

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 14 October 2020

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Virtual (via Zoom)

Present: Councillors: Jim Brown (Mayor), Michelle Gardner (Deputy Mayor), Doug Bainbridge, Sandra Barr, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Adrian Brown, Teresa Callaghan, Laurie Chester, David Cullen, Alex Farquharson, John Gardner, Jody Hanafin, Liz Harrington, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Lizzy Kelly, Graham Lawrence, Mrs Joan Lloyd, John Lloyd, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, Lin Martin-Haugh, John Mead, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Margaret Notley, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Sharon Taylor OBE CC, Jeannette Thomas and Tom Wren

Start / End Start Time: 7.00pm
Time: End Time: 9.55pm

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

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillor Michael Downing.

There were no declarations of interest.

At this juncture, the Mayor advised that he would be taking the Motion concerning Local Government Reorganisation shown at item 10, as Main Debate (item 4) and item 12 (Change to Standing Orders - Voting at Council Meetings) as the first item.

2 **MINUTES - 15 JULY 2020**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 15 July 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS**

The Mayor informed Members that the October Council meeting coincided with Local Democracy Week and Black History Month. A small ceremony to mark the 125th anniversary of an elected Council in Stevenage was due to be held on 23 October 2020. The Mayor reported that the Stevenage Helps appeal by Stevenage Community Trust had raised £63,399.26. With the help of Stevenage Community Trust, a fundraising site for the Mayor's three charities had been set up.

Since the last Council meeting, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor had been involved in a number of activities including:

- Visits to Knebworth House
- Re-opening of Stevenage Arts and Leisure Centre
- Handing out face masks
- Summer Play Roadshow
- Virtual Special Constable attestation
- Cycling Festival photocall and other cycling-related events
- VJ Day events
- Unveiling underpass artwork
- Public health webinar
- Re-opening of St Nicholas Church
- Filming landmarks of Stevenage
- Visiting Forgotten Soldiers Exhibition at Stevenage Museum
- Electric vehicle charging points photocall

The Mayor concluded by stating that while the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions were continuing to impact the role of the mayoral team, the Mayor and Deputy Mayor would be happy to support local organisations at small group or virtual events.

4 **MAIN DEBATE**

There was no Main Debate.

5 **PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS**

There were no petitions and deputations.

6 **QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL**

There were no questions from the Youth Council.

The Youth Mayor (Alissa Crew) apologised on behalf of the Youth Council for not submitting questions. The Youth Mayor outlined why no questions had been submitted on this occasion.

7 **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

The Council received one question from a member of the public relating to maintenance of the cycleway network. The response to the question had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting. The questioner (Jill Borchers) was present in the meeting, and asked the following supplementary question:

“Would it be possible for the Council to set up a meeting with Cycling UK Stevenage group to discuss cycling matters relating to Town Centre Regeneration?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration agreed to meet the cycling group. Arrangements for the meeting would be provided after consultation with officers. Councillor John Gardner indicated that the Portfolio Holder for Economy,

Enterprise and Transport was in the process of setting up a liaison group for Town Centre Regeneration. He also pointed out that pedestrian safety was a top priority when designing roads and cycleways throughout the Borough.

8 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Phil Bibby, asked the following question:

“What communication and/or promotion has taken place to encourage more take up of the Temporary Pavement Licences that were introduced to streamline applications by businesses to place temporary furniture, such as tables and chairs outside of cafes, bars and restaurants?”

The Leader of the Council confirmed that one business had formally applied for the licence. However, the Council was working with hospitality outlets to assess their requirements. A number of hospitality operators were waiting for details of the three-tier lockdown system before deciding whether or not to apply for the Temporary Pavement Licence. Councillor Taylor stated that the Council was waiting for a number of applications to be submitted so as to allocate the licences fairly.

The Leader informed Council that parts of Stevenage High Street had been cordoned off primarily to allow pedestrians to move safely while social distancing. She noted that weather had a bearing on outdoor seating arrangements.

Councillor Taylor asked Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) to provide a written answer on arrangements for managing Temporary Pavement Licences in Stevenage High Streets.

The Leader of the Council went on to congratulate Stevenage-born Formula One (F1) driver, Lewis Hamilton, for equalling Michael Schumacher's all-time record for career F1 victories (91) by winning the Eifel Grand Prix. Lewis Hamilton was on the verge of a record-equalling seventh F1 World Championship. Councillor Taylor said Hamilton was an inspiration for young people of Stevenage.

Councillor Taylor informed Council that Councillors Rob Broom, John Gardner and Jeannette Thomas had been shortlisted for 2020 LGIU and CCLA Councillor Awards. Councillor Broom was nominated and shortlisted as a finalist in the Community Champion category; Councillor Jeannette Thomas in the Innovation and Service Transformation category and Councillor John Gardner in Environment and Sustainability Pioneer. The Leader said she was proud and pleased that the work of Stevenage councillors had been recognised in these national awards.

In her Covid-19 update, the Leader informed Council that Stevenage continued to have the lowest number of cases in Hertfordshire. Stevenage was in Tier 1 (Medium Risk) of the new three tier system. 25 confirmed cases were recorded in the seven days to 11 October 2020 and the provisional incident rate was 28.49 per 100,000 cases. 658 Covid-19 cases had been recorded in Hertfordshire up to 11 October 2020. There was a national issue regarding case data in connection with how residential addresses of university students were being recorded. In a number of cases, Covid-19 test results for students were recorded against home addresses

and not university addresses. SBC and the Local Resilience Forum were prepared for the second wave. Arrangements for local contact tracing had been agreed. Stevenage Helps continued to provide targeted support. Members were informed that SBC had been allocated £45.3K for compliance and enforcement activities including Covid-secure Marshalls. Covid updates were available on the Council website.

Councillor Taylor also provided updates on future governance of the Herts Growth Board. There was unlikely to be announcement of Growth Deals this autumn due to the cancellation of the autumn budget. MHCLG had confirmed the opening of a new bidding window between December 2020 and March 2021 in preparation for the Single Housing Investment Fund. Herts Growth Board members were planning to formalise governance arrangements by forming a Section 101 Committee. This was a prerequisite for a Growth Deal. The future Growth Board governance proposals were scheduled to be brought to the November Executive and December Council meetings. The Leader reported that an All Member Briefing concerning the future governance of the Herts Growth Board would take place before the November Executive meeting.

The Leader concluded by congratulating officers, Members and residents involved with Stevenage Indoor Market. The Market had recently undergone an incredible transformation. It was reported that the Market attracted a wide range of new and old businesses including a bread stall, fish monger, cake shop and toiletry stall. Councillor Taylor informed Council that the Indoor Market was now under Town Centre management.

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

- Green Flag Awards for five of Stevenage's green spaces
- Stevenage High Street Improvements
- Stevenage Economic Task Force
- Homelessness and Rough Sleeping
- Housing Development Team Award
- Car Cruising
- Black Lives Matter
- Stevenage Museum Exhibition- Forgotten: the British African colonial soldiers of the Second World War
- New SBC Website
- Neighbourhoods

The Leader of the Council congratulated officers and green space volunteers for maintaining the five Green Flag sites in Stevenage. Councillor Taylor thanked Assistant Director (Communities & Neighbourhoods) for producing an e-book on the work done by Cooperative Councils to support communities during the pandemic.

The Leader of the Opposition (Councillor Bibby) welcomed Stevenage High Street improvements including signage to indicate location of the three hours free parking area in Primett Road. Councillor Taylor acknowledged that it had taken longer than

planned to install the signage.

9 **UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS**

The Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee reported that the Committee had met three times since the last Council meeting. Members of the Committee welcomed the livestreaming of Executive meetings. Live broadcasts were a helpful tool for meeting preparation.

The Chair of the Community Select Committee reported that the first Committee meeting for 2020/21 was scheduled for 21 October 2020. The main agenda items for this meeting were Sport and Leisure Review Report and an update on Members' questions relating to the Council's complaints system.

10 **NOTICE OF MOTIONS**

Councillor Sharon Taylor moved and Councillor Sandra Barr seconded a motion in respect of Local Government Reorganisation.

In introducing the motion, Councillor Taylor expressed astonishment that proposals for local government reorganisation were being introduced in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. She said the timing and reorganisation plans were wrong. Members were informed that the Leader of Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) had commissioned work on local government reform options within Hertfordshire without consulting the District and Borough Councils. Councillor Taylor pointed to the results of a recent survey of 2,030 residents that was carried out by a reputable national polling company - Survation. The survey was commissioned jointly by local District and Borough Councils in the County. Councillor Taylor informed Council that Executive had considered SBC's financial contribution to the cost of the survey. The survey revealed that 59% of residents strongly opposed the creation of a single unitary council across the county and 80% of people believe their area would be better served by a local council rather than a single county wide unitary. Councillor Taylor expressed concerns that the proposals would take decision-making away from local residents. The economic plans did not take into consideration local conditions around the County.

Councillor Barr informed Council that she did not see the justification for commissioning the devolution report. She considered devolution proposals to be a vanity project that would disenfranchise local residents.

During the debate, issues raised included:

- Potential savings from the proposed re-organisation would contribute towards alleviating financial pressures arising from Covid-19
- There should be a focus on centralisation and not devolution
- Results of the poll were not conclusive because loaded questions were used in the survey
- Devolution was on the agenda of local authorities run by all major political parties and the issue was on the last Conservative Party manifesto
- Calls for local government re-organisation appeared to be driven by political

- ambitions without adequate engagement with residents
- Local authorities were making significant savings through shared services
- Smaller unitaries could be more beneficial to residents than the proposed single unitary for Hertfordshire
- Some Hertfordshire local authorities did not own housing stock. Devolution plans would place those on the Stevenage housing waiting list at a disadvantage
- Services such as libraries and museums were likely to be defunded as part of savings proposals under devolution
- There was no evidence that any savings would benefit local residents

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

“This council strongly rejects the proposal from Hertfordshire County Council to create a single unitary council for the 1.2 million people living in Hertfordshire.

We reject the proposal to create what would become the biggest council in the country because it would:

1. greatly reduce the democratic input of Stevenage people to decision-making and impact upon their ability to hold those taking decisions on their behalf to account and;
2. almost certainly result in the reduction or cessation of important discretionary services that are relied upon by our businesses and residents, especially those who are isolated and/or vulnerable.

We believe the government’s intention to commence a structural reorganisation of local government in the middle of the Covid Pandemic is ill-timed and will unnecessarily divert attention and resources . We should be focussed on recovery not reorganisation.

Council urges government to publish its green paper on social care before the white paper on local government reorganisation as the future structure of social care has a fundamental impact on the structure of local government.

Council supports the work of Hertfordshire Districts & Boroughs to explore and assess alternative options to the County Council’s proposal to form a single Hertfordshire Unitary Council and agrees that proper engagement should take place with Hertfordshire people.

Council agrees to:

Write to the Leader of the County Council setting out our objections to his proposal.

Ask that the Leader of the County Council sets out what commitment there would be to ensure that the people of Stevenage would be given equal opportunities in respect of employment, funding, business initiatives, Council housing investment, leisure facilities, arts facilities and sporting facilities and health initiatives.

Write to the Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government to demand that the publication of the Recovery and Devolution White Paper is delayed until after the next General Election by which time the social care green paper will have been published and implemented and the local and national recovery from the Covid crisis will hopefully be well under way.

Continue to support the work of Hertfordshire District & Borough Leaders to explore alternative local government structural options in the event that the Recovery & Devolution White Paper confirms the Government's intention to commence the structural reform of local government

Ensure that the views of Hertfordshire people be sought and taken into account when developing any alternative local Government structural options for Hertfordshire.

Communicate the potential impact of a Single Unitary Council for Hertfordshire on Stevenage to the people of the town."

11 **QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS/PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

The Council received three questions from the Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders. The responses to the three questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

(A) Question from Councillor Graham Lawrence

Supplementary question - "Can we use some of the communication resources to keep people more informed about some of the major projects that are going on within Stevenage?"

In response to the supplementary question, the Leader of the Council stated that she spent a lot of time giving information to regional and local radio. She emphasised the importance of exercising caution with regards to enquiries relating to planning applications and maintaining the independence of the Planning and Development Committee. With regards to the Kenilworth development, Councillor Taylor informed Council that utilities, tree and engineering work had commenced on site.

(B) Question from Councillor Doug Bainbridge

Councillor Bainbridge did not ask a supplementary question.

(C) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson

Supplementary question - "Did the Council change its position regarding authorisation of Broadwater Day 2020 and if not, would the Council go ahead with

potential sanctions?”

The Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Working replied that the Council had complied with Hertfordshire Director of Public Health’s decision to allow the event to go ahead. However, SBC did not formally support the event. The Council’s decision was consistent with its position on not holding public events during the pandemic. With regards to the changing of public toilet locks in the area, the Leader of the Council pointed out that the toilets had been out of use for a long time. Health and safety compliance checks could not be carried out in time for the event. Councillor Taylor informed Council that following uncertainty about the extent to which outdoor events, such as Broadwater Day, were permitted to take place, Public Health had developed guidance for local authorities and event organisers.

12 **CHANGE TO STANDING ORDERS - VOTING AT COUNCIL MEETINGS**

Council considered an amendment to the Council’s ‘Temporary’ Standing Orders for voting at Council meetings.

The Chief Executive commented that the original method of voting for virtual meetings at the first Council meeting was somewhat laborious and accordingly an alternative method of voting was being recommended. The Mayor explained that under the proposed new method, when taking a vote it would be assumed that all were in favour of the Motion or amendment on the table. If a Member or Members chose to vote against or abstain they would be asked to raise their virtual hands. The number of votes and abstentions would be totalled and the outcome announced.

Councillor Robin Parker mentioned that Microsoft Teams had an electronic voting functionality. He indicated his preference for electronic voting at virtual meetings. The Chief Executive informed Members that the Council was in the process of migrating to Office 365. The use of Teams for virtual meetings could be considered on completion of this migration. Councillor Taylor stated that the Council would continue to explore ways of improving virtual meetings. She advised Council to accept the recommendations as an interim measure. The Chief Executive undertook to ask officers to provide Councillor Parker with details of voting options in Zoom.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the Temporary Standing Orders approved in accordance with the provisions of the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panels Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020 be amended to provide an alternative method for voting at Council meetings as set out in paragraph 3.3 of the report.

13 **ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW OF 2019/20 INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL CODE**

Councillor Mrs J Lloyd moved the recommendation and Councillor T Callaghan seconded the recommendation. Councillor Parker sought clarification on whether or

not the Council took into consideration business ethics of its investment counterparties. Strategic Director (CF) confirmed that SBC carried out due diligence on investment counterparties. Appropriate action would be taken if there was proof of business practices that did not meet the Council's standards.

It was **RESOLVED** that the 2019/20 Annual Treasury Management Review be approved by Council.

14 **AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 10 September 2020 were received and noted.

15 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

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 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.

16 **EMERGENCY COVID-19 FUNDING SUPPORT FOR STEVENAGE LEISURE LIMITED**

Council considered a report outlining the Executive recommendations in relation to emergency funding provision for Stevenage Leisure Limited (SLL) as a consequence of the financial impact of Covid-19.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED**:

1. That the report to Executive on 12 August 2020 be noted.
2. That Council approves funding for Stevenage Leisure Limited (SLL) up to a maximum of £1.38 Million, for the reasons as set out in the Executive report.

CHAIR