

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 20 September 2023

Time: 2.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Richard Henry (Chair), Jeannette Thomas (Vice-Chair), Sandra Barr, Lloyd Briscoe, Jackie Hollywell and Loraine Rossati.

Start / End Start Time: 2.00pm
Time: End Time: 3.15pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Mrs Joan Lloyd and Simon Speller.

The Leader also submitted apologies for absence on behalf of the Chief Executive who, together with Councillor Speller, was attending the East of England Net Zero Conference in Cambridge.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 18 JULY 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 18 July 2023 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEES 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 – 6 July 2023

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 24 July 2023

Community Select Committee – 26 July 2023

4 FUTURE COUNCIL 2025 TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME SAVINGS UPDATE

The Executive considered a report in respect of an update on the Future Council 2025 Transformation Programme savings.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure and IT advised that the report sought approval to proposed changes in both the customer services location and opening times. She

commented that since the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of people visiting customer services 'in person' had fallen from an average 78 of customers a day in Q1 2019 to 7 in Q1 2023. The existing space was now oversized for the number of visitors and customers coming into the centre. Another costly and confusing issue for the customer was that there were two entrances to Daneshill House. With reduced numbers coming into the centre, it was considered that this was the right time to change the service offering. It was therefore proposed that the customer service centre operations be moved to the main reception entrance of Daneshill House.

The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure and IT stated that, in addition to the proposed re-location, there was an opportunity to align the Customer Services opening hours with those of neighbouring councils and hence reduce the need for two staffing shifts to deliver the 8am-5pm opening times. The proposed opening times would be 9am-5pm for both in person visits and telephone contact.

The Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure and IT referred to the ongoing transformation work outlined in the report on the proposed changes to community advice and support, housing, and localities teams as part of activity-based review of services. These changes would further embed the Co-operative Neighbourhood model, enabling close working relationships with communities to help resolve problems, maintain a visible and proactive presence, and help Council teams to work effectively together. The activity-based service reviews would also deliver efficient services and efficiencies.

In response to Members' questions, officers commented as follows:

- the majority of visitors to the Customer Service Centre (CSC) had pre-arranged appointments. Once the CSC had moved there would be a member of staff based in the Main Reception to greet customers and point them in the right direction as to how their enquiry could be resolved; and
- there would continue to be self-service PCs in the CSC, with staff on hand to assist customers if required.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the change of location of the customer service centre to the main reception entrance of Daneshill House be approved.
2. That the change of opening hours of customer services from 8am - 5pm to 9pm – 5pm be approved.
3. That the potential savings to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and General Fund in support of the Medium Term Financial Strategy be noted.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

5 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 1 2023/24

The Executive considered a report in respect of Corporate Performance for Quarter 1 (April – June 2023) of 2023/24.

The Leader of the Council advised that this was the first quarter of reporting in 2023/24, and therefore also the first time that Members would be considering the new Corporate Performance Suite as agreed by the Executive in July 2023.

The Leader of the Council explained that the performance suite for 2023/24 had been refined so that it focused not only on new regulatory requirements and the Council's significant investment in social housing, but also those areas which residents had told the Council mattered to them the most, namely the environment and climate change; anti-social behaviour; provision and maintenance of homes; and delivery of good local services. He added that these measures had been classified as 'Community Measures', and that there were 13 (out of 35) indicators which would be regularly highlighted and communicated to residents throughout the year.

The Leader of the Council commented that, to help clarify and provide context to performance, the FTFC milestones and strategic measures had (for the first time) been brought together to provide a complete picture of progress against the 5 current strategic priorities of the FTFC programme.

The Leader of the Council stated that, where there was a need to improve performance, the report explained the challenges faced and mitigations being applied. These areas would require specific attention and active management by officers going forward. This was reflected in the report recommendations, which were being closely monitored by Senior Management and the relevant Portfolio Holders.

The Deputy Chief Executive gave a presentation concerning the Quarter 1 2023/24 report, and commented that of the 35 Corporate Performance Indicators, 2 were at Amber status, 3 were at Red, and a number of new measures were being baselined during 2023/24. He outlined the action taken to address the 3 Red Indicators, namely Homelessness Preventions; Number of affordable homes delivered; and Number of Voids returned by contractor.

The Deputy Chief Executive then 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 Neighbourhoods; Making Your Money Count; and a Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town.

The Deputy Chief Executive concluded by referring to some of the community measures for Quarter 1, which included an 18.6% decrease in anti-social behaviour cases and a small decrease in the number of fly-tipping cases compared to the same period last year. Furthermore, 55% of the Council's Housing Stock had an EPC rating of C or above, 82.44% of Council homes met the national Decent Homes standard, and the Council had provided 339 new homes since 2014 (with a target of

reaching 394 for Quarter 2).

In respect of the good local services community measure, the Deputy Chief Executive reported that there had been over 22,000 visits from children to the Council's Everyone Active-managed leisure facilities; 85.5% of complaints were responded to within deadline; 88% of respondents were satisfied with the Customer Services Centre; and 99.45% of residential bins had been collected.

The Portfolio Holder for Community Safety and Equalities stated that she was pleased with the reduction in anti-social behaviour. She thanked and commended SBC officers and the Police for their excellent partnership working in this area.

In reply to Members' questions, officers replied as follows:

- there had been positive outcomes with recent recruitment processes in some service areas, including the appointments of a new Assistant Director for Housing Compliance, Repairs and Building Safety and a new Head of Building Safety. The Housing Repairs Service still had recruitment challenges, both to management roles and specialist tradespeople. Strategic Directors were soon to meet with Assistant Directors to monitor the use of agency/temporary staff, although it was acknowledged that the current employment market was very competitive; and
- the Cartref site referred to in Appendix A to the report had been used temporarily as a depot/storage area in connection with the Major Repairs Contract and was owned by the Council. Should a scheme be developed, a planning application would be submitted and consulted upon in the usual manner.

The Leader drew attention to the Council's green credentials by referring to the recent fitting of solar panels on to seven of the Council's refuse lorries. As well as savings on fuel, the vehicles would save a considerable amount of Carbon Dioxide emissions in the coming years.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development welcomed the progress toward the completion of Helston House, with 29 new homes being delivered, and was appreciative of the community open day that took place in September. The Portfolio Holder confirmed that it was anticipated that the first occupants of the new eco-friendly Helston House development would be moving in during October 2023.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the service performance against 35 corporate performance measures and delivery of key milestones in Quarter 1 2023/24 through the Future Town Future Council Programme (Appendix A to the report) be noted.
2. That the Council's performance as demonstrated through the 13 Community Measures (Appendix B to the report) be noted.
3. That the performance challenges in relation to homelessness preventions, number of homes provided, and voids (Section 4.2 of the report) be noted, and the planned measures to improve performance be endorsed.

4. That the strategic risk updates (Section 6 of the report) be noted.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2024/25

The Executive considered a report in respect of the proposed Council Tax Support Scheme for 2023/24.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development advised that the recommendation in the report was to retain the current 8.5% maximum liability for those on maximum benefit (working aged claimants).

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development stated that the report also recommended looking at the scheme again early in the next municipal year (2024/25) to see if a more significant proportion of the town's households had moved to Universal Credit (UC). If so, the scheme may need to be amended in future years.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development commented that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, at its July 2023 meeting, had supported the proposal to continue with the existing scheme for 2024/25. However, there was a further recommendation in the report that post-Annual Council in May 2024, a policy Overview and Scrutiny meeting be held to determine whether there had been a transition to UC and whether the scheme needed to be updated for future years beyond 2024/25.

The Strategic Director (CF) agreed to provide all Members with a Briefing Note to use when advising residents about the Council Tax Support Scheme, including signposting them to the Council's online tool that they could use to determine eligibility for support under the Scheme.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the recommendation from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 24 July 2023 to retain the current Council Tax Support Scheme for April 2024 be approved.
2. That a policy Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting be held post- Annual 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 Sections 4.4 - 4.5 of the report.
3. That the directive contained in the Social Security Administration Act 1992 be used 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.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.
Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 GENERAL FUND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY UPDATE (2023/24 - 2027/28)

The Executive considered a report in respect of an update on the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy 2023/24 – 2027/28.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development advised that the report identified the level of medium term inflation and other pressures for the General Fund and the consequently £3.2Million amount of ‘balancing the budget savings’ required for the three year period between 2024/25 - 2026/27. The MTFS identified the need for £1.23Million to be found through a combination of savings, efficiencies, new surplus income and transformation in 2024/25.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development stated that the Council’s inflationary pressures were projected to be £1.4Million next year before the other cost increases which were set out in the report. Increases in Council Tax and core resources were predicted to be £367,000, highlighting the reason why councils across the country had to continue to find innovative ways to balance their budgets.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development explained that Minimum risk assessed balances for 2024/25 were estimated to be £3.5Million. The projected year end balance for 2024/25 was estimated to be £4.3Million which was above the minimum amount required. This would result in a £310,000 draw on general reserves, with an additional £1.941Million of allocated reserves available.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development referred to a specific recommendation in the report to permit officers to commit to underwrite the detailed design stage (known as RIBA Stage 3) to enable final design and construction pricing for the Swingate site (Plot A), ahead of entering into the joint venture with Mace and the subsequent start on site within 2023/24.

The Strategic Director (CF) drew attention to the increasing number of Section 114 Notices being issued to local authorities across the country, which emphasised the difficulties being experienced by councils in balancing their budgets. It was fortunate that SBC was not in a Section 114 position, although the identification of savings and efficiencies continued to be challenging year on year.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the change to the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) principles, as outlined in Paragraph 3.11 and as amended in Paragraph 4.9.11 of the report, be approved.
2. That, for modelling purposes, Council Tax increases be set at the threshold allowed assumed at 2.99%, subject to any change in Government rules, in

order to help achieve a balanced budget, as set out in Paragraph 4.6.8 of the report.

3. That the updated inflation assumptions used in the MTFs, as set out in Section 4 of the report, be approved.
4. That the recommendation set out in Paragraph 4.3.4 of the report to transfer a maximum of £225,000 from the Business Rates Reserve should the SG1 Swingate site Joint Venture not proceed, be approved.
5. That the approach to “Balancing the Budget” options, as set out in Section 4.8 of the report, be approved.
6. That an amount of £300,000 for 2024/25 be approved for inclusion in the budget setting process to support the Transformation Fund, to help deliver the Balancing the Budget Target, as set out in Paragraph 4.8.3 of the report.
7. That a Balancing the Budget Target of £3.2Million (of which £1.23Million relates to 2024/25) be approved for the period 2024/25 – 2026/27, as set out in Section 4.9 of the report.
8. That General Fund growth be only approved for the Council’s FTFC priorities and the growth allowance included in the 2024/25 budget be £75,000. Growth above that level will need to be funded by further savings in addition to the £3.2Million target identified.
9. That a minimum level of balances for the General Fund of £3.50Million be approved for 2023/24, as set out in Paragraph 4.10.8 of the report.
10. That the MTFs be regularly reviewed and revised to reflect any material financial pressures so forecasts are updated and re-presented to the Executive for approval.
11. That the Trade Unions and staff be consulted on the key messages contained within the MTFs and more specifically when drawing up any proposals where there is a risk of redundancy.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

8 FIRST QUARTER REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2023/24

The Executive considered a report in respect of the First Quarter Revenue Budget Monitoring 2023/24.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development advised that, for Quarter 1, the report highlighted a net decrease for the General Fund of £273,020 and a net pressure of £154,510 for the Housing Revenue Account.

The Executive noted that both General Fund and HRA remained within their variation limits, as delegated to the Executive by Council.

It was **RESOLVED**:

General Fund

1. That the 2023/24 First Quarter projected net decrease in General Fund expenditure of £273,020 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 proposed movement on reserves, as detailed in Paragraph 4.2.1 of the report, be noted.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

4. That the 2023/24 First Quarter projected net pressure in HRA expenditure of £154,510 be approved.
5. That two budget virements totalling £450,000, from planned maintenance budgets, to fund the proposed fencing works as detailed in Paragraph 4.5.9 of the report, be approved.
6. That the existing backlog of fencing works be prioritised to be completed and new fencing repairs be added to a waiting list, unless they relate to emergency repairs and those creating a health and safety risk, which will be dealt with immediately, with all other repairs being completed in order of date raised.
7. That a budget virement of £238,000 from revenue contributions to capital, for void property repair costs, be approved, as detailed at Paragraph 4.5.6 of the report.
8. That it be noted that the cumulative increases made to the HRA net budget remain within the £400,000 variation limit delegated to the Executive in the January 2023 budget report.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

9 ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW 2022/23 AND PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS

The Executive considered a report in respect of a review of the 2022/23 Annual Treasury Management Strategy and Prudential Indicators.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development advised that the report

presented the outturn position against the parameters that were set as part of the Strategy approved in February 2022.

The Executive be noted that there were no breaches to the Treasury Management policy in 2022/23 and no Treasury Limits were breached during the year. The Council also had no liquidity difficulties.

The Assistant Director (Finance) commented that the report had been considered by the Audit Committee at its meeting held on 6 September 2023. The Audit Committee had agreed that the Strategy review be recommended by the Executive to Council for approval.

It was **RESOLVED** that the 2022/23 Annual Treasury Management Review be recommended to Council for approval.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

10 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

11 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.

12 PART II MINUTES - EXECUTIVE - 18 JULY 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 18 July 2023 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

13 STEVENAGE (SURVIVORS) AGAINST DOMESTIC ABUSE (SADA) SERVICE UPDATE

The Executive considered a Part II report in respect of an update on the Stevenage (Survivors) Against Domestic Abuse (SADA) service.

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