

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 21 January 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair) (Chair), (Vice Chair), Myla Arceno, Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Anne Wells and Nigel Williams

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.02pm

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Lynda Guy.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 December 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **PART I DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee considered the following Part I Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 15 January 2025:

2. MINUTES - CABINET - 11 DECEMBER 2024

The Committee noted the Minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 11 December 2024.

3. GARAGES ASSET MANAGEMENT REPORT

The Committee considered the Council's Garages Asset Management Report. The Assistant Director (Stevenage Direct Services) advised the Committee that the purpose of the report was to outline plans for managing garage stock, focussed on repairs, contracts, and budgets. The Committee heard that the Cabinet had held discussions that highlighted the need for ongoing member involvement in monitoring progress.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

Members commented regarding the reduction in scope and budgeted spend compared to the previous garage asset management strategy. The shift from whole place renewal of garage sites to a more targeted approach was discussed. The Chief Financial Officer explained this change was largely due to financial constraints, with a focus on addressing key issues such as roof replacements and asbestos management while maintaining functionality. In addition, voids have significantly reduced since the approval of the first garage programme which had used projected increased income to fund borrowing by reducing void garage levels.

Members commented that the current strategy may serve as a "sticking plaster" rather than addressing long-term maintenance needs. The Chief Financial Officer confirmed that the strategy included funding for targeted repairs and other garage components but acknowledged the programme will need a refresh in a few years at a suitable time to assess future needs.

Members queried the management of asbestos works and suggested the use of a nominated subcontractor under the main contractor's supervision to reduce Council management requirements. The Chief Financial Officer clarified that the current approach was based on advice from the Council's property surveyor team.

Members raised questions about the projected cumulative income losses due to disrepair, as outlined in the report. The Chief Financial Officer explained that the figures represented estimates of potential losses if no investment was made, in this scenario income losses would increase annually as more garages would fall into disrepair.

4. COMMUNITY SAFETY STRATEGY 2025 – 28

The Head of Community Advice and Support informed Members that the report on the Community Safety Strategy 2025-28, which outlined the emerging priorities of the SoSafe Partnership for the next three years, had been considered by Cabinet without further amendments and was scheduled for review by full Council.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

5. LICENSING ACT 2003 - REVIEW OF STATEMENT OF LICENSING POLICY

The Interim Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) informed the Committee that the review, required every five years, outlined the Council's regulatory role and approach as the Licensing Authority. A new recommendation, introduced at the General Purposes Committee (4th December 2024), was included in the Cabinet report.

The Committee heard that the introduction of the Council as a "responsible authority" for enforcement was well received by Cabinet members.

The Interim Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) advised Members of the need to amend the constitution to grant the Head of Environmental Health and Licensing the necessary delegation for the responsible authority role.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

A Member questioned the use of rateable value for licence fee determination. The Head of Environmental Health & Licensing clarified that fees were set by regulations (unchanged since 2005) and could not reflect full cost recovery.

6. GAMBLING ACT 2005 - REVIEW OF STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

The Interim Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised the Committee that this statutory review, required every three years, focused on how the Council regulated gambling premises. The policy aimed to protect the most vulnerable in the community, ensuring robust measures are in place to address gambling harms and received support at the General Purposes Committee and Cabinet meetings.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

A Member highlighted unclear wording in section 3.13 of the report, suggesting redrafting for clarity.

Members questioned assumptions linking gambling harm with income levels. Officers clarified that the local area profile helped identify potential risks, with no specific evidence of significant gambling harms in Stevenage.

Members commented about gambling addiction observed in the community. Officers assured collaboration with the Gambling Harms Alliance and ongoing efforts to address harms through a new Gambling Harms Strategy introduced in January 2025.

7. CONSULTATION ON AN AMENDMENT TO TWO ARTICLE 4 DIRECTIONS TO REQUIRE CHANGES OF USE FROM CLASS E(G)(I) (OFFICES AND CLASS E(G)(III) (LIGHT INDUSTRIAL) TO CLASS C3 (RESIDENTIAL) TO OBTAIN PLANNING PERMISSION

The Interim Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised the Committee that Article 4 directions were used to remove permitted development rights, requiring developers to submit full planning applications rather than relying on prior approval processes. This ensured the Council could protect key employment areas, aligning with local policies, particularly as prior approvals did not account for those policies.

The Committee heard that the amendments aimed to align the Council's Article 4 directions with updated central government regulations and ensure they remained enforceable. This process required consultation and engagement with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The Interim Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised the Committee that Cabinet members had recognised the importance of mitigating the impact of developments on employment areas and supported the amendments.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

Members queried whether the amendments represented new powers for the Council. Officers clarified that the powers had existed for several years but required updates to reflect legislative changes, ensuring they remained enforceable, and the Council retained control over certain developments.

Members raised questions about potential Class E premises that could be converted to residential use. Officers noted that Class E was broad, covering shops, restaurants, and offices, with central government promoting deregulation to deliver more homes. However, implementing Article 4 directions required robust evidence, and many councils had faced challenges when attempting to apply those in town centres.

The Head of Planning Policy explained the robust evidence submitted in 2022 to justify the existing Article 4 directions, which had been reviewed and remained relevant. They confirmed that amendments were consistent with the latest regulations and that the Council was confident in its approach.

8. COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY (CIL): DRAFT CHARGING SCHEDULE – PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The Interim Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) provided an overview of the update to the Council's CIL Charging Schedule. The update aligns charges with inflation and new policies, including those related to climate change. Extensive viability testing has been conducted to ensure charges are reasonable and do not undermine the Local Plan. The second round of statutory consultation is set to commence, with the aim of submitting the schedule for examination alongside the Local Plan.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

Members queried whether considerations for setting the CIL rate were purely economic or incorporated other factors, such as climate change. Officers explained that viability testing accounted for development costs, including sustainability requirements, and balanced charges to avoid discouraging development. The process involved consultancy support and public documentation of findings.

Members commented about CIL income distribution, specifically the allocation of 15% to communities. The Chief Financial Officer confirmed that these allocations had happened and offered to circulate further information.

Members questioned the exclusion of specific premises from the town centre zone on the map. Officers clarified that the map aligned with the current Local Plan, which defined these areas as edge-of-centre, based on evidence from earlier consultations.

Members asked whether CIL charges varied by development size. Officers confirmed that charges were based on gross floor area, with thresholds for exemptions (e.g., affordable housing). They confirmed that developers were legally

required to pay.

Members queried the differing rates for sheltered housing versus extra care housing. Officers explained that rates were set following viability testing and population forecasts. It was determined that the rates would not hinder future development.

Members further explored how increased affordable housing provision impacted CIL income. Officers acknowledged the logical connection but emphasised the Council's commitment to delivering affordable housing.

Members questioned how the public consultation would be conducted. Officers outlined the approach, including notifications to stakeholders, social media announcements, and hard copies of documents being made available. They confirmed that the methods mirrored those used in the first consultation round, adhering to the Council's Statement of Community Involvement.

9. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) - FINAL BUDGET AND RENT SETTING 2025/26

The Chief Financial Officer introduced the updated HRA report, noting updates based on scrutiny comments and pressure on repairs quantified for 2024/25 and 2025/26.

The Committee heard that, to address increased costs, borrowing had been utilised instead of a £5 million revenue contribution to capital, adding an annual cost of approximately £280,000.

The Chief Financial Officer advised the Committee that the report included a statement acknowledging risks to the HRA.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

10. DRAFT GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2025/26

The Chief Financial Officer presented the draft report, updating members on budget shortfalls.

The Committee heard that the report proposed a council tax increase of 2.99% and that the updated budget avoided service cuts for 2025/26.

Cabinet had agreed all recommendations set out in the report.

Members commented about council tax reductions for disabled groups asking questions relating to:

- Application deadlines relative to the start of the council tax year.
- Eligibility requirements for disability-related discounts.
- Backdating of discounts for late applications.

The Chief Financial Officer clarified that discounts were generally backdated based on proven financial circumstances and offered to provide a detailed note from the

Revenues and Benefits team. They also highlighted support available for vulnerable residents to complete applications.

Members asked about the proposed council tax increase of 2.99% versus the MTFs assumption of 1.99%. The Chief Financial Officer explained that the additional 1% made a contribution to the General Fund's savings target and this helped avoiding service reductions. The CFO also identified that in previous year's increases had been below inflation rises. The CFO acknowledged that savings were required for 2026/27 onwards and plans for potential savings were under review for future years but emphasised the importance of balancing the medium-term financial position.

Members praised the reintroduction of the Graduate and Apprenticeship Scheme. The Chief Financial Officer explained its funding through business rate gains, addressing recruitment challenges for hard-to-fill roles.

Members enquired about preceptors' council tax increases. The Chief Financial Officer noted that preceptors had not yet finalised their precepts but provided preliminary figures, including a likely £14 increase on a Band D property for the Police and Crime Commissioner and for the County Council 5%.

11. DRAFT CAPITAL STRATEGY 2024/25-2029/30

The Assistant Director (Finance) presented the draft Capital Strategy.

The Committee heard that the proposed 2025/26 capital programme for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and General Fund was based on the draft budget report from December.

The Committee were informed that updates would be incorporated into the final capital programme for February, reflecting changes presented earlier in the meeting.

The Assistant Director (Finance) informed the Committee that, for the General Fund, £2.6 million in new proposed schemes had been reviewed by officers and members and would be recommended for Council approval in February.

12. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

The Committee noted that there had been no Urgent Part I Business.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part I Decisions of the Cabinet be noted.

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

There were no Urgent Part I Decisions Authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

It was **RESOLVED** that:

1. That 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 involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.
2. That Members consider the reasons for the following reports being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

7 **PART II MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 17 December be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

8 **PART II DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee noted that the only Part II Business at the Cabinet meeting held on 15 January 2025 was the minutes of the previous Cabinet meeting.

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

There were no Urgent Part II Decisions Authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

10 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

CHAIR