

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 24 November 2021

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Myla Arceno, Adrian Brown, Michael Downing, Alex Farquharson, Chris Howells, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati and Simon Speller.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.55pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Wendy Kerby.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 26 OCTOBER 2021

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 26 October 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

2. Minutes of the Executive – 20 October 2021

Noted.

3. Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees

Noted.

4. Covid-19 Update

Officers gave an update on the latest position:

- The Vaccination Centre at Robertson House was administering boosters on a daily basis;
- The number of complaints received by the Environmental Health Team about non-mask wearing by customers in retail outlets had been relatively low;

- A mobile vaccination unit would be in the Bedwell Ward for two consecutive Saturdays in December. In response to a number of questions, Officers confirmed that this was due to the lower take up of the vaccination in the Ward but could potentially be rolled out to other areas. Officers would confirm the details when they were available.

5. Towns Fund Business Cases – Tranche 1

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) recapped the decisions taken by Executive on 17 November 2021 in relation to the Gunnels Wood Road Infrastructure Project and the Marshgate Biotech/Life Science Centre Project. The following comments/questions were raised:

- Councillor Bibby CC advised that Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) was in agreement to the Gunnels Wood Road project. He confirmed that any major infrastructure improvements made by HCC would be subject to public consultation.
- In relation to the Marshgate project and the loss of car parking spaces, it was suggested that the alternative option of the St Georges Multi Storey Car Park was not viewed by residents as the safest or easiest place to park so any improvements that could be made to this car park would be welcomed;
- A Member asked how the design of the Gunnels Wood Road roundabout was different to the existing one and what advantages there were to the new design. The Assistant Director advised that the County Council was responsible for the design of the roundabout but the aim was to increase the capacity of vehicles and to improve options for sustainable transport in the area. The more detailed design options would be dealt with at a future stage. It was suggested that Members could be involved in the design process;
- The remaining 7 Town's Fund Business Cases would be submitted to Members at the Executive and Overview and Scrutiny Committee and through the approval process by the beginning of March 2022;
- In relation to the Marshgate scheme there had been comments in the local media that the new use of the proposed building was out of character with the Town Centre. Officers advised that this was an exciting proposal and was consistent with the Town Centre framework which was trying to create mixed use developments in the Town with the added bonus of additional footfall in the Town Centre. There were also benefits for the staff working at the business in terms of transport links and the town centre location.
- In relation to the Gunnels Wood Roundabout the Assistant Director agreed to put a briefing note together with the process regarding potential schemes with County Council colleagues and circulate to all Members
- The increasing loss of surface car parking spaces was a concern for Members. Officers advised that current capacity in the Town Centre was more than adequate for the demand for parking spaces. The loss of the surface car parks was to aid the regeneration plans and a core principle of the Local Plan and Regeneration Framework. Improvements would be considered to make the multi storey car park to make it a more attractive

place to park. There were also plans for a new multi storey car park on the railway station north site and an update would be provided to Members in due course.

- In response to a question, Officers confirmed that there would be a programme of communications published shortly to direct shoppers to the available car parks in the Town.

6. 2021/22 Mid-Year Treasury Management Review

The following comments/questions were raised:

- A Member asked if the potential rise in interest rates or rise in the rate of inflation would make any difference to the Council's Treasury management projections? Officers advised that there would be no difference to those fixed term investments that were held by the Council and that any new borrowing would be taken at the best rate available although it was reiterated that rates did fluctuate all the time. Rates were also tracked constantly and forecasts for the coming year monitored.
- Seven deposits were due to mature shortly. A Member asked how far in advance officers looked for potential new investments. Officers advised that were spread across a number of Investment Companies and that where rates had the potential to be a bit more volatile, the Council would likely look nearer the time to invest.
- Officers advised that they worked within the principles of the Treasury Management Strategy and any breach of this would be reported to the Audit Committee followed by Executive, Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Council.

7. 2nd Quarter General Fund and HRA Revenue Budget Monitoring Report 2021/22

The following comments/questions were raised:

- Officers reported significant budget pressures due to the rise in levels of homelessness and also a loss in skip income. The loss in skip income was in part due to the lack of HGV drivers and the prioritisation of the refuse collection/recycling service. The pricing structure for skip hire was also currently under review by the Council's Commercial Manager.

8. Urgent Part I Business – Community Renewal Fund

Noted.

4 VOID LOSS PRESENTATION

The Committee received a presentation from the Service Delivery Manager, Stevenage Direct Services and the Housing Operations Manager on Repairs and Void Loss.

Officers informed the Committee that voids were properties for which there was a current rent account but no tenancy existed and as a result there was a loss of income to the Council. The focus for officers was to reduce this void loss. Historically resources had been modelled on having approximately 40 void properties per month. However this had risen to 3 times this amount over the course of the pandemic.

Members were advised of the current void process:

- Pre-void and termination – before the property is returned to the Council (Housing and Investment Team);
- Void works (Repairs and Voids Team);
- Inspection and Letting (Housing and Investment Team)

Officers advised that the significant increase in voids was not unique to SBC but that delays in repairs due to material shortages, challenges in recruitment and retention and the appointment of a new electrical supplier had exacerbated the increased numbers.

It was noted that some hard to let properties were now beginning to be let, particularly in the Independent Living Schemes.

Officers advised of a programme of actions to be taken, including:

- An increase in the recruitment of project officers in the Repairs and Voids service;
- Support being given from other teams within the Housing Service;
- Officers working closely with suppliers to seek to reduce material delays;
- A thorough review of the programme of tenancy audits to ensure they were as robust as they can be.

The Chair then invited comments and questions from Members.

Members asked if there were specific targets outlined in the Action Plan. Officers advised that there were overarching actions, as a result of process mapping. Detailed forecast targets would be set and submitted to Members as part of the quarterly performance reports to Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

In relation to material delays Officers advised that they were working closely with the procured suppliers to mitigate this although the suppliers had experienced similar problems with materials and staff recruitment.

In relation to the increase in the amount of voids, Officers advised that reasons for this included a number of tenants having passed away, a backlog due to essential lettings only being carried out and the suspension of the Choice Based Lettings scheme during the Pandemic and particularly the lock down periods, some clients requiring additional time to move with a multi agency approach being needed.

In response to a question, officers confirmed that hard to let properties were being

looked at for re-purposing for possible emergency accommodation.

Following a further question from a Member, Officers also confirmed that there were systems in place to ensure any concerns about tenants raised by housing officers or contractors were reported back appropriately.

The Chair then welcomed the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health and Older People to the meeting. The Portfolio Holder advised that she had been working with officers on this issue and assured Members that the process for bringing void properties back into use was being reviewed to ensure houses were handed over in good time and in good condition.

In response to a question regarding how the Council would be informed that a property was likely to become a void, Officers informed the Committee that tenants were obliged to give 28 days notice as the standard notice period.

Also, in terms of temporary accommodation, officers were working to ensure that as far as possible forecasting was undertaken for properties coming back to the Council.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their presentation and answers.

5 URGENT PART I DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

None.

6 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

7 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 to 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, as amended by SI 2006 No. 88.

2. That having considered the reasons for the following item being in Part II, it be determined that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

8 PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

8. Part II Decisions of the Executive

9 URGENT PART II DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

None.

10 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR