

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**DATE: 22 NOVEMBER 2023**

**TIME: 6pm**

**LOCATION: Council Chamber**

### MINUTES

**Present:** *Councillors: L Martin-Haugh (Chair), S Booth, R Broom, J Brown, F Chowdhury, M Downing, B Facey, C McGrath, S Mead, M Notley, R Parker CC, C Veres, and A Wells*

**Start/End Time:** *Start: 6:00pm  
End: 8:40pm*

#### **1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Phil Bibby CC.

There were no declarations of interest.

A Member asked whether the meeting was being livestreamed. They were advised that due to resourcing, Planning and Development Committee meetings were being livestreamed instead as owing to greater public interest in the Planning meetings and limitations of Officer resource in being able to livestream all meetings.

#### **2 MINUTES – 17 OCTOBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 12 October 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

#### **3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

##### **2. MINUTES – 12 OCTOBER 2023**

Noted.

##### **3. MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES**

Noted.

#### **4. HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUSINESS PLAN REVIEW 2023**

Members were advised that the report detailed the work that had been carried out on the HRA business plan revision and followed consultation with the Executive on the 15<sup>th</sup> November. There had also been a presentation to the Community Select Committee on the 19<sup>th</sup> October. The recommendations in the report formed the basis of the HRA budget 2024/25 which would be presented to the Executive in December.

The Strategic Director (CF) reminded Members there was a Modern Member Programme on the HRA Business Plan being held in December.

#### **5. HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023 - 2028**

The Committee was advised that the report was seeking approval of the Housing Asset Management Strategy (HAMS) 2023 – 2028 and set out the framework on investment into the existing SBC housing stock. This included investment priorities and how the Council met the new requirements.

In response to questions, the Strategic Director (RP) advised:

- There were communication plans with both the HRA and HAMS on how the Council shared the strategies over the next 15 months. There had been consultation with the Community Select Committee on how to communicate this and aimed to show the positive work the housing service was undertaking.
- More detail on the criteria for housing stock surveys could be provided to Members. It was oriented around the Decent Homes Standard and the Stevenage Standard was also applied. The government was potentially changing the Decent Homes Standard so the criteria is likely to change again in the future.

#### **6. SECOND QUARTER REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2023/24**

Members were advised that the Executive approved the General Fund and Housing Revenue Budget for Quarter 2. There was a net increase in the General Fund of £1,850 and an underspend of £1.229m from the HRA. This was due to two key decisions, firstly, not to take out borrowing within the first 6 months of the year, and the interest earned on balances due to the interest rates increasing. The budget does not include the recent pay award, and this would be included in the Quarter 3 report.

In response to questions, the Strategic Director (CF) and the Assistant Director (Finance) advised:

- There would be an ongoing assessment of the commercial viability of the skip service and work to generate additional business.
- The increase in income generated related to the investment earnings on the current balance.
- Officers were looking at using agencies for specific activities such as seasonal work, but this would always fluctuate, and the recruitment market remains challenging. In terms of agencies, Officers confirmed that seasonal agency staff are not more expensive than employing directly, however in professional roles, day rates are usually more expensive than permanent employment.

## **7. FIRST AND SECOND QUARTER CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2023/24**

The Committee were advised that this report was approved by the Executive. There was a net change of £447,000 a year. The report also sought approval for a £15m of budgets to be reprofiled into 2024/25. The main areas were Regeneration where £6m was being moved back by a year due to working through the spend and delivery plans for Town Fund schemes, and Housing Development where £8m was being moved as the team were still finalising Section 106 agreements. The spend calculated in September showed £16m which accounted for 22% of the revised budgets.

In response to questions from Members, it was advised that:

- The term TMS stood for Treasury Management Strategy.
- Officers needed to see the trajectory of spend before locking in any investments as they were always security accredited. Investments were from Council balances, there was not a separate portfolio for this.

## **8. MID-YEAR TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW 2023/24**

Members were advised that there were no breaches or recommendation changes in the policy. The average yield of investments was 5.27%.

In response to questions, the Assistant Director (Finance) advised:

- The Debt Management Office (DMO) is part of the treasury department in the Government.

- Debt management was stipulated from government regulations, and it was becoming even more heavily regulated. There was a lot of scrutiny on Council finances and wasn't much that the Council could change.
- The DMO was the opposite of the Public Works Loan Board (PWLB). The rates weren't as good, so the Council avoids investing here. There was an increase in interest by the Government in terms of the levels of debts. Some indicators weren't reaching the mark, but this included the HRA debt which was the majority of the Council's debt.

## **9. BALANCING THE BUDGET OPTIONS 2024/25**

The Committee were advised that the Balancing the Budget Options report came annually and there was an annual gap based on meeting the general fund need and the funding that was available. Due to this, difficult decisions had to be made. There was a £1m savings target going forward and the Council Tax increase did not cover the level of inflation. There was a £56,000 gap next year that Officers were looking to close when bringing the General Fund draft report to the Executive in January.

In response to questions, the Strategic Director (CF) advised:

- The recommendations were the end result of the financial services deliberation group.
- The HCC verge maintenance was based on CPI and was higher now. The contract was renegotiated resulting in a greater figure.
- The reasons for closing the customer service centre (CSC) were based on a number of factors. Mainly to reduce the number of CSC staff in natural turnover, moving more services to digital in line with the transformation programme, and more efficient use of the building.
- There was a saving of £145,000 but there was greater volume of customer demand around repairs and housing management queries.
- More services are available online, but people who didn't want to or were unable to, could still use the service by phone or in person.
- The rebranding of the CSC was not in the report, but this could be fed back.
- There would be a 1-, 3-, and 6-month review of the CSC to see how it was going and how to improve.
- £5.2m of central government funding had been lost and there was a bigger number of residents and properties to deal with.

- The Council was looking into renting the previous CSC area, but it was a question of whether it would be possible to in the current market. Officers were exploring potential tenants.
- Officers were aware when car parks were quieter, usually Mondays and Fridays due to hybrid working patterns. Car park use was heavily linked to working and commuter patterns.
- In relation to Car park use, it is still one of the three biggest income streams for the Council. The surplus was reduced but there were no overall losses and the surplus funded other services. Part of the regeneration strategy is to build on some of the car parks so these would need to be replaced.
- The Council Financial Security Group (CFSG) was run by the resources portfolio holder and had one member from the Liberal Democrats and one member from the Conservatives.
- The planning team were multiskilled and were able to handle both applications and start enforcements. The graduate planner position would be expected to get to grips with applications, enforcement and planning policy.

## **10. URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was none.

### **4 PRESENTATION ON 2021 CENSUS DATA FOR STEVENAGE**

The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager and the Corporate Policy and Research Officer gave a presentation on the 2021 Census Data for Stevenage which was published as part of the meeting agenda pack. The Policy team produced an update on Stevenage demographic data yearly, and review the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) objectives every 4 years. The presentation looked at the 9 protected characteristic groups taken from census data and showed the changes from 2001, 2011 and 2021.

In response to a range of questions from a Member, Officers advised that as of May next year there will be boundary changes so the ward statistics could change. The way the data had been presented in the meeting was an overview for presentation purposes and that the in-depth detail was contained in the full report. There was a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment which looked at opportunities to explore deprivation.

A Member suggested the website should offer alternative languages. The Corporate Policy and Performance Manager advised that they were exploring the SBC online offer and ensuring it was accessible for everyone.

Members suggested communications around the EDI Officer Group and the EDGG should be improved so more people knew about them. The Corporate Policy and

Performance Manager advised that the EDI Officer Group was for Officers only and they were still promoting it, but it was slowly growing. Cllr Hollywell added that the EDGG collaborated with Officers and people in HR and was a Member and staff led group mainly around governance. It was reported at every annual Council.

In response to a question, the Corporate Policy and Research Officer defined the term 'legal partnerships' as marriages or civil partnerships and was the terminology and definition used in the census.

In response to various questions from a Member the Corporate Policy and Performance Manager advised:

- The team wanted to look at ward level data and profiles, but it required a lot of time and effort but would be considered.
- Religion was included as it was a protected characteristic. Further analysis could be done around this, but it would depend on what resources were available to undertake this work.
- There was data surrounding employment of Stevenage residents and there were links referenced at the end of the presentation that gave further information on this.
- A key topic within the EDI Action Plan was the annual review process against big activities and how the Council performed on these impacted what they did next. They were monitoring all activities, and this was key to feedback and progress.

A member spoke strongly regarding the presentation of some of the information within the report, suggesting a different format for some information, and mentioning that the formatting of printed copies of the presentation clipped material from the slides. The Officers advised that the data presented was based on census data and reiterated that more detail of the data was found in the full report. The Strategic Director (TP) offered to walk through the data and graphs in a separate meeting at a later time if it was helpful to Members.

A few Members raised the topic of employment and income of Stevenage residents and were interested in these statistics. Some Members also added that comparison data with other towns in Hertfordshire, as well as ward by ward data, would be helpful to see. Officers advised that the census data was available online for any user.

Another Member asked what the boundaries in the deprivation map meant in geographical terms. They were advised that the data came from the OCSI (Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion) and was completed in 2019 for the Ministry of Housing. The areas were the output areas and there was an average of 4 per ward. The aim of the boundaries was to try and define neighbourhoods and have the same number of people in each output area.

A number of Members thanked Officers for the time and detail put into the presentation.

The Strategic Director (TP) reiterated his offer, that he would be able to speak to members outside of the meeting at their request, if there were specific points in relation to the census data if they wished, and that extensive data is also in the public domain.

The Chair indicated she was unhappy with the manner of questioning from one Member in relation to the presentation and report. The SD (TP) reminded all present of the importance of conducting question and debate in a constructive, polite and respectful manner at all times.

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

There was none.

## **6 URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was none.

## **7 EXCLUSION OF THE 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 item of business on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1-7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Acts as amended by Local Government (Access to information) (Variation) Order 2006
- (2) That Members consider the reasons for the following reports (if any) being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

## **8 PART II MINUTES – OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 17 OCTOBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED:** That the Part II Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 17 October 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

## **1 PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

Noted.

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

There was none.

**1 URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

Chair