

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 14 February 2023

TIME: 6pm

LOCATION: Council Chamber

MINUTES

Present: *Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Phil Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Jim Brown, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Wendy Kerby, Conor McGrath, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati, and Anne Wells.*

Start/End Time: *Start: 6:00pm
End: 7:55pm*

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Rob Broom, Andy McGuinness, and Sarah Mead.

Councillor Stephen Booth substituted for Councillor Andy McGuinness.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES – 24 JANUARY 2023

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 24 January 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

1. MINUTES – 18 JANUARY 2023

Noted.

2. MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES

Noted.

3. GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2023/24

The Committee was given an update on the General Fund and Council Tax Setting 2023/24 since the draft that was presented in the January meeting. This included the projections for business rates which were gained but still had to be realised. Rateable values had gone up by £20m and it was likely there would be a high level of appeals, but these took a long time to go through. Additionally, there was an update on the Council Tax Top Up Scheme (Discretionary element). From the 1st April 2023, everyone receiving Council Tax Support (CTS) will get up to £25 or up to their liability. If people go on to CTS during the year, they will also get the top up.

In response to questions, the Strategic Director advised:

- A provision was made every year with the total amount of business rates for sharing. Just over £2m was set aside for 2023/24 appeals. The business rate gains for 2022/23 were £800,000, but the level of the appeals hadn't all been realised. The Council made educated projections to decide upon set aside an amount.
- By the end of the financial year the Council will know how much the business rate income was but there is uncertainty over the business rate yield for many years until the next re-evaluation date, as business could backdate appeals
- Putting together the savings package took a great deal time and as it wasn't completed by November, a meeting with Leader's Financial Security Group wasn't possible. Briefings had been offered to all parties.
- The total cost of the Commercial Sales Officer role included the employers cost which are often over 30%. The post had one year's funding to demonstrate impact, then afterwards it would be self-funded from the additional income it would generate.
- The Equalities Impact Assessment was being revised to have an overarching impact on policy. By producing the assessment, it gave Members details of the potential impacts and should be taken into account when decision making.
- The 1% tax rise next year will provide £63,500. There would be a balance between what can be achieved through fees and charges, and the Council had looked for efficiencies and opportunities to increase income.
- Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) had an established emergency plan and a number of people trained for the roles. The plan had been stress tested. The Council does have significantly fewer employees than in 2005, but capacity to address emergencies would depend on the incident. Hertfordshire

authorities worked closely and had joint arrangements of mutual aid.

In response to questions from several Members regarding cuts to play services, the Strategic Director advised:

- All play services would be cut. There will be a consultation process to look at other options.
- The Council was looking at £1.5m minimum savings by October/November due to inflation. The leadership team looked at all services and new income streams and given the size of the challenge following several difficult funding rounds, the decision was to look at larger areas of spend.
- 1063 registered children used the play services. They had to be registered to use the service, pre-pandemic data was available but they might not have been registered before then.
- Since COVID there was a downturn in attendance, especially in afterschool clubs. The cost per child was relatively high.
- There was a consultation process for staff and their feedback would be considered. In previous cuts to play services, staff were able to suggest alternatives.
- The users of the play services would also be consulted. The Council would look at other options on what could be done.
- These cuts had only been proposed as the Council didn't have enough money to run all the services.

4. CAPITAL STRATEGY 2022/23 – 2027/28

Members were advised that we had an unfunded capital programme for next year of £177,000. The Council had found slippages and schemes that no longer needed to proceed and now had a balanced budget for 2023/24 for Members to approve.

5. ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023/24 INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL CODE INDICATORS

Members were advised that this report was scrutinised by the Audit Committee and there were no comments. This report set out parameters for the coming year 2023/24 and aligned with the capital programme.

In response to questions, the Strategic Director responded:

- The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) had a lot of planned borrowing and this was higher than the share of the investment interest, so this had a greater adverse impact. The General Fund

had less borrowing and was more shielded and had a less negative impact. Most borrowing from the HRA was fixed.

- The Council used treasury management advisors for forecasting when to borrow.
- In terms of equities, there were, for example, property funds, but the capital was at risk. Additionally, some investments required the Council to be in for 10 years to be protected and the Audit Committee at the time did not agree to risk this. The Council was risk adverse and the cash balance was predicted to go down.
- The Council could invest in capital risk, but it had to be within the strategy.

6. URGENT PART I BUSINESS – 8 FEBRUARY 2023

There was none.

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

There was none.

5 MAKING IT HAPPEN: THE REFRESHED CLIMATE CHANGE STRATEGY AT THE GRASSROOTS WITH THE EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change, Councillor Simon Speller, gave a verbal presentation and discussed the refreshed Climate Change Strategy. This included:

- Within the 9 levels of climate change strategies, Cllr Speller focused on levels 7 and 8 which related to neighbourhood and street level climate change strategies.
- The climate change fund, otherwise known as the 'Dragons Den Scheme', was around £7.5k per borough ward for communities and residents to use. This pilot scheme will be community-led.
- Cllr Speller, as portfolio holder, represented the Council on pre-county/district working parties – The Hertfordshire Climate Change Strategy Partnership, The Hertfordshire Investment and Planning Policy Partnership, and The Hertfordshire Waste Partnership.
- The Hertfordshire Green Infrastructure Strategy contained the biodiversity action plan as well as accessibility and green spaces.
- He urged Members to send in green schemes and engage with the community to identify green spaces.
- He brought attention to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, as well as the review of the Hertfordshire Waste Partnership and waste management.

Cllr Speller informed Members of the progress and work that has been going on. This included the tree planting at Fairlands Valley Park by some schools. He urged Members to visit these schools in their wards to see what else they would like to get involved in. Additionally, various residents in Stevenage had planted flowers, shrubs, and other vegetation to small green spaces in their streets.

Cllr Speller highlighted the first Dragons Den Pilot Scheme in Baddeley Close. Small green areas will be community-led developments and turned into green spaces such as sensory gardens. He stressed that these schemes must have sustainable community interest. These areas would have a green impact, would look appealing and could also save the Council money as these spaces would not need grass cutting.

A Member referred to residents who wanted to plant wildflowers, but the grass kept being cut. Cllr Speller advised that the best person to contact was Veronica Chan as this was a pilot scheme. Many residents may not have known about the schemes, and the Council and Members could find ways to create community schemes.

Another Member suggested that the Council would have to plant 300,000 trees to address climate change according to research conducted by Hertfordshire University. The Council needs to reduce CO2 emissions to achieve the 2030 target SBC set and this cannot be solely achieved through the Dragons Den Scheme. Cllr Speller responded that this scheme wasn't about strategy, but more the implementation of the local community side of the strategy. He agreed the 2030 targets were aspirational and that the Council needed to focus on climate change. However, he stated that the Council needed to achieve community engagement as well as building constructive partnerships with Hertfordshire County Council and other districts to move forward. A lot of people were very interested in the Dragons Den Scheme and this was a way to get people thinking about climate change.

A Member asked whether there were any rules other than it being community led. Cllr Speller advised there were three key criteria to the scheme. It was something people in the area wanted, it had to have a green benefit, and everyone had to understand that they couldn't rely on the Council but would need to work together to address climate change.

A Member reported that they had spoken to schools in their Ward, and they came up with a suggestion to put skips in certain areas to reduce fly tipping. The Strategic Director responded that this was a good suggestion and should be linked to a community day or activity.

Cllr Speller spoke of Stevenage Borough Football Club's support for the English Football League green awareness weekend. He spoke on behalf of Cllr Sarah Mead who had suggested that there should be a green conference of local organisations and partnerships such as North Hertfordshire College and Stevenage Football Club.

A Member highlighted the resolution passed in 2019 that was specific about agreeing a target of 2030, which was similar in other Councils, but noted the first climate strategy was set in 2010. Cllr Speller responded that a citizen's panel came out in 2019. He suggested that the report produced was good but there could have been better engagement. Cllr Speller proposed that his idea was to engage with and meet interested parties. Another Member responded that the citizens panel did have some value as it had people who weren't usually engaged in such discussions.

A Member highlighted the 5,000 pieces of grassland the development corporation gave the Council in the 1980s. This was a great scheme. However, 30% or more of the countries emissions come from the construction industry. The Local Plan was the biggest protector and defender of climate change policies. The Strategic Director stated that there are more innovations coming through construction teams. There are still emissions related to construction, but he noted the industry was changing and some firms are classified as net zero. However, there are lessons to be learned and SBC was looking at decarbonisation projects and other innovations.

Another Member asked whether the Dragon's Den projects were all resident-led schemes, whether this was Borough Council money, and whether there was a time limit on this scheme. The Strategic Director confirmed that they were resident-led. He advised there was a mix of government grant funding, development funding and some underspend that was brought forward. This would be tested for a year with an expectation to continue. Cllr Speller responded that it was whenever the residents were ready. Residents should propose and run schemes, but SBC could help residents with, for example social media.

6 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

There was none.

7 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED:**

- (1) That 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 Acts as amended by Local Government (Access to information) (Variation) Order 2006
- (2) That Members consider the reasons for the following reports (if any) being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure

8 PART II MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 24 JANUARY 2023

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Part II Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 24 January 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

9 PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

Noted.

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

There was none.

11 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was none.

CHAIR