

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 22 January 2025

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: (Chair), (Vice Chair), Myla Arceno, Julie Ashley-Wren, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Robert Boyle, Leanne Brady, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Kamal Choudhury, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Coleen De Freitas, Lin Martin-Haugh, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater CC, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Loraine Rossati, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells, Nigel Williams, Jade Woods and Tom Wren

Start / End Start Time: 7.00pm
Time: End Time: 8.50pm

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

Apologies for Absence were received on behalf of Councillors Sandra Barr, Nazmin Chowdhury, Akin Elokolusi, Robin Parker CC and Tom Wren.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 18 DECEMBER 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 18 December 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

3 **MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS**

The Mayor spoke of the recent sad death of former Councillor, Alderman David Cullen. David had been a Stevenage Borough Councillor for over 36 years and an Alderman for the past 3 years. The Mayor said that David would be remembered for his contribution to the Council and the Town, particularly in his role as Chair of the Planning and Development Committee and Overview and Scrutiny Committee. David's funeral service would be held at St Hilda's Church on Wednesday 5 February followed by refreshments at The Poacher Pub on Bedwell Crescent.

The Leader of the Council spoke of David's outstanding contributions to Stevenage which had resulted in the title of Honorary Alderman being awarded in 2021. He remembered David's political passion and knowledge of political history.

Councillor Stephen Booth, Leader of the Opposition and the Lib Dem Group recalled

David as a formidable opponent with a fine record for the Council.

Councillor Phil Bibby advised that David was also highly thought of by the County Council and sent condolences to his family.

Councillor Simon Speller said that David was a sharp, intelligent councillor but approachable and easy to work with particularly in his role as Chair of the Planning and Development Committee, as well as a passionate follower of Stevenage Borough Football Club.

A number of other Members spoke in tribute to Alderman Cullen following which the Council stood to observe a minute's silence.

The Mayor then referred to a list of events he had supported since the last Council meeting on 18 December which had been circulated at the meeting. He gave particular thanks to Hilary Spiers at the Arts Guild who was helping to organise a number of his upcoming events.

4 COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

There was no community presentation.

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

There were no questions from the Public.

8 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Stephen Booth, asked the following question: Does the Leader of the Council agree that the Council should be fitting solar panels to all new Council homes as standard and run a programme to retrofit all Council homes with solar panels. Would he also agree to join the campaign with the Liberal Democrat Group to get developers to fit solar panels as a standard feature for all new houses?

The Leader of the Council said that the Council was working hard to meet the net zero targets. He would ensure that Councillor Booth received a written response in relation to the specific issue of solar panel installation.

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

- Build a Better Bedwell;
- Stevenage Green Business Grants;
- Simpler Recycling;
- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF);
- Older People/Age Friendly Communities;
- Stevenage Works Update;
- Severe Weather Emergency Protocol;
- Budget Consultation;
- Regeneration of the Town Centre.

9 **UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS**

Councillor Lin Martin-Haugh, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee advised that at its December meeting, the Committee had considered the following issues:

- Corporate Performance – Quarter 2 2024/25
- Council Tax Base 2025/26
- Housing Revenue Account (HRA) – Draft Budget and Rent Setting 2025/26
- Housing Inspection Outcome
- Repairs and Maintenance Policy – Approval
- Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy

Members asked several questions on the Repairs and Maintenance Policy particularly around the clarity of the consultation process and how it would be communicated with the public. Members highlighted the need to produce a simplified version of the policy to increase accessibility for tenants, particularly those with complex needs. Members had also stressed the importance of identifying and supporting vulnerable tenants.

Regarding the Homelessness and Rough Sleepers Strategy, Members commended the Rough Sleeper Team for their hard work and dedication in addressing homelessness and complex cases within Stevenage.

The meeting held on 21 January considered the decisions of the Cabinet held on 15 January which included:

- Garages Asset Management Report
- Community Safety Strategy 2025 – 28
- Licensing Act 2003 - Review of Statement of Licensing Policy
- Gambling Act 2005 - Review of Statement of Principles
- Consultation on an amendment to two article 4 directions
- Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL): draft charging schedule – public consultation
- Housing Revenue Account (HRA) - Final Budget and Rent Setting 2025/26
- Draft General Fund and Council Tax Setting 2025/26
- Draft Capital Strategy 2024/25-2029/30

Members asked a number of questions regarding these items.

The Chair of the Community Select Committee gave an update on the work of the Committee. A presentation had been received from Officers regarding the Council's work with regards to its Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and had direct guest speaker input from the Chair of the Equalities Commission Legacy Group, Errol John and the Chair of Stevenage World Forum, Kate Belinis regarding race equality, John Preamble from Junction 7 Creatives and Coco Brinda representing local LGBTQ+ community.

The Chair advised that Committee would be continuing its work on this theme with a meeting on 29 January focusing on Age and Disability.

The Chair of the Environment and Economy Select Committee updated the Council on a meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held in December. The Committee heard from the Council's CEO, Matt Partridge regarding his role as the District and Borough Council Step2Skills Board Member. The Committee also considered its draft report and recommendations relating to the Skills Agenda review.

The Chair then updated the Council on a meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held in January 2025. The Committee had considered the final report and recommendations of the Skills Agenda Review, building on the great work that the Council was doing through its Stevenage Works Programme, Skills Framework and activities with partners in this area.

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NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Local Government Devolution

Councillor Richard Henry moved and Councillor Ceara Roopchand seconded the following motion:

'Labour councils and councillors across the East of England have, for years, been a beacon of hope in contrast to a disastrous and divisive Conservative Government.

Labour Councils have protected key services and delivered for residents' time and time again despite the difficult financial circumstances.

It is exciting to now have a Labour Government working with us hand in hand.

However Council does not underestimate the scale of the challenges ahead. The Conservative government left the NHS, Local Government and the economy in ruin, and it will take time to rebuild the foundations in the East and across the country.

Council resolves to:

1. Recognise the benefits of working with our new Government to fulfil its vital commitment of devolving power into the hands of local communities and;
2. Resolves to agree to play its part in supporting the Government in delivering on its mission to realise genuine devolution to councils across the East of

England thereby supporting and empowering our residents and businesses.’

In moving the Motion, Councillor Richard Henry highlighted his passion for Stevenage, being ambitious for its communities and noted that the Council would fight for the very best outcome for the town. Meetings and briefings across the County had been held and would continue over the next few weeks. He advised that the Government was determined in its view to deliver devolution and local government reform. He advised that having more powers in the areas of adult skills/travel to work and more money for affordable homes was to be welcomed and would be a positive outcome for Stevenage.

Cllr Henry informed Council that it would take some time for all partners to consider the best options for Hertfordshire to become a Mayoral level authority. He confirmed that the earlier announcement from the County Council Leader that a single Unitary Council was his preferred option was not supported by any of the District Leaders in Hertfordshire.

It was noted that further information was expected imminently from the Minister on the detail of what the Government would be asking of local Councils. A County level working party made up of all Council Leaders and the Police and Crime Commissioner had been convened to gather the data necessary to inform options for submission to the Government by the end of March 2025.

Cllr Henry concluded by confirming that his priority would be to make sure any proposals put the needs of Stevenage first.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Roopchand advised that the devolution proposals were a unique opportunity to shape the future of Stevenage and help to provide solutions to challenges. Services such as Health Care and Education would be able to be tailored to better suit the needs of the community. Residents would have more involvement in decisions affecting their daily lives as there would be stronger ownership and responsibility. There would also be opportunities to boost the local economy and the local infrastructure.

Councillor Booth, Leader of the Opposition stated that the Government's plans for devolution and reform had no guarantees that powers would be devolved locally and, in his view, the reason this was being proposed was to save money. He suggested that it would have been more useful if a campaign for electoral reform rather than local government reform was the concern for the government.

Councillor Bibby stated that a devolution package was needed but was concerned about the potential and associated impacts of the County being broken up. In his opinion, a single Unitary Council would provide all services cutting out public confusion regarding responsibility.

Councillor McGuinness stated that he did not doubt the Leader's commitment to the Town but the proposals from this Government would take the powers away from local Councils and voting for this motion would be a vote for the dissolution of Stevenage Borough Council.

Councillor Speller advised that although he had concerns around neighbourhood governance and the distance between the service suppliers and the public, there were benefits of economies of scale for services such as recycling and refuse, housing and social care, workforce skills and Town and Country Planning.

Upon being put to the vote, the Motion was carried.

11 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO CHAIRS/PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

The Council received a question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren regarding pavements and footpaths. The response to the question had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Supplementary Question: What plans does the Council have to address the issue of pavement parking in the Old Town part?

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance agreed that there were issues of pavement obstruction in the Old Town and design solutions did exist to help but that he would be happy to meet with any Members with concerns about specific areas.

The Council received a question from Councillor Andy McGuinness regarding Local Community Budgets. The response to the question had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Supplementary Question: What consideration has been made to ensure that a further increase of locality budgets and ensure the power to spend the budgets remained in the hands of local communities in conjunction with the neighbourhood teams?

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Communities and Neighbourhoods the Leader of the Council advised that if possible and a greater Government settlement was awarded, he would like to look at the levels of LCB funding as he valued the local spending the budgets allowed. The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance agreed that an increase would be welcomed but that Councillors should be encouraged to identify ward priorities and use the money in conjunction with the Climate Change Community Fund and where possible the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to make a difference in those areas.

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

The Council considered a report seeking approval to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Rent Setting for 2025/26.

In moving the motion, Councillor Jeannette Thomas, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources and Transformation advised that the aim of the budget was to balance the Council's money with the needs of the existing housing stock, while allowing investment in new homes to replace those lost under the Right to Buy system. There was also an ongoing need to provide homes for residents on the

council home waiting list.

She advised that the budget included funding of £39Million for revenue and capital works to existing council homes and £28Million of investment to enable the delivery of new social and affordable homes. This was part of the ongoing plan over the next ten years to improve the maintenance of council homes, to ensure that tenants had the good quality, safe and sustainable homes they deserved.

The report set out the requirements for revenue growth for 2025/26 HRA totalling £4.8 Million. The biggest area of growth was on responsive repairs, where the budget had been increased by over £2Million in response to increased demand for repairs and much higher costs. Work was ongoing to contain this budget pressure, but nationally social housing providers had all been reporting much higher costs for repairs and maintenance partly due to an increase in service demand and additional regulatory burdens.

Council noted the continuing improvements to the Council's Void Property Service, and a further budget of £704,000 which had been allocated to introduce an in-house team, to improve performance and the void turn-around time.

The Portfolio Holder informed Council that the local authority housing sector had come under increased regulation in recent years and that it was important to have the resources in place to meet those demands, manage the process and improve areas such as data quality, resident engagement and digital services.

The portfolio Holder advised that the medium term forecasts for the HRA showed that significant savings would have to be made in the coming years in order to balance the fund. To help achieve those savings a further £200,000 had been added to next year's budget to help identify and implement the major savings required.

Rental income provided the main source of funding for the HRA and it was recommended that rents should be increased by 2.7% for 2025/26, in line with the Government's rent setting guidelines of September CPI figure plus 1%. This would increase average weekly rents by £3.21 for social rents, £3.94 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes and £5.02 for affordable rents. The net rental income increase for 2025/26 was estimated to be £1.9Million which would take into account the likely impact of future right to buys, the timing of new stock coming on stream and properties taken out of management that were awaiting redevelopment.

It was noted that for homes that had service charges, these would not be subject to the rental increase of 2.7% but were based on actual cost of the services provided. Of the 2,757 properties that received service charges, 68% would see an increase of less than 50p per week. The remaining properties would receive higher increases, due to utility cost increases which were still projected to be higher than general inflation.

Lastly, the Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the cost to deliver services next year would result in a deficit for the year of £668,000 which would be funded from balances.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Jackie Hollywell, Portfolio Holder for Housing advised that housing continued to be a top priority for the Council, as evidenced through the recent housing inspection where a C2 regulatory judgement from the Regulator for Social Housing had been awarded.

Key priorities included maintaining full compliance with all statutory and regulatory requirements to ensure tenants' homes remained safe and complied with the requirements of the Social Housing Regulations Act, Building Safety Act and the Fire Safety Act.

It was noted that the Council's decent homes programme, would include installation of 1,316 new kitchens and bathrooms, 3,936 heating upgrades, 1,014 window or door upgrades and 500 properties would receive works to improve energy efficiency.

The 2025/26 budget would contribute towards the delivery of 341 new Council homes over the next 5 years in addition to the 497 new homes the council had already delivered to date.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing confirmed that the Chief Finance Officer was content with the projected level of balances, and that the budget proposed was robust, noting though that, for future years, the allocation of resources would be prioritised and service-related savings identified to reflect the level of funding available.

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

1. That 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. The 2024/25 service charges be approved as set out in paragraph 4.2.
3. That the HRA budget for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix A and as revised from the January 2024 draft budget report (as set out in para. 4.8.1) be approved.
4. The 2024/25 growth options as set out in section 4.4 be approved.
5. That the 2024/25 Fees and Charges as set out in Appendix B be approved.
6. That the minimum levels of balances for 2024/25 as shown in Appendix C be approved.
7. That the Rent Increase Equalities Impact Assessments appended to this report in Appendix D be noted.
8. That the contingency sum of £400K, within which the Cabinet can approve supplementary estimates, for 2024/25 (unchanged from 2023/24) be approved.
9. That the comments from Overview and Scrutiny 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 **AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 27 November 2024 were received.

14 **APPOINTMENT OF CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

The Council considered a report in respect of the appointment to the post of Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service, Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer upon the recommendation of the Appointments Committee.

In moving the report, Councillor Richard Henry advised that following the extended notice given by the current Chief Executive Matt Partridge the appointments process had been undertaken and would allow a seamless transition to the post of Chief Executive. The Leader placed on record his sincere thanks to Matt for his dedicated and outstanding service as Chief Executive since his appointment to the role in 2019. He thanked Matt for his support and advice particularly since taking up his role as Leader of the Council 2 years ago.

Council was advised that following a comprehensive and robust appointments process he was pleased to recommend to Council the appointment of Dr Thomas Pike to the role. Tom would bring a wealth of experience and skills to the role and he had already demonstrated considerable strategic vision and operational excellence and commitment to public service.

In seconding the report Councillor Jeannette Thomas also thanked Matt Partridge for his work and support to her and reiterated the robustness of the appointments process.

A number of Members spoke and gave thanks to Matt Partridge for his work and commitment in his role as Chief Executive and also congratulated Tom Pike for his appointment.

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

1. The appointment of Thomas Pike be approved, with effect from 14 April 2025 as:

Chief Executive
Head of the Paid Service
Returning Officer
Electoral Registration Officer and

2. Thomas Pike be appointed to the Chief Executive Salary range of £145000-£165000

15 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Not required.

CHAIR