

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 20 December 2023

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Myla Arceno (Mayor), Jim Brown (Deputy Mayor), Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Forhad Chowdhury, Nazmin Chowdhury, Michael Downing, Bret Facey, Alex Farquharson, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Chris Howells, Mason Humberstone, Wendy Kerby, Lin Martin-Haugh, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Maureen McKay, Sarah Mead, Adam Mitchell CC, Margaret Notley, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Simon Speller, Baroness Dr Sharon Taylor of Stevenage, OBE, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells and Tom Wren.

Start / End Start Time: 7.00pm
Time: End Time: 9.38pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Lloyd Briscoe, John Duncan, Graham Lawrence CC and Mrs Joan Lloyd.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 18 OCTOBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 18 October 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

3 MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor advised that she had attended 73 Mayoral engagements since the October 2023 Council Meeting. In total, she had attended more than 220 engagements since the beginning of her term of office in May 2023. She stated that it was a great honour and privilege to represent the Council as the first citizen of the town.

The Mayor paid tribute to the efficient team of the Mayor's office, including her Secretary, and was grateful for the support of the Democratic Services Team. She also thanked the Deputy Mayor for his support and for attending the engagements that she had been unable to attend.

The Mayor thanked her fellow councillors for their support and encouragement. She

paid tribute to their work and dedication to the town, and also thanked officers and staff who were working behind the scenes to support her work.

The Mayor then thanked the many groups, communities, individuals and organisations who had extended the invitations to her to attend events. It had been truly inspirational to have met the winners and the nominees of this year's Stevenage Pride Awards.

The Mayor announced that she had received many visitors to the parlour and the Ingelheim Lounge. She had attended many Christmas Carol Services and had been a part of the group singing Carols at some Care homes. Meeting the frontline staff while cleaning the streets or cutting trees were some of the things she loved to do when she had some free time.

The Mayor referred to meeting the King Charles in Stevenage's Coptic Church, which was unexpected and a great honour to have been invited. She was particularly impressed when King Charles spoke to her about her NHS work and even laughed with her reply to his comment which could be viewed on the Royal Family Channel.

The Mayor was delighted to announce that the town had been recognised as being Dementia Friendly last month. She thanked the Council's Leisure and Health Officer and the Alzheimer's Society, together with the many organisations and individuals who had been working passionately to secure this recognition.

The Mayor advised that the plan for the next six months was to continue to promote all dementia activity and support available in Stevenage, including Dementia Friends training for Council frontline Staff, Members and partner organisations. Tool kits would be created for local businesses and taxi companies within Stevenage to make Stevenage even more Dementia Friendly. Another plan was to create a Dementia Hub which could support residents to find out what services were available for those living with Dementia, their families, and carers. Working in partnership with Everyone Active, the aim was to host this within the Healthy Hub at the Leisure Centre.

The Mayor concluded by announcing that she was looking forward to the next six months.

The Mayor invited the Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor to address the Council.

The Youth Mayor and Deputy Mayor shared their journeys so far in their Mayoral year for 2023/24.

The Youth Mayor stated that their journey began with an introduction to their roles, meeting various staff members, including the Regeneration Team who introduced them to the remarkable Stevenage Better initiative, leaving them thoroughly impressed by the town's past achievements and future objectives.

The Deputy Youth Mayor commented that summer commenced with Stevenage Day, an event brimming with interactions - engaging with residents, speaking with

charitable organisations, enjoying captivating performances, and connecting with the vibrant leisure and events team.

June took the Youth Mayor to Autun for the annual town twinning event, an enriching experience where she not only explored beautiful locales, but also engaged in a round table discussion, warmly welcomed by accommodating dignitaries.

The Council noted that the latter part of the year had been a whirlwind of activity. Among their engagements, the Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor took part in significant events including:

- Heading the inaugural Stevenage Youth Festival with an opening speech, a platform to launch the festivities, and engaging with incredible partners supporting the town's youth;
- Attending the Pride awards, celebrating diversity through captivating acts and proudly presenting the Young Person's Award alongside Councillor Sandra Barr;
- Participating in this year's Remembrance Sunday, an honour that included inspecting the troops alongside the Mayor - an immensely touching experience etched in their memories;
- Recently, witnessing the spectacle of the Town Centre Christmas lights switch-on, featuring remarkable performances from Nala the station cat and Junior Andre; and
- Hosting the annual Christmas card design competition, offering a student from one of the town's schools the opportunity to craft their Christmas card, fostering creativity and community involvement.

The Youth Mayor concluded by stating that their journey this year had been full of connections, engagements, and meaningful experiences, amplifying their dedication to the community and its ongoing development.

4 COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

There were no community presentations.

5 PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

The Council considered a petition containing over 1,000 signatories received by the Council in respect of Fairlands Valley Park Lighting.

The Lead Petitioner (Jennifer Huygen) addressed the Council. Jennifer began by stating that the petition highlighted that there was a wide community need for the installation of wildlife-friendly lighting in Fairlands Valley Park (FVP).

Jennifer explained that paths in FVP were pitch dark in the evenings. Users were unable to see the paths or the surrounding areas, and would be unaware of anyone approaching them until they had passed each other. The edges of the paths were

not visible, which increased the possibility of users slipping and sliding. This was an unsafe situation for such a high usage facility. For this reason, a number of potential users avoided the Park.

Jennifer advised that she was aware that FVP was more than just a place to be physically active. She gave the testimonies of a number of other users of the Park who had provided her with reasons why they would not venture into the Park after dark.

Jennifer commented that the studio space next to Costello's Café in the Park was used for dance classes. The parents of the children using the facility told her that they did not feel comfortable walking through the Park, and hence rather than walk of cycle they travelled to and from by car.

Jennifer stated that the petition was supported not just by individuals, but also by local community organisations, including Cycling UK (Stevenage), Fairlands Valley Spartans Running Club and Stevenage Striders Running Club. These organisations rarely used FVP during the winter months. However, she had learnt that they would consider using the Park more often in the winter if the lighting was improved.

Jennifer then read out statements in support of the petition from the Assistant Community Manager of Co-Space in the Town Centre and from Cycling UK (Stevenage).

Jennifer referred to the motion in response to the petition submitted by Councillor Simon Speller. She stated that SBC prided itself on resident-led design, which was a key pillar of its Corporate Plan. The petition was in line with that ambition, as increased usage of the Park would help the Council to achieve a number of priorities, including a modal shift towards active travel which in turn would help achieve Climate Change targets, as well as improving the health and wellbeing of the community. It would also help to address some of the parking issues around local schools, with more children being encouraged to walk.

Jennifer confirmed that the petition requested SBC to install lighting in a wildlife conscious way, and was not asking for the whole Park to be fitted with street lights. Working with ecologists as part of the installation would be expected, in order to minimise disruption to wildlife. Advancements in lighting solutions should make this possible.

Jennifer concluded her presentation by expressing the opinion that reflective lighting strips would not be enough to meet the requests of the petition. She asked the Council to consider a proposal that a Business Plan for the installation of an appropriate lighting solution for FVP should be prepared.

In response to the Petition, the following motion was moved by Councillor Simon Speller and seconded by Councillor Loraine Rossati:

“That this Council expresses its sincere thanks to Jennifer Huygen for her endeavours in bringing this matter to the attention of the Council.

The Council is committed to maintaining and enhancing our green spaces for the enjoyment and use of the community.

This petition is particularly timely, coinciding as it does with the start of our strategic review of the green spaces within Stevenage, of which more details can be found here:

<http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/news-and-events/news/help-shape-the-provision-of-future-green-spaces>

It is therefore proposed that:

- This request be included for consideration as part of the public consultation regarding the development of the new Green Spaces Strategy;
- Officers be asked to identify budget costings for the installation of reflective edging / markers for use on the pathways;
- Officers be asked to seek the views of the Police and the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust regarding community safety and ecology considerations;
- Subject to the outcomes of the wider consultation and strategic review of our green spaces, that this request be considered for inclusion in the accompanying action plan; and
- Officers be asked to identify any suitable external funding opportunities that might support this request, in the context of the extremely challenging financial position of this Council and local government in general”.

A debate ensued. There was general all-party support for the motion as a balanced and proportionate response to the petition. The following points were made:

- the motion was timely because SBC had commenced a review of its Green Spaces Strategy;
- consideration should be given to investigating the request in the petition for the installation of wildlife friendly lighting in the Park;
- the motion empathised with the petitioners, but was also conscious of the wider picture and challenges, such as funding (FVP did not feature in the current Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan). Use of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding, or even crowd funding, could be considered;
- the use of solar and wind powered energy to power any lighting could be considered;
- the ongoing maintenance (including energy costs) of any installed lighting must be taken into account; and
- clarification would be required on the ownership of the existing lighting in and around FVP (ie. SBC or Hertfordshire County Council).

Following debate, and upon being put to the vote, the motion was carried.

Both Councillor Speller and the Mayor thanked Jennifer for bringing the petition to

the attention of the Council.

6 QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL

There were no questions from the Youth Council.

7 QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

There were no questions from the public.

8 LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Phil Bibby CC, asked the following question:

“In the light of the recent Ombudsman ruling against the Council where it had fallen short in dealing with a vulnerable resident’s issue with a secure Door Entry System, could he have assurances that this situation would not happen in the future?”.

The Leader of the Council replied that the Council had acknowledged the letters that had been received from the Secretary of State (Michael Gove MP) and the Housing Ombudsman, who had previously committed to writing to every social landlord who had been awarded an adverse finding of severe maladministration and had recognised that there were missed opportunities to avoid the failures identified in the case. The Council had rightly apologised to the tenant around the failings that had occurred.

The Leader of the Council advised that the Regulator for Social Housing had concluded from its own investigations that the case did not indicate a systemic failing and that the consumer standards had not been breached and, hence, they would not be taking any regulatory action.

The Leader of the Council commented that, as was the case with other Registered Providers, the work of the Housing Ombudsman Service continued to support the Council in driving forward improvements to its services. The Council had taken on board the learning from this case, which had resulted in several actions including:

- Improving the Housing complaints handling policy and processes;
- The introduction of a team of dedicated Strategic Complaint Managers, each responsible for an area of housing, who would work together on cross-service cases, ensuring a thorough and holistic approach to complaint handling;
- The establishment of a Member-led Housing Management Board that would continue to monitor and drive good performance, compliance, resource allocation, risk management and tenant communications and engagement; and
- the holding of fortnightly complaints clinics with the aim to ensure effective Member and management oversight and to look to continuously improve complaints handling across the housing service.

The Leader of the Council was committed to the further improvement of the

Council's repairs and voids services to ensure they were cost effective and responded to the tenants' needs. Improvement work in this regard was underway and was being led by the Assistant Director for Building Safety and Housing Property Services.

The Council then received updates from the relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on the following matters:

- Graffiti Blitz;
- Climate Change Community Fund Schemes;
- Co-operative Councils Innovation Network Annual Conference;
- Pin Green Association;
- Council of the Year Award: Affordable Housing Awards;
- New Reception / Customer Service Update;
- Arts and Heritage Update;
- No More Service Evolve Framework;
- Safer Streets;
- Creation of a new Space Catalyst in Stevenage; and
- Securing Inward Investment.

The Leader of the Opposition commented that Hertfordshire County Council would be prepared to work in partnership with the Borough Council on the ongoing removal of graffiti across the town. The Leader of the Council thanked him for offering to work together on this project for the betterment of the town.

9 UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS

The Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee advised that there had been two meetings of the Committee since the October 2023 Council meeting. She referred to the presentation given to the Committee's November meeting in respect of the 2021 Census data for Stevenage. The way the Census data was presented by the Office for National Statistics made it difficult to extrapolate information down to Ward level, although she hoped that the Committee would be able to do further work on the data later in the Municipal Year.

The Chair of the Community Select Committee advised that the Committee had met on 14 November 2023 and received a well-informed presentation from the Assistant Director (Building Safety and Housing Property Services) on the external review of Housing Voids which had been undertaken by Ridge. The report emphasised that

the Service needed to improve communication with residents, and to formalise policies, processes and procedures. She was confident that work had commenced in response to the Ridge review's recommendations. The Committee also interviewed the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development in respect of complaints and were confident that the Portfolio Holder was exploring opportunities to improve the associated processes.

The Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee advised that the Committee had completed a one-off piece of pre-scrutiny work on the proposed Cycle Hire Scheme for Stevenage. It was hoped that this Scheme would be rolled out in the Spring of 2024. The debate included SBC Officers and local representatives of Cycling UK. This was an exciting development that would enable residents to move cheaply, quickly and enjoy the added health benefits of cycling around the town. In January 2024, the Committee would be considering its review work on Bus Services and the Cost of Living. There would also be a meeting of the Committee, in conjunction with the Planning & Development Committee, in February 2024 to consider the Council's Biodiversity Strategy.

10 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Supporting Voter ID

Councillor Bret Facey moved and Councillor Phil Bibby CC seconded the following motion:

"Stevenage Borough Council recognises the importance of public trust in the security of the electoral process.

This Council notes:

- The threats to the democratic process must be combated to protect the integrity of our democracy.
- That the independent Electoral Commission has called for a resolution to issues relating to voter ID in the UK.
- The recent law change allows for the provision of free voter ID cards (Voter Authority Certificates) which are issued by local authorities. This means financial hardship will not be a barrier to a voter's ability to get an ID and cast their ballot.

This Council believes:

- Considering how frequently residents now require ID in their day-to-day lives, the new requirement for voters to have ID to vote is a reasonable approach to reducing the threat of voter fraud and ensures that there are still not significant barriers to voting.
- That the system for applying for voter ID for those without a valid voter ID is simple and has ensured that all can access the electoral process.

This Council resolves:

- To put on record its support for the Election Act 2022's positive change which has introduced voter ID to further safeguard our democratic process.

- To fulfil its duty to properly inform residents about the latest change in voting requirements.
- To commit to continuing to use its communication channels to notify residents about the need for voter ID in next year's Local Elections and potential parliamentary elections."

Following debate, and upon being put to the vote, the motion was lost.

11 **QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRS / PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

The Council received eleven questions from Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders. The responses to the eleven questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

- (A) Question from Councillor Margaret Notley re: Swingate House structure collapse during demolition works

Supplementary question: "Has a report been prepared detailing if there is a risk of RAAC in any of the buildings within SBC's Corporate Estate and, if so, when will it be shared with councillors?"

The Leader of the Council confirmed that no RAAC had been found within the Council's Corporate Estate and therefore no report had been produced.

- (B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness re: enforcement action taken by the Council over the past 2 years

Supplementary question – "Please could the Portfolio Holder provide details of the number of cases within the various categories outlined in the original question that resulted in successful enforcement action?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Community Safety & Equalities agreed to provide a written answer to this question.

- (C) Question from Councillor Bret Facey re: fees charged to owners of Council-managed garages

Supplementary question: "What performance management takes place to ensure that residents are receiving the service they are paying for?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development replied that residents/garage owners would not witness site visits unless they were present when the inspections took place. If any garage owner felt that an inspection had not taken place then she encouraged them to report this to the Council for follow up action.

- (D) Question from Councillor Alex Farquharson re: use of land currently occupied by garages condemned due to asbestos contamination

Supplementary question: "Will the Portfolio Holder commit that the land on which the asbestos-contaminated garages were situated on would remain dedicated to residential parking whatever the long term fate of the current garage structures?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development replied that she was unable to give a firm commitment, as each garage block would be looked at individually to determine the best future use. Options would include providing ongoing parking; replacing the asbestos-contaminated garages with new garages; disposal of the site; or demolition to provide additional housing.

- (E) Question from Councillor Tom Wren re: timescales for responding to and dealing with issues raised by councillors

Supplementary question: "Would it be possible for the complaints system to track when raised by councillors had been resolved rather than simply responded to?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure & Information Technology replied that there was no central tracking mechanism, although they could be tracked if Members used the "Your Say" system. However, she was keen to explore opportunities to improve the current system and associated processes and would take the matter up with appropriate officers.

- (F) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren re: traffic enforcement around local schools

Supplementary question: "Would it be possible to receive data from the Parking Enforcement agencies regarding the process for the issuing of parking tickets?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Co-operative Council & Neighbourhood Communities replied that she would arrange for a written answer to be provided. However, she urged School Governing Boards to take up issues regarding parking in the vicinity of their respective schools, including a modal shift to provide more bicycle parking.

- (G) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth re: use of the Council's Geographical Information System (GIS)

Supplementary question: "Who was charged with updating information on the GIS?"

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure & Information Technology replied that she would arrange for a written answer to be provided.

- (H) Question from Councillor Graham Snell re: the Christmas tree in the Town Centre

Supplementary question: "Is the Christmas tree SBC property or is it on hire?"

The Leader of the Council replied that the tree was owned by SBC and

feedback received this year would be considered ahead of next Christmas.

- (I) Question from Councillor Adam Mitchell CC re: communications to tenants regarding asbestos-contaminated garages

Supplementary question: “Due to conflicting information, could it be confirmed whether or not asbestos in garages was detrimental to health, and could she guarantee that more measured and consistent communication to residents was given on this matter?”

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development replied that she would arrange for a written answer to be provided.

- (J) Question from Councillor Wendy Kerby re: plans for the Bandley Hill Play Centre site

Councillor Kerby was pleased that the Play Centre was to be used as nursery for children. She had no supplementary question.

The Executive Portfolio Holder for Co-operative Council & Neighbourhood Communities was also pleased with the future use of the Play Centre.

- (K) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC re: cessation of live streaming of scrutiny meetings

Supplementary question: “Will the Leader look into the possibility of an Opposition Member chairing a Scrutiny function or Scrutiny Committee?”

The Leader of the Council replied that he was aware that some councils had Opposition Members chairing scrutiny committees. He would give thought to this matter after the May 2024 Elections.

12 MID YEAR TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW 2023/24

The Council considered a report in respect of the Mid Year Treasury Management Review 2023/24, including the Prudential Indicators. It was noted that the report had been endorsed by both the Audit Committee and the Executive.

It was moved by Councillor Jeannette Thomas, and seconded by Councillor Richard Henry, that the Recommendation in the report be approved.

In reply to a Member’s question regarding the ongoing reduction in the Public Works Loan Board’s interest rates (set out in Chart 1 in the report), the Strategic Director (CF) was requested to provide a written reply.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that the 2023/24 Mid Year Treasury Management Review and Prudential Indicators report be approved.

13 REVIEW OF PARLIAMENTARY POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2023 - OUTCOME OF REVIEW

The Council considered a report in respect of proposals for Polling Districts and Polling Places in the Borough to be applied to all elections from May 2024 onwards.

The Chief Executive advised that the matter had been extensively consulted upon, including discussions with the Political Group Leaders. The draft report was shared with Group Leaders in advance of it being finalised, with no comments being received.

It was moved by Councillor Richard Henry, and seconded by Councillor Claire Parris, that the Recommendation in the report be approved.

Following debate and upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that the proposals for Polling Districts and Polling Places in the Borough, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be adopted and applied to all elections from May 2024 onwards.

14 AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 8 November 2023 were received.

In closing the meeting, the Mayor wished everyone present a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

MAYOR