the Council was committing around £500,000 of Capital investment to regenerate the parks over the next two years. However, had more investment been made in the past to allow for regular maintenance then the equipment in the play areas would have lasted for many more years, thereby allowing children to have enjoyed them for longer, and giving the Council a better return on tax payers' money.

Councillor Facey explained the amendment was funded by removing half of the money allocated for switching the Council's vehicle fleet from diesel to HVO. He commented that HVO did reduce carbon emissions, but did not reduce Nitrogen Dioxide emissions, which was the major cause of air pollution, smog and acid rain. Nor did HVO reduce the particulates generated through exhaust fumes which contributed towards breathing problems and asthma. The amendment would allow the Council to use the remaining half of the funding to pilot the use of HVO during 2024/25.

Following debate, a recorded vote (see below) was then taken on the amendment. The amendment was lost.

[Recorded Vote on amendment:

For – Councillors Phil Bibby, Bret Facey, Alex Farquharson, Chris Howells, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence, Adam Mitchell and Margaret Notley - 8

Against – Councillors Myla Arceno, Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Stephen Booth, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Forhad Chowdhury, Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Mason Humberstone, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, Lin Martin-Haugh, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Robin Parker, Ellie Plater, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Baroness Taylor, Jeanette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells and Tom Wren - 28

Abstentions – 0

Not present – Councillors John Duncan, Mrs Joan Lloyd and Loraine Rossati – 3]

A further debate then took place on the substantive motion.

At the conclusion of the debate, and in response to an issue raised by a Member during the debate, the Leader of the Council stated that he would confirm in writing to all Members how progress on the implementation of the conversion of the vehicle fleet from diesel to HVO, together with the solar panels on vehicles initiative, would be reported.

A recorded vote* was then taken on the substantive motion, and it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the following be approved:
 - a. the revised working revenue estimates for the year 2023/24 amounting to £13,571,480 and the revenue estimates for 2024/25 amounting to £12,788,410;
 - b. the contribution from balances totalling £1,191,105 in 2023/24;
 - c. the contribution from balances totalling nil in 2024/25.
2. That it be noted that at its meeting on 13 December 2023 the Executive calculated the amount of 28,579.4 Band D equivalent properties as its council tax base for the year 2023/24 in accordance with Regulation 3 of the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 1992 made under Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended by Section 74 of the Localism Act 2011.
3. That the following amounts be calculated by the Council for the year 2023/24 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended by Section 74 of the Localism Act 2011:

- a. £87,862,489 Being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2)(a) to (f) of the Act, less the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3)(a) to (d)
- b. £81,024,560 Being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3)(a) to (d) of the Act.
- c. £6,837,929 Being the amount by which the aggregate at 3a above exceeds the aggregate at 3b above, calculated by the Council in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act as its Council Tax requirement for the year.
- d. £239.26 Being the amount at 3c divided by the amount at 2 above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B (1) of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year

e. Valuation

Bands

A	£ 159.51
B	£ 186.09
C	£ 212.68
D	£ 239.26
E	£ 292.43
F	£ 345.60
G	£ 398.77
H	£ 478.52

Being the amounts given by multiplying the amount at 3d. above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band divided by the number which in that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation D, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 36(1) of

the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands.

4. a. That it be noted that for the year 2024/25 Hertfordshire County Council have stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each of the categories of the dwellings shown below:

Valuation Bands

	Basic Amount Of Council Tax	Adult Social Care Charge	2023/24 Council Tax
A	£ 961.58	£ 162.25	£ 1,123.83
B	£ 1,121.84	£ 189.30	£ 1,311.14
C	£ 1,282.11	£ 216.34	£ 1,498.45
D	£ 1,442.37	£ 243.38	£ 1,685.75
E	£ 1,762.90	£ 297.46	£ 2,060.36
F	£ 2,083.42	£ 351.55	£ 2,434.97
G	£ 2,403.95	£ 405.63	£ 2,809.58
H	£ 2,884.74	£ 486.76	£ 3,371.50

- b. That it be noted that for the year 2024/25 Hertfordshire Police Authority have stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and amended by Section 27 of the Police and Magistrates' Court Act 1994, for each of the categories of the dwellings shown below:

Valuation Bands

A	£ 167.33
B	£ 195.22
C	£ 223.11
D	£ 251.00
E	£ 306.78
F	£ 362.56
G	£ 418.33

H £ 502.00

5. That, having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at 3e. and 4a. and b. above, the Council in accordance with Section 30(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the following amounts as the amounts for council tax for the year 2024/25 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Valuation Bands

A	£1,450.67
B	£1,692.45
C	£1,934.24
D	£2,176.01
E	£2,659.57
F	£3,143.13
G	£3,626.68
H	£4,352.02

6. To determine in accordance with Section 52ZB Local Government Finance Act 1992 that the Council's basic amount of Council Tax for 2024/25 is not excessive in accordance with principles approved by the Secretary of State under Section 52ZC having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at 3e.
7. That the 2023/24 revised net expenditure for the General Fund of £13,571,480, as set out in Paragraph 4.10.1 of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be approved.
8. That the draft General Fund Budget for 2024/25 of £12,788,410, with no contribution from balances and a Band D Council Tax of £239.26 (assuming a 2.99% increase), and as summarised in Appendix G to the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be approved.
9. That the updated position on the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), as summarised in Section 4.12 of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be noted.
10. That the minimum level of General Fund reserves of £3,537,794, in line with the 2024/25 risk assessment of balances, as shown at Appendix C to the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be approved.
11. That the contingency sum of £400,000 within which the Executive can

approve supplementary estimates, be approved for 2024/25 (reflecting the level of balances available above the minimum amount).

12. That the 2024/25 Balancing the Budget options, as set out in Section 4.7 and Appendix A of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, totalling £1,223,852 and £95,603 for the General Fund and HRA respectively, be approved.
13. That the events options, as set out in Paragraph 4.7.4 of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be approved for 2024/25.
14. That the Growth options included in Section 4.8 of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be approved for inclusion in the 2024/25 General Fund (£167,120) and HRA (£47,625) budgets.
15. That the pressures identified in Sections 4.2 and 4.9 of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report be noted.
16. That the use of £200,000 of Business Rates in the base budget be approved, and that any gains secured above that sum be only used once realised and be ring fenced to maintain the Council's financial resilience.
17. That the use of the "pooling gains" of £220,000, as set out the Paragraph 4.4.9 of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be noted.
18. That the comments from Overview and Scrutiny, as set out in Section 4.16 of the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report, be noted.
19. That the Equalities Impact Assessment, appended to the General Fund and Council Tax Setting report in Appendix D, be noted.
20. That key partners and other stakeholders be consulted and their views considered as part of the 2024/25 General Fund budget setting process.
21. That the revised General Fund Capital Budget for 2024/25 of £33.6Million, as set out in Appendix B to the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
22. That the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Budget for 2024/25 of £54.9Million, as set out in Appendix C to the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
23. That the updated forecast of resources 2024/25, as detailed in Section 4.4 (General Fund) and Section 4.10 (HRA) of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
24. That the General Fund Capital Budget re-profiling of £2.6Million from 2023/24 to future years, as set out in Paragraph 4.1.4 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
25. That the General Fund Capital Budget savings, as set out in Paragraphs 4.1.3 and 4.1.5 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.

26. That the approach to resourcing the General Fund Capital Programme, as outlined in Paragraph 4.4 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
27. That the General Fund growth bids identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy, as set out in Paragraph and in Appendix A of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
28. That the HRA budget increases identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy, as set out in Section 4.9 and in Appendix C of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
29. That the approach to resourcing the HRA Fund Capital Programme, as outlined in Paragraph 4.10 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
30. That the HRA Capital Budget re-profiling of £1.45Million from 2023/24 to future years, as set out in Paragraph 4.9.3 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
31. That the HRA growth bid (IT - £21,000) identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy, as set out in Paragraph 4.9.4 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be approved.
32. That the 2024/25 de-minimis expenditure limit, as set out in section 4.11 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be increased from £7,500 to £9,999.
33. That up to £500,000 of any revenue surplus in any year can be allocated to the Capital reserve to support capital expenditure be approved.
34. That the comments from Overview and Scrutiny, as set out in Paragraph 4.13.4 of the Capital Strategy 2023/24 - 2028/29 report, be noted.

[*Recorded Vote on Substantive motion:

For – Councillors Myla Arceno, Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Stephen Booth, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Forhad Chowdhury, Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Mason Humberstone, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, Lin Martin-Haugh, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Baroness Taylor, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells and Tom Wren - 28

Against – Councillors Phil Bibby, Bret Facey, Alex Farquharson, Chris Howells, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence, Adam Mitchell and Margaret Notley - 8

Abstentions – 0

Not present – Councillors John Duncan, Mrs Joan Lloyd and Loraine Rossati – 3]

4 ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS 2024/25

The Council considered a report in respect of the Annual Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25, including its Annual Investment Strategy, Prudential Indicators and Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy following consideration by the Audit Committee and Executive.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 be approved.

5 RESOLUTION TO EXTEND 6 MONTH ATTENDANCE RULE - SECTION 85, LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

The Council considered a report in accordance with Section 85(1) of the Local Government Act 1972, to extend Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd's non-attendance at meetings of the Council until 2 May 2024 (the date of the Borough Council Elections).

The Chief Executive commented that he was sure that officers and Members would wish to send Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd their best wishes.

It was moved by Councillor Richard Henry, and seconded by Councillor Jeannette Thomas, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

Councillor Henry advised that there would be an opportunity for Members to pay tribute to Councillor Mrs Lloyd at the Annual Council meeting in May 2024.

Upon the motion being out to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that in accordance with Section 85(1) of the Local Government Act 1972, Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd's non-attendance at meetings of the Council until 2 May 2024 (the date of the Borough Council Elections) on the grounds of ill health be approved.

6 STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL CORPORATE PLAN - MAKING STEVENAGE EVEN BETTER (2024 - 2027)

The Council considered a report which sought approval of the Stevenage Borough Council Corporate Plan - Making Stevenage Even Better (2024-2027).

It was moved by Councillor Richard Henry, and seconded by Councillor Simon Speller, that the recommendation in the report be approved.

In moving the motion, Councillor Henry stated that the 'Making Stevenage Even Better' Corporate Plan outlined the Council's direction of travel for the next 3 years. It was informed by what residents had told the Council mattered to them, obtained through surveys conducted since 2021, and in which over 3,000 residents took part. The findings represented a strong local evidence base for change, and indicated a desire by residents to prioritise:

- Climate change and utilisation of green spaces;

- Provision and investment in good local services;
- Diversity of retail and investment in town centre and leisure facilities;
- Maintenance and appeal of local areas; and
- Community safety and prevention of crime.

Councillor Henry advised that the Council had listened to these views, and for the purposes of clarity and to provide a clear framework by which existing partnership commitments and programmes could be reflected, had categorised these areas into 5 strategic priorities and 3 cross cutting themes within the Corporate Plan, as follows:

Strategic Priorities

1. Transforming Our Town
2. More Social, Affordable and Good Quality Homes
3. Thriving Neighbourhoods
4. Tackling Climate Change
5. Balancing the Budget

Cross-cutting Themes

1. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion
2. Health & Wellbeing
3. Technology & Innovation

Councillor Henry referred to the formal public consultation carried out on the Corporate Plan in October 2023, and was pleased to report that the outcome showed a good level of support, with 69% of respondents indicating that the priorities were representative of what mattered to them. To build on the feedback obtained and to ensure the Council promoted its activities within the Plan, he was keen that the next 4 months were used to actively promote and communicate the plans, with accessible, compelling communications packages developed for each area of work.

Councillor Henry explained that Members would be working with officers to develop a robust performance framework for monitoring and transparency purposes. He added that over the next three years there would be difficult financial decisions, in order to balance the budget. However, effective communication, robust performance monitoring and a commitment to the outcomes and actions set out in the Corporate Plan would provide a solid direction of travel, which would aim to make Stevenage and even better place to live, work and visit.

Following debate, and upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that new Stevenage Borough Council Corporate Plan – Making Stevenage Even Better (2024-2027) be approved.

7 ELECTORAL SERVICES - SCALE OF FEES

The Council considered a report which sought approval to a scale of fees for electoral events from 1 April 2024.

The Chief Executive stated that, as Recommendation 2.5 in the report referred to the Returning Officer's fee, he would be withdrawing from the meeting for the remainder of this item. Accordingly, he withdrew from the meeting.

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

In moving the report, Councillor Henry drew attention to the point that, whilst Government guidance concerning the scale of fees for staff supporting elections remained in draft form, the Department for Levelling Up Communities and Housing (otherwise known as DLUH) had indicated that it would be applicable across Great Britain for all national polls from 2 May 2024 onwards, when the Police and Crime Commissioner elections would be held, which would be combined with the Borough Council all-out local elections. Therefore, this was the last opportunity for the scale of electoral fees to be considered by Council ahead of those elections taking place. He was sure that the shared desire across the Chamber would be for the Returning Officer to be able to employ the best possible team to run the elections whilst also meeting his statutory obligations.

In reply to a Member's question on the report, it was confirmed that Polling Station Inspectors were three senior officers who visited polling stations throughout the day on election days to check on the welfare of staff and to ensure that each station was set out correctly in accordance with legislation and guidance.

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

1. That the scale of fees for electoral events from 1 April 2024, as outlined in Appendix A to the report, be approved.
2. That the Chief Executive (as appointed Returning Officer) keeps the fees for electoral staff under review and be delegated authority to amend any of those fees following revised national guidance issued by Central Government.
3. That the Chief Executive be delegated authority to create additional roles for electoral events with attributable fees, as required.
4. That the Chief Executive be delegated authority to uplift any electoral staff fees as appropriate due to market forces or other factors (such as difficulty in recruiting staff).
5. That the Returning Officer's fee be uplifted each year following agreement of the JNC pay award for Chief Executives.

In closing the meeting, the Mayor announced that this would be the last Council meeting that she would be chairing throughout. She thanked everyone for their contributions to the meeting and throughout her time as Mayor.

MAYOR