

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 13 May 2020

Time: 2.00pm

Place: Virtual (via Zoom)

Present: Councillors: Sharon Taylor OBE CC (Chair), Mrs Joan Lloyd (Vice-Chair), Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, John Gardner, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell and Jeannette Thomas.

Also Present: Councillors Phil Bibby CC and Robin Parker CC (observers).

Start / End Time: Start Time: 2.00pm
End Time: 4.51pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

An apology for lateness was received from Councillor Robin Parker (observer). He joined the meeting at 4.00pm.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 11 MARCH 2020

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 11 March 2020 be approved as correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES

In respect of the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 4 March 2020, which involved a public health discussion, the Leader asked that the Council's thanks be conveyed to the HCC Director of Public Health for his excellent work in heading up the County Local Resilience Forum throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

In relation to the Minutes of the meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 10 March 2020, a Member thanked officers for progressing a number of the environmental projects in the St. Nicholas Ward. The Leader suggested that, once the lockdown restrictions were relaxed, Select Committee Members should visit the recently expanded Symonds Green Community Centre.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the following meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees be noted –

Community Select Committee – 4 March 2020

4 CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) UPDATE REPORT

The Executive considered a Coronavirus (Covid-19) update report.

The Leader of the Council introduced the report, including thanks to Key Workers and SBC staff working during the pandemic, and passed over to Portfolio Holders, the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors to go through the report section by section.

The Executive was advised that the report provided a brief introduction about COVID-19, referencing the first reports of this deadly virus in Wuhan at the end of last year. It then outlined the UK Government's response to the crisis in terms of measures it had taken to try to stop the spread of the virus and the financial assistance to help businesses, individuals and households affected as a result of COVID-19. The graphs in Sections 3.4 to 3.7 of the report reflected cases and, sadly, deaths due to COVID-19 nationally and more locally in Hertfordshire and Stevenage. The report then outlined the role and key priorities of the Hertfordshire Resilience Forum in dealing with the worst public health crisis in a century.

The report provided information on the Council's emergency response arrangements, how these fitted into the Local Resilience Forum's response structure, and then highlighted the main actions and achievements of the eight SBC response cells which had been set up to deal with the crisis.

The Leader invited the Executive Portfolio Holders to summarise the work forming part of their portfolio areas which had been carried out by the SBC response cells. As part of these summaries, Portfolio Holders acknowledged and thanked all staff involved in the work of the cells and on the frontline over the past two months.

Attention was drawn to Section 4.11 of the report, which provided a summary of the key decisions which had been taken to ensure the health and safety of staff, residents and those who visited the town and to comply with the new 'coronavirus' legislation which had been brought in by the Government to deal with the crisis. The Executive was asked to note and endorse these key decisions which, due to the necessary speed of decision taking at the time, could not be taken in accordance with normal approval processes.

The report included a proposed approach to preparing a recovery plan for Stevenage, and addressed both the recovery arrangements that would be needed to support the town and the actions needed to restore and recover Council operations.

The financial implications section of the report highlighted the significant financial impact on the Council's income, expenditure and cash flow, and recommended that officers carry out a review of the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Strategies for consideration by the Executive at its June 2020 meeting.

The replies to questions/Member comments included:

- The Leader and fellow Local Government officials (through the LGA and DCN) were having unprecedented access to Government Ministers during the pandemic, enabling direct feedback of issues being encountered at County and District/Borough level;
- The impact had been severe on the leisure/arts/culture sector. The DCN were asking for the Secretary of State for DCMS (Oliver Dowden MP) or another senior figure to take part in future teleconferences to discuss support for the sector;
- The Leader would be giving evidence to an all-party Parliamentary Committee on District/Borough Councils;
- It was clarified that the number of Covid-19 related deaths shown in the ONS Ward breakdown table at Paragraph 3.7.4 of the report (16) referred to the number of deaths in hospital;
- The Strategic Director (RP) would clarify how the Wards stated in the report aligned with the actual boundaries of Stevenage Wards;
- Although it was important to receive accurate statistical information going forward, it was acknowledged that there was no guarantee that the ONS statistics would provide Ward level information;
- The East & North Hertfordshire (ENH) Health Trust had previously reported that 260 individuals admitted to their hospitals with Covid-19 symptoms had recovered and been discharged. This figure was likely to be higher now;
- The Leader commented that at no time during the pandemic had the Lister Hospital been overwhelmed. She asked that the Council's thanks be conveyed to the Chief Executive of the ENH Health Trust and his Team for their sterling work over the past two months;
- It was noted that the Government's Job Retention Scheme had been extended to October 2020, with businesses anticipated to be asked to provide a higher contribution to staff wages;
- There were DWP delays in processing Universal Credit applications, which had a knock-on effect of SBC rent arrears;
- The impact of Council Tax support payments from the Hardship Fund had yet to be fully realised;
- SBC had given business rate relief of over £20Million to local companies and over £10Million to businesses eligible for Government support grants;
- Operation Shield had been well-intentioned by the Government, but would have been more effective if food/essentials packages had been co-ordinated locally (as had happened at SBC with Stevenage Helps);
- The Leader was delighted with the public messages of thanks provided to the SBC's Refuse & Recycling Teams and other front line teams for continuing to operate throughout the pandemic;
- Work was continuing with the Youth Mayor and Youth Council to support young people with mental health issues during the lockdown;
- SBC had a net annual budget of £9Million. A worse-case scenario forecast had revealed that SBC income losses/increased costs for 2020/21 could be over £11Million. Work had commenced on a review of the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Strategies. The Leader stated that the Council would do all it could to avoid having to make any cuts to

jobs and services, but noted that the Council was not lawfully allowed to run a deficit budget. In common with other local authorities across the UK, the Council would struggle to bridge this financial deficit unless an appropriate level of further Government support funding was forthcoming;

- Urgent Key Decision No. 11 – Suspension of highway verge maintenance etc. – the situation had moved on, and this service was now operational;
- The Chief Executive would work with colleagues and partners to start populating the draft Recovery Plans with a view to sharing first drafts of both the SBC and Town plans with Members at the June 2020 Executive meeting;
- Members considered that, following on from recent discussions concerning the Future Town Future Council objectives for 2020/21, key pieces of work (such as Climate Change work) would be continuing alongside the recovery work;
- The first Hertfordshire Climate Change & Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP) meeting was due to take place on 14 May 2020 and would start to look at high level interventions, including energy companies and affordable public transport opportunities;
- The Leader implored any residents who were struggling to meet Council Tax/rent payments to contact the Council to discuss possible alternative payment arrangements;
- Once clarity was received over the recent national relaxation of the lockdown restrictions, the Leader further implored the Government to introduce a stable funding platform for Local Government going forward;
- Additional measures were being investigated regarding social distancing in the Town Centre, and the car parks associated with Parks/open spaces had been re-opened following the Government’s latest announcement regarding the easing of lockdown restrictions;
- The Strategic Director (TP) undertook to contact GTR to ascertain the expected increased demand for train usage at Stevenage Railway Station following the easing of lockdown restrictions; and
- Officers were asked to issue clear communications to residents regarding the easing of the lockdown restrictions, in particular the relaxation of the stay at home provisions, with clarification that they would continue for identified vulnerable/shielded groups.

The Executive supported the Leader’s proposed addition to Recommendation 2.4 of the report, in order to record the significant pressures on the Council’s budget if the Government did not meet its promise to fund the shortfall being predicted and set out in the report.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the current position and the Council’s emergency response to date be noted.
2. That the Officer Key Decisions which have been taken in response to the COVID-19 emergency, as set out in Paragraph 4.11.2 in the report, be noted and endorsed.
3. That the recovery phase approach, as set out in Section 4.13 of the report, be approved.

4. That the Executive records the significant pressures on the Council's budget if the Government does not meet its promise to fund the shortfall being predicted and set out in the report, and that officers be requested to undertake a review of the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Strategies and report back to the June 2020 Executive meeting.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report; and 4. To highlight the significant pressures on the Council's budget.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

Pinelodge Care Home

The Chief Executive reported that the Council had learned, via the media, that between 11 April 2020 and 30 April 2020, there had been 20 Covid-19 related deaths in Pinelodge Care Home (a 120 bed home, located in Graveley Road, Stevenage).

The Executive was concerned that, notwithstanding that this Care Home was located just over the Borough boundary in North Hertfordshire, the Council had first learnt of the above situation via the local media. The Chief Executive would raise this matter with the HCC Director of Adult Care Services.

The Leader wished to record the Council's condolences to the families and friends of the deceased.

6 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Not required.

7 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR