

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 9 December 2020

Time: 1.00pm

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.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 1.00pm
End Time: 5.01pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Phil Bibby CC and Robin Parker CC (observers).

There were no declarations of interest.

The Leader of the Council welcomed Nick Penny (the incoming Assistant Director – Finance & Estates) to the meeting, and looked forward to him officially joining the Council on 14 December 2020.

The Leader then gave a Covid-themed Christmas message to the children of Stevenage.

The Leader referred to the recent staff “Celebrating Our People” Awards, and congratulated James Chettleburgh (Principal Planning Officer) on his employee of the year award, and the entirety of the SBC staff on the team of the year award.

2 MINUTES - 18 NOVEMBER 2020

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 18 November 2020 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MINUTES OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 10 November 2020 be noted.

4 COVID-19 UPDATE

The Executive considered a brief verbal update on the Covid-19 pandemic from the Strategic Director (RP).

The Strategic Director (RP) advised as follows:

- the first UK citizens had been vaccinated with the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine, following the nation's receipt of the initial 800,000 doses; by Christmas, it was expected that the NHS would have received 4 Million doses of the vaccine;
- 280 GP immunisation centres across the UK were also expected to commence operation in the next week;
- independent analysis had been published indicating a 90% efficacy of the Oxford Astra Zeneca Covid-19 vaccine;
- London had been put on notice that it may soon receive Tier 3 Covid-19 restrictions should case numbers continue to rise at the current rate;
- Hertfordshire's case rate had increased by 12.3% in the past week, with a significant increase in cases amongst under 24 year olds – based on those figures, there was more chance of the county entering Tier 3 than Tier 1 should the rate of positive tests continue to rise;
- the HCC Director of Public Health had expressed concerns that some Hertfordshire residents had started to believe some of the false narratives surrounding the pandemic on social media, and hence work was underway through the Herts Communications Cell to ensure that messages of assurance were sent out to the public;
- the East and North Herts Acute Trust had been due to receive delivery of the vaccine on 7 December 2020 and the process would then commence to administer doses across the county; and
- the mass vaccination sites for Hertfordshire had been identified and were in the process of being mobilised, and the Council was awaiting an announcement as to when these centres would commence operation.

It was noted that requests from GP surgeries for assistance with Covid-19 vaccination related issues (parking, marshalling arrangements, etc.) were being fed into the Logistics Cell of the Hertfordshire Local Resilience Forum.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Covid-19 update be noted.

5 HOUSING FIRST APPROACH - STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

The Executive considered a report on a Housing First approach for Stevenage, outlining the Council's initial proposals for the medium and long term response to engaging and housing the Borough's rough sleeper clients, together with identifying the additional resources required.

By way of context, the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People stated that, in the week prior to the Covid-19 national lockdown restrictions (16 March 2020), there were 121 households in Council-owned emergency or temporary accommodation, including 19 in bed and breakfast. During June 2020, after the restrictions were lifted, this figure had risen by 66% to 181 cases, including 69 in bed and breakfast. This level of demand had placed a significant strain on already stretched resources. At the start of September 2020, the Council had 153 households in temporary accommodation, and 47 in bed and breakfast, an all time high.

In respect of rough sleepers, the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People advised that since the “Everyone in” directive was put in place in March 2020, the Council had received 126 cases of rough sleeping or at imminent risk of rough sleeping. The Council had placed these in accommodation. There were 26 cases currently accommodated and, of these, 16 clients were in nightly-let accommodation and 10 within the Council’s own temporary accommodation stock.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People explained that the report focused on the current spend in addressing homelessness, the activities that had been undertaken to date, and provided a summary of the proposals for the Council’s provision over the coming winter months.

The Housing Operations Manager (Providing Homes) gave a slide presentation on the report, covering the short, medium and long term plans for the implementation of Housing First, and the immediate next steps for progressing the initiative.

It was noted that the medium to long term Housing First proposals would be subject to a business case being brought back to the Executive before the end of the 2020/21 financial year.

In response to a series of Members’ questions, the Housing Operations Manager (Providing Homes) replied as follows:

- Winter 2020/21 Cold Weather provision – due to the pandemic, the accommodation previously used by SBC for Night Shelter accommodation for rough sleepers when the temperature fell to 0 degrees centigrade or below was not compliant with the Government’s Covid-19 guidance. The use of bed and breakfast accommodation would continue until arrangements could be put in place for the use of alternative, Covid-19 compliant, premises;
- Rough Sleepers – SBC was obliged to endeavour to house rough sleepers when they presented themselves to the Council, regardless of local connection. However, if a Stevenage local connection was not evident, but if a local connection was identified elsewhere, then it would be possible (following joint working with the local authority that covered that area) to arrange for individuals to be transferred back to that area to be accommodated;
- Officers had investigated the use of a Housing First approach already adopted by other Hertfordshire councils, including Dacorum and St. Albans (who favoured a dispersed units approach) and Welwyn Hatfield (who used a Housing in Multiple Occupation style provision). SBC would be considering a mixed dispersed units/HMO approach; and
- Best practice – this had been gleaned wider afield from the Hertfordshire Tactical Co-ordinating Group, which itself fed into a regional forum covering areas including London, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

The Housing Operations Manager (Providing Homes) undertook to arrange for her slide presentation to be sent to all Members of the Council.

It was noted that none of the funding provided to Hertfordshire County Council to deal with rough sleeping had, as yet, been shared with Borough/District Councils,

and that the Leader and Strategic Director (CF) were continuing to press for this to occur.

The Executive supported the Leader's additional recommendation that, following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People and Assistant Directors of Finance & Estates and Housing & Investment, a letter should be written to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government highlighting the significant funding gap of those local authorities operating a Housing Revenue Account (HRA), and the disparity between Government financial support provided to assist Councils' General Fund budgets, and the absence of similar support funding for HRAs (including full recompense of expenditure already incurred on rough sleeper accommodation), with a request that such support funding be provided as soon as possible.

The Leader thanked the Housing Team for the magnificent service they had provided during the coronavirus pandemic.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the support provided to homeless households during the Covid-19 restrictions, March – July 2020 and then November to December 2020 be noted.
2. That the Council's operational plan over the coming winter months, as detailed in the report, be approved, and that delegated authority is granted for the Strategic Director (RP), following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, to agree any minor amendments, subject to financial control.
3. That the current service pressures in Housing and Investment within the General Fund (GF) and Housing Revenue Accounts (HRA) be noted, which will be monitored by the Council's Finance department in line with the HRA Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) planning which will be reported to Executive as and when required.
4. That it be noted that funding has been obtained through Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government (MCHLG) for short term spends, and that the approach for use of these funds detailed at Paragraph 4.32 of the report be agreed.
5. That the Leader, following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People and Assistant Directors of Finance & Estates and Housing & Investment, write a letter to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government highlighting the significant funding gap of those local authorities operating a Housing Revenue Account (HRA), and the disparity between Government financial support provided to assist Councils' General Fund budgets, and the absence of similar support funding for HRAs (including full recompense of expenditure already incurred on rough sleeper accommodation), with a request that such support funding be provided as soon as possible.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report; and 5. To highlight a disparity in Government support funding for authorities with Housing Revenue Accounts. Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 STEVENAGE PARKING STRATEGY 2021 - 2031: PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The Executive consider a report in respect of the draft Stevenage Parking Strategy 2021 – 2031, seeking approval to its publication for consultation purposes.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport advised that the draft Parking Strategy placed an increased emphasis on non-car modes, reflecting the adopted Transport Strategy and HCC Local Transport Plan 4. Whilst providing for those who needed to use cars, the Strategy sought to help to reduce the impact of parked vehicles on streets and people, support the Living Streets agenda and help move towards the town's zero-carbon ambitions.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport explained that the Strategy provided a hierarchy to guide the design of new parking schemes, and set out clear criteria on important matters, such as the circumstances in which permit parking may be introduced or when new parking spaces would be constructed. The Strategy affirmed that on-street parking management would seek to remain self-funding, and included financial measures to help fund provision for non-motorised modes through requesting contributions when new facilities for car parking were provided, which would then be under SBC's control.

In response to a Member's request, the Engineering Services Manager confirmed that consideration of the provision of any new disabled parking spaces in the Borough would include the ability for sufficient space to allow disabled drivers/passengers to use any door to get in/out of the vehicle.

The Executive instructed officers to:

- Ensure that the consultation document contained a list of questions at the end of each section that the Council would wish consultees to answer as part of their representation/response to the document;
- Ensure that the consultation period be extended from one month to two months; and
- Ensure that, with consultation on Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs), a higher bar was set on the level of public consultation responses received on each CPZ proposal, and a similar high bar was set on the number of residents in favour of adopting a CPZ for their street/area.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the content of the draft Stevenage Parking Strategy 2021-2031, as attached at Appendix A to the report, be noted.
2. That delegated powers be granted to the Assistant Director(Planning and Regulation), following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Economy,

Enterprise and Transport, to make minor amendments as are necessary in the final preparation of the draft Strategy prior to its consultation.

3. That the draft Stevenage Parking Strategy 2021-2031 be published for consultation in early 2021.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 HOUSING FOR OLDER PEOPLE STRATEGY 2020 - 2030

The Executive considered a report seeking the adoption of the proposed Housing for Older People Strategy (HOPS) 2020 - 2030.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People advised that the Strategy outlined the Council's joint approach with Hertfordshire County Council to improve housing options for older people in the town, with the objective of enabling healthy ageing for older people in Stevenage through the provision of a new housing and support offer.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People stated that the Strategy has been guided by a series of surveys, workshops and events, and feedback from both residents and people who work with older people. This had shaped the main themes of the Strategy, and had guided the recommendations within it. This work has been supported by national and local research and data sources, together with best practice from other areas and national organisations.

The Housing Operations Manager (Managing Homes) gave a slide presentation on the report and Strategy, focussing on the four key themes of housing development, standards and design; information, advice and technology; support and assistance to help people move; and inter-organisational working. The presentation also outlined the financial resources required to support the implementation of the Strategy.

The Leader asked officers to ensure that reference to the Council's buy back scheme was included in the Strategy document prior to its final publication.

The Leader thanked the Team involved in the preparation of the Strategy for the level of compassion and care reflected in the document and for the extensive level of consultation on its contents.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the draft Housing for Older People Strategy 2020 - 2030, as attached at Appendix A to the report, be adopted.
2. That the Older Persons Strategy delivery post to implement the strategy be agreed (this is included in the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) draft budget report and Medium Term Financial Security (MTFS) report presented to the December 2020 Executive).

3. That an interim report be submitted to the Executive in 1 year's time and a progress report in 2 years' time with any resource request or review that may be required.
4. That it be noted that a growth bid of £17,000 will be recommended for 2022/23 and included in the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy for modelling purposes, for the initiatives as set out in Section 5 of the report.
5. The proposed performance and monitoring indicator details, as set out on page 38 of the draft strategy, be agreed.
6. That, subject to approval of the draft Strategy, the front facing document be shared with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People and Leader of the Council for approval.
7. That delegated powers be granted to the Assistant Director (Housing and Investment), following consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People, to make any minor amendments as are necessary to the Strategy prior to its publication.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

8 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE 2020/21 - QUARTER TWO

The Executive considered a report with regard to the Council's Corporate Performance information and statistics relating to Quarter Two of 2020/21.

[During the element of the presentation on this item which related to grant funding received by SBC from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), the Leader declared a personal interest as a Member of the Hertfordshire LEP Board, but stated that she had not been involved in any decisions regarding approval of the above grant funding.]

The Chief Executive gave a slide presentation on the report. By way of introduction, he commented that in spite of Covid-19, the Council had generally maintained good progress in respect of its Future Town Future Council (FTFC) and Corporate Performance Indicators. However, a number of the PIs had been affected by the Covid-19 situation. It had been and continued to be one of the toughest years faced by SBC, as it maintained a balance between front line service provision, delivering FTFC objectives, responding to Covid-19, and the challenges of Brexit.

The Chief Executive advised that, of the 13 FTFC PIs, 5 were green; 1 was amber; 5 were red; and 2 were not available. In relation to the 41 Corporate PIs, 23 were green; 2 were amber; 8 were red; and 8 were not available. The amber, red and not available PIs were primarily due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Chief Executive went through the reasons for the amber, red and not available PIs, together with planned measures for their improvement, all as detailed in the

report. He concluded by referring to a number of the performance highlights achieved by the Council during Quarter Two of 2020/21.

In reply to a question from the Leader, the Strategic Director (CF) undertook to investigate and respond on whether the rent arrears figures set out in Paragraphs 3.104 (£765,753.39) and 3.108 (£368,283.37) of the report should form a cumulative total for rent arrears.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the delivery of priorities which form the Future Town, Future Council Programme and performance of the Council across the key themes for Quarter Two 2020/21, together with the latest achievements, be noted.
2. That, in accordance with the Council's Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules, the Council be recommended to continue the adoption of the current Co-operative Corporate Plan, subject to further review in Autumn 2022.
3. That impacts of the Government directive on housing rough sleepers during Covid-19 be noted and that future Housing First plans be endorsed (Paragraphs 3.97 to 3.102 of the report).
4. That the impacts on the Council's Housing Options Service from the Government directive on evictions and the COVID-19 pandemic be noted and that future Housing First Plans be endorsed (Paragraphs 3.92 to 3.96 of the report).
5. That the impacts of Universal Credit and COVID-19 on rent collection rate be noted and action plans be endorsed (Paragraphs 3.103 to 3.113 of the report).
6. That the impacts of COVID-19 on the following areas be noted and plans be endorsed:
 - Job Creation/New Business Start Up through the Business Technology Centre (Paragraphs 3.125 to 3.128 of the report);
 - Ability to inspect food establishments (Paragraphs 3.129 to 3.131 of the report);
 - Issues with the letting of Council garages (Paragraphs 3.132 to 3.138 of the report);
 - Collection of Council Tax (Paragraph 3.165 of the report); and
 - Ability to identify and remove HRA/GF savings (Paragraphs 3.166 to 3.168 of the report).
7. That the level of void loss and how voids sheltered and major works impacts this measure be noted, and improvements be endorsed (Paragraphs 3.114 to

3.122 of the report).

8. That the plans to improve website satisfaction be endorsed (Paragraphs 3.155 to 3.157 of the report).

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

9 DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT RENT SETTING AND BUDGET REPORT 2021/22

The Executive considered a report in respect of the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Rent Setting and budget report 2021/22.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that it was proposed that the HRA rent on dwellings be increased by 1.5%, which would be an average increase of £1.46 for social rents, £2.38 for affordable rents and £1.80 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52 week year). This had been calculated using the rent formula CPI +1%, in line with the Government's rent policy.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the impact of the proposed changes in service charges meant that 1,710 or 58% of homes (who pay a service charge) would receive a service charge reduction, even though service charges had fluctuated between individual services. There were only two properties with a service charge increase above £4.00.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources commented that the impact of the 2021/22 combined rent and service charges increases meant:

- 306 homes or 4% would receive a rent and service charge reduction;
- 7,578 homes or 96% of households would receive a weekly rent and service charge increase of less than £3.50 (based on 52 weeks); and
- There were only 5 properties with an increase of more than £5.00.

In terms of the draft HRA Budget for 2021/22, the Portfolio Holder for Resources explained that this had reduced by £204,000 from the position reported to the Executive in November 2020, as set out in Paragraph 4.7.1 of the report. The HRA Budget for 2020/21 had changed by £63,000, as summarised in Paragraph 4.7.2 of the report.

In respect of borrowing, the Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that, last year, the HRA Business Plan was recalculated to take advantage of the lifting of the HRA debt cap that had restricted HRA borrowing to £217Million. New loans totalling £23.8Million and £26.6Million were expected to be taken in the current and next financial years. However, the decision when to take the new borrowing would be reviewed, weighing up the cost of carry and the prevailing Public Works Loan board (PWLb) rates.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that HRA capital spend was projected to be £34.1Million in 2020/21, with £22.9Million being on works to existing homes, and

that in 2021/22 capital spend would increase to £49.3 Million, with £30.1 Million being on new homes and £18.6 Million on works to existing homes. The majority of funding for the capital programme would come from new loans and there was therefore no requirement for a revenue contribution to capital (RCCO) in 2021/22 as result of the borrowing

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People added that, when comparing rents for a 3 bed property, a Private Sector rent would be on average 133% more than a Council social rent, and 32% more than the Council's affordable homes. The SBC rentals were therefore much more affordable for those residents in the Borough that needed to rent properties.

The Strategic Director (CF) stated that, between the draft and final HRA/rent setting reports, an assessment would be made of the 2020/21 rent arrears position. Also, the report had been written prior to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement on the 2021/22 Finance Settlement. The funding announcement included a pay freeze for 2021/22 with the exception of low paid workers. This would reduce the costs in the HRA draft budget by £148,000.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the Housing Revenue Account rent on dwellings be increased, from week commencing 5 April 2021, by 1.5% which is an average increase of £1.46 for social rents, £2.38 for affordable rents and £1.80 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52 week year), having been calculated using the rent formula CPI +1%, in line with the Government's rent policy set out in Paragraph 4.1.1 of the report.
2. That the draft 2021/22 Housing Revenue Account be approved, as set out in Appendix A to the report, but it be noted that this may be subject to change as a result of any consultation and the finalisation of recharges from the General Fund.
3. That it be noted that the final Housing Revenue Account rent setting budget for 2021/22 would be presented to the Executive on 20 January 2021 and Council on 28 January 2021.
4. That key partners and other stakeholders be consulted and their views fed back into the 2021/22 budget setting process.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

10 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

The Chair accepted an urgent item of business in respect of a verbal update/presentation from the Strategic Director (RP) on European Union Transition (Brexit).

The Strategic Director (RP) provided updates on the current position on Brexit; the implications of a no trade deal scenario; the Hertfordshire response; immediate and significant risks to Hertfordshire; the SBC response; key risks for the town; key risks for the Council; and measures in place to provide support to local businesses.

It was **RESOLVED** that the verbal update/presentation on European Union Transition (Brexit) be noted.

11 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That under Section 100A 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 the reasons for the following reports being in Part II were accepted, and that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

12 PART II MINUTES - EXECUTIVE - 18 NOVEMBER 2020

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 18 November 2020 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

13 FINANCIAL SECURITY OPTIONS 2021/22

The Executive considered a Part II report in respect of a range of Financial Security Options regarding the 2021/22 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account budgets.

It was **RESOLVED** that the recommendations contained in the report, together with one additional recommendation made at the meeting, be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

14 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR