

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Monday 25 September 2017

Time: 6.00 p.m.

Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: L Martin-Haugh (Chair), J Brown, M Downing,
A Farquharson, M Gardner, J Lloyd, S Mead and R Parker CC.

Start / End Time Start Time: 6.00 p.m.
 End Time: 7.25 p.m.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P Bibby CC, H Burrell, E Harrington, A Mitchell CC and C Saunders.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 26 JULY 2017

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26 July 2017 are approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3. PART 1 DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

This report had not been circulated to Members five clear days before the meeting nor had it been made available for public inspection. The Chair determined however that given the short time left before the end of the call-in period on 29 September 2017, it could be considered on this occasion.

Business Rates Revaluation Support Scheme 2017/18 – 2020/21

The meeting was advised that this item had not been included in the Council's Forward Plan and therefore 28 days' notice of the decision being taken had not been given. The Chair was consulted prior to the meeting of the Executive and as the Scheme need to be advertised for a month to allow businesses to apply and to ensure that monies are distributed in a timely manner the Chair was content that the matter be consider by the Executive at their meeting on 19 September.

The Assistant Director Finance and Estates presented a report which updated Members on the Government's scheme and proposed a local scheme for distributing the funds.

The Committee was advised that the Policy and Development work that it had undertaken on the Business Rates Evaluation Support Scheme had been considered in the writing of the report and that the scheme would be advertised from 26 September.

Members asked a number of detailed questions about business rate collection and the process for dealing with arrears which were answered by the Officer.

Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017/18 – 2020/21

The Assistant Director Finance and Estates presented the report and advised the Committee of the issues around change rent policies and longer term financial planning.

Members asked a number of detailed questions about the Council's loan repayment schedules which were answered by the Officer.

A Member questioned the rationale behind the inflation assumptions in the report. In reply the Officer advised the Committee that the CPI indicator had been benchmarked against other factors, although higher rates of inflation remained a risk, while the utility increases had been based on market movements in the previous five years.

In reply to a question concerning the fitment of solar panels to Council properties the Committee was advised that it was currently not economically viable to undertake the fitting of these panels but officers are continuing to track the market conditions so as to be in a position to act if/when the position improves.

In reply to a further question concerning the feasibility of retro fitting sprinkler systems to high rise blocks the Committee was advised of the activities currently being undertaken by the Council with regard to fire safety across all seven of the Council's high rise blocks.

A Member expressed concern at the potential safety hazards presented by the provision of some tenant supplied cookers and freezers in sheltered housing schemes. The Assistant Director Housing and Investment undertook to review the situation.

General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017/18 – 2020/21

The Assistant Director Finance and Estates presented the report and advised the Committee that recommendation 8 in the report had been amended by the Executive to include the Leader as one of the consultees for the Hertfordshire Business Rates process.

A Member expressed concern at the potential loss of business rate revenue as a

result of schools transferring to academy status. In reply the Assistant Director Finance and Estates advised the Committee that such transfers were tracked by the Council. Councils are bound to act in accordance with national policy in this regard.

In reply to a question concerning a potential lack of agreement amongst Hertfordshire authorities the Committee was advised that in the event of non-agreement existing arrangements would apply. It was noted that the trial would be for a one year period and that it had not been determined that Hertfordshire would host the trial.

1st Quarter Revenue Monitoring Account – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

The Assistant Director Finance and Estates presented the 1st Quarter Revenue Monitoring Account – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account.

In reply to a question concerning variation limits delegated to the Executive the Committee was advised that limits were prescribed in the Council's Financial Regulations which were agreed at Council. In addition the variation limits should be considered within the context of the Council's overall budget spend.

1st Quarter Monitoring Capital Programme – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

The Assistant Director Finance and Estates presented the 1st Quarter Monitoring Capital Programme – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account and advised the Committee that the Executive had discussed budget clinics for officers and upgrading the Council's ICT infrastructure.

Members raised the issue of budget slippage and the potential for reallocating monies to alternative projects. In reply the Committee was advised that in many cases monies had been committed to projects and were therefore unavailable unless savings had been achieved or the spend was deemed to be no longer necessary.

In reply to a question concerning budget clinics for officers the Committee was advised that the clinics assisted officers with the budget setting process and should result in reduced deferrals over the coming months.

Annual Treasury Management Review of 2016/17 Including Prudential Code

The Assistant Director Finance and Estates presented the report and advised the Committee that the review had been recommended for approval by Council.

In reply to a question concerning the actions to be taken following the recent downgrading by Moody's of the UK sovereign rating to Aa2 the Committee was advised that the downgrading by Moody's moved its UK rating into line with that provided by both Fitch's and S&P's. The Council would continue with its risk averse investment strategy.

Corporate Performance for Quarter One 2017/18

The Assistant Director Corporate Services and Transformation presented the report and advised the Committee that the Executive had focussed on improvement measures for voids and the Customer Service Centre at their meeting.

Members questioned the activities being undertaken by the Council to address the high turnover of staff and performance of the Customer Service Centre. In reply Officers advised the Committee of a number of initiatives under consideration such as training schemes for staff, digital pathways to Council services, staff movement between front and back office services in times of high demand and recruiting above establishment but conceded that pay and bonus initiatives would be difficult to implement due to the constraints of the Single Status agreement.

The Committee was advised that there was a lack of demand for standard sheltered accommodation which was the main reason behind the failure to achieve the re-let target. The housing allocation policy is under review and will consider options to potentially expand the client base for this type of accommodation and thus reduce re-let times.

A Member expressed concern at the increasing financial losses, including service charges, for major voids. In reply the Committee was advised that contractors were now liable to pay penalties to the Council should repair works to empty properties exceed the target number of days. In reply to a further question it was confirmed that Council Tax would not be recovered in such circumstances.

In reply to a Member's question about the impact of recent IT issues on the ICT1 availability of core systems indicator, the Committee was advised that should the Council's website be classified as a core system the ICT1 measure performance could be expected to fall for Quarter 2.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Part 1 decisions taken by the Executive at its meeting on 19 September 2017 be noted:

- **Business Rates Revaluation Support Scheme**
- **Housing Revenue Account Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017/18 – 2020/21**
- **General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017/18 – 2020/21**
- **1st Quarter Revenue Monitoring Report – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account**
- **1st Quarter Monitoring Capital Programme – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account**
- **Annual Treasury Management Review of 2016/17 including Prudential Code**
- **Corporate Performance for Quarter 1 2017/2018**

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

None.

5. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

6. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED** that:

1. Under Section 100(A) of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involved 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. Members having considered the reasons for the following report being in Part II and determined that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

7. PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

This report had not been circulated to Members five clear days before the meeting. The Chair determined however that given the short time left before the end of the call-in period on 29 September 2017, it be considered on this occasion

Communal Heating Refurbishment Contract Procurement

The Assistant Director Housing and Investment presented a report that sought approval from the Executive to commence procurement of a Communal Heating Contract.

Members asked a number of questions on the report which were answered by the officers.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Part II decision taken by the Executive at its meeting on 19 September 2017 be noted:

- **Communal Heating Refurbishment Contract Procurement**

8. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None

Chair