

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 8 March 2023

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, Michael Downing, John Duncan, Bret Facey, Alex Farquharson, John Gardner, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Chris Howells, Wendy Kerby, Graham Lawrence CC, Mrs Joan Lloyd, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Anne Wells and Tom Wren.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 7.00pm
End Time: 9.14pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Baroness Taylor of Stevenage OBE and Councillors Lin Martin-Haugh.

In respect of Item 9 – Notice of Motions, and with regard to the motion “A fully funded pay rise for Council and School workers”, the following Members declared interests:

- (i) Councillor Jackie Hollywell – worked in Local Government, but with a salary not subject to agreed NJC pay rates. She stated that she would therefore participate in the debate and vote upon this motion.
- (ii) Councillor Bret Facey – worked in Local Government with a salary that may be subject to agreed NJC pay rates. He stated that he would not take part in the debate or vote upon this motion.
- (iii) Councillor Rob Broom - worked in Local Government with a salary subject to agreed NJC pay rates. He stated that he would not take part in the debate or vote upon this motion.

2 MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor referred to a list of recent events she had attended which had been circulated to Members. She summarised the activities that she and her consort had been involved with since the December 2022 Council meeting which had included:

- Events in support of the people of Ukraine;
- Various Christmas events, including the Mayor’s own Christmas social evening;
- Her fundraising Charity Concert and Ball;
- Mayor of Hertford’s Games Night;
- Hertford history evening;
- Elstree Studios Tour;
- Various Civic Services, including her own;
- A visit to Stevenage from the High Sheriff;
- A visit to see how the new Stevenage Muslim Community Centre was progressing;
- Hosting a Schools Parliament in the Council Chamber; and
- Continuing the “Right up my Street” nominations and judging.

In respect of the Mayor’s Civic Service, held on 12 March 2023, she read out a warm and heartfelt letter of thanks for the event from Louise Faure Walker, Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire.

The Mayor thanked the Mayoress, the Deputy Mayor, Councillors and Officers for their continued help and support.

3 COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

There were no community presentations.

4 PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

There were no petitions or deputations.

5 QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL

There were no questions from the Youth Council.

6 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from the public.

7 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

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

“Are the Executive confident that the way the consultation on the Station Gateway Area Action Plan has been structured on the Council’s website will engender a good representation and response from the public?”

The Leader of the Council replied that he would ask officers to look at improving the way the consultation was structured on the website to make it easier for the public to access.

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

- Innovate UK Edge;
- New Multi-Storey Car Park;
- New Community Woodland;
- Community Renewal Fund;
- Stevenage Warms Spaces;
- Oaks Cross First Modular Homes;
- Tree Planting in Chells;
- Future Councils Funding;
- New Leisure Contract (Everyone Active); and
- Street Food and Music Event: Sunday, 5 March 2023

In respect of the new Multi-Storey Car Park, Councillor Phil Bibby, CC advised that it had been brought to his attention from a keen cyclist that the western entrance to the car park and cycleway adjacent to the railway line was near a foul sewer which affected the pavement/cycleway level and was potentially dangerous. He wondered whether this matter could be resolved.

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport replied that matter had been brought to his attention. The initial advice was that cyclists should dismount their bikes before they reached this point. However, he stated that SBC and HCC officers investigating the option of a permanent resolution of the issue and that Councillor Bibby would be advised of this once the position was clear.

8 UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS

In the absence of the Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, the Vice-Chair of the Committee advised that there had been two meetings of the Committee since the December 2022 Council meeting. The Committee had been fulfilling its role of scrutinising Executive decisions, including those on the Housing Revenue Account, General Fund, Capital Strategy, Housing for Older People Strategy, Stevenage Design Guidance SPD, Temporary Accommodation and Procurement Strategy and Treasury Management Strategy. The Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change had given a presentation to the February meeting of the Committee on “Climate Change Strategy – Making it happen at grass roots level”.

The Chair of the Community Select Committee advised that the Committee’s scheduled February meeting to discuss public health had been cancelled due to the Hertfordshire Director of Public Health being called away unexpectedly. The Committee would be meeting next on 9 March 2023.

The Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee advised that the Committee was conducting a detailed review on the impact of the cost of living crisis on the public, the Council and its employees, and local businesses. At the January 2023 Committee meeting, the Citizens Advice Bureau and representatives from the SBC Policy and Warms Spaces Teams attended to report on the impact and reasons why Stevenage residents required support as a consequence of the crisis.

At the February 2023 meeting of the Committee, the Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport attended, as did WENTA representatives and the Council's Business Relationship Manager, to inform Members of the impact on the business community in Stevenage. There was to be a further Committee meeting in March 2023 to look at the impact on SBC and its employees, involving officers from the Finance and Human Resources Teams and Trade Union representatives.

9 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

(i) A fully funded, proper pay rise for Council and School workers

Councillor Teresa Callaghan moved and Councillor Jackie Hollywell seconded the following motion:

“That this Council notes:

Local government has endured central government funding cuts of more than 50% since 2010. Between 2010 and 2020, councils lost 60p out of every £1 they have received from central government. New research by UNISON has shown that councils across England, Wales and Scotland are facing a collective funding shortfall of £3bn by the financial year 2023/24 and a cumulative funding gap of £5bn by 2024/25.

Councils led the way in efforts against the Covid-19 pandemic, providing a huge range of services and support for our communities. Local government has shown more than ever how indispensable it is. But Covid has led to a massive increase in expenditure and loss of income, and as we emerge from the pandemic, local authorities and schools need far more support from Westminster. Recent funding announcements from the Government relating to schools did nothing to help.

Council and school workers kept our communities safe through the pandemic, often putting themselves at considerable risk as they work to protect public health, provide quality housing, ensure our children continue to be educated, and look after older and vulnerable people.

Since 2010, the local government workforce has endured years of pay restraint with the majority of pay points losing at least 25 per cent of their value since 2009/10. Staff are now facing the worst cost of living crisis in a generation, with inflation hitting 10% and many having to make impossible choices between food, heating and other essentials. This is a terrible situation for anyone to find themselves in.

At the same time, workers have experienced ever-increasing workloads and persistent job insecurity. Across the UK, 900,000 jobs have been lost in local government since June 2010 – a reduction of more than 30 per cent. Local government has arguably been hit by more severe job losses than any other part of the public sector.

There has been a disproportionate impact on women, with women making up more than three-quarters of the local government workforce.

Recent research shows that if the Government were to fully fund the unions' 2023 pay claim, around half of the money would be recouped thanks to increased tax revenue, reduced expenditure on benefits and tax credits, and increased consumer spending in the local economy.

This Council believes:

Our workers are public service super-heroes. They keep our communities clean and safe, look after those in need and keep our towns and cities running.

Without the professionalism and dedication of our staff, the council services our residents rely on would not be deliverable.

Local government workers deserve a proper real-terms pay increase. The Government needs to take responsibility and fully fund this increase; it should not put the burden on local authorities whose funding has been cut to the bone and who were not offered adequate support through the Covid-19 pandemic.

This Council resolves to:

Support the pay claim submitted by UNISON, GMB and Unite on behalf of council and school workers, for an increase of RPI + 2%

Call on the Local Government Association to make urgent representations to central government to fund the NJC pay claim

Write to the Chancellor and Secretary of State to call for a pay increase for local government workers to be funded with new money from central government

Meet with local NJC union representatives to convey support for the pay claim and consider practical ways in which the council can support the campaign

Encourage all local government workers to join a union.”

Members across the Chamber debated the related matters ahead of the vote being taken.

At the conclusion of the debate, and upon being put to the vote, the motion was carried.

(ii) Vaping

Councillor Stephen Booth moved and Councillor Robin Parker CC seconded the following motion:

“Whilst acknowledging the role vaping products play in aiding adults to stop smoking, Council notes with concern:

- The increased use of vaping products by children in the UK buying them directly from newsagents, supermarkets and other outlets.

- The increasing number of local authorities who have had to take enforcement action against shops illegally selling vaping products to youngsters.
- The marketing of certain vaping products with bright coloured packaging and flavours such as “bubblegum” that might appeal to children.
- The significant increase in availability of disposable and single-use vaping products which are cheaper and easier for children to access.

That this Council calls for:

- Vaping products to be in plain packaging and kept out of sight behind the counter.
- Mandatory age-of-sale signage on vaping products (this is currently voluntary).
- A ban on free samples of vaping products being given out to people of any age.

That Council instructs the Chief Executive to write to Stephen Barclay MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to express Council’s demand for the greater regulation of vaping products detailed in this motion.

That Council further resolves to bring a joint report to an upcoming meeting of the Licensing Committee detailing enforcement activity and strategy within Stevenage related to the illegal sale of vaping products to children, and exploring opportunities for engagement with local schools to inform young people of the potential dangers of vaping.”

Members across the Chamber debated the related matters ahead of the vote being taken.

At the conclusion of the debate, and upon being put to the vote, the motion was carried.

10 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS / PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

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

(A) Question from Councillor Bret Facey re: apprenticeships in Stevenage

Supplementary question – “Since 2010, 8,830 new apprenticeships have been created in Stevenage, and over £5.3Million had been created across England, as a large part due to the Conservative Government’s education priorities and reforms. Does the Portfolio Holder welcomes this achievement and the positive impact it is having on the town’s young people?”

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation & ICT stated that she would not necessarily concur that the Conservative Government's actions had increased the town's apprenticeship rates. The Council had worked hard over a number of years to increase the number of apprentices both within SBC and across the town. It was vital for young people to have that outlet and receive practical support to boost jobs throughout the town.

(B) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren re: leaseholders' engagement forums

Supplementary question – "During a time of massive change for leaseholders due to the refurbishment programme why did the Council not provide opportunities for engagement with leaseholders?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development replied that the Council was still liaising with individual leaseholders, just not having the Forums. The reason was due to the Housing White Paper, which required resident (including leaseholder) engagement to be reviewed and a new engagement structure developed. However, there were ample opportunities for leaseholders to engage with both Members and officers.

(C) Question from Councillor Graham Snell re: advertising space in and around the new Bus Interchange

Supplementary question – "When will wi-fi services be available for users of the Bus Interchange?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation & ICT agreed to investigate the issue and provide a written reply to the question.

(D) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC re: Your Say complaints system

Supplementary question – "When will the errors on the Your Say system be corrected and, if so, when (the main one being replies with no title/name on them, only reference numbers)?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Resources, Transformation & ICT replied that the system was in the process of being further modified to seek to take account of comments made by some Members. Members would be informed once this work had been completed.

(E) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness re: Lytton Way traffic flow

Supplementary question – "Please could I have a bit more detail of the nature of the arrangements and discussions with HCC and what is SBC's position on those arrangements (does the Council wish them to be permanent)?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport drew attention to the answers he had given to similar questions on Lytton Way asked by Councillor

Parker at the 20 July 2022 Council meeting, and Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren at the 19 October 2022 Council meeting, when he had agreed that the situation was frustrating for all concerned. He referred Councillor McGuinness to those previous answers, and added that SBC officers were working closely with HCC colleagues to effect a tangible solution to the issue.

(F) Question from Councillor Tom Wren re: builders' waste and rubble dumped on grass verges

Supplementary question – “Does the Council consider builders' waste on grass verges as fly tipping, and whether the Council could take action with Fixed Penalty Notices when such waste was not cleared?”

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change considered fly tipping to be an abomination. He had drawn the issue to the attention of the County Waste Partnership, and he agreed that the Council needed to do more to prevent fly tipping. He asked the Assistant Director (Stevenage Direct Services) to provide a written reply in respect of Fixed Penalty Notices.

(G) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth re: Playground between Swimming Centre and Harrow Court

Supplementary question – “If this site is dangerous, why is it not properly secured (as children are able to access it over the fence)?”

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment & Climate Change offered to join Councillor Booth, the relevant ward Councillors and officers from Stevenage Direct Services in a site visit to the play area to investigate with a view to resolving the issue.

(H) Question from Councillor Chris Howells re: Junction between Lytton Way and Swingate

Supplementary question – “Does the Executive Member agree that with all that is happening in the town, such as flat building, commercial development and traffic restrictions, both proposed and in place, traffic congestion will only get worse?”

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise & Transport did not agree with the questioner. The work with the Highway Authority (HCC) on highway design was still being looked at as part of the Station Gateway consultation regarding the town centre.

(I) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC re: Play services budget

Supplementary question – “In 2013, Spencer Way and surrounding streets were developed and those residents were given a promise that a play area would be provided in that area. Since then there had been a sign saying that a play area was coming soon. Is the Council still committed to building that play area?”

The Leader of the Council agreed to arrange for this matter to be investigated by

officers, and to provide the questioner with a written answer.

(J) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson re: Community Centre for Bragbury End

There was no supplementary question.

11 MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES SCHEME 2023/24

The Council considered a report in respect of a proposed Members' Allowances Scheme for 2023/24.

It was moved by Councillor Richard Henry, and seconded by Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd, that the recommendations in the report be approved.

During the debate, the Council noted that the Liberal Democrat Group would be raising the issue of the level of Special Responsibility Allowances for minority party Group Leaders with the Independent Remuneration Panel as part of the Panel's review of Members' Allowances in the Autumn of 2023.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That a Members' Allowances Scheme be agreed for 2023/24, as set out in Appendix A to this report, be agreed.
2. That the Scheme be updated should a percentage increase NJC Pay Award be agreed for 2023/24.
3. That, should the 2023/24 NJC Pay Award be a flat rate increase for employees, then (as per 2022/23 Scheme) the Scheme be updated by the percentage rate increase on allowances listed in the NJC pay agreement circular dated 28 February 2022.

12 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2023/24

The Council considered a report in respect of a proposed Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24.

It was moved by Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd, and seconded by Councillor Richard Henry, that the recommendations set out in the report be approved.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the Pay Policy Statement 2023/24 set out in accordance with the Localism Act 2011 and the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.
2. That the Pay Policy Statement be placed on the Council's website.

13 AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 7 February 2023 were received.

MAYOR