

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Monday, 24 July 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Forhad Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Sarah Mead, Margaret Notley, Robin Parker CC, Carolina Veres and Anne Wells

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 9.20pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Conor McGrath.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 20 June 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

2. Minutes – 15 March 2023

Noted.

3. Minutes of Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees

Noted.

4. Station Gateway Area Action Plan: Preferred Options Report – Public Consultation Feedback

The Committee was informed that Executive had considered a report in respect of public consultation feedback on the Station Gateway Area Action Plan (AAP) Preferred Options and had approved the recommendations set out in the report.

Members were advised that the report focussed on the latest stage of consultation and captured comments from all stakeholders as well as members of the public. It was advised that as this was a high level strategic

policy objective it would not automatically become planning policy nor immediately implemented. The AAP was a long term policy for potential improvements to the area giving consideration as to how the space could be used in the future and would form part of the review of the Local Plan in 2025/26.

In reply to a number of questions/comments from Members, the Strategic Director (TP) and the Assistant Director Planning and Regulation gave the following responses:

- In response to the Preferred Option and impact on Lytton Way and the objections that had been received to the downgrading or closure of Lytton Way, it was noted that some comments had been received in support as well as some with areas of concern. Officers reiterated that in taking a preferred option forward, this did not confirm a policy position nor a precise development scheme, but would form part of the review of the Local Plan and would require further development and further public consultation.
- In relation to the change in traffic flow that would be required, modelling had been undertaken by HCC as Highways Authority who had advised that there could be impacts on the network without people changing their preferred mode of transport. If this were to go forward in a number of years, there would have to be a number of mitigations made to address the traffic impacts around Fairlands Way and Gunnels Wood Road and St George's Way.
- It was confirmed that the high level bridge crossing on Lytton Way would be maintained until there was an adequate at grade crossing alternative;
- In terms of consultation timescales, the Local Plan update would take place in 2024/5. The Station Gateway would form part of the Local Plan leading up to 2031;
- Officers advised that so far consultation had taken place over 2 phases with over 1400 responses received. Officers were aware that the technology used so far in the consultation could be further improved and the Council would be looking at easier ways for the public to engage going forward;
- A Member was concerned that the initial branding of the scheme as 'connections' gave the impression that people would only be getting on a train to travel outside of the Town. Officers advised that this was not simply seen as an arrival point for in and out of Town travel but would be the integral linkage point at the heart of the town for all residents including those travelling across Stevenage between the east and west of the Town;
- In relation to the access to the new Multi Storey Car Park (MSCP), Members were advised that the car park had been 'future proofed' in terms of its design to ensure any potential changes to Lytton way would not affect access to the car park;
- It was advised that the review of the Local Plan would be subject to the Secretary of State's approval and once agreed would form planning policy, but that any specific decisions would have to be submitted to the Planning and Development Committee for approval.

5. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan (2023-24)

The Committee was advised that the recommendations in the report had been approved and that following a question at Executive in relation to safeguarding responsibilities. Officers had advised that the Action Plan demonstrated that the Council recognised the needs and issues faced and how it would strive to address and tackle issues in a positive way. Progress around digital engagement had also been improved but it was recognised that there was further work to do to capture the voices of young people.

In response to a question regarding the process for monitoring successes against the Action Plan, Officers advised that the work of the Legacy Group would continue and this would include moving the recommendations forward but it was agreed that some of the actions should be tightened up recognising that the actions were not just for Stevenage Borough Council but also a range of its partners.

In relation to digital engagement, a number of measures had been put in place to break down barriers including Council Officers using tablets to engage people and support them in completing consultations. Members were pleased to note that this had been successful in a number of places including Independent Living Schemes and would continue to be monitored.

In relation to social inclusion, Officers advised that they would continue to use the data gathered from a number of sources to furnish the Equality Impact Assessments that were undertaken, taking account of socio economic factors alongside the protected characteristics.

6. Housing Under Occupation Policy Review

Members noted that the Policy would apply to specialist housing (such as disabled properties), as well as general needs housing, and appropriate adaptations could be made to certain properties to allow tenants of specialist housing to downsize.

7. Local Lettings Policy for Specialist Accommodation (Older People)

Noted.

8. Corporate Performance Quarter 4 2022/23, Annual Report 2022/23 and Corporate Performance Suite 2023/24

In response to a concern officers advised that in relation to telephone answering levels within the Customer Service Centre (CSC), there was not one simple answer. Challenges within the CSC included recruitment and retention and high volumes of complex enquiries which could themselves restrict call handling capacity. Members were advised that improvements were being made to on-line services, 2 additional colleagues had joined the team and that a digital knowledge base system had also been put in place.

It was also noted that areas of the Council that were seeing improved performance, such as the Housing Repairs would take the burden off the Call Centre with reduced repeat enquiries.

9. 4th Quarter Revenue Monitoring 2022/23 – General Fund and Housing Revenue Account

Officers confirmed that the core resources of the General Fund was made up of Council Tax collected, NNDR and Government Grants.

The overspend referred to in paragraph 4.12 of the report in relation to repairs and voids was made up of a slight increase in agency costs, sub-contractor costs and also re-charges had been slightly higher than previously. The Schedule of Rates charge had not increased but the impact going forward would be looked at by Officers alongside what actions were currently being taken. The Strategic Director (CF) agreed to provide a fuller explanation to Members of the Committee of the situation following the meeting.

10. 2022/23 Capital Expenditure Outturn

Noted.

4 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

The Committee considered a report including the latest available information around the current local Stevenage Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme and whether any changes to the scheme should be considered for the financial year 2024/25.

Officers summarised the CTS scheme for 2023/24 as follows:

- That the CTS scheme for all working age claimants would be based on 91.5% of their Council tax liability;
- Elderly CTS claimants were protected in law from any restriction to the liability used in CTS calculations. Their awards would always be based on 100% of the council tax charge.
- All local discretions currently in place continued e.g. war pension disregards;
- Other aspects of the Council Tax Support scheme mirrored the previous Council Tax Benefit scheme.

It was noted that the current CTS scheme worked and protected the most vulnerable customers by the use of applicable amounts and income disregards. However, the challenges and opportunities introduced by Universal Credit (UC) prompted a review of the structure of the scheme, but concluded that until the majority of claimants were in receipt of UC, any alternative would add further complexity.

Officers advised that they still recommended therefore that a two stage approach be followed as the Council moved forward. Firstly, instead of looking to change the current scheme in the short term, the introduction of further automation of UC change notices be continued. Secondly, once actual caseload migration is timetabled, consideration of a banded scheme or a discount scheme would be

revisited.

The following comments were made by Members in response to the report:

- Members were of the view that the scheme should remain unchanged at the moment but if there needed to be a change going forward there had to be considerable notice given to those residents affected;
- Officers advised that there were a number of complicated Housing Benefit cases and a plan would be needed for this caseload particularly as recruitment and retention of staff in this area was an issue;
- Members were pleased to note that elderly claimants were protected by law.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That no other options around scheme design should be explored further for Stevenage's local Council Tax Support scheme for April 2024.
2. That a policy Overview and Scrutiny meeting is held post Full Council in May 2024 to determine whether there has been a transition to Universal Credit and a need to adapt the existing scheme as set out in section 4.4-4.5 of the report.
3. That it be confirmed that the Council continues to use the directive contained in the Social Security Administration Act 1992 to disregard, in full, awards of War Widows, War Disablement and Armed Forces Compensation when determining entitlement for housing benefit and/or council tax support.

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

None.

6 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

7 **EXCLUSION OF 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 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.

8 **PART II MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 20 June 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

9 **PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

13. **Part II Minutes – Executive – 14 June 2023**

Noted.

14. **Regeneration Programme Update and SG1 Programme Implementation**

The Committee received a presentation and asked a number of questions regarding this item which were answered by the Strategic Directors (TP) and (CF) and the Assistant Director Regeneration.

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

None.

11 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR