

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 15 March 2023

Time: 2.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Jeannette Thomas (Vice-Chair in the Chair), Sandra Barr, Lloyd Briscoe, Jackie Hollywell, Mrs Joan Lloyd and Simon Speller.

Start / End Start Time: 2.00pm
Time: End Time: 3.12pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Richard Henry (Chair).

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 8 FEBRUARY 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 8 February 2023 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 –

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 17 January 2023

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 24 January 2023

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 14 February 2023

4 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE QUARTER 3 2022/23

The Executive considered a report in respect of Corporate Performance for Quarter 3 of 2022/23.

The Chair advised that the report provided performance and risk updates relating to delivery of the Future Town Future Council Programme; corporate performance results across the Council's business units; progress against the actions set out in the Cost-of-Living Action Plan; and a summary of the Strategic Risks identified and managed by the Council. Stevenage Borough Council, like all local authorities, was challenged by significant spending reductions and workforce pressures. The report also included a number of areas of progress and delivery against the FTFC programme.

The Chief Executive gave a presentation concerning the Quarter 3 report, and summarised the Future Town Future Council (FTFC) performance highlights throughout the Quarter, under the headings of Transforming Our Town; More Social and Affordable Housing; Co-operative and Neighbourhoods; Making Your Money Count; and a Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town.

The Chief Executive reported that, as at Quarter 3, of the 63 Corporate Performance Indicators, 42 were at Green status; 3 were at Amber; 12 were at Red; and 6 were outstanding (mainly relating to voids, household waste and community safety), the reasons for which he outlined in his presentation.

The Chief Executive presented the improvement activities for the customer services and voids red indicators, and explained the performance challenges being experienced with regard to the human resources and other red indicators.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the delivery of priorities which form the Future Town Future Council Programme (Appendix A to the report) and service performance across the key themes for Quarter Three 2022/23 (Appendix B to the report) be noted.
2. That the strategic risk updates (Section 4.6 of the report) be noted.
3. That the performance challenges in relation to housing voids (Section 4.4.5 of the report), customer services (Section 4.2.5 of the report) and human resources (Section 4.2.13 of the report) be noted, and the planned measures to improve performance be endorsed.
4. That the Executive Action Tracker (Appendix C to the report) be noted.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

5 THIRD QUARTER REVENUE MONITORING REPORT 2022/23 - GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

The Executive considered a report in respect of the Third Quarter Revenue Budget monitoring 2022/23 for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT advised that the General Fund was showing a net decrease in expenditure of £205,150, made up of a number of variances, but predominately from release of insurance provision of £135,000, and a reduction in budget of £70,000 required for Bed and Breakfast, as homelessness presentations had reduced. This had been offset by a reduction in forecasted income across a number of areas, including parking - £91,000 and trade waste - £67,000. A full breakdown was set out in Section 4.1 of the report.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT commented that the £205,150 underspend carried the following risks that were yet to be evaluated:

- the risk that an underspend on salaries would not materialise. Budgets were set to include 'transitional vacancy', ie. a short gap between the exit of a postholder and a new starter commencing. This was included in the budget and equated to £280,000; and
- Potential that there was housing benefit subsidy gap, where work was ongoing. An update would be included in the Quarter 4 monitoring report.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT advised that, in line with the anticipated forecast, £1.728Million of General Fund reserves would be utilised based on the Quarter 3 monitor. This represented an improvement of £205,000, which would leave the Council with just under £5.2Million of reserves going into 2023/24.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT explained that the report was seeking approval to change the 2023/24 General Fund budget of £12,000 in relation to payment card charges linked to parking.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT stated that the HRA was showing a net increase in expenditure of £157,730 made up from a reduction in rental income of £371,000 due to the delay in anticipated new dwellings coming on line and an increase in council tax on void properties of £107,000. These matters had been partly offset by the improvement on interest on balances of £340,000. A full breakdown of variances can be found in Section 4.4 of the report.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT commented that the report was also seeking approval for two virements of £250,000 each, one from the decent homes budget and the second one from the cyclical maintenance budget. Both of these virements related to the funding of works to bring void properties into occupation.

The Assistant Director (Finance) added that the cumulative changes to the General Fund and HRA remained within the increase variation limits delegated to the Executive by the Council.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the 2022/23 Third Quarter projected net decrease in General Fund expenditure of £205,150 be approved.
2. That it be noted that the cumulative changes made to the General Fund net budget remains within the £400,000 increase variation limit delegated to the Executive.
3. That the changes to the 2023/24 General Fund budget of £12,000, as set out in Paragraph 4.1.5 of the report, be approved.
4. That the 2022/23 Third Quarter projected net increase in Housing Revenue Account (HRA) expenditure of £157,730 be approved.

5. That two virements from the HRA planned maintenance budgets to fund the works to void properties be approved, namely a virement of £250,000 from the decent homes budget and a second virement of £250,000 from the cyclical maintenance budget, as set out in Paragraph 4.4.4 of the report.
6. That it be noted that the cumulative increases made to the HRA net budget remain within the £250,000 increase variation limit, delegated to the Executive, after the Council endorsed charges made in the January 2023 budget report.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 THIRD QUARTER CAPITAL MONITORING REPORT 2022/23 - GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

The Executive considered a report in respect of the Third Quarter Capital Programme monitoring 2022/23 for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT advised that the report was seeking approval to the reprofiling of £9.006Million from the 2022/23 budget and £12.8Million from the 2023/24 budget into future years. The majority of the reprofiling was connected to Housing Development schemes associated with the Kenilworth project. In respect of the Kenilworth project, Phase 2 could not commence until phase 1 had been completed. Phase 1 completion was now forecast for completion in winter 2023 and the New Build Programme reflected the upcoming in-year opportunities within the programme as sites progressed through Planning.

The Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation and ICT stated that there were three virements which Members were requested to approve, moving underspends from these schemes totalling £144,000 back into the Deferred Works Reserve (contingency) which could then be re-allocated in the future.

The Assistant Director (Finance) explained that the actual spend as at the first week of March 2023 represented 75% of the revised General Fund budget for 2022/23, and 80% of the revised HRA budget. Based on trends, the Council was ahead on spend in comparison to previous financial years.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That capital budget re-profiling of £9.006Million from 2022/23 to future years be approved.
2. That an in year virement of £66,000 to reallocate unspent resources to the Deferred Works Reserve from underspends on vehicles within the SDS Capital Programme be approved.
3. That an in year virement of £68,000 to reallocate unspent resources to the Deferred Works Reserve from underspends on the Finance & Estates Capital

Programme be approved.

4. That an in year virement of £10,000 to reallocate unspent resources to the Deferred Works Reserve from underspends on the Communities & Neighbourhoods Capital Programme be approved.
5. That capital budget re-profiling of £12.781Million from 2023/24 to future years be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

Zero Emission Bus Scheme

At the Leader's request in advance of the meeting, the Chair invited the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport to provide an update on the Zero Emission Bus Scheme. He conveyed the very challenging news that Arriva had opted not to progress with the Zero Emission bus scheme in Stevenage.

The Portfolio Holder advised that the Council had been recently notified, by Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), that Arriva planned to withdraw from the Government-funded Zero Emissions Bus programme. This was very difficult news for the town, local commuters, and those of Members and officers of the Council who had been working very hard to tackle the climate crisis.

The Portfolio Holder reminded Members that the Government had awarded funding to the HCC and Arriva partnership in March 2022, as one of 12 areas that could bring forward electric or hydrogen buses. Nationally, this was intended to deliver 943 zero emission buses, from a national fund of £196M. For Stevenage, this would have meant 27 new, electric, modern and state of the art buses. At the time, this investment was greatly welcomed by the Council as, with a first-rate new bus interchange and new buses, there was an outstanding opportunity to help tackle climate change, and provide the high quality public transport that local people deserved.

The Portfolio Holder commented that this followed news from Milton Keynes at the end of 2022, where Arriva had pulled out of the electric bus funding programme planned there too.

The Portfolio Holder stated that the Council was led to believe that lower than expected passenger numbers had made it difficult for Arriva to justify their business case of match funding the Government's investment. Without question it was a very challenging time for local buses. While the overall number of journeys that people made was starting to recover to the 2020 level, it was reported that there had been a slower return of passenger numbers for some local buses, as well as the train network.

The Portfolio Holder was of the view that a good, well-functioning bus network was

vital for the town's economy. Indeed, around half of all public transport trips were made on buses. In Stevenage there had been some very difficult impacts, including too few drivers, disruption and delay to bus services. The Council offered its support to local bus drivers who were doing a great job keeping the town on the move. However, it was also clear that the country, and Stevenage, needed a properly funded bus strategy. Without investment into new, climate friendly, and regular buses, a difficult future was envisaged. It was vital the Government learnt lessons from this zero emissions programme, recognised the damage caused by a lack of drivers and funding, and came up with a long-term plan to protect and improve buses.

The Portfolio Holder advised that officers were engaging with HCC, who had led this bid, to help consider if there were any solutions or routes forward.

The Executive was extremely disappointed to receive this news, especially in the light of Arriva's supposed long-term commitment to climate change issues.

8 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.

9 YOUTH SKILLS INVESTMENT IN STEVENAGE

The Executive considered a Part II report in respect of youth skills investment in Stevenage, and seeking agreement for the Council to act as the accountable body for a programme to support disadvantaged and under-represented young people in the town to consider and potentially secure careers in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector.

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.

10 AFFORDABLE OLDER PERSONS HOUSING STOCK - NEW SUPPLY AND STOCK MANAGEMENT

The Executive considered a Part II report in respect of a new supply and management of the Council's Affordable Older Persons Housing Stock.

It was **RESOLVED** that the recommendations contained in the report, together with an additional recommendation circulated at the meeting, be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

11 LAND ACQUISITION AND SCHEME CONTRACT APPROVAL

The Executive considered a Part II report seeking approval for the acquisition of land and appointment of a contractor for the development of a site in Bandle Hill 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.

12 SITE DISPOSAL REPORT

The Executive considered a Part II report seeking approval for the disposal of surplus amenity land in Roebuck Ward, as identified in the Locality Review, to generate a capital receipt for the Council.

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.

13 PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT - THE FORUM

The Executive considered a Part II report providing an overview of proposals for a new Life Sciences development on the site of the Forum shopping area in the town centre, and the commercial and legal position of the Council as landowner of the car park.

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.

14 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR