

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 12 October 2022

Time: 2.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Sharon Taylor OBE CC (Chair), Richard Henry (Vice-Chair), Sandra Barr, Jackie Hollywell, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Simon Speller and Jeannette Thomas.

Start / End Start Time: 2.00pm

Time: End Time: 5.15pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence.

The Chair (Councillor Sharon Taylor) announced that she would be declaring an interest in Item 4 – Social Housing Decarbonisation Funding, as her daughter worked for Wates Living who are the recommended contractor for undertaking the works. She advised that she would leave the meeting for the duration of this item, which would be chaired by the Vice-Chair, Councillor Richard Henry.

The Chair paid tribute to former Councillor Howard Burrell who had passed away recently. As well as his work as a councillor, she referred to former Councillor Burrell's distinguished musical career, including his role as Professor of Music at the University of Hertfordshire. She expressed her condolences to his wife, family and friends.

2 MINUTES - 14 SEPTEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 14 September 2022 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 meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees be noted –

Community Select Committee – 5 September 2022

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 20 September 2022

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 21 September 2022

4 SOCIAL HOUSING DECARBONISATION FUNDING

[Prior to the consideration of this item, Councillor Sharon Taylor declared an interest in the matter as her daughter worked for Wates Living who are the recommended contractor. She left the meeting for the duration of the item, which was chaired by the Vice-Chair, Councillor Richard Henry]

The Executive considered a report in respect of the proposed procurement process for a contract to undertake decarbonisation works to 399 Council homes, in conjunction with funding awarded from a bid made by SBC to the Government for Social Housing Decarbonisation funding Wave 1.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development advised that the report detailed proposals to enter into a contract with a construction partner, to enable the retrofit a number of Council homes to EPC C. This used an established procurement framework, and would enable swift progress as the Council worked to tackle the climate crisis through projects such as this retrofit.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated that the report recommended that the Executive agreed that the Council called-off via direct award from the South East Consortium framework and that Wates Living be appointed from that framework to carry out the works. This would improve the energy performance of around 399 of the Council's social rented homes.

In response to Members' questions, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development commented:

- it was not affordable for the Council to undertake decarbonisation works for the whole of the Council's housing stock as the Government decarbonisation scheme required match-funding from the Council unless the Government stepped up to provide the appropriate financial level of support and/or considered other flexibilities, such as waiving the cost of SBC's borrowing to purchase the housing stock. The Council would be bidding for Wave 2 of funding, but the Government needed to publish a long-term plan for social housing decarbonisation to provide local authorities with more certainty of funding and delivery, to help households meet their energy costs along with contributing towards meeting climate change targets; and
- the Housing & Investment Unit would endeavour to make tenants' lives as comfortable as possible whilst the decarbonisation works to their homes was being completed. As far as reasonably possible, individual needs would be taken into account during discussions between officers and tenants prior to work commencing on their properties.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That it be agreed that the Council can call off via direct award from the South East Consortium framework, and that Wates Living be appointed from that framework to carry out works to improve the energy performance of around 399 Stevenage Borough Council social rented homes.

2. That a contract value for the works, with an anticipated value of around £3 million using JCT measured term contract, for the period from the appointment date of the successful contractor to 30 June 2025, be agreed.
3. That the option to include further works, within the contract value, should SBC be successful in its bid for funding through Wave 2.1 of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, be agreed, and that this option will be built into the agreed contract call off.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

5 CLIMATE CHANGE - ANNUAL UPDATE - OCTOBER 2022

The Executive considered a report in respect of the Climate Change annual update 2022, which provided an overview of the actions that SBC was taking to address climate change following a review being undertaken by the new Portfolio Holder.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change advised that the report showcased the new approach to street level and neighbourhood working on tackling climate change. The report expanded upon the June update to the Executive which highlighted SBC's work on climate change, along with successes in bidding for funds to decarbonise its housing stock, as well as supporting local businesses on their low carbon journeys.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change referred to the co-operative working between himself and the Portfolio Holders for Communities, Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Council, Culture, Leisure, Children and Young People, and Economy, Enterprise and Transport to help and hear residents' concerns about climate change.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change highlighted the recommendation to fund a new Head of Climate Action role, to be considered in the overall Medium Term Financial Strategy package in November 2022. This was recommended in order to increase full-time senior capacity to support this priority, to help formulate a range of complex businesses cases for investment, lobby for funding, help mobilise teams and support the delivery of the Council's local engagement activity.

With the aid of a short slide presentation, the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change highlighted the green working with strong community involvement that already taken place across the Borough, including sites at Vardon Road, Baddeley Close and Fairlands Valley Park. He explained that he would be establishing 3 Neighbourhood Green Planning pilot schemes in the St.Nicholas/Martins Wood wards; Pin Green/Bedwell wards; and Shephall/Bandle Hill wards.

The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) drew attention to Paragraph 3.9 of the report, and commented that SBC had agreed to fund 100 Memberships for a WENTA-run net zero programme for small and medium size businesses supporting

them to understand what they could do to address climate change challenges.

The following comments were made by Members:

- members of the public who regularly raised questions on green/climate change issues were recommended to read the report, as it answered a number of the frequently asked questions on such issues;
- thanks were given to the work of the Green Space Volunteers, the Youth Mayor/Youth Council and various other community groups for their practical initiatives in helping to address green/climate change issues on the ground;
- it was confirmed that the retrofitting of decarbonisation measures to all SBC-owned properties would cost approximately £240Million. Officers would continue to bid for Government funding and would endeavour to complete as much work as possible to support the Council's ambition to be net carbon zero by 2030; and
- the concept of Neighbourhood Green Plans was supported.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the progress being made to deliver the Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan be noted.
2. That the proposed approach to engagement, as set out in the report, be endorsed.
3. That it be noted that a proposal to create a Senior Officer lead role for Climate Change will be included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy report in November 2022.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY (CIL) - ALLOCATIONS AND GOVERNANCE

The Executive considered a report outlining the amounts of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) secured and projected; seeking agreement to the maintenance of the current CIL Charging Schedule for 2023/24; and seeking agreement to a proposed change to the approval process for CIL expenditure and allocation.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change advised that SBC had been applying the Community Infrastructure Levy to new developments since April 2020. He drew attention to a proposed review of CIL rates in 2023/24, as well as recommendations to change the responsibility for approval of CIL income of more than £75,000 from the Planning & Development Committee to the Executive, and for the allocation of £15,000 CIL monies per Co-operative Neighbourhood area per year for local infrastructure improvements.

The Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) added that the proposed review of CIL rates would take account of the increased growth in the life sciences sector in the Borough.

In reply to a Member's question, the Assistant Director (Planning & Regulation) confirmed that there were certain trigger points during the development period for schemes that required developers to make CIL payments.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the amounts of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) secured and projected be noted.
2. That the current CIL Charging Schedule rates be maintained and the rates reviewed in 2023/24.
3. That Executive approval, rather than Planning & Development Committee approval, be required to allocate and spend more than £75,000 of CIL income.
4. That the allocation of £15,000 per Co-operative Neighbourhood area, per year from 2023, be approved for local infrastructure (as per CIL Regulations) improvements which support Climate Change improvements and carbon reduction measures.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 COST OF LIVING CRISIS RESPONSE

The Executive considered a report which provided an update on the steps that SBC had taken already in responding to the cost of living crisis in the country, and seeking agreement to the actions that would be taken to further support local residents, businesses and community groups, and the Council, over the coming months.

The Leader drew attention to the national and local context for the cost of living crisis, and the impact of increases in the cost of energy, food, fuel and other goods; the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia; highest levels of inflation for 40 years and rising interest rates; ongoing residual impact from the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit. Other factors were also impacting on businesses, such as increased supplier and material costs, challenges in recruiting and retaining staff, and transport costs.

The Leader stated that the impact on the Council and its finances, including increased costs, an increase in debt and arrears for rent, council tax and business rates, increased demand for benefits, homelessness and other support, and reduced income from key income streams, were set out in the report

The Leader explained that the report also updated the Executive on the steps that Stevenage Borough Council and partners had taken already in responding to the cost of living crisis and introduced a proposed action plan to further support local

residents, businesses, Council employees and the Council itself. This plan would form the basis of continued discussions with partners, including through Stevenage Together, to develop a town-wide response to the crisis and co-ordinate activity to achieve maximum benefit.

The Leader advised that the Action Plan would be overseen and kept under review by the Cost of Living Member Working Group. The next cost of living report would be submitted to the December Executive and update reports thereafter on at least a quarterly basis.

Members made the following comments:

- there was a need to communicate to residents the sources of legitimate household financial support that might be available to them, as well as warning them of the possibility of scams in this area;
- physical and mental wellbeing of individuals would be affected, and there was a limit to the amount of support that could be given by services such as Citizens Advice and the HCC Money Advice Unit; and
- there was a strong possibility of increased homelessness due to the cost of living crisis, especially as a number of private landlords were leaving the sector by selling their properties.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the draft Cost of Living Action Plan, attached at Appendix A to the report, be agreed as the basis of an initial town-wide response to the cost of living crisis.
2. That the Council continues to work with key local partners, including through the Stevenage Together Partnership, to develop a co-ordinated response across agencies to support residents, businesses and community groups.
3. That the Executive Member Cost of Living Working Group continues to oversee the development and implementation of the action plan, supported by the Officer Working Group, and reports back on progress to the Executive in December 2022.
4. That it be noted that the potential for reduced income from fee-based services and people struggling to pay council tax and/or rent, coupled with increased demand for services and higher costs, could significantly impact on the Council's short and medium-term finances. This will be closely monitored and reported to Executive as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and budget setting process.
5. That the Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport writes to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to request that the recently announced cap on the cost of energy for businesses for six months is extended to two years, in line with the cap on household energy costs, to provide certainty for local organisations.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

8 FUTURE COUNCIL 2025 TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Executive considered a report which provided an update on the Future Council 2025 Transformation Programme, including proposals for the Council to implement a Five-Star Customer Service programme, which responded to the key principles agreed by the Executive in August 2021.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT reminded the Executive that, in order to respond to increasing financial challenges faced by the Council, and to deliver the level of service residents and customers expected, it had agreed the need for a transformation programme in August 2021.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT stated that this programme was part of the Making Your Money Count objective within the Corporate Plan. Since the previous report, further work had been undertaken to shape proposals and to implement a first phase of change, and further investment had been made in a team to deliver the programme.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT referred to the improvements underway in 2022/23, as well as the outline of a programme for 2023/24. The report included an update on digital improvements being made in the first phase, as well as a proposed Five-Star Customer Service programme to improve the service offered to residents. The programme had been shaped by feedback from Members, staff and residents (including, for example, analysis of complaints), and the report also included proposals for further resident engagement in order to shape the future offer to residents.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT explained that the five parts of the proposed programme were:

- 1) Accessible services online and 24/7;
- 2) Easy to use and trackable processes;
- 3) Spot and solve issues before they arose;
- 4) An answer first time and clarity on the next steps; and
- 5) Personalised advice and support.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT commented that the report included a set of changes to processes, technology, structures and culture which would make up the programme, and which would be developed into more detailed plans over the autumn. Plans were being developed to implement structural changes to create larger, more resilient teams and also enable savings. There was approximately £9M staffing spend associated with the services that could be included in the next phase. To illustrate the potential impact, a 5% saving would generate £450,000. A 10-15% saving, which could only be delivered over a period of time, would equate to a saving of circa £1.35M. An outline of the possible team structure was set out in Appendix A to the report. A further update report to Executive was anticipated early in 2023.

The Executive supported the multi-channel approach to transformation and noted that it would be challenging to manage residents' expectations in certain areas of transformation, such as in the work of the Co-operative Neighbourhood Teams.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the Five-Star Customer Service programme, as outlined in Paragraph 4.2 of the report, be agreed.
2. That progress on the first phase of implementation of the Transformation programme be noted.
3. That it be noted that further work to develop detailed plans, including structural change, is ongoing and will be taken forward over the autumn of 2022.
4. That the proposal for resident feedback and engagement, as outlined in Section 4.28 of the report, be endorsed.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

9 REVISED COMPLAINTS POLICY AND NEW UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOUR POLICY

The Executive considered a report in respect of a proposed revised Council Complaints Policy and a proposed new Unacceptable Behaviour Policy.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT advised that the proposed revised Complaints Policy incorporated the changes required to meet the Housing Ombudsman's Complaints Handling Code. This Code aimed to ensure social landlords had positive, welcoming complaints processes and with a more consistent approach across the sector.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT commented that the Council would change from a 3-stage to a 2-stage complaints process and would adopt a new standard definition for customer complaints. This would be supported by a new digital complaints system.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT stated that it was recognised that some residents repeatedly raised the same issue through different channels or to different councillors, even though they had taken the complaint through all stages of the complaints process and have had an appropriate resolution in line with the policy. Consequently, a new Unacceptable Behaviour Policy was also proposed to ensure the organisation could respond if a customer's demands or persistence became unreasonable. This approach could also be applied to interactions online or on social media.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT recommended that the Executive approved these policies to ensure that the Council complied with the

Ombudsman's requirements and continued to offer a high-quality complaints service to customers. To support the new policies there would be training for complaints handling officers, and also for councillors through the Modern Member Programme.

Members asked for consideration to be given to the following:

- when operating the Complaints Policy, could officers look at distinguishing between complaints and service requests;
- in respect of the Unacceptable Behaviour Policy, it should be made clear that the public may have to deal with a specified officer (especially in small teams), but would have the right for the matter to be escalated to more senior officers if required; and
- the wording in the Unacceptable Behaviour Policy regarding behaviour on social media should be strengthened.

In reply to a Member's question, it was confirmed that complaints on the existing system will remain on that system until completed. Only new complaints will be entered into the new system.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the proposed Complaints Policy, as attached at Appendix A to the report, be approved.
2. That the proposed Unacceptable Behaviour Policy, as attached at Appendix B to the report, be approved.
3. That it be acknowledged that future updates to the Complaints Policy may be needed more frequently than in the past, to meet the requirements of two complaints ombudsman.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

10 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2023/24

The Executive considered a report in respect of the proposed Council Tax Support (CTS) Scheme for 2023/24.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT advised that the report recommended that the current Council Tax Support Scheme remained in place for 2023/24. The scheme for those working aged claimants (WAC) on maximum benefit was a reduction in their liability by 91.5%, paying just 8.5% of their Council Tax bill. Elderly CTS claimants were protected by legislation, and on maximum benefit received 100% rebate.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT explained that the scheme may needed to be changed once more Working Aged Claimants were subject to Universal Credit, as set out in the report. However, the transition to Universal Credit had been slow to date. The report recommended that the scheme

was looked at again in May or June 2023 to determine whether a banded scheme would be better if there had been a significantly increased move from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the existing Council Tax Support scheme of 8.5% council tax liability for those working aged claimants on maximum benefit, (subject to any benefit uplifts) be approved for the financial year 2023/24.
2. That a review of the caseload and transition to Universal Credit in June 2023 be approved, so that consideration can be given for a banded scheme (as set out in Paragraph 4.7.1 of the report).

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

11 QUARTERS 1 AND 2 CAPITAL MONITORING REPORT 2022/23 - GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

The Executive considered the Capital Monitoring report in respect of Quarters 1 and 2 of 2022/23 for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

In respect of the General Fund, the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT referred to the key changes to the reprofiling of capital expenditure for 2022/23 totalling £1.902Million. The major change (£1.004Million) related to Stevenage Direct Services and the Garage Improvement Programme. This Programme was currently being developed and expenditure was anticipated during 2023/24.

With regard to the Housing Revenue Account, the Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT drew attention to the key changes to the reprofiling of capital expenditure for 2022/23 totalling £26.939Million. The main change (£26.744Million) related to New Build Housing Development, where the reported underspend was not reduced as part of the budget setting, to allow flexibility in switching from planned schemes (if delayed or still in the planning stage) and to open market acquisition. The level of capital funding for Housing Development and Housing Investment would be updated as part of the next iteration of the HRA Business Plan.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT commented that there was a forecast reduction in capital receipts for the two years (2022/23 to 2023/24) mainly due to sales now unlikely to proceed. However, receipts for development land of £2.5Million, originally budgeted for 2023/24, had now been received in 2022/23.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That Capital budget re-profiling of £28.841Million from 2022/23 to future years be approved.

2. That in-year virement of £100,000 to re-allocate unspent resources to the provision for current programmes within the Stevenage Direct Services Capital Programme be approved.
3. That in-year virement of £58,000 to re-allocate unspent resources to the provision for current programmes within the Finance & Estates Capital Programme be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

12 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

Investment Zones

The Leader referred to the Government's recent announcement to create a series of Investment Zones across the country. The timescale was very tight, as Government guidance was issued on 2 October 2022, with a deadline for expressions of interest of 14 October 2022. It would be for Upper Tier authorities (ie, Hertfordshire County Council - HCC) to consider the submission of expressions of interest.

The Leader referred to the great opportunities for Stevenage to expand its thriving STEM city/life sciences sector (which had already created additional apprenticeships, training and jobs in the town), as well as continued support for the Town Centre Regeneration programme.

The Leader commented that the Investment Zone prospectus was high level, and that further detail would be required in the future. However, she referred to two dimensions that SBC wished to drive to inform the approach for Stevenage, namely:

- Funding – the opportunity for more Stevenage-raised Business Rates, to be re-invested in the town, was welcomed (with the caveat that the gains were not used to shore up or be in lieu of other public sector finances); and
- Planning liberalisation – this aspect needed further detail, in terms of the rules that would be invoked. Although there could be a loosening of Planning rules, she was not convinced that this would be required in Stevenage, as the Council already had a set of clear policies that ensured that the town benefited from sustainable growth and employment.

The Strategic Director (TP) advised that the response/expression of interest to the Government was being co-ordinated by HCC, supported by the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). He outlined some key points of the Government's policy as follows:

- it was unclear if the Government had a cap on the number of Investment Zones (IZs) nationally. However, the Government was looking for a spread of sites across the country (some mixed, some commercial, and some residential); and
- the known incentives on offer including 100% relief on Business Rates for new businesses in IZs for 25 years; enhanced capital allowances for businesses

(National Insurance, Stamp Duty etc.).

The Strategic Director (TP) added that the IZ bid had to be supported by landowner and relevant Borough/District Councils, and had to be quite specific (sites rather than broader zones).

The Strategic Director (TP) explained that, across Hertfordshire, HCC and the LEP had been looking for Borough/District Council to respond with sites they would wish to recommend for an expression of interest. For Stevenage, work had involved looking at the GlaxoSmithKline site, sites around the Gunnels Wood Road area, and the Station Gateway area.

In terms of Planning liberalisation, the Strategic Director (TP) advised that the implications were quite vague. The use of Local Development Orders was mentioned, as was the ability of local authorities to opt in or opt out of liberalised Planning arrangements.

The Strategic Director (TP) stated that there would be continued discussions amongst Hertfordshire Council Leaders, with the intention for HCC to submit an expression of interest with a strong focus on life sciences and with Stevenage to be a focal point within the submission. It would be made clear in the expression of interest that there were elements relating to Business Rates and Planning that would need to be explored in more detail before a firm commitment could be made, and that the matter would be reviewed at the next stage.

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

14 LAND DISPOSALS

The Executive considered a Part II report which sought approval to conduct a procurement exercise to dispose of sites in order to meet the capital receipt requirements set out in the Council's approved Capital Strategy, and to enable a place shaping scheme to take place in the Bedwell Ward.

It was **RESOLVED** that the recommendations contained in the report be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

15 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

Accommodation for asylum seekers

The Leader, assisted by the Strategic Director (TP), provided an update on accommodation for asylum seekers.

CHAIR