

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 19 December 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, Conor McGrath, Sarah Mead, Margaret Notley, Robin Parker CC, Carolina Veres and Anne Wells

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.30pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence and no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 22 NOVEMBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting held on 22 November 2023 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

At this juncture, Councillor Parker commented that at the previous meeting he had a cold and was unwell, which may have made comments he made rather loud when speaking on item 4 – presentation on 2021 Census data for Stevenage, and also stated that the comments he made in respect of the presentation were directed towards senior officers rather than the report authors.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE

2. Minutes – 15 November 2023

Noted.

3. Minutes of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees

Noted.

4. Corporate Performance – Quarter 2 2023/24

Members were advised that the Executive had received a presentation on the Council's performance across key priorities and projects for Quarter 2.

Officers gave the following answers/comments to a number of questions raised by members:

- In relation to voids, these properties were the subject of both an independent review as well as a review by the Community Select Scrutiny Committee. Officers were aware that improvements were still needed to the service and close monitoring was underway to ensure the voids backlog would be cleared. Certain specialist work was contracted but the Council's aspiration was for a fully internal workforce by 2025;
- Tenancy Satisfaction Measures had been introduced in response to the Social Housing Regulator requirements. The measures were to understand tenants' satisfaction with the provision of Council services in relation to tenant engagement, home maintenance, ASB, complaint handling and communal spaces. An independent research company had been commissioned to undertake the survey and reports would be presented to Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in Q1 2024/25;
- In relation to rent arrears mitigation, Officers advised that the Council had put additional resources into the Team to carry out targeted support for tenants in difficulty as it was recognised that households were under immense pressure as a result of the cost of living crisis. Work was also underway with Citizens Advice for debt and welfare advice for residents;
- Officers agreed that the target of 100% EPC C rating by 2030 for every social housing provider was a challenge. Further bidding for Government grants would have to take place for additional investment. The Private Rented Sector would be monitored through the Planning and Environmental Health services;
- In relation to waste, Officers agreed that the reduction in waste was the primary issue before recognising recycling percentages;
- The numbers referred to in the report relating to Everyone Active visits would be reviewed to ensure it was clear that the numbers referred to visits and not the number of users which could be misleading;
- The number of Stage one complaints made by tenants was a cumulative measure and had reduced from the first quarter. Officers advised that complaints were welcome as they were used to drive forward improvements to that service. Fortnightly complaints clinics were now being held to ensure the Council was responding effectively to these complaints. Substantial new guidance was also now in place following national issues such as the Grenfell Fire and the tragic death of a child following damp and mould issues;
- Following the suspension by the Government of benchmarking data, Officers advised that there were a number of mechanisms used including a wide role for the office for Local Government (Oflog), the new performance body for local government.

5. Council Tax Base 2024/25

Officers advised 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.

In response to a question regarding collection rates, the Strategic Director (CF) advised that although the trend nationally was down, she was confident that the target for collection should remain at 98.25%. Members noted that some staff had been diverted to work on issuing additional grant funding during the pandemic, as no additional resources had been made available to carry out these additional duties.

In relation to contacting residents who were in debt, Members were advised that a first, second and final reminder could be issued. The Council Tax Support Scheme was encouraged and residents were reminded to call the Council should they have any concerns regarding payment of Council Tax. Levels of debt were also complicated by the four weekly assessment of Universal Credit.

6. Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget Setting and rent Report 2024/25

In response to a question, the Assistant Director Finance advised that the rents on dwellings would be increased by 7.7% in line with Government policy for rent setting. Officers were aware of the additional burden placed on tenants and reassured Members that support was in place for those struggling to meet their rental liability regardless of their employment status.

Officers recognised that the impact on young people was not clear as currently laid out in the report, but that this would be addressed in a revised version of the report.

In relation to consultation, Members were advised that Officers would be working closely with tenants to establish the impact of the rent and service charge increases and put in place systems to mitigate this, including benefit support services, debt advice and payment arrangements. Close working was also underway with partners such as Citizens Advice and Step Change to deliver joint events that target all groups impacted by the change.

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

None.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

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.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

7 **PART II MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 22 NOVEMBER 2023**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 22 November 2023 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

8 **PART II DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

9. **Part II Minutes – Executive – 15 November 2023**

Noted.

10. **Housing Benefit Overpayment and Sundry Debt Write Offs Greater than £10,000**

Noted.

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

None.

10 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR