

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 20 October 2021

Time: 1.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

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

Start / End Start Time: 1.00pm

Time: End Time: 3.07pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Jackie Hollywell, Phil Bibby CC (observer) and Robin Parker CC (observer).

There were no declarations of interest.

The Leader referred to the dreadful and tragic events of last Friday (15 October 2021) when Sir David Amess MP was murdered whilst carrying out one of his constituents' surgeries. This appalling incident had sent shockwaves throughout the UK, as did the murder of Jo Cox MP in 2016. She added that these incidents were an assault on democracy and the peaceful lives wanted for all people.

The Leader knew that everyone in Stevenage would wish to join her, the Mayor, Executive Members and all other Members of the Council in sending their deepest condolences to Sir David's family, staff, friends and constituents. Listening to the tributes to Sir David in recent days it was clear that he died as he lived, serving the public and representing the constituents he cared so much for. She hoped that Sir David would rest in peace, and further hoped that there would be no more such incidents in the future.

2 MINUTES - 15 SEPTEMBER 2021

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 15 September 2021 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES

In relation to the Minutes of the meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 13 September 2021, the Leader commented that she and the Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport had been interviewed by the Committee in connection with their review of SBC's response to the Covid-19

pandemic. It was gratifying to learn that the Stevenage business community had felt supported by the Council throughout the pandemic, and the sterling efforts of the Council's Shared Revenues & Benefits Team in administering the Government Support Grants had also been recognised and applauded.

In relation to the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 21 September 2021, the Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People, Leisure & Culture expressed this thanks to the Committee for their work in investigating the feasibility of a New Town Heritage Centre, including their visits to other towns to seek best practice. In response to a question from the Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport, the Strategic Director (RP) undertook to provide a written response to him regarding the plans for storage of surplus Museum exhibits and artefacts once the Heritage Centre was in operation.

With regard to the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on 22 September 2021, the Leader explained that the first two Town Deal Business Cases (relating to the Marshgate Biotech Centre and the Gunnels Wood Road Infrastructure project) had both been endorsed by the Stevenage Development Board, and would be presented to the Executive in November 2021 for approval.

In respect of the Minutes of the meeting of the Environment & Economy Select Committee held on 4 October 2021, it was acknowledged that local authorities would require a much greater level of Government funding in order to realise both national and local Climate Change aspirations.

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

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 13 September 2021

Community Select Committee – 21 September 2021

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 22 September 2021

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 4 October 2021

4 COVID-19 UPDATE

The Executive considered an overarching verbal progress report from the Strategic Director (RP), assisted by the Senior Environmental Health & Licensing Manager, together with a short presentation from the Corporate Policy & Research Officer, providing an update on the latest epidemiology statistics relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Strategic Director (RP) advised that, nationally, the daily figure for new Covid-19 cases had been beyond 40,000 for seven days in a row. The number of patients in hospitals had risen by 10% in a week to 7,749. The Government had indicated that it was still committed to its Plan A, based around booster vaccinations and vaccinations for children aged 12 and above. However, the NHS Confederation had called upon the Government to re-introduce some Covid measures due to the rise in cases and increasing pressure on NHS services.

The Strategic Director (RP) stated that, in response, the Health Secretary had announced that he would be holding an emergency press call at 5.00pm today (21/10/21) to confirm the Government's position. The Council would be monitoring this closely, and would continue to work with partners in the Hertfordshire Local Resilience Forum to take any necessary action.

The Senior Environmental Health & Licensing Manager reported on the outcome of the Hertfordshire Health Protection Board meeting held earlier in the day. He commented that the Hertfordshire Director of Public Health (HDPH) had stressed that the level of Covid infections was such that it was still in the pandemic phase. Even though national numbers were rising, the increase in cases in Hertfordshire was below average (case rates in the 12-16 year old age group were beginning to plateau, but were increasing in the 60+ age group). The testing rate was also increasing.

In relation to the Delta sub-variant of the Covid virus, the Senior Environmental Health & Licensing Manager advised that the HDPH had stated that the impact and prevalence of this sub-variant was still under investigation, but it was believed that it could be 10% more transmissible than the original Delta variant. There was a potential for increased hospitalisations amongst those who had already been vaccinated. There was also an important role for vaccine boosters in preventing that potential increase. There was a move towards improving communications with the public regarding the vaccine booster roll out.

The following matters were raised during the verbal progress report/presentation:

In reply to a number of Members' queries on the verbal progress update, the Senior Environmental Health & Licensing Manager undertook to:

- clarify the position with regard to how and where in Stevenage Covid booster vaccinations were being administered; and
- attempt to ascertain statistics relating to the correlation between flu and Covid booster vaccinations in terms of any increased risk of not being vaccinated for one or the other or both.

During the meeting, information was received stating that Robertson House was to start operating as walk-in facility for Covid booster vaccinations for the clinically vulnerable and Over 50s. The Leader asked for details to be posted on the SBC website, together with information regarding the introduction of walk-in surgeries for 11 to 16 year olds offering them the opportunity to be vaccinated.

In relation to the epidemiology presentation, the following points were made:

- Officers were requested to continue pressing for the visit of a mobile Covid vaccination unit to Bedwell Ward, in an attempt to improve the level of vaccine take up in that ward;
- The Corporate Policy & Research Officer undertook to provide Members with some preliminary results in respect of national Antibody studies;
- Professor Jim McManus and his Public Health Team had been recognised at the Pride of Stevenage Awards event by receiving the Judges' Special Award for

their excellent work throughout the Covid pandemic. The Executive wished to record its own vote of thanks to Professor McManus and his Team, and also to the Hertfordshire Local resilience Forum for its commendable support role.

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

5 CLIMATE CHANGE - ANNUAL UPDATE 2020/21

The Executive considered a report providing an overview of the action taken to tackle Climate Change by Stevenage Borough Council and with partners, through the Council's joint working on the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP).

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration reminded Members that SBC had declared a Climate Change emergency in 2019 and had set a Borough-wide target of achieving net zero carbon by 2030. In 2020, following extensive public and stakeholder consultation, the Council adopted a Climate Change Strategy with 8 key themes to guide everyone towards a net zero future.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration stated that the report highlighted the work the Council had done to reduce its carbon emissions over the last year. Furthermore, it detailed the work the Council had undertaken as an active partner within the Hertfordshire Sustainability and Climate Change Partnership (HSCCP) and what the Council was doing to seek to support and educate residents and businesses in recognition of their respective roles. The report provided a snapshot of the work carried out and continuing initiatives, and highlighted the challenges faced as a society in changing behaviours to reduce emissions in good time.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration stressed the enormity of the collective challenge in tackling Climate Change. Many issues needed to be addressed to achieve the Council's Climate change ambitions, including a sufficient level of Government funding to local authorities to expedite change. This issue was included as one of the suggestions to be included in the Council's proposed letter to the Government outlined in Recommendation 2.3 in the report. The report also contained at Recommendation 2.2 some additional measures that required Executive approval in order to support the Council's Climate Change journey.

The following issues were raised by Members:

- it would be helpful if there was an SBC communications campaign about recycling/re-use of materials in order to inform and educate residents, in order to emphasise the fact that the collective effort in recycling/re-use would make an overall difference;
- in reply to a question, it was confirmed that the intention was for the SBC fleet of waste collection vehicles to be low or zero carbon by 2030;
- the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods & Co-operative Council informed Member that he had asked the Co-operative Neighbourhood Teams to look for local initiatives/projects that could contribute towards the Council's net zero carbon ambitions; and

- the issue of pressure being brought to bear on the Government to provide increased and sufficient funding to Local Government to drive Climate Change initiatives was an important part of the Local Government Association’s lobbying of Government.

In order to reinforce the Council’s expectation that all new construction schemes were designed with low or zero carbon measures, Members supported an addition to Recommendation 2.2, with the following:

“(vi) To work with the Council’s development and regeneration partners to ensure the Council’s construction work is making the maximum contribution to its net zero carbon ambitions.”

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the content of the Climate Change Annual Update (2020- 2021) be noted.
2. That the following additional measures be agreed to support the Council’s Climate Change journey:
 - (i) To develop the business case to migrate the Council’s corporate and waste fleet to low or zero carbon from 2028, in the interim commit to switching fuel supplies to low or zero carbon alternatives, subject to a detailed business case;
 - (ii) Following the Executive’s commitment to accelerate the SG1 Phase 2 programme, including a move to the low carbon Public Sector Hub by 2026; the Council will also develop proposals and a business case to reduce energy use, and reduce the physical and carbon foot print of other Council buildings;
 - (iii) Embed the low carbon ways of working the Council has embraced during the pandemic into current and future ways of working, to continue that carbon saving;
 - (iv) Support residents and business to reduce their carbon footprint by illustrating a comprehensive range of measures they can take, including education and publicity campaign, through a Communication and Collaboration Plan;
 - (v) Provide a total of £8,000 to offer grants to local Stevenage businesses to help transition their business to lower carbon and to supplement bids for low carbon investments. The amount is subject to budgeting for 2022/2023; and
 - (vi) To work with the Council’s development and regeneration partners to ensure the Council’s construction work is making the maximum contribution to its net zero carbon ambitions.
3. That Officers prepare a submission on behalf of the Council’s Executive to the Minister of State (Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change),

making the urgent case for Government to:

- Develop a comprehensive funding plan for the retro-fitting social housing with energy saving measures, including electric heating, insulation, local energy generation and carbon reduction measures;
- Support Stevenage Borough Council's multi-million pound bid to the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund;
- Develop a carbon emissions pricing scheme that protects and supports local business, discouraging the displacement of carbon creation to more vulnerable places while incentivising business to invest in low carbon technologies; and
- Developing and funding a plan for a comprehensive, integrated and funded public transport system to offer people a genuine alternative to car ownership and driving, and a fully funded EV strategy and network. In Stevenage the Council is building a new bus interchange and bidding for funds to electrify the existing bus fleet, but the services need to be significantly expanded, reliable and affordable to people.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report; and 2(vi). To ensure the Council's net carbon zero ambitions are reflected in the construction work of its development and regeneration partners.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 REVIEW OF THE CO-OPERATIVE PROCUREMENT STRATEGY 2021-2024

The Executive considered a report in respect of the proposed updated Co-operative Procurement Strategy 2021-2024.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the Strategy had last been updated in 2016/17. The proposed 2021-2024 Strategy had been drafted to align with the Council's Future Town, Future Council ambitions.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the Strategy was based on the following five foundation principles:

1. Community Wealth Building – focusing on money being re-invested in Stevenage which would support the aim of locally re-circulating wealth in the area;
2. Sustainability – tackling Climate Change and improving sustainability must be a key foundation for all procurement activity;
3. Social and Ethical Procurement – Social Value involved looking beyond the prices of each individual contract and looking at what the collective benefit would be to the community when a public body chose to award a contract;
4. Commercial and Insourcing – the Council's commitment to deliver as many services as possible in-house, which was the Council's default position; and

5. Proactive Procurement – the support from the Council’s Corporate Procurement Team to deliver better procurement and also for developing a knowledge and intelligence base to deliver the Council’s ambitions.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources explained that the Council had spent approximately £60M on the procurement of goods, works and services in 2020/21, an increase of £10M from 2019/20, mainly due to major construction projects taking place in the town as part of the Transforming Our Town programme and major repairs and works to the SBC housing stock.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that consultation on the updated Strategy was carried out during the summer and a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group was held in September 2021. Feedback from both was set out in Paragraphs 4.5 and 4.6 of the report.

The Leader stated that the five foundation principles contained in the Strategy were key to the Council’s ethos as a Co-operative Council. Members were pleased to see the emphasis on community wealth building and, where possible, the local sourcing of goods and services.

It was **RESOLVED** that the updated Co-operative Procurement Strategy for 2021-2024, as attached at Appendix A to the report, be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2022/23

The Executive considered a report in respect of the proposed Council Tax Support Scheme for 2022/23.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the report recommended that the Council retained the current 8.5% liability for those on maximum benefit (working age claimants). She stated that the number of Council Tax Support claimants had reduced, citing the example that case numbers had reduced by 154 between 1 April 2021 and 1 October 2021. However, it was not yet clear what the impact would be of the ending of the Government’s furlough scheme.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources reported that a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group was held in September 2021 and Members of that Group had supported the continuation of the existing scheme. A letter to that effect had been sent to Hertfordshire County Council and the Hertfordshire Police & Crime Commissioner.

The Leader commented that it was vital that the maximum Council Tax liability for those residents eligible was unchanged from 8.5%, especially in the light of the Government’s recent decision to remove the £20 per week uplift for those in receipt of Universal Credit, and its replacement with in her view an underfunded £500M Hardship Fund, which would be subject to an application process.

It was **RESOLVED** that the existing Council Tax Support Scheme of 8.5% council tax liability for those working age claimants on maximum benefits (subject to any benefit uplifts) be approved for the financial year 2022/23.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

8 1ST AND 2ND QUARTER CAPITAL PROGRAMME MONITORING REPORT 2021/22

The Executive considered a report in respect of 1st and 2nd Quarter Capital Programme Monitoring 2021/22 (General Fund and Housing Revenue Account).

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that, in respect of the General Fund, the net decrease in 2021/22 capital expenditure was currently £59,000, as described in the report. A number of other budgets had been brought forward into 2021/22 or re-profiled into 2022/23. The next increase in 2022/23 capital expenditure was currently £271,000.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that there was an increase in the forecasted capital receipts of £1.41Million in 2021/22 and £929,000 in 2022/23. This was due to increases arising from updated projections on sales relating to Housing Development schemes, with some offset by re-profiling of other site disposals into 2022/23.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources referred to an update in the report regarding the Towns Fund. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities had released project funding to the Council as Accountable Body of £1.875Million (or 5%) as a forward payment towards the up to £37.5Million that Stevenage may be able to draw down. There were 9 projects for which business cases needed to be developed and approved, and the 5% received was to cover early-stage activity in project development.

In relation to the Housing Revenue Account, the Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that there was currently a 2021/22 decrease in capital expenditure of £4.4Million (£4.3Million of this related to a review of Housing Development sites). This £4.4Million would be re-profiled into 2022/23.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources commented that there had been 18 Right to Buy sales in the first half of 2021/22. 15 of these were in Quarter 1 and 3 in Quarter 2, with the marked reduction in sales possibly reflecting the changes to Stamp Duty, which was abolished on purchases up to £250,000 from 1 April 2021, but reverted to £125,000 in October 2021.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the 2021/22 General Fund Capital Programme net decrease in expenditure of £59,000, as summarised in table one, Paragraph 4.1.1 of the report, be approved.

2. That the General Fund net increase of capital expenditure of £271,000 in 2022/23, also as summarised in table one, Paragraph 4.1.1 of the report, be approved.
3. That Council be recommended to approve the additional General Fund budget requirements of £291,000, as set out in table two, Paragraph 4.2.1 of the report.
4. That the net decrease of £4.4 Million in the capital expenditure for the 2021/22 Housing Revenue Account, as summarised in table nine, Paragraph 4.4.1 of the report, be approved.
5. That the corresponding net increase of £4.4 Million in the capital expenditure for the 2022/23 Housing Revenue Account, also as summarised in table nine, Paragraph 4.4.1 of the report, be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

9 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

10 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 report being in Part II were accepted, and that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

11 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR