

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 22 March 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Adrian Brown, Michael Downing, Alex Farquharson, Wendy Kerby, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris and Simon Speller.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.56pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for Absence were received on behalf of Councillors Myla Arceno, Chris Howells, Sarah Mead and Loraine Rossati.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 9 FEBRUARY 2022 AND 15 FEBRUARY 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 February 2022 and 15 February 2022 be approved as correct records and signed by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

2. Minutes – 2 February 2022 and 9 February 2022

Noted.

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

Noted.

4. Covid-19 Update

The Chair asked the Committee to submit any questions they had regarding the Covid-19 update to the Strategic Director (TP).

5. Towns Fund Business Case – Stevenage Enterprise Centre

The Committee was informed that this was the final of the nine Towns Fund Business Cases for submission to the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. It was for a life sciences-based facility, which it was hoped

would help create jobs and investment in the town. The project was at an early stage, and a refined Business Plan would be required prior to any draw down of Towns Fund monies.

The following questions/comments were made by Members:

- in response to a question, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) confirmed that the equalities and diversity implications of all the Towns Fund projects were considered at overall programme level, as well as through specific Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) prepared for each scheme. Once the Enterprise Centre project was further advanced, a fuller EQIA would be produced. Officers had impressed on the potential developer the need for the facility to be inclusive and available for use by community groups and residents;
- in reply to a further question, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that the Centre would be owned by SBC. An interested developer has an option for the site (supported by a private investor), and discussions were ongoing with potential operators of the facility. It had been identified that there was market demand for life sciences space, and it would be up to the operator to consider a mix of short/long terms leases for the use of space within the Centre. It was confirmed that there would be no impact/risk on SBC finances, as it was proposed that the project would be funded through external investment, as well as a Towns Fund contribution. However, a due diligence exercise would need to be undertaken prior to the expenditure of Towns Fund monies.
- officers were requested to give consideration to a proposal that the Committee be consulted on the Towns Fund schemes in future when significant project milestones were met; and
- in response to a final question regarding the possible overlap between the Enterprise Centre and the existing Business Technology Centre (BTC), the Strategic Director (CF) stated that the BTC was a Council-owned asset and was a commercial arrangement between SBC and WENTA, carried out through a procurement exercise.

6. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Policy & Strategy

The Corporate Policy & Research Officer advised that the proposed Policy and Strategy re-affirmed the Council's commitment to the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and in publishing a clear and updated set of equality objectives under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

In response to a Member's question, the Corporate Policy & Research Officer explained that the "Equality Framework for Local Government" referred to in Paragraph 3.1.4 of the report was a framework published by the Local Government Association and contained criteria for good practice. SBC would be self-assessing against the framework in order to provide a baseline for ongoing work on the proposed EDI Action Plan.

A Member referred to the 9 protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010, as listed in Paragraph 3.2 of the Policy and in the Strategy, and

was concerned that a socio-economic duty was not included in that list. Although the Policy encouraged Members and officers to consider the impact of their decisions on people who were less fortunate because of their social/economic background, the Committee agreed that this statement should be strengthened to require (rather than encourage), and asked officers to obtain the agreement of the Executive Portfolio Holder for Communities, Community Safety & Equalities to this change.

7. Corporate Performance – Quarter 3 2021/22

The Strategic Director (CF) stated that two-thirds of the Key Performance Indicators were at green status, but that work had continued to address those at red status via areas of focus on Temporary Accommodation / Homelessness; Voids; Garage Voids; and Customer Service Centre. The challenges faced by these areas, together with actions for performance improvement, had been presented to the Executive.

The Strategic Director (CF) added that the officers were investigating the Executive's request for the provision to all Members of a ward by ward report on long-term voids (including the length of time that the property had been void and the reasons why).

The Strategic Director (CF) responded to a series of questions as follows:

- she explained the colour coding in the performance charts, commenting that the red symbol was a triangle and not an arrow;
- she would come back to Members outside of the meeting regarding whether the statistics for Performance Measures CS8 (Anti-social behaviour per 1,000 population) and N115b (The rate of violence against the person per 1,000) related to reported incidents and/or convictions;
- the Assistant Director (Digital & Transformation) would be looking at introducing measures to improve Customer Service Centre telephony response times;
- she explained that the colour coding for the various quarters set out in the performance charts related to performance within each quarter, rather than cumulatively;
- she agreed to request the relevant Assistant Director to respond to Members in respect of the ongoing discussions with the Lawn Tennis Association regarding tennis development across Stevenage (referred to in Paragraph 3.47 of the report); and
- she agreed to arrange for a briefing note to be prepared and sent to Members in relation to ongoing Suicide Prevention work (referred to in Paragraph 3.48 of the report).

A Member commented that officers should give consideration to a review and possible simplification of the performance measures set out in the report for future presentation, linking them more directly to the Council's priorities.

8. Approval of the Discretionary “Energy Rebate” Scheme

The Strategic Director (CF) advised that the Discretionary Scheme had been designed to assist hardship cases for those residents living in properties in Council Tax Bands E to H. However, new Government guidance indicated that discretionary funds could be used to assist residents living in properties in Bands A to D, and so officers had requested clarification from the Government regarding use of the funds.

In reply to a question, the Strategic Director (CF) commented that the discretionary scheme was intended to benefit those residents who were already in receipt of Council Tax support, housing benefits and/or Universal Credit.

9. 3rd Quarter Revenue Budget Monitoring report 2021/22

Noted.

10. 3rd Quarter Capital Programme Monitoring report 2021/22

Noted.

10a. Urgent Business – Update on Ukraine Crisis

In response to a question, the Strategic Director confirmed that the SBC Ukraine Crisis Working Group was an officer body, set up to gauge the detrimental impacts of the crisis on SBC services, finances, contracts, energy costs, fuel costs, materials costs etc., together with actions to mitigate against these impacts. The Working Group met on a weekly basis.

4 OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2022-23

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report requesting the Committee to agree its Work Programme for the 2022/23 Municipal Year.

The Scrutiny Officer drew attention to the outcome of a Members’ survey regarding ideas for improving scrutiny set out in Section 4 of the report, and suggestions for future scrutiny reviews outlined in Section 5. In respect of the latter, he referred to a request for a scrutiny review of the Council’s Constitution (which he proposed would be considered via a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group); and a request for a review of Communications, including customer complaints and social media (which he proposed would be considered as a one-off performance review). He asked Members to bear in mind the limited capacity/resources available to support scrutiny reviews.

The following points were raised by Members during the discussion on the report:

- continued consideration of the Committee’s Action Tracker in the summer of 2022 was welcomed;
- it was noted that, although the Committee could support work on the review of

- the Council's Constitution, the ultimate responsibility for approving and adopting a revised Constitution rested with the Full Council;
- consideration should be given to the introduction of a Gap analysis approach to major reviews (similar to previous Best Value reviews);
 - scrutiny resources should match its supposed importance in the Council;
 - more emphasis should be placed on Executive Portfolio Holders being invited to attend Committee meetings to be questioned and challenged on specific items; and
 - a greater use of expert/external witnesses to assist the Committee in its work, and the possible use of "critical friends", would be welcomed.

As part of the Constitution Review, and in response to a Member's request, the Borough Solicitor (Monitoring Officer) was asked to prepare a Briefing Note for Members on the legal requirements for a constitution; what it should contain; possible Local Government Association model constitution; and what authority it carried.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That Scrutiny Members' feedback on ideas for improving Scrutiny, as set out in Section 4 of the report, be noted.
2. That, having considered the ideas put forward by individual Members set out in Section 5 of the report, the following matters be added to a work programme of potential Scrutiny review items for 2022/23:
 - Council Constitution review (as a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group)
 - Communications review
3. That the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group meetings carrying out policy development work identified so far for the Committee, as set out in Section 7.1 of the report, be noted.

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 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 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 MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 9 FEBRUARY 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 9 February 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

9 PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

12. Part II Minutes – Executive – 2 February 2022

Noted.

13. Write Offs

The Strategic Director (CF) answered a number of Members' questions regarding this item.

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

None.

11 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR