

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 13 December 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Michael Downing, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence (substitute), Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Claire Parris and Loraine Rossati.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 8.17pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Phil Bibby CC, Bret Facey and Anne Wells. Councillor Graham Lawrence CC was substituting for Councillor Bibby.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 23 NOVEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday, 23 November 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

2. Minutes – 16 November 2022

Noted.

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

Noted.

4. Cost of Living Crisis Response

The following comments were made by Members:

- the Citizens Advice Bureau was appreciative of the support provided by Council officers in dealing with cases related to the cost of living crisis;
- in respect of the comment made at the Executive meeting about the diluting/softening of the demarcation of the Executive and Scrutiny roles

with regard to work on the cost of living crisis, a Member disagreed with this comment and stated that the Executive and Scrutiny should keep to their respective and separate roles. The Member felt that there was always scope for collaboration, but that Scrutiny should not relinquish its powers to challenge and probe;

- a Member asked about how the Council targeted those who would be perhaps eligible for cost of living support, but who perhaps did not realise they were eligible. The Strategic Director (RP) replied that some grant support funds were administered by SBC and others by partner organisations. As well as online options, the Council was publishing information on noticeboards around the Borough. He commented that eligibility was, of course, dependent on individual circumstances and that Council officers would always endeavour to direct applicants to the appropriate support provider.

5. Corporate Performance Quarter 2 2022/23

The Committee was informed that the recruitment and retention of staff in the Customer Service Centre had been difficult. Measures that had been taken included an increase in the entry level salary for a Customer Service Advisor from Grade 2 to Grade 3. This had increased the number of recent applicants. A further measure was to try and recruit above the establishment level for the service in order to provide resilience for when staff left or were successful in being appointed to other positions within SBC.

Officers noted a Member's suggestion that consideration be given to offering employment to recently retired individuals, that could be trained to help out the Customer Service Centre (CSC), even if only on a part-time basis. A further suggestion from a Member was that the recorded telephone message should be made better use of, with bespoke key messages regarding the most frequent issues that people call the CSC about, giving the public an option to listen to more information and ways to resolve their problems.

6. Council Tax Base 2023/24

Noted.

7. Draft Housing Revenue Account Budget Setting and Rent Setting Report 2023/24

The Committee noted the significant pressures on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), both due to increased regulatory compliance requirements and inflation costs. A full review of the HRA Business Plan was scheduled for the Autumn of 2023.

8. Urgent Part I Business – Use of Ibis Hotel as accommodation for Asylum Seekers

The Committee was informed that the Leader of the Council had advised the Executive that the Council had been informed by the Home Office on 3

December 2022 that it would be using the Ibis Hotel in the Town Centre as a “spot” hotel for the accommodation of asylum seekers until 16 December 2022.

In reply to a series of Members’ questions, the Strategic Director (RP) commented as follows:

- the Refugee Council had not been involved in this arrangement as it was not a dispersal scheme. The Home Office had the expectation that the Council and its partner organisations would assist in the support arrangements for the asylum seekers;
- the asylum seekers were provided with some advice/guidance on the location of key services and amenities, but officers would look to strengthen/enhance the quality of the information provided;
- the Home Office was leading on communications with regard to the new arrivals, although it was important that the messaging from SBC was clear at a local level so that residents and businesses were fully aware of developments;
- representations had been made to the Home Office regarding the unsuitability due to their location of this (and the Novotel) hotel for the accommodating of asylum seekers;
- it appeared that hotels were being used due to the volume of asylum seekers arriving, the slowness in processing applications to remain (or otherwise) and the lack of availability of either more appropriate or dispersal accommodation;
- Government support funding and additional resources for local authorities was only available through the dispersal scheme. No additional funding had been provided for Borough/District Councils to assist/support the occupants of the Home Office’s spot/contingency hotels.
- a suggestion that the asylum seekers be provided with information where parks and play areas for children are would be passed on to the relevant officers from the Strategic Director
- no funding had been made available from the Home Office for “spot” hotel accommodation for either upper or lower tier authorities

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

None.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

6 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.

7 PART II MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 23 NOVEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 23 November 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

8 PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

10. Part II Minutes – Executive – 23 November 2022

Noted.

11. Leisure Services and Active Communities Management Contract

The Operations Director answered a number of Members' questions in respect of this item.

12. Regeneration Programme update and SG1 Programme Implementation

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) answered a number of Members' questions with regard this item.

13. Making Your Money Count Options 2023/24 (Part 2)

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

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

None.

10 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR