

**Meeting** COUNCIL  
**Portfolio Area** ALL  
**Date** 19 JULY 2023



## ANNUAL SCRUTINY REPORT FOR 2022-23

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### 1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To report on the work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during the 2022/23 Municipal Year and to outline the Work Programme for the three Committees for 2023/24.

### 2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the work undertaken by Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees during 2022/23 be noted.

### 3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 This Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000, Overview and Scrutiny's role is to operate as an independent function of the Council's decision-making process, by having overview of the Council's decision making, holding the Executive to account, having the power to "call in" decisions for reconsideration and undertake internal and external scrutiny reviews.
- 3.2 The Council's Constitution requires that there be an annual report to Council on the scrutiny activity over the past Municipal Year (see Article 6.3 of the Constitution).

- 3.3 This report is a retrospective look at the scrutiny review work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and the two Select Committees during the 2022-23 Municipal Year.
- 3.4 In accordance with the Constitution the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was also charged with scrutinising the Executive's proposals on Budget & Policy Framework items that go before Council for decision. In addition, the Committees considered updates on Scrutiny studies that had been undertaken previously, examining the progress of recommendations and where appropriate following up on matters raised.
- 3.5 The Committees have also worked with their relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on a number of separate policy development meetings developing policies and considering reports before their submission to the Executive. This report, however, focuses on the role of the Committees' Scrutiny post Executive decision.

## **4 SUMMARY OF SELECT COMMITTEE REVIEWS**

- 4.1 Each Select Committee review made formal recommendations to the relevant Executive Member, Officers and external partners. The following is a summary of the outcomes of each scrutiny review.

### **4.2 COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE**

#### **4.2.1 Scrutiny of Housing Voids**

In conducting this review, the Community Select Committee met on 3 occasions in total with 3 formal Committee meetings to undertake the review as follows: On 5 September 2022, 11 October 2022 and 2 November 2022, and held 2 site visits days on 13 October to visit 3 properties at various stages of the void process at properties in the Roebuck, Bedwell and Martins Wood ward areas and a revisit on 2 November to the property in Bedwell and were supported by the following officers Rob Gregory, Assistant Director, Communities and Neighbourhoods; Assistant Director SDS Steve Dupoy; Operations Manager, Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson; SDS Service Delivery Manager, Dean Stevens; Kemal Hulusi, Commercial and Contracts Manager; Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing Development and Housing, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.

- 4.2.2 The review made recommendations on the following 7 areas:

#### **1 Carry out programmed Tenancy Audit of properties**

Carry out a programmed cycle of inspections on properties. Officers to consider how such an inspection regime would be instigated and whether there could be agreed triggers that would necessitate a visit, such as complaints from neighbours due to the dumping of rubbish, non-payment of rent as well as any planned maintenance or reactive maintenance visits to the property etc. and on any such visits a checklist in relation to a disrepair/defects survey should be completed.

- #### **2 Parallel processes** – When a tenant has given the Council notice and hands in the keys early, the voids team will carry out works and

administrative processes that are required to minimise the void loss period.

- 3 **Regular sharing of data on voids with Members** – Provide data on all void properties for a twelve-month period. To see what the actual performance of Void properties with general needs is, as this data has hitherto not been collected. Currently there is a standard target of 26 days, and some properties with major needs had a turnaround of up to 64 days.
- 4 **Recruitment** - Provide periodic updates to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development, and in turn the Community Select Committee on the progress with recruitment and retention of DSO officers and with any temporary outsourcing of voids work to external contractors.
- 5 **A revised Officer data capture of end-to-end void process** – That officers provide Members with a detailed proposal of the end-to-end void process so they can make a view as to whether this process is likely to have the desired Impact of raising the current performance levels of the voids service
- 6 **Investigate potential incentives and penalties to encourage tenants to maintain their rented properties in a reasonable condition** - for officers to explore ways to hold tenants to account for keeping SBC's property/their home in good repair. Where there are rechargeable repairs identified in inspection activity or otherwise, throughout the term of the tenancy, that the tenant is charged, at discretion, to avoid leaving multiple repairs and a large bill at the end of the tenancy. This should include unauthorised modifications.
- 7 **Pursue better benchmarking with similar local authorities** - Officers saw the benefit of local, meaningful benchmarking discussions and future sharing of data compared with the current national benchmarking group – Housemark. Housing officers will continue to reach out to other similar sized authorities who have a retained housing stock to share experiences and where possible data.

4.2.3 The details of the review report but can be found by following the link to the meeting that they were agreed 9 March 2023 – [Report and Recommendations - Voids Review - 9 March 2023](#)

#### 4.3 **Update on Damp and Mould**

4.3.1 Following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak, who died of a respiratory condition caused by mould in his housing association home in Rochdale, all public sector housing providers were required to provide a statutory response to the Secretary of State regarding their current practises regarding damp and mould cases. In addition to this, the Chair of the Community Select Committee was keen to update scrutiny Members on the previous work that the Committee had undertaken regarding damp and mould. Members received a presentation from the Housing Investment Programme Manager, Keith Pierson, regarding the latest position with damp and mould cases in the Council's housing stock, detailing what action had taken place since the

Committee's review into the issue in 2017. In 2020 a new policy was adopted following Members' recommendations including:

- carrying out a review of the Council's damp & condensation policy to ensure it remained fit for purpose and further develop the improvement plan
- an ambitious condition survey programme targeting 50% of stock to identify future improvement programmes
- developing case management processes further to improve resident engagement. Additional capacity would be built into the HRA Budget for 2023/24 to support this
- developing the IT system for case management including reporting tools to get more data enabling more targeted and earlier interventions
- planning further projects such as air quality monitors, use of technology and alternative wall finishes
- improving reporting and feedback mechanisms to make it easier for tenants

4.3.2 Given the raised profile of damp and mould in the media, there had been unhelpful developments more recently with regards to disrepair claims, with instances of residents following legal advice to ignore the advice of the Council and not engage with Officers. Moreover, cases were increasing due to the cost-of-living crisis which was currently contributing to the rise in cases. These included not enough air changes, the refusal to use extractor fans and to turn central heating on due to the increase in utility charges added to the problem of poor air quality.

4.3.3 Members stated that they were confident in the work that officers were undertaking regarding damp and but would keep the matter under review.

4.3.4 [Agenda for Community Select Committee on Monday, 9 January 2023, 6.00pm \(stevenage.gov.uk\)](#) and [CSC Minutes 9 January 2023](#)

#### 4.4 **Community Select Committee sitting as the Council Statutory Crime & Disorder Committee**

4.4.1 Members invited the Police to provide a presentation and answer questions regarding the following issues:

- Policing of the town centre
- Recent burglaries - information to help Members understand if this is potentially a trend or more isolated cases?
- Prevalence of marijuana across the town - is anything being done?
- Are ward priorities too focussed on cars?
- Explanation of what resources exist to tackle crime of all types in Stevenage

4.4.2 Prior to the meeting the Chair asked the Police to comment on what the impact for them had been from the publishing of Baroness Casey's review

into the standards and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police, for the processes and procedures for Hertfordshire Constabulary. The Police agreed that there was work for the Police to do to restore and maintain public confidence and trust following recent troubling incidents, and they gave assurances to the Committee that Hertfordshire Police had the appropriate processes and procedure in place to address the issues raised in Baroness Casey's report. The Police advised that there are mechanisms in place for anyone both internal and external to the Police, for them to come forward with any concerns regarding the Police's conduct.

#### **4.5 ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE**

##### **4.5.1 Climate Emergency Review**

4.5.2 The Committee continued its review of the Climate Emergency:

4.5.3 The review was completed in two stages, with an interim report published on 23 March 2022 including 13 recommendations. Overall, the Committee met formally on 11 occasions over the two years in 2021 and 2022 and informally on 3 occasions to undertake the review.

4.5.4 For the second part of the review the Committee received input from the following groups and people on the following dates:

- Thursday 23 June 2022, to consider the University of Hertfordshire's Zero Carbon Lab report providing theoretical carbon reduction measures which could help the Council reach its net zero ambitions
- Wednesday 13 July 2022, interview with the Leader of the Council, Cllr Sharon Taylor and Executive Portfolio Holder for Resources and ICT, Cllr Joan Lloyd
- Tuesday 22 September 2022, interview with the new Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment and Climate Change, Cllr Simon Speller
- Thursday 20 October 2022, interviews with the Executive Portfolio Holders for Culture, Leisure, Children and Young People, Cllr Richard Henry; Communities, Neighbourhoods and Co-operative Council, Cllr Sandra Barr; and Executive Portfolio Holder for Community Safety, Equalities, Health and Older People and received specific Officer updates on the Council's tree policy and on efforts towards improved recycling rates and a drive to encourage residents to use less in the hierarchy of waste management.
- Monday 24 October 2022, informal meeting of the Committee to interview Friends of the Earth, Peter Foord and Andy Holtham
- Wednesday 16 November 2022, representatives of the Committee met Members of the Young People's Climate Change Committee (a sub-group of the Youth Council) to engage with young people re climate change
- Thursday 17 November 2022, interviews with HCC Executive Portfolio Holder for Environment, Cllr Eric Buckmaster and Chair of the

Hertfordshire Climate Change Sustainability Partnership, Cllr Graham McAndrew, and with HCC Head of Sustainability, Julie Greaves and Lead Officer for Climate Change, East of England LGA, Matt Partridge

- Tuesday 17 January 2023, final report and recommendations of the review.

4.5.5 The review made recommendations on the following 6 areas:

1. **SBC and area wide pathway and targets** It is recommended that clear targets and a pathway to 2030 for both SBC targets and area wide targets need to be established. It is not currently clear what the targets or pathway are to see how Stevenage gets from where it is now to 2030. The way progress against the 2018 baseline figure is measured and publicised needs to be thought through so that this is clearly described to show what progress is being made each year and understood by Officers, Members and by the public.
2. **Pace** Is the climate emergency really being treated as an emergency? It is recommended that there is a need to ramp up the pace to get to net zero for the town by 2030. Members accept there are challenges around funding but where it sits in corporate priorities is an area that is a decision for the authority. Members will be looking to see how the pace is picked up leading to 2030.
3. **Adaptations** The review established that due to extreme weather events linked to climate change there is already a need for adaptations to buildings and for up-to-date emergency response plans to care for older residents in sheltered housing schemes. It is recommended that there be an audit of all adaptations required across the Council.
4. **Behaviour Change** It is recommended that officers from SBC link up with officers from the HCC Behaviour Change unit to work together on behaviour change initiatives.
5. **Future review** It has been recommended by the Chair of the Environment and Economy Select Committee that the issue of the climate emergency should be under regular review by the Committee and that a progress report should be brought back to the committee on a yearly basis.
6. **Training** The Committee recommends the creation of a training package for members, and additional training for senior Officers, on climate change mitigations and adaption, so that future decision makers are well informed in all aspects of the councils' operations, and the bearing climate change mitigation and adaption may have on them.

#### 4.6 **Executive Member Response to the Climate Emergency review**

4.6.1 The Select Committee received the formal response from the Executive Member for Environment and Climate Change, Councillor Simon Speller to the recommendations listed above. Based on the Executive response Environment & Economy Members provided the following critique:

- Members discussed the ongoing need to provide clear data that showed progress against the baseline figures from 2018, which

Members understood would be soon available via the Council's website.

- The need for adaptations to buildings, creating cool spaces during increasing episodes of extreme heat which was going to be an ongoing feature of climate change.
- The need for ongoing behavioural change to help harness community involvement in climate change practises and specific projects.

4.6.2 In addition to the formal review work undertaken by Environment and Economy Select Committee Members, selected Members and Officers supported the work of the Executive Portfolio Holder for Climate Change by contributing to 7 informal meetings of the Portfolio Holder's Climate Change Progress Group.

#### **4.7 Cost of Living Review**

4.7.1 The Committee started its review of the Cost of Living with a scoping document in December 2022 where it decided that the focus of the review should be on three areas including a focus on the impact on (i) local residents, (ii) impact on local businesses and (iii) the impact on Council staff.

4.7.2 The Committee received an officer presentation in January 2023 providing an overview of the cost of living crisis in a national, County and local context from the interim Head of Policy and Communities, Ben Threadgold. The Committee also interviewed Charlotte Blizzard-Welch, CEO Stevenage Citizens Advice and SBC officer, Gemma Maret, Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager regarding the operation of warm spaces.

4.7.3 In February 2023 the Committee received a presentation from the Business Relationship Manager, Mena Caldbeck on the impact of the cost of living crisis on small to medium sized businesses (SMEs) in Stevenage.

4.7.4 Members interviewed Simon Holmes, Director of Client Services and Enterprise Partnership Manager and Emma Wright, Client Services Operations Manager from Wenta (an independent, not-for-profit social enterprise that run the Council's Business Technology Centre (BTC)) to present on how businesses at the BTC are being impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. The Executive Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe, also attend the meeting and joined in the discussion.

4.7.5 In March 2023 the Committee received responses to questions they had set for the Trade Unions and interviewed the Head of Human Resources (job-share), Kirsten Frew and Clare Davies regarding the impact on Council's employees.

4.7.6 The Committee intends to revisit the same three themes during 2023-24 to complete the review.

#### **4.8 Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

4.8.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on 9 occasions to provide overview of the work of the Executive, specifically looking at all Key Decisions made by the Executive and all Budget and Policy Framework items. In addition to these meetings the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## 5.1 **2023/2024 Scrutiny Work Programmes**

5.1 Following the usual practise, the Scrutiny Officer canvassed scrutiny Members in January and February for their feedback on scrutiny activity and ideas for future scrutiny reviews. This informed a report to each of the three scrutiny Committees in March 2023. The shape of the three committees work programmes are as follows:

### 5.2 Community Select Committee:

The Community Select Committee agreed to scrutinise the following issues:

- Undertake a main review item on Housing Repairs
- Hold the statutory meeting on Crime and Disorder
- Continuation of a standing item on Public Health looking specifically at the impact of the new NHS health bodies Integrated Care Boards replacing Clinical Commissioning Groups
- Hold a one-off update on the Cultural Strategy
- Receive the Executive Member Response on the Housing Voids Review
- Undertake pre-scrutiny on the Community Centres strategy
- Undertake pre-scrutiny of the Allocations Policy
- Undertake pre-scrutiny of the new Housing Management Governance arrangements (replacement for the Housing Management Advisory Board (HMAB) )
- Undertake pre-scrutiny of Fairlands Valley Activity Centre

### 5.3 Environment and Economy Select Committee:

The Environment & Economy Select Committee agreed to scrutinise the following issues:

- Continuation and completion of review on the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis
- Undertake a main review on Bus Services and the collapse of the Zero Emission Bus Scheme
- Hold two update monitoring meetings in November 2023 and March 2024 on progress of the Climate Emergency actions following the Committee's completed review
- Schedule a one-off single meeting performance review on commercial vehicles parking in residential areas
- Scope a review of STEM employment opportunities for Young People
- Undertake pre-scrutiny of the Biodiversity Strategy
- Undertake pre-scrutiny of Waste and Recycling Strategy



The programmes above will be prioritised to ensure the key review activity takes place during the Municipal Year. As well as carrying out review work the Committee will also undertake any other pre-scrutiny Policy Development work as directed by the officer Strategic Leadership Team and the Council and Executive Forward Plan.

#### 5.4 Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme:

5.4.1 In addition to undertaking all scrutiny of Budget & Policy Framework items and decisions of the Executive, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has the capacity to undertake a “Select Committee” style meeting during the year if it so wishes. The Committee agreed to add the following items to its work programme:

- Scrutiny of the Council’s Information Communication Technology (ICT) delivery
- Scrutiny of the 2021 Census Data for Stevenage

As well as carrying out review work the Committee will also undertake pre-scrutiny Policy Development work as directed by officer Strategic Leadership Team the Council and Executive Forward Plan.

5.4.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee will review the Council’s Forward Plan of Key Decisions and also consider all ‘Call-in’ requests in accordance with the Council’s Constitution as well as considering any Councillors Call for Action in relation to matters relating to Resources and any Petition appeals, in accordance with the Councils Petition Scheme, regarding matters relating to Resources or of a Corporate or Council wide nature.

#### 5.5 Scoping reviews

5.5.1 A schedule of dates for meetings for the two Select Committees has been arranged for the 2023-24 Municipal Year, as and when any further meetings are scheduled electronic diary invites will be sent to Members on the Committee. These meetings will incorporate the scoping of the review where Members will identify the areas they wish to cover during the review, who to interview, what evidence/background information is required and which Members will lead the questioning on a specific area, as well as undertaking site visits, where appropriate. Meetings will also be arranged to revisit previous reviews to monitor actions.

#### 5.6 **Pre-Scrutiny Policy Development Meetings**

5.6.1 Pre-scrutiny Policy Development meetings will continue to be undertaken as and when directed by the Strategic Directors/Assistant Strategic Directors. These meetings are chaired by the relevant Overview & Scrutiny or Select Committee Chairs and the relevant Executive Portfolio Holders are invited to attend.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial Implications**

5.5.1 There are no financial implications for this report.

### **5.2 Legal Implications**

5.2.1 There are no legal implications for this report.

### **5.3 Climate Change Implications**

5.3.1 All Climate Change implications are addressed in paragraphs 4.5.1 to 4.6.