

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Monday, 25 November 2019

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: **Councillors:** Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Sandra Barr, Jim Brown, Laurie Chester, Michael Downing, Michelle Gardner, Andy McGuinness, John Mead, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Robin Parker CC and Claire Parris

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 8.10pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sarah-Jane McDonough. Councillor Phil Bibby apologised for lateness.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 15 OCTOBER 2019

With regard to Future Town Future Transport, the Strategic Director (TP) informed the Committee that officers would provide a briefing note on the status of cycleways in Stevenage.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 15 October 2019 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Committee considered the decisions of the following matters arising from the Executive held on 20 November 2019.

Minutes of the Executive – 20 November 2019

Noted.

Minutes of the Overview & Scrutiny and Select Committees

Noted.

Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy

The Assistant Director (Housing & Investment) presented a revised Homelessness Strategy for 2019-2024. The strategy's four priorities would be met through an Action Plan. The Strategy had been revised in line with additional powers and duties introduced by Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA 17) and requirements of Housing Act 1996.

The introduction of HRA 17 had seen an increase in the number of customers seeking homelessness advice and an increase in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. The Committee were informed that Housing & Investment officers were working with Housing Development and other Council services regarding market acquisitions and a purpose-built hostel to reduce the use of temporary accommodation. The Council was looking at adopting the "Finland"/ (Housing First) Model of providing homes to homeless people without imposing a condition that they engage in services for addictions or mental health. This model had been piloted in Manchester and local authorities in Hertfordshire.

Members welcomed the Strategy and recommended that former homeless customers be supported to tackle addiction and other underlining causes of homelessness and to learn new skills or get into training, education or work. It was reported that some customers were turning to food banks and convenience food outlets due to the lack of kitchen utensils in temporary and emergency accommodation properties.

In response to questions, the Assistant Director informed Members that:

- Support arrangements for the homeless will be added to the Action Plan
- The HMAB would receive quarterly reports and an annual report on the Homelessness Action Plan
- The Council has a duty to provide kitchen utensils in Emergency accommodation although efforts will be made to support those who do not have these items when they are in Temporary Accommodation
- Benefits of the Homelessness Strategy included a dedicated rough-sleeper worker and an action plan for performance monitoring
- Personalised homelessness plan was one of the requirements of HRA 17

Members sought clarification on partnership working arrangements and the spike in the number of households placed in temporary accommodation between 2014/15 and 2015/16.

Council Tax Support Scheme

The Committee received an update on the proposed Council Tax Support Scheme for 2020/21. The proposals had previously been discussed by the committee in a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group setting. The Assistant Director (Finance & Estates) stated that efforts were directed at the software supplier to design and introduce reliable and accurate automation of Universal Credit change notices.

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2019/20 Mid-Year Treasury Management Review

The Assistant Director (Finance & Estates) updated Members on the Treasury Management activities in 2019/20 and review effectiveness of the 2019/20 Treasury Management and Investment Strategy. The AD provided clarification on the cash balances. Members welcomed the improved chart of cash balances.

Second Quarter Revenue Monitoring Report 2019/20 – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

The Committee received an update on the Second Quarter Revenue Monitoring Report 2019/20. The Assistance Director advised that the General Fund net increase to the working budget was £25,000. She highlighted the significant increase in Bed and Breakfast costs arising from the Homeless service related Bed and Breakfast and the fuel cost saving being lower than anticipated in the 2019/20 savings option. These pressures had been mitigated mainly from the release of £159,000 from the Regeneration Asset Reserve and the Insurance provision of £131,000.

The 2019/20 HRA net deficit had reduced by £89,000 and the most significant variances were from rents. These variances were mitigated by the Business Unit restructuring and release of some of the insurance provision. A review into the Council's Voids Procedures had been scheduled.

In relation to paragraph 4.2.2 of the report, Officers were advised that the nearby housing scheme in East Hertfordshire was known as the "Gresley Park" development.

Second Quarter Capital Monitoring Report 2019/20 - General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

Members received an update on the Council's 2019/20 capital programme. The update highlighted the 2019/20 General Fund Capital Programme, Capital Resources General Fund, 2019/20 Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme and Capital Resources Housing Revenue Account. The Assistant Director (Finance and Estates) informed the Committee that the Council was looking at ways of mitigating the impact of Right To Buy (RTB) discounts. Subject to the government's response to the consultation on RTB sales, the Council could end up returning a proportion of the receipts to central government.

In response to questions, the Assistant Director stated that:

- In view of the recently announced increase in the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) rate, local authorities were considering other borrowing options including inter-authority lending facilities and municipal bonds
- The Council had sought legal advice on property investment opportunities outside the Borough

With regard to the latest award of Local Growth Funding (GD3), the Strategic Director informed the Committee that GD3 funds had not yet been released. Local partners had written to government to confirm that they would meet all the conditions set out by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. These conditions included working with the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and other stakeholders to create a new, independent, unincorporated partnership body to oversee the town centre regeneration. The LEP was awaiting the Secretary of State's approval to implement the governance arrangements, appoint an independent Chair and utilise the funds on specific projects including the new Bus Interchange. The delay in the release of the funds does present challenges to the programme but the Council had a commitment to put together plans to utilise the funds before the March 2021 spend timeframe.

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

None.

5 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

The Strategic Director (TP) updated the Committee on progress regarding the Towns Deal Fund, development of a Towns Deal Board and Investment Plan. Stevenage was one of the towns across England that had been invited to work with the government to develop innovative regeneration plans. A prospectus for the Towns Deal was published in November 2019. The prospectus explained how towns can prepare for a Towns Deal and it outlined requirements such as the setting up of Towns Deal Boards and investment priorities and project proposals set out in a locally-owned Town Investment Plan. It was confirmed that district and borough councils would have oversight of governance arrangements. Local authorities had the flexibility to identify projects in their areas of responsibility.

The Strategic Director assured Members that Towns Deal Board members would have a duty to avoid conflict of interest. Board members would be expected to adhere to the Nolan Principles of Public Life and a Code of Conduct. There would be an expectation for the Board to disclose interest on any matter and for others to call out suspected conflicts of interest. The Strategic Director indicated that the Towns Deal Board would have an advisory and not executive function.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

It was **RESOLVED**:

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 involved 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 DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered Financial Security Options for 2020/21 - 2022/23.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Financial Security Options 2019/20 – 2021/22 Part II decisions of the Executive be noted.

8 **URGENT PART II DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

None.

9 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR