

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 8 December 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, John Gardner, Richard Henry and Jeannette Thomas.

Start / End Start Time: 1.00pm

Time: End Time: 4.17pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Rob Broom, Jackie Hollywell, Phil Bibby CC (observer) and Robin Parker CC (observer).

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 17 NOVEMBER 2021

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 17 November 2021 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Minutes of the meetings of Select Committees be noted:

Community Select Committee – 3 November 2021

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 18 November 2021

4 COVID-19 UPDATE

Prior to the consideration of this item, the Chair announced the sad news of the recent death from Covid-19 of the Deputy Leader of North Hertfordshire District Council, Councillor Paul Clark. He had been a District Councillor for Hitchin for over 30 years and in May 2021 had been elected for the first time as a County Councillor. The Chair asked for the Executive's condolences to be conveyed to NHDC.

The Executive considered an overarching verbal update 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 information concerning the Omicron variant and the latest epidemiology

statistics relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The following issues were raised by Members:

- The Corporate Policy & Research Officer undertook to chase up progress on the Mobile Vaccination Unit that was promised for the Bedwell Ward, and that, when dates were agreed, signage advising of the dates/locations be displayed in both the Bedwell and Rockingham Way Neighbourhood Centres;
- The Corporate Policy & Research Officer was asked to incorporate into the next Covid-19 update presentation to the Executive local figures as to who had received booster jabs compared with those who should have had a booster vaccination; and
- Officers were requested to publish a Briefing Note regarding the Omicron variant on the Council's website.

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

5 TOWNS FUND BUSINESS CASE - STATION GATEWAY

The Executive considered a report seeking approval of the Towns Fund Business Case in respect of the Station Gateway Project.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that this project had received the support of the Stevenage Development Board (as per the Minutes of the Board tabled at the meeting). The project was compatible with the objectives of the Stevenage Area Action Plan for the Gateway area. The report asked for £6.5M worth of funds to be drawn down, of which £6M related to the construction of a new Multi-Storey Car Park on the Station North Car Park (see also Minute 6 below).

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration stated that the project would contribute to the desire for Stevenage to become a destination town, as well as addressing the Council's climate change objectives by reducing reliance on cars, and encouraging the use of trains and buses.

In response to a Member's question, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that Legal & General (who owned Stevenage Leisure Park to the west of the railway line) were continuing their engagement with SBC regarding plans for redevelopment of the Leisure Park, although these plans were for the long term.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the endorsement of the project from the Stevenage Development Board be noted.
2. That the business case for the Station Gateway project be approved, and that authority be delegated to the Strategic Director (TP) to submit the project summary to the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing Towns Fund team on behalf of the Council (acting as Accountable Body).

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW STATION NORTH MULTI-STOREY CAR PARK AND CYCLE HUB AS PART OF A SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT INTERCHANGE

The Executive considered a report with regard to the proposed construction of a new Station North Multi-Storey Car Park (MSCP) and Cycle Hub as part of a Sustainable Transport Interchange.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration advised that this project was interlinked to the Bus Interchange and Lytton Way highway works schemes. The new MSCP would provide a travel hub for motorists and cyclists, within easy reach of the Railway Station and Bus Interchange. The MSCP had been designed to ensure that there was sufficient capacity for electric vehicle (EV) parking/charging, both in the first instance and to take account of future increased EV usage.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) added that there were a number of important factors to consider in association with the MSCP project, including the impact of current and future developments, utilising the current surface level car parks as part of the Regeneration Strategy, parking capacity and usage patterns, sustainability, design funding, and mitigation of the capacity and financial implications during the construction phase. Officers were on track to seek final approval to the scheme in February 2022, pending the outcome of the planning process.

At the Chair's request, the Strategic Director (CF) explained the proposed funding sources for the projects, as set out in Recommendation 2.2.1 of the report. The Chair drew attention to Recommendation 2.2.3 of the report, which outlined available options for mitigating any loss to parking capacity and income during the construction phase.

The following comments were made by Members:

- Officers were asked to give consideration to the re-instatement of the Fairlands Valley Showground "Park and Ride" bus service for the duration of the construction works on the new MSCP;
- In view of the ever-changing car parking landscape in the town, Officers were requested to add a new section to the SBC website showing visitors where to park in the Town Centre, which could be regularly updated as changes were brought about through the various stages of the Town Centre Regeneration Programme;
- Officers undertook to investigate and report back to Members on the provision of disabled parking spaces on the Station South Car Park whilst construction of the new MSCP was taking place on the Station North Car Park;
- Following conclusion of the planning process, officers were asked to report back to Members to update them on Hertfordshire County Council's comments with regard to any highway impacts of the proposed development; and
- The Assistant Director (Regeneration) was asked to give provide an overview of the project to the next meeting of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the impact of new and existing redevelopments in the town centre and the impact it will have on car capacity and locations be noted.
2. That it be noted that an application for planning approval is being presented for submission for the MSCP and cycle hub facility.
3. That the emerging design for the MSCP, which can be refined during and after the planning process, be noted.
4. That it be noted that the total estimated budget for the scheme is £9.7M, with a target construction price of £8.9M.
5. That the decision-making gateway for the project be noted.
6. That it be noted that the revenue impact of any borrowing to fund the capital cost and any forecasted one-off income loss during construction are key financial considerations for the General Fund, and that authority will be sought from Council to delegate to Executive approval of the additional borrowing and change to the Treasury Management Strategy, subject to the revenue impacts falling within current Executive delegated limits.
7. That the proposed funding mechanism for the project be approved, subject to the Towns Fund approval process and funding being confirmed by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) comprising:
 - £6M from the “Towns Fund”;
 - £200,000 from the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP);
 - £1.45M from the Marshgate land sale receipt, as set out in Resolution 8. below; and
 - £1.85M to £2.05M from prudential borrowing, subject to the net impact on the General Fund, as stated in Resolution 6. above.
8. That the use of £1.45M of capital funding from the Marshgate land sale receipt, which was ring-fenced for regeneration purposes in August 2021, be approved. This receipt was being generated from the sale of car park and as such part of the receipt is being requested to be used to replace parking in the town.
9. That the preparation of a report detailing the available options for mitigating any loss to parking capacity and income during the construction phase be approved, including (but not limited to):
 - “park & stride” at alternative sites;
 - utilisation of existing capacity in other car parks, with flexibility on tariff types;
 - enhanced maintenance in St. George’s Way Multi-Storey Car Park;
 - review of parking concession deals and where their parking is located; and
 - promotional campaign relating to the other parking facilities, improvements made, and the range of options available.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 2 2021/22

The Executive received a presentation from the Chief Executive concerning the Quarter Two (July to September 2021) Corporate Performance report 2021/22.

The Chief Executive drew attention to the Future Town Future Council (FTFC) performance highlights in Quarter 2, under the headings of Transforming Our Town; More Social and Affordable Housing; Co-operative and Neighbourhoods; Making Your Money Count; and a Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town.

As at Quarter 2, the Chief Executive advised that, of the 46 Corporate Performance Indicators, 32 were at Green status; 1 was at Amber; 12 were at Red; and 1 was not available.

The Chief Executive referred to the focus on the Temporary & Emergency Accommodation; Voids/Repairs; Garage Voids; and Customer Services service areas, and set out the challenges faced by these areas, together with the proposed actions aimed at performance improvement.

Comments on the report made by Executive Members included the following:

- Paragraph 3.28 – Dunn Close garage conversion scheme: Officers were asked to ensure that, for enhanced security, the temporary lighting around the hoardings bounding this site was adjusted to be at a higher level than the existing;
- Paragraph 3.35 – Garage Improvement Programme: Officers were requested to publish details of the Programme on the Council’s website;
- Paragraphs 3.44 & 3.45 – Healthy Stevenage: the Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People agreed to ensure that officers included updates from the Equalities Commission to the Healthy Stevenage Partnership on the health inequalities in minority communities;
- Paragraph 3.50 – Arts Projects: Officers were reminded to ensure that engagement with Ward Councillors took place regarding local arts projects in their areas;
- Paragraph 3.52 – Cycleways: it was confirmed that the wording should state “installation on a major cycleway” not “installation of a major cycleway”; and
- Paragraph 3.55 – Climate Change: it was confirmed that a new, refreshed Climate Change Citizens’ Panel would be established in the near future post consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Regeneration and the Leader.

The Executive debated the Quarter 2 position with regard to the key themes which were outlined in the report concerning Emergency & Temporary Accommodation, Voids/Repairs, Garage Voids and Customer Services. Members agreed an additional recommendation that a further detailed update concerning the proposed improvement activities for these service areas be included as part of the Quarter 3 Corporate Performance report to be submitted to the Executive in March 2022.

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 2021/22, together with the latest achievements, be noted.
2. That the continued impacts of Covid-19 on the Housing Options service and actions to recover performance be noted (Paragraphs 3.72 to 3.77 of the report).
3. That performance challenges relating to housing voids be noted and actions to improve performance be endorsed (Paragraphs 3.78 to 3.84 of the report).
4. That the challenges related to garages with asbestos and the letting of council garages, and the planned measures to improve performance, be monitored and endorsed (Paragraphs 3.85 to 3.92 of the report).
5. That challenges within the Customer Service Centre (including Complaints and Website) be noted and improvement plans endorsed (Paragraphs 3.93 to 3.114 of the report).
6. That the Executive Action Tracker, as set out in Appendix 3 to the report, be noted.
7. That a further detailed update concerning the proposed improvement activities for the Emergency & Temporary Accommodation, Voids/Repairs, Garage Voids, Repairs and Customer Services service areas be included as part of the Quarter 3 Corporate Performance report to be submitted to the Executive in March 2022.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report; and 7. To more closely monitor the performance measures attributable to these service areas.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

8 COUNCIL TAX BASE 2022/23

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

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the Council Tax Base for 2022/23, after making allowances for a collection rate of 98.25%, was 28,003.7 equivalent “Band D” properties (the comparative figure for 2021/22 was 27,733.8).

The Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that the expected increase in Council Tax support (CTS) cases expected and accounted for in the 2021/22 tax base did not materialise, and the caseload at 22 November 2021 was only 5,515, of which 3,472 were working age. The 2021/22 tax base assumed numbers would rise up to 3,940 for those of working age by 31 March 2022.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources explained that the increased council tax income

collectable by SBC in 2022/23 was estimated to be £59,532. The tax collection rate had remained unchanged in the 2022/23 calculation, despite council tax being 0.8% below target collection rate, which equated to £48,938 in lost income. The tax base was going to be higher as a result of lower CTS in 2021/22, and it was envisaged that collection rates should improve in 2022/23.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That, in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Tax Base) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by Stevenage Borough Council for the year 2022/23 will be 28,502.5 equivalent “Band D” properties, reduced to 28,003.7 equivalent “Band D” properties after making allowances for a 98.52% collection rate.
2. That the 2022/23 Council Tax Base be approved, subject to any changes made to the Council Tax Support Scheme (CTS) for 2022/23. The Executive approved the CTS Scheme at its meeting on 20 October 2021 for recommendation to Council.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

9 HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA): DRAFT HRA BUDGET 2022/23; HRA MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2021/22 - 2025/26; AND HRA BUSINESS PLAN REVIEW 2021

The Executive considered a report on the Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 2022/23; the HRA Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021/22 – 2025/26; and HRA Business Plan Review 2021.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources advised that the increase in rents was based on September 2021 CPI+1% as set by legislation, which resulted in a 4.1% increase for 2022/23. This, however, should be considered in the context of a low increase in 2021/22, as CPI was only 0.5%, and 4 years of rent reductions between 2016/17 - 2019/20. Social rents would be an average £103.07 per week, LSSO weekly rents would be £120.33 and Affordable £167.57. This generated £2.1Million of rental income for the HRA.

In respect of the draft HRA budget, the Portfolio Holder for Resources stated that this was projected to be £3.2Million, as set out in the table in Paragraph 4.7.1 of the report, which contains £1.4Million of growth pressures, as detailed in Section 4.9 and which included the HRA’s share of Transformation costs for next year of £270,000. Of all the growth, only £179,000 was being treated currently as on-going, while the costs were reviewed ahead of the 30 year HRA Business Plan refresh. Accordingly, the growth had been limited to up to October 2022.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources commented that the 2022/23 year end HRA balances were projected to be £29.7Million, but there was a need to build relatively high balances into the HRA in order to pay back loans taken out for the self-financing agreement with the Government. The latest projected balances for the

HRA versus those projected in the last HRA Business Plan showed that by 2025/26 there was a small gap of £364,000. The minimum level of balances would be assessed for the final budget report, (but was £2.9Million last year) and in the short term balances were higher due to the need to repay debt.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People added that comparison between HRA property rents per week and private sector rents per week showed that a three-bedroom private sector rental property costs an additional 131% (2021/22,133%) more per week than an SBC council home and 30% more than the affordable let properties(2021/22, 32%).

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People advised that Section 4.11.2 of the report set out the financial risks and challenges facing the HRA which included decarbonisation, Housing White paper and Fire Safety Act, all of which would result in what were currently unknown costs being incurred by the HRA. A further update concerning funding these items would be presented as part of the review the HRA Business Plan.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing, Health & Older People updated the Executive on the activities of the Housing Development Team. Since its inception, 300 new homes had been delivered by the Council's in-house Development Team, with 298 more in construction. The chart in Paragraph 4.1.4 of the report showed that SBC would have more properties projected in the HRA in 2022/23 (8,058) since 2014/15 (8,137).

Members noted that a review of the HRA 30 year Business Plan would take place in Summer 2022.

In response to a question, the Strategic Director (CF) confirmed that the situation with regard to the numbers of Right to Buy applications was kept under regular review.

The Executive supported an additional recommendation proposed by the Leader that the Executive Portfolio Holders for Resources and Housing, Health & Older People be requested to write a joint letter to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing setting out the Council's concerns and uncertainties over the funding of its HRA Budget, including Climate Change/decarbonisation implications, new fire/building safety regulations, increased cost of Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) borrowing, the steep rise in the cost of construction materials, and the continuing pressures caused by the Covid pandemic, and that this letter be copied to the Local Government Association and District Councils Network.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the HRA rent on dwellings be increased, week commencing 4 April 2022, by 4.1% which is an average increase of £4.06 for social rents, £6.60 for affordable rents and £4.74 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52-week year), calculated using the rent formula, CPI + 1% in line with the Government's rent policy, as set out in Paragraph 4.1.1 of the report.
2. That draft 2022/23 HRA budget, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be

approved, noting 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 HRA rent setting budget for 2022/23 be presented to the Executive on 21 January 2022 and Council on 26 January 2022.
4. That key partners and other stakeholders be consulted, and their views fed back into the 2022/23 budget setting process.
5. That for modelling purposes, unless specified, fees and charges increases are in line with inflation.
6. That for modelling purposes, the updated inflation assumptions used in the Medium Term Financial Strategy be approved.
7. That the Capital Programme assumptions contained within the report be approved for the existing programme and new build properties and incorporated into the 2022/23 budget.
8. That borrowing to fund capital projects in 2022/23 of £15.7M be approved, and that future years be considered annually in line with anticipated expenditure.
9. That the minimum level of balances for the HRA Business Plan, set as a minimum of £3Million, be noted.
10. That the reserve of £3.4Million, to mitigate against future interest rate volatility and a reserve to accommodate future debt repayment, be noted.
11. That, if material changes to forecasts are required following further Government announcements, the Assistant Director (Finance and Estates) be requested to revise the Medium Term Financial Strategy and re-present it to the Executive for approval.
12. That Trade Unions and staff be consulted on the key messages contained within the Medium Term Financial Strategies and more specifically when drawing up any proposals where there is a risk of redundancy.
13. That the Executive Portfolio Holders for Resources and Housing, Health & Older People be requested to write a joint letter to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing setting out the Council's concerns and uncertainties over the funding of its HRA Budget, including Climate Change/decarbonisation implications, new fire/building safety regulations, increased cost of Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) borrowing, the steep rise in the cost of construction materials, and the continuing pressures caused by the Covid pandemic, and that this letter be copied to the Local Government Association and District Councils Network

Reason for Decision: As contained in report; and 13. To bring to the Government's attention the continuing challenges faced by the Council as the owner of its Housing Stock.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

10 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

11 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 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 - 17 NOVEMBER 2021

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 17 November 2021 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

13 MAKING YOUR MONEY COUNT OPTIONS 2022/23

The Executive considered a Part II report in respect of the proposed Making Your Money Count options for 2022/23 regarding the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account budgets.

It was **RESOLVED** that the recommendations contained in the report, together with an amendment to Recommendation 2.12 and one additional Recommendation, be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

14 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

Omicron Covid-19 variant

The Chair accepted as an urgent item of Part II business an update from the Senior Environmental Health and Licensing Manager on the Covid-19 Omicron variant.

CHAIR