

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 7 February 2024

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, Loraine Rossati and Simon Speller.

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

**Time:** End Time: 3.29pm

### 1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chair welcomed Adrian Hawkins OBE (Chair of the Stevenage Development Board) to the meeting. He stated that Adrian would be addressing the Executive in relation to Item 4 on the agenda – Stevenage Works Skills Framework: Unlocking Jobs, Skills and Opportunities for Local People.

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Mrs Joan Lloyd.

There were no declarations of interest.

### 2 MINUTES - 17 JANUARY 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 17 January 2024 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

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

In respect of Minute 3 of the minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 8 January 2024, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development confirmed that she would be responding to the recommendations of the Housing Repairs scrutiny review by the prescribed deadline.

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

Community Select Committee – 8 January 2024

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 16 January 2024

#### **4 STEVENAGE WORKS SKILLS FRAMEWORK - UNLOCKING JOBS, SKILLS AND OPPORTUNITY FOR LOCAL PEOPLE**

The Executive considered a report in respect of the consolidation of the ongoing work around skills development into a skills framework approach involving key sectors in the town, building several tangible actions to help further support the work that was underway, and co-ordinating key internal resources to further aid delivery.

The Leader introduced the report by stating that he was deeply committed to providing opportunities for the people of Stevenage. This included ensuring that young people could access the fantastic employment opportunities on their doorstep. These opportunities would also apply to disadvantaged and disabled groups.

The Leader advised that the Skills Framework had been developed jointly with Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership. The Council had made great strides in putting skills at the heart of its regeneration programme. The Stevenage Works Programme had already made an excellent impact, engaging over 500 young people to explore construction careers, raising £50,000 for local community activities, helping 150 people into jobs in the sector, together with work with North Herts College and Job Centre Plus.

The Leader stated that Stevenage was home to the third largest Cell and gene cluster in the world and also to a strong and growing Space and Defence cluster. Stevenage was also home to vital public services, such as the NHS, Borough Council services, and the County Council HQ soon to be based in the town.

The Leader explained that so far SBC had attracted £2.7Million funding to help the community access skills and jobs, including the exciting Mission 44 project. SBC had also been asked to pilot a project to help support 150 people with disabilities to develop new skills or access work or to be supported to remain in work.

The Leader commented that the Framework was a draft document, and the Environment & Economy Select Committee would be considering it in more detail. The views of the Stevenage Development Board was also be sought on the document.

The Portfolio Holder for Co-operative Council and Neighbourhood Communities advised that she was deeply invested in the journey towards enhancing the lives of residents, which was exactly what the Framework was about. It was her mission was to ensure that work reached those who needed it the most. Stevenage offered careers for individuals to become rocket scientists, defence specialists, doctors, nurses, genetics scientists, engineers and much more.

The Portfolio Holder for Co-operative Council and Neighbourhood Communities stated that it was important that residents were equipped to make the most of these diverse and high value roles. She had seen some of the work undertaken so far, and she had attended the Mission 44 launch event at Airbus. Seeing young people so committed to developing their future was encouraging. The joint work with partners on the Framework, and highlighted Stevenage as an exemplar not only

throughout Hertfordshire, but regionally and nationally.

The Leader invited Adrian Hawkins (Chair of Stevenage Development Board) to address the Executive. Adrian advised that the skills agenda was very close to his heart, having been a school governor and involved in various organisations responsible for skills. He was delighted that the Town Investment Fund provided a narrative for developing the skills agenda in Stevenage, in order to match the needs of local businesses with the skills required by local people to fulfil those needs.

Adrian stated that 8 years ago the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership supported the development of the Stevenage Bioscience Catalyst and thereafter the Cell and Gene Catapult. Both of those organisations had led to international businesses wishing to set up within Stevenage. This presented a huge opportunity for the town, as 7,500 to 10,000 jobs would be arriving over the next 3 to 4 years, and the skills agenda had to be developed and prepared to support this opportunity.

Adrian commented that the engagement between business and the education sector was a crucial aspect in identifying the skills required for different types of employment. The Stevenage Development Board had brought a number of local employers together and they had re-iterated that they wanted to employ more local people to work in their businesses. Additionally, North Herts College had commenced development of SITEC (Stevenage Innovation & Technology Centre), with Phase 1 focussing on Life Sciences, and subsequent phases including areas such as engineering, electronics and sustainability.

Adrian stated that he was delighted to work with an organisation such as SBC who were so keen to progress the regeneration of Stevenage work, not just in buildings, but in the people who occupy them and contribute to the economy of the town.

The Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme Manager gave a short presentation on the Stevenage Works Skills Framework, highlighting the opportunities, ambitions and challenges, together with the response of stakeholders in building on the once in a generation regeneration activities to establish Stevenage as a centre of excellence in skills.

The Executive was supportive of the Stevenage Works Skills Framework, and thanked the Portfolio Holder for Co-operative Council & Neighbourhood Communities, officers and Adrian Hawkins for driving forward the Skills agenda for the Council and the town.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the proposed 'Stevenage Works Skills Framework' be approved for implementation and publication.
2. That delegated authority be given to the Strategic Director (TP), having consulted with the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods, Communities, Co-operative Councils & Young People and the Leader of the Council, to make any final changes to the Skills Framework and to oversee the continued development of the associated 'Stevenage Works Skills Framework Action

Plan’.

3. That delegated authority be given to the Strategic Director (TP), having consulted with the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods, Communities, Co-operative Councils & Young People and the Leader of the Council, to make any structural or other organisational changes which may be necessary to support the implementation of the ‘Stevenage Works Skills Framework’.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **5 FINAL GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2024/25**

The Executive considered a report in respect of the Council’s final General Fund, Council Tax Support Scheme and final proposals for the 2024/25 Council Tax.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Deputy Leader advised that the 2024/25 budget should be viewed against the backdrop of Government grant cuts which totalled £5.3Million since 2010, and the need for the Council to have found savings of £14Million in this period when inflationary costs were also taken into consideration.

The Deputy Leader stated that, at the time of writing the report, the Government’s final finance settlement had not been published. The report included an assumption about the increase in the funding guarantee grant to the Council, estimated to be an additional £100,000. The report to Council would be adjusted when the settlement was finally published.

The Deputy Leader commented that the General Fund budget also now included the projections for business rates which were completed by the 31 January 2024. The Council had £569,000 additional income relating to 2023/4 and was projecting an additional £1Million business rates income in 2024/25. The draft budget had already accounted for £200,000 of this income. However, experience demonstrated that business rates income fluctuated significantly. This was highlighted within the report and, given the risk profile, the as yet unrealised gains had been transferred to the business rates reserve to support the resilience of the General Fund and delivery of the Council’s priorities, as set out in report.

The Deputy Leader explained that, as a result of the changes set out in the report, there was not expected to be a draw on balances for 2024/25. However, despite a £1Million savings target for 2025/26, officers were forecasting the need to use £638,000 of General Fund balances to achieve a balanced budget. The report commented that, if business rates income remained relatively stable, a proportion of this could be used to reduce the use of balances in 2025/26.

The Executive noted that the savings and growth package remained unchanged from that included in the January draft budget report, and the Deputy Leader welcomed the comment from Overview and Scrutiny in support of the HVO fuel which would reduce the Council’s fleet carbon omissions considerably. She was also pleased to be able to confirm that the savings package for 2024/25 was

predominately funded from the Council's Transformation and commercial activity without the need to make service cuts.

The Deputy Leader concluded by stating that the increase in Council Tax remained unchanged at 2.99%, with the caveat that SBC only retained 11% of the overall Council Tax raised.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following proposals be recommended to Council on 21 February 2024:

- 1 That the 2023/24 revised net expenditure on the General Fund of £13,571,480 be approved, as set out in Paragraph 4.10.1 of the report.
- 2 That the draft General Fund Budget for 2024/25 of £12,762,310 be approved, with no contribution from balances and a Band D Council Tax of £239.26 (assuming a 2.99% Council Tax increase), and as summarised in Appendix G to the report.
- 3 That the updated position on the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), as summarised in Section 4.12 of the report, be noted.
- 4 That the minimum level of General Fund reserves of £3,537,794, in line with the 2024/25 risk assessment of balances, as shown at Appendix C to the report, be approved.
- 5 That the contingency sum of £400,000 within which the Executive can approve supplementary estimates, be approved for 2024/25 (reflecting the level of balances available above the minimum amount).
- 6 That the 2024/25 Balancing the Budget options, as set out in Section 4.7 and Appendix A to the report, totalling £1,223,852 and £95,063 for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) respectively, be approved.
- 7 That the events options, as set out in Paragraph 4.7.4 of the report, be approved for 2024/25.
- 8 That the Growth options included in Section 4.8 of the report be approved for inclusion in the 2024/25 General Fund (£167,120) and HRA (£47,265) budgets.
- 9 That the pressures identified in Sections 4.2 and 4.9 of the report be noted.
- 10 That the use of £200,000 of Business Rates in the base budget be approved, and any gains above that be used only once realised, and be ring fenced for use to maintain the Council's financial resilience.
- 11 That the use of 'pooling gains' of £220,000, as set out in Paragraph 4.4.9 of the report, be approved.
- 12 That the comments of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in Section 4.16 of the report, be noted.

- 13 That the Equalities Impact Assessment appended to the report at Appendix D be noted.
- 14 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.*

## **6 FINAL CAPITAL STRATEGY 2023/24 - 2028/29**

The Executive considered a report in respect of the final Capital Strategy for 2023/24 – 2028/29.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Deputy Leader advised the General Fund capital proposals were unchanged from the January 2024 report, as were the funding challenges faced by the Council. The Capital programme, other than those elements funded from third parties, remained very much “fix on fail”. However, the October 2023 capital report to the Executive outlined a strategy for future proofing the Council’s assets, assets which officers were now striving to implement.

The Executive noted that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee had considered the report in January 2024 and commentary from the committee had been included in the report.

The Deputy Leader stated that the Housing Revenue Account Capital programme also remained unchanged, and the spending plans were included in the Final Budget and Rent Setting 2024/25 report that was approved at the Council meeting on 24 January 2024.

It was **RESOLVED** that the following proposals be recommended to Council on 21 February 2024:

1. That the Revised General Fund Capital Budget for 2024/25 of £33.6Million, as set out in Appendix B to the report, be approved.
2. That the Draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Budget for 2024/25 of £54.9Million, as set out in Appendix C to the report, be approved.
3. That the updated forecast of resources 2024/25 be approved (set out in the report at Section 4.4 – General Fund, and Section 4.10 – HRA).
4. That the General Fund capital budget re-profiling of £2.6Million from 2023/24 to future years be approved (as set out in Paragraph 4.1.4 of the report).
5. That the General Fund capital budget savings (as set out in Paragraphs 4.1.3 and 4.1.5 of the report) be approved.

6. That the approach to resourcing the General Fund capital programme, as outlined in the report (Paragraph 4.4), be approved.
7. That the General Fund growth bids identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy (as set out in Paragraph 4.2 and in Appendix A to the report) be approved.
8. That the HRA budget increases identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy (as set out in Section 4.9 and Appendix C to the report) be approved.
9. That the approach to resourcing the HRA capital programme, as outlined in the report (Paragraph 4.10), be approved.
10. That HRA capital budget re-profiling of £1.45Million from 2023/24 to future years be approved (as set out in Paragraph 4.9.3 of the report).
11. That the HRA growth bid (IT £21,000) identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy (as set out in Paragraph 4.9.4 of the report) be approved.
12. That the 2024/25 de-minimis expenditure limit (set out in Section 4.11 of the report) be increased from £7,500 to £9,999.
13. That up to £500,000 of any revenue surplus in any year can be allocated to the capital reserve to support capital expenditure be approved.
14. That the comments from Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in Paragraph 4.13.4 of the report, be noted.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **7 ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS 2024/25**

The Executive considered a report in respect of the Annual Treasury Management Strategy, including Prudential Code Indicators for 2024/25, for onward recommendation to Council.

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Deputy Leader advised that there had been no breaches of the Treasury Management Strategy so far in 2023/24, and the report highlighted the Council's investments and borrowing and how they were managed.

The Deputy Leader stated that the returns achievable on the Council's investments were based on the current Bank of England base rate and the risk appetite of the Treasury Management Strategy, which was compliant with the advice from the Council's treasury advisors, Link Asset Management.

The Deputy Leader commented that there were no changes recommended for counter party limits, as the existing limits had allowed the Council to remain flexible

with respect to volatile cash balances (held by the Council on a short-term basis).

In considering the Council's level of cash balances, the Deputy Leader asked Members to note that the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy and Capital Strategy had a planned use of resources over a minimum of 5 years and the HRA Business Plan (HRA BP) had a planned use of resources over a 30-year period, which meant that, whilst not all of the funds were committed in the current year, they would be required in future years.

The Executive noted that the Treasury Management Strategy was in line with the latest CIPFA Treasury Management and Prudential Codes issued in December 2021.

The Strategic Director (CF) referred to two corrections to the report, as follows:

- Paragraph 4.1.1 - the sentence should read that the returns on investments had averaged 5%, not 3.48%, and the total interest earned was £1.9Million and not £1.29Million; and
- The table in Paragraph 4.15.1 should read that the total Housing Revenue Account (HRA) loans equalled £233.231Million and not £234.231Million, and the total Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) debt at 31 December 2023 equalled £234.987Million and not £224.987Million.

It was **RESOLVED** that the 2024/25 Treasury Management Strategy be recommended to Council for approval.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **8 STEVENAGE CYCLE HIRE SCHEME - REPORT AND PUBLIC CONSULTATION FEEDBACK**

The Executive considered a report providing an overview of the work undertaken, including public consultation, to develop a Stevenage Cycle Hire Scheme.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy & Transport advised that the proposed Scheme built on a Feasibility Study for such a scheme carried out in 2019. This Feasibility Study was based on the methodology used for similar schemes in Guildford, Watford, Derby and Manchester. The Feasibility Study was updated in 2023.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy & Transport stated that the Scheme contained a range of policy objectives which aligned with the Local Plan, Stevenage Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan, Stevenage Cycling Strategy, Stevenage Mobility Strategy and National Active Transport policy direction. The Scheme had to satisfy the following 4 points:

- Reducing greenhouse and local pollutant emission in Stevenage to help tackle Climate Change and improve air quality;
- To improve quality, accessibility and affordability of clean modes of active



- transport within Stevenage, and offer people an efficient way of connecting with public transport as an alternative to using their car;
- Improving journey times and connectivity in and around Stevenage; and
  - To encourage a modal shift from cars to bicycles.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy & Transport explained that the Council's Climate Change Strategy was an important aspect that drove the Scheme, with that Strategy setting a target that Stevenage had net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy & Transport commented that a Cycle Hire Scheme for Stevenage could offer many economic benefits, such as increased tourism (where cyclists were more likely to stop and shop, thereby creating revenue for local businesses). The Scheme could also create jobs in maintenance, customer service and administration. The Scheme also offered the opportunity to enhance mobility within Stevenage to improve access to affordable and convenient transportation options.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy & Transport advised that the Scheme embraced National Planning Policy for active travel and was consistent with Hertfordshire County Council's Transport Vision 2025. A business and community engagement event was held in September 2023 to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to understand what a Stevenage Scheme could look like, involving case studies from around the UK. At the event participants were able to meet and greet cycle hire operators, demonstrate a variety of cycles, give their views on a proposed Stevenage Scheme and complete a consultation survey.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy & Transport reported that a total of 1,137 public responses were received to the formal consultation on the Scheme, along with representations from key stakeholders.

In reply to a series of Member questions, officers commented:

- Discussions would be ongoing with the operator regarding the programme/timescales for Phases 1A and 1B of the Scheme, with the intention of both phases being implemented as soon as practicably possible; and
- Officers were requested to liaise with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) officers with a view to HCC providing a financial contribution to support the Scheme through use of Section 106/Community Infrastructure Levy funds.

A discussion ensued regarding the locations of the bike storage units and electrical charging points, and it was agreed that Ward Members should be consulted about these before any works commenced. It was suggested that it might be appropriate for an event to be held after the May 2024 Elections, in order that the views of newly-elected Members could be taken into account. This could take the form of an all-Member overview meeting, followed by individual area/ward meetings (similar to the Policing Priority meetings).

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the progress made in the Stevenage Cycle Hire Scheme and work undertaken by officers up to September 2023 (as set out in Appendices A, B, C, D, E and F of the report) be noted.
2. That the ongoing strategic direction and final steps for the Cycle Hire Scheme, to further develop the proposal for a scheme in Stevenage, be approved.
3. That it be noted that the comments of the Environment & Economy Select Committee have been sought and considered on the content of the report.
4. That it be noted that engagement with key stakeholders will continue, ahead of incorporating the Cycle Hire Scheme.

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

## **9 URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

## **10 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.

## **11 PART II MINUTES - EXECUTIVE - 17 JANUARY 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 17 January 2024 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

## **12 STEVENAGE CYCLE HIRE SCHEME - REPORT AND PUBLIC CONSULTATION FEEDBACK**

The Executive considered a Part II report in respect of the procurement process undertaken and recommended chosen supplier to implement a cycle hire scheme in Stevenage; and seeking agreement to the progression of the contract award for the Scheme.

Members asked a number of questions, which were responded to by officers.

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

*Reason for Decision: As contained in report.*

*Other Options considered: As contained in report.*

**13. URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**CHAIR**