

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## EXECUTIVE MINUTES

**Date: Wednesday, 13 December 2023**

**Time: 2.00pm**

**Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage**

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

**Start / End** Start Time: 2.00pm  
**Time:** End Time: 3.02pm

### **1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

There were no declarations of interest.

### **2 MINUTES - 15 NOVEMBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 15 November 2023 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair

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

It was **RESOLVED** that the following Minutes of meetings of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees be noted –

Community Select Committee – 19 October 2023

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 1 November 2023

Community Select Committee – 14 November 2023

### **4 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 2 2023/24**

The Executive considered a report in respect of Corporate Performance for Quarter 2 of 2023/24 (July to September 2023).

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and stated that Quarterly performance reporting was one of the key ways Members and Officers held themselves to account, identifying where the Council was succeeding and also where it needed to improve. The report provided Members with an update on delivery of the Future Town, Future Council Programme, along with corporate performance results across the Council's business units.

The Chief Executive reminded the Executive that the Council had 35 performance measures, 17 of which were 2023/24 baseline measures. As at Quarter 2, 13 were at Green status (meeting or exceeding target), 3 were Amber (within a manageable tolerance) and 1 was Red (urgent improvement action required). There was also 1 outstanding measure (percentage of household waste sent for reuse, recycling and composting), which would be available at Quarter 3.

The Chief Executive advised that the measure at Red status (number of voids returned by contractor) was a key area of focus. New performance measures were being introduced to provide insight into voids backlog performance; changes had been made internally to strengthen the management of the service and better scope/supervise void works; regular performance review meetings were being held; and a voids improvement plan was being implemented.

The Chief Executive referred to the Quarter 2 Future Town Future Council Programme Performance Highlights under the themes of Transforming Our Town; More Social and Good Quality Affordable Housing; Co-operative Neighbourhoods; Balancing the Budget; and A Clean, Green, Safe and Thriving Town.

The Chief Executive reported some of the community measures for Quarter 2, as follows:

- Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) – there had been a 15.7% decrease in ASB cases in comparison to the same period in 2022/23;
- Fly tipping – 138 cases had been reported, in comparison with 117 cases in the same period in 2022/23. Deterrents included mobile CCTV cameras, improved signage, and asking perpetrators to remove fly tipped material;
- Housing Stock – 55% of the Council's Housing Stock had an EPC rating of C or above;
- Decent Homes – 84.39% of Council Homes met the national Decent Homes standard;
- Affordable Housing – the Council had provided 394 new Council/Affordable homes since 2014;
- Everyone Active-managed leisure facilities – over 20,000 visits from children;
- Customer Services Centre (CSC) – 81.1% of complaints were responded to within deadline and 88.2% of respondents were satisfied with the CSC; and
- Residential Refuse bins – 99.65% of bins were collected.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Performance stressed that performance management was vital, to enable Members and the Council to demonstrate local accountability to residents, but responding to their concerns and issues where possible, as well as demonstrating to the Government that the Council was operating in an effective manner.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment & Performance asked fellow Portfolio Holders to look at their respective performance measures, in order to determine their appropriateness and, if not, to consider more appropriate measures for introduction in 2024/25.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the service performance against 35 corporate performance measures and delivery of key milestones in Quarter 2 2023/24 through the Future Town Future Council Programme, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be noted.
2. That the Council's performance as demonstrated through the 13 Community Measures, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be noted.
3. That the performance challenges in relation to voids (as set out in Section 4.4.2 of the report) be noted, and the planned measures to improve performance be endorsed.
4. That the strategic risk updates, as set out in Section 4.7 of the report, be noted.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **5 COUNCIL TAX BASE 2024/25**

The Executive considered a report in respect of the proposed Council Tax Base for 2024/25.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development advised that the report captured the taxbase for levying the 2024/25 Council Tax by all preceptors. This included an estimate of new properties likely to liable for the charge, together with an assessment of discounts likely to be given. The taxbase included the latest Council Tax Support Scheme that Members agreed at the Executive in September 2023.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development explained that the 2024/25 taxbase was estimated based upon there being 29,088.5 equivalent "Band D" properties, which was then reduced to 28,579.4 equivalent "Band D" properties after making allowances for a 98.25% collection rate.

In response to a Member's question, the Strategic Director (CF) explained that the Council Tax Base had been calculated based on the number of properties as at October 2023, discounting those in receipt of Council Tax Support or Single Persons Discount, and converting the resultant figure to a Band D equivalent property. This was why the final Council Tax Base figure was invariably not a whole number.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That, in accordance with the Local Authorities (calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by Stevenage Borough Council for the year 2024/25 will be 29,088.5 equivalent "Band D" properties, reduced to 28,579.4 "Band D" properties after making allowance for a 98.25% collection rate.
2. That the 2024/25 Council Tax Base be approved, subject to any changes made to the Council Tax Support (CTS) Scheme for 2024/25, the Executive having

approved the CTS Scheme at its meeting held on 20 September 2023 for recommendation to Council.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **6 DRAFT HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT (HRA) BUDGET SETTING AND RENT REPORT 2024/25**

The Executive considered a report in respect of the draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Rent Setting for 2023/24.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development advised that the report followed on from the HRA Business Plan that was presented to the Executive in November 2023. It was recommended that HRA rents on dwellings be increased by 7.7%, which represented September CPI plus 1%, and was in line with Government policy for rent setting. This would mean an average of £8.45 for social rents, £13.12 for affordable rents and £9.96 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52 week year).

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated that the net rental income increase for 2024/25 was estimated to be £4.5Million, which included the impacts of estimated right to buys, a significant number of expected new properties and properties taken out of management (awaiting redevelopment). Service charges were not subject to the rental increase of 7.7%, but were based on cost recovery. It was recommended that service charge costs should increase with inflationary pressures and changes in usage. The cost of gas was expected to reduce by 40% compared to last year, and this had been reflected in the charges for communal heating systems.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development explained that the impact of these changes was that 5,136, or 64%, of homes did not receive a service charge. Of the 2,834 properties that were eligible for service charges, 648 (8%) would see a decrease up to £17.50 per week due to lower gas costs and 2,172, or 27%, would have increases up to £2.50 per week.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development advised that the overall impact of the 2024/25 rent increase and service charges was that 7,424 homes, or 93%, would receive a weekly rent and service charge increase between £4.00 and £9.99. The reduction in utility prices had led to lower increases for some homes, offsetting the impact of the CPI +1% rent increase of 7.7%. The increases above £9.99 mainly related to larger properties and where affordable rents were paid.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated that the report also outlined the requirements for revenue growth for the 2024/25 HRA totalling £2.4Million, and which was shown in Section 4.4 of the report. The main items were:

- One off growth for Void Works of £500,000 to meet the additional costs relating to void properties;

- One off growth of £850,000 to continue the work in clearing the current backlog of fencing repairs and replacements; and
- Additional staffing of £249,000 for staff posts that had been extended in response to operational challenges.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development commented that new loans totalling £37.6Million and £18.8Million were expected to be taken in the current (2023/24) and next (2024/25) financial years. However, the timing of when to take the new borrowing would be reviewed, weighing up the cost of carry and the Public Works Loan Board rates. The interest payable in 2023/24 and 2024/25 was estimated to be £8.9Million and £9.4Million respectively.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development explained that the HRA balances had been significantly increased from £3.3Million to £10.3Million, in order to mitigate the higher borrowing levels included in the latest HRA Business Plan, and to allow greater flexibility to respond to future challenges facing the HRA.

In reply to a Member's question, the Strategic Director (CF) confirmed that when a Council property was let, it became the responsibility of the tenant to pay rent/Council Tax etc. This responsibility passed to the Council when properties became void. She referred to initiatives aimed at improving the identification of when properties became vacant/void, including the recent employment of an Empty Homes Officer and enhanced information collaboration arrangements between the Revenue & Benefits Team and Housing Officers.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the HRA dwelling rents be increased (week commencing 1 April 2024) by 7.7%, which equates to an average increase of £8.45 for social rents, £13.12 for affordable rents and £9.96 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52-week year).
2. That Council be recommended to approve the 2024/25 service charges, as set out Paragraph 4.2 of the report.
3. That Council be recommended to approve the HRA budget for 2024/25, as set out in Appendix A to the report.
4. That the 2024/25 growth options, as set out in Section 4.4 of the report, be approved.
5. That Council be recommended to approve the 2024/25 Fees and Charges, as set out in Appendix B to the report.
6. That Council be recommended to approve the revised minimum levels of balances for 2024/25, as shown in Appendix C to the report.
7. That the Rent Increase Equalities Impact Assessments, as shown in Appendix D to the report, be approved.

8. That the increase to the 2023/24 Working Budget of £256,540, to fund the 2023/24 pay award, as detailed in Paragraph 4.4.11 of the report, be approved.
9. That the contingency sum of £400,000, within which the Executive can approve supplementary estimates, be approved for 2024/25 (unchanged from 2023/24).
10. That the decisions taken on Resolutions 1 to 9 above be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration, in accordance with the Budget and Policy Framework Rules in the Council's Constitution.
11. That key partners and other stakeholders be consulted and their views considered as part of the 2024/25 budget setting process.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **7 URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

## **8 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.

## **9 PART II MINUTES - 15 NOVEMBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 15 November 2023 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

## **10 HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENT AND SUNDRY DEBT WRITE OFFS GREATER THAN £10,000**

The Executive considered a Part II report seeking approval to the writing off of a Housing Benefit Overpayment and Sundry Debts deemed irrecoverable which were properly due to the Council and were greater in value than £10,000.

It was **RESOLVED** that the recommendation set out in the report be approved.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

11 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**CHAIR**