

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 19 October 2022

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Margaret Notley (Mayor), Myla Arceno (Deputy Mayor), Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Adrian Brown, Jim Brown, Teresa Callaghan, Nazmin Chowdhury, Matt Creasey, Michael Downing, John Duncan, Bret Facey, Alex Farquharson, John Gardner, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Chris Howells, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence CC, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, Lin Martin-Haugh, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Sharon Taylor OBE CC, Jeannette Thomas, Anne Wells and Tom Wren.

Start / End Start Time: 7.00pm
Time: End Time: 9.41pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Liz Harrington.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor was saddened to hear of the recent passing of former Councillor Howard Burrell, who had served as an SBC member between 2007 and 2019 and who had been Mayor of the Borough in 2015/16. She knew that a number of Members and officers had attended his recent funeral.

A number of other Members spoke in tribute to former Councillor Burrell, following which the Council stood to observe a minute's silence.

The Mayor announced that Members would no doubt be aware that the Leader of the Council (Councillor Sharon Taylor) was to become a peer with the right to sit in the House of Lords. The Mayor congratulated Councillor Taylor on this excellent achievement.

A number of Members commented and congratulated Councillor Taylor on the achievement.

Councillor Taylor thanked Members for their comments and advised that she would be championing Stevenage and local government generally in her work as a new

peer in the House of Lords.

The Mayor presented Councillor Taylor with a bouquet of flowers.

A list of recent Mayoral events had been circulated to all Members. The Mayor then summarised the activities that she and her consort had been involved with since the July 2022 Council meeting which had included:

- various engagements associated with the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, including the Proclamation event on 11 September 2022 and the Service of Thanksgiving and Commemoration at St. Albans Abbey on 18 September 2022;
- the funeral of former Councillor Howard Burrell;
- the opening of four new businesses in the town;
- numerous charity and fundraising events, including quizzes, garden parties, afternoon teas, barbecues, AGMs, Civic and Military Services and Parades;
- the Coptic Orthodox Church 10th Annual celebration;
- a lunch celebrating 100 years of the ladies Ahmadiyya Muslim Association;
- meeting Spanish students on an exchange visit with Nobel School;
- welcoming Japanese visitors to Stevenage Healthy Hub;
- viewing the St. Bernadette Relics (currently on tour from Lourdes in France) at St. Joseph's Church;
- attending 3 Awards ceremonies;
- attending the Scouting District Camp in Henlow; and
- joining in with four Walks and Talks organised by Cllr Simon Speller.

3 MINUTES - 20 JULY 2022 AND 15 SEPTEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED**:

- (1) that the Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 20 July 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

In respect of Minute 12 – Questions from Members to Committee Chairs / Portfolio Holders, Question (E) concerning a Community Centre at the Hertford Road/Kenilworth Close shops, Councillor Alex Farquharson commented that the response to his original question referred to planning approval/permission. He stated that planning permission did not guarantee that the Community Centre development would take place, especially as the proposal was in the later phases of the development.

- (2) that, subject to the amendments set out below, the Minutes of the Extraordinary Council meeting held on 15 September 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

- the addition of Councillor Adrian Brown to the list of those who had submitted apologies for absence for the meeting; and
- in Minute 2 – Memorial: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and in relation to the 12th paragraph of the preamble, the comment made by Councillor Stephen

Booth stating “He spoke of his memories as a child being visited in hospital by Princess Elizabeth...” be replaced with “He spoke of his memories as a child when he was at St. Mary’s Hospital Paddington to have his tonsils removed, comfortably accommodated in a cot donated by Princess Elizabeth...”

4 COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

There was no community presentation.

5 PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

There were no petitions or deputations.

6 QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL

There were no questions from the Youth Council.

7 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

(A) Question from Mr Jim Borchers

The Council noted that a response to the question submitted by Mr Borchers regarding the network of cycle paths and footpaths around the town had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Mr Borchers was present at the meeting and, following a brief introduction during which he stated that the reply to his original question indicated that the situation was worse than that described on the SBC website in respect of the frequency of sweeping of and clearing of broken glass on cycleways and issues with the use of the FixMyStreet system, he asked the following supplementary question:

“What plans are there to improve the reporting and resolution of problems on the footways and cycleways so that less people are discouraged from using them?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change replied to confirm his view that the major issue raised in the question and supplementary question concerned performance management. It was quite clear that the sweeping and leaf-clearing winter schedule was not at an ideal standard, but had been driven by a reduction in resources since the late 2000s. He offered to Mr Borchers a place on the soon to be established SBC Climate Change Reference Panel for specialist and interested parties in environmental/climate change issues, and on a smaller sub-group to tackle Active Travel matters. He also urged everyone to read the Climate Change Strategy on the Council’s website.

(B) Question from Mr Paul Dawson

The Council noted that a response to the question submitted by Mr Paul Dawson regarding 20mph speed limits in Stevenage had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Mr Dawson was present at the meeting and asked the following supplementary question:

“Could a meeting be arranged with members of 20 is Plenty for Hertfordshire to help with the process of identifying local areas in Stevenage that would benefit from 20mph Zones by working with local residents?”

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change replied that many councillors were supportive of the 20 is Plenty campaign, but considered that the most appropriate forum for handling 20mph speed limits was the Highway Authority (Hertfordshire County Council). He envisaged 20mph Zones being introduced in a manner proportionate to the individual issues of certain areas, rather than as a blanket restriction across the Borough. As with the previous questioner, he extended an invitation to Mr Dawson to become part of his Climate Change Reference Panel, and further agreed to meet with him and his group to see how a practical solution could be developed.

8 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Phil Bibby, asked the following question:

“With the ever escalating inflationary pressures on the construction industry, the expectations in the business model for the Regeneration programme would need to be re-visited. When did the Leader consider that the time would be right to make another presentation to Members to explain what is proposed in the current circumstances and what the expectations are going forward?”

The Leader of the Council replied that she had reminded a Government Minister that all Councils involved in large-scale construction projects were faced with these inflationary pressures. This had been exacerbated significantly by the Government's recent fiscal announcement. The situation was tricky because she did not expect that any Government would provide significant additional financial support for local government. She felt that it was now timely to arrange another presentation for Members on the Regeneration programme in the near future.

The Council then received updates from relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on the following matters:

- Climate Change Strategy;
- Tree Planting in Fairlands Valley Park;
- Net Zero services for Small Businesses;
- Digital Enhancement;
- Housing First Modular Homes;
- Helston House, Scarborough Avenue;
- Museum Funding Award; and
- Summer Play Schemes.

9 UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS

The Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee advised that the Committee had

met on 2 occasions in recent months, as well as on 2 occasions as part of Portfolio Holder Advisory Groups (to consider the revised Complaints Policy/new Unacceptable Behaviour Policy and Transformation Programme). Items considered at the most recent meeting of the Committee had included the Social Housing Decarbonisation funding and the Cost of Living crisis.

The Chair of the Community Select Committee stated that recent meetings of the Committee had considered evidence in respect of Voids performance in respect of the Council's housing stock, and Members looked forward to receiving further evidence from the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development at a future meeting.

The Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee advised that the Committee had continued its major review of climate change mitigation and had received evidence from the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change. The next meeting of the Committee would receive evidence from other Portfolio Holders with regard to the climate change mitigation impacts in respect of their portfolio areas. Further evidence would be received at future meetings from friends of the Earth and other interest groups.

10 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding

Councillor Phil Bibby moved and Councillor Graham Lawrence seconded the following motion:

“That Council notes that Hertfordshire County Council is at the last stage in its bid for Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding, which is to be targeted at improving bus services and punctuality, thereby encouraging increased patronage.

In the expectation that the bid will be successful and, given Stevenage's inclusion in the Sustainable Travel Towns initiative, it is proposed that the Council works closely with the County Council to implement the BSIP as far as it relates to Stevenage, which will require commitment to and support for appropriate bus priority schemes, yet to be agreed.”

The following amendment was moved by Councillor Sharon Taylor and seconded by Councillor Lloyd Briscoe:

In the first paragraph, removal of the words “...which...” and its replacement with “...on which SBC have worked in close partnership with our Hertfordshire County Council colleagues through the Sustainable Travel Town partnership, the Zero Emission Bus bid, and the work to create a new bus interchange. The BSIP funding...”

In the second paragraph, removal of the words “...it is proposed that the Council works...” and its replacement with “...we recognise that the Council is working...”

The amendment was supported by the mover and seconder of the original motion,

and the following comments were made during the debate on the amendment:

- Up to date information on bus times, frequency and cancellations needed to be provided in real time, including mobile phone applications;
- The former SB1 bus service was excellent and well used, and a similar type service should be re-introduced (with appropriate funding);
- It was hoped that BSIP funding would still be available following the appointment of a New Prime Minister;
- The lack of bus drivers was the major reason why some services had been curtailed;
- The service required significant improvement, especially for non-ambulant disabled persons;
- As well as punctuality and reliability, the frequency and affordability of the service had to be borne in mind;
- Hertfordshire County Council's move towards electric buses was commendable; and
- The service needed to be sustainable commercially, with robust contract monitoring arrangements.

The Leader of the Council asked Councillor Phil Bibby (as HCC Transport Portfolio Holder) if they could work together on a joint presentation to Members on the BSIP, in association with relevant SBC and HCC officers

Upon being put to the vote, the amendment was carried.

The following comments were made during the debate on the substantive motion:

- It was understandable for people to not use local buses as the service had deteriorated in recent years;
- The former Superbus service had been funded by the former Stevenage Development Corporation – that service was discontinued after it had been passed to HCC. It was therefore good to hear that HCC was now looking positively to improve bus services across the county;
- Improvements required political will, together with the necessary funding and resources to expedite the changes needed, both at national and local levels;
- Every effort should be made to improve bus services in Great Ashby; and
- A cost benefit analysis should be used so that the benefits of the service outweighed the costs.

Councillor Phil Bibby agreed to ask HCC officers to give a presentation to Members on the BSIP. He hoped that Government support funding would be available to progress the BSIP.

Upon the substantive motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that Council notes that Hertfordshire County Council is at the last stage in its bid for Bus Services Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding, on which SBC have worked in close partnership with our Hertfordshire county council colleagues through the Sustainable Travel Town partnership, the Zero Emission Bus bid, and the work to create a new bus interchange. The BSIP funding is to be targeted at improving bus services and

punctuality, thereby encouraging increased patronage.

In the expectation that the bid will be successful and, given Stevenage's inclusion in the Sustainable Travel Towns initiative, we recognise that the Council is working closely with the County Council to implement the BSIP as far as it relates to Stevenage, which will require commitment to and support for appropriate bus priority schemes, yet to be agreed.

11 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS / PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

The Council received nine questions from Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders. The responses to the seven questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

(A) Question from Councillor Bret Facey re: bidding for Council properties

Supplementary question – “When bidding on two bedroom houses, disabled applicants need to know that there are toilets on both floors. He was surprised to hear from Housing Officers that SBC did not record such information, nor did they know the level of access to flat block gardens. As a result, disabled residents were forced to bid on unsuitable properties, wasting their and officers' time. Please could the Council start to record such basic information on the housing list to help residents bid on appropriate homes?”

In reply, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated that, if the Housing IT system could hold the information requested then she would see what could be done. Otherwise, there would be a need for funding to be identified to upgrade the system so that such information could be held. She was also waiting for the work of the Community Select Committee on the Voids review to conclude, which may identify other suggestions and recommendations for action. In terms of the example quoted by Councillor Facey, the disabled applicant could ask officers to do the bidding for them.,

(B) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell re: Police Priority Setting

Supplementary question – “The Council put a lot of time and resource into Police Priority meetings, but Members were not getting as much out of them as they used to. He felt that in-person only meetings would help, but could the Portfolio Holder offer Members some form of platform (cross-Party) so that they could put forward some constructive suggestions in order to sharpen up the process and get more out of it?”

The Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Equalities, Health & Older People replied that the Council was always looking at ways of improving communication with the Police. The meetings were dependent on the Police Officers and calls on their time, especially if major incidents or events were taking place. She would ask officers to look at a form of platform for Members' suggestions, and took the point about in-person only meetings, as hybrid meetings were not always the easiest to administer.

- (C) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren re: the Swingate/Lytton Way road junction

Supplementary question – “Can the Portfolio Holder give an indication of the timescale for a resolution of this frustrating situation, in view of the fact that the Police have been required to intervene on a number of occasions?”

In reply, the Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport replied that the issue was in the main the responsibility of Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), as Highways Authority. SBC officers were monitoring the situation and reporting back to HCC.

- (D) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth re: employee absenteeism

Supplementary question – “Does the service the Council uses from Good Shape provide sickness data not just on the crude basis of days lost, but discriminates between regular short periods of absence and lengthier periods of sickness (why does the Council not use the Bradford formula, as used by the NHS and other large organisations)?”

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation & ICT replied that the information referred to in the supplementary question was available and provided. She was not aware of the Bradford formula (and there would no doubt be cost implications should it be introduced), but she asked Councillor Booth to provide her with information about it so she could ask officers to investigate that system and come back to him.

- (E) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness re: the Station gateway Area Action Plan (redesigning of Lytton Way)

Supplementary question – “Whilst welcoming the Station Gateway project and its associated highway mitigation, there were still some vulnerabilities about a achieving a modal transport shift to ensure the town does not get clogged up with traffic as a result of any changes to Lytton Way. Given that the proposed changes were so comprehensive and permanent, would the Portfolio Holder and HCC Highways consider the introduction of a pilot scheme/trial (possibly temporary barriers) which would mirror the consequence of some of the options explored to ascertain some of the impacts on the town for the future?”

In reply, the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change replied that the matter would at some point in the future come before the Planning & Development Committee. The number of options for Lytton Way were gradually being narrowed down. The traffic congestion modelling was not a precise science, but was a fairly accurate tool. SBC officers would pick up whether or not the modelling would be sensitive enough to pick up modal shifts in behaviour. He asked the Strategic Director (TP) to request the Assistant Director (planning & Regulation) to provide a fuller answer to the question.

- (F) Question from Councillor Robin Parker re: the partial collapse/demolition of Swingate House

Supplementary question – “Vious report about the incident were expected from the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), SBC, the demolition contractor and maybe others. When those report were made public, please could he be assured that Members would receive these before they were sent to The Comet newspaper or other external media?”

The Leader of the Council replied that the main report would be from the HSE. She had no control over when the HSE would be publishing their report. Any reports prepared by SBC would be published and Members would see them first, although no report would be prepared and published until information had been received from the HSE.

- (G) Question from Councillor Graham Snell re: Wi-fi at the new Bus Interchange

Supplementary question – “Can the answer to the original answer be checked, as the bus service information provided could only be accessed via the Arriva app, but there were no public wi-fi facilities in the Bus Interchange building?”

In reply, the Leader of the Council stated that the Council would endeavour to arrange for the installation of a public wi-fi system in the Bus Interchange as soon as possible. She would ask officers to provide Councillor Snell with a written answer as soon as a timescale was agreed for this installation.

- (H) Question from Councillor Tom Wren re: the Tabor Close development

Supplementary question – “Why was this project claimed as a successful SBC initiative when nearly 12 months ago Members of the Executive posed for a photo opportunity in front of it, but when its faced by continual delays does the Council look to deflect the blame onto others?”

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development replied that the Council had worked in conjunction with Keepmoat and Origin Housing Association to get houses built for tenants for nomination by SBC. The fact that HCC Highways approval had to be granted before the new properties could be occupied was beyond SBC control. What may or may not be common practice in most private developments regarding completed house being occupied prior to Highway Authority approval was not the case in respect of the Tabor Close scheme. Highways Authority approval had now been given, and it was hoped that tenants would be moving into the new homes in November 2022.

- (I) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson re: the SBC grass cutting programme

Supplementary question – “Along the A602 road in the Broadwater area of the town, a number of overgrown patches were present in the banks which formed part of the grass verge. Could these areas be mowed when the Grass Cutting Team were next in this vicinity, in order to tidy up the area?”

In reply, the Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change stated that it would depend on whether the areas in question had been left for re-wilding, but he noted that the A602 was an amenity corridor. He suggested if Councillor Farquharson and local residents had a scheme in mind that they rolled it into the work on Climate Change, in terms of whether or not certain grass verge areas needed to be cut, or that he accompanied the Portfolio Holder on a site visit to the areas in question so that they could be identified and referred back to the Grass Cutting Team for appropriate action.

12 ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY REVIEW OF 2021/22 INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL CODE

The Council considered a report in respect of the Annual Treasury Management Review 2021/22, including the Prudential Code. It was noted that the report had been endorsed by both the Audit Committee and the Executive.

It was moved by Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd, and seconded by Councillor Sharon Taylor, that Recommendation 2.3 in the report be approved.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that the 2021/22 Annual Treasury Management Review be approved.

13 ELECTIONS ACT 2022

The Chief Executive introduced this officer report by stating that it set out what was known and not known by the Council thus far, recognising that the Government was still developing the related policy and secondary legislation. He added that there would be a number of challenges to overcome during the coming week and months, but as always officers would strive to ensure that the Council delivered a well-run, policy and legally compliant election process.

It was moved by Councillor Sharon Taylor and seconded by Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd that the recommendation set out in the report be approved.

In moving the report, Councillor Taylor advised that further information was required from the Government regarding the Elections Act 2022. The Association of Electoral Administrators/Returning Officers had written to the Government's Levelling Up, Communities & Housing Minister regarding this matter on a number of occasions expressing their concerns, some of which were set out in the report. A huge amount was being asked of Electoral Officers should there be timetable delays to the May 2023 electoral process as a result of provisions outlined in the Act.

Councillor Taylor stated that the secondary legislation had yet to be published. Even this was published in the near future, there were significant doubts as to whether there would be sufficient time to implement the required changes, including integration with election IT systems.

Councillor Taylor added that the Council should convey its objections to the Government that it was pressing ahead with the Elections Act 2022 in spite of the

concerns raised by the AEA and Returning Officers.

The following comments were made by Members during the debate on the report:

- the concern that there may be some unfunded burdens on the Council as a result of some of the proposals referred to in the Act;
- the Government's timetable for the adoption of a robust system to handle voter ID in time for the May 2023 elections was unrealistic. It could potentially disenfranchise a significant number of the electorate, and hence more time was needed to properly test and implement such a system;
- this was a vast bureaucratic sledgehammer to crack a tiny nut. Over the years there had been very few cases on impersonation at a Polling Station;
- far too many proposals contained in the Act awaited secondary legislation to provide the detail;
- the distraction of the Coronation of King Charles III on 6 May 2023 only 2 days after the 4 May 2023 Elections could cause additional problems. Many of the staff planning for the Elections would be the same staff who would be supporting events in connection with the Coronation;
- calls should be made for a postponement of the implementation of certain key sections of the Act, and to request the new Government to thoroughly review the proposals;
- although some steps needed to be taken to address larger scale electoral fraud, a number of the proposals set out in the Act were over-bureaucratic, and hopefully the Government would be persuaded by the views of the AEA and Returning Officers;
- the proposals were politically motivated and were an affront to democracy by attempting to make it more difficult for people to vote;
- a great deal of impersonation had been ruled out by the rigorous process for signature checking that was carried out with postal voting;
- when the position became more certain, would officers be holding an All-Member Briefing on the new arrangements; and
- the disadvantaged in the community (including the disabled and those with learning difficulties) would not necessarily possess the necessary photographic ID and hence would be disenfranchised under the proposed arrangements.

Councillor Taylor proposed an amendment to the motion to ensure that the concerns raised by Members be referred to the Department of Levelling Up, Communities & Housing.

In terms of the Government's own fraud statistics on elections, Councillor Taylor reported that in 2017 there was 1 conviction for electoral fraud and 1 person acquitted (out of 200 reported cases); and from 2018 to 2021 there had been no evidence of large scale electoral fraud.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that the report be noted and the concerns highlighted by Members on the Elections Act 2022 be referred to the Department of Levelling Up, Communities & Housing.

14 AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 7 September 2022 were received and noted.

CHAIR