

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

EXECUTIVE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 13 March 2024

Time: 3.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Jeannette Thomas (Vice-Chair in the Chair), Lloyd Briscoe, Jackie Hollywell, Loraine Rossati and Simon Speller.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 3.00pm
End Time: 4.27pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Richard Henry (Chair), Sandra Barr and Mrs Joan Lloyd.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 7 FEBRUARY 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 7 February 2024 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

3 MINUTES OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND SELECT COMMITTEES

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance thanked the Chair and Members of the Environment & Economy Select Committee for their work and support throughout the 2023/24 Civic Year, particularly on Climate Change and Biodiversity issues.

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

Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 23 January 2024

Environment & Economy Select Committee – 12 February 2024

4 REGENERATION PROGRAMME DELIVERY UPDATE

The Executive considered a report which provided an update on the projects within the Government's Towns Fund programme being delivered by Stevenage Borough Council and Stevenage Development Board partners.

In the absence of the Leader of the Council, the Chair (Deputy Leader) advised that the regeneration of the town centre was a key priority for the community, alongside

the Council's work to build more council homes. She reminded Members that, under the Town Deal reporting arrangements, the Council was required to provide regular reports back into central Government to highlight the progress which was being made.

The Chair stated that, as the report demonstrated, the regeneration programme continued to progress at good pace. Alongside the Deputy Mayor and Executive Member for Co-operative *Council* and Neighbourhood Communities, she had been delighted to have visited the new housing being delivered by Guinness Trust recently, for the 'topping out' ceremony. This was a vital project, not only to regenerate the town, but because the Council had nomination rights. 143 Stevenage households would be able to move into high quality affordable housing. The early works had commenced in Swingate, the first step of the Council's flagship SG1 scheme with Mace, with the main construction following shortly.

The Chair advised that the report highlighted recent successes and investments into Stevenage, including the new Autolus building; the plans to regenerate the Forum and the GSK site; the work to develop a first class swimming, leisure and wellbeing facility; and progress in delivering the Towns Fund projects.

The Chair read out the Leader of the Council's supportive comments on the report and on the continued work of the Regeneration Team and its partners.

The Assistant Director (Regeneration) gave a slide presentation providing some detail on the delivery of the Regeneration Programme, including updates on the Cycling and Pedestrian Connectivity (including Arts & Heritage Trail) project; the Diversification of Retail project; the proposed new Sports and Leisure Hub scheme; the New Towns Heritage Centre; the Station Gateway Enabling works; the Life Sciences potential and skills agenda; and the Stevenage Innovation and Technology Centre (SITEC), based at North Herts College.

In response to a Member's request, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) agreed to provide a map showing the locations of the 22 underpasses to be given makeovers, once these had been agreed with Hertfordshire County Council.

In reply to a Member question regarding retail in the Town Centre, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) stated that the retail units in the Queensway scheme were fully let, with a mixture of uses. He added that it was a difficult time for the retail sector nationally, but hoped that the additional 1,900+ jobs created by the Autolus development and the Forum redevelopment, together with the planned 3,000 new residential units in the Town Centre over the coming years, would naturally provide a demand and opportunities for new retail provision to serve those new employees and residents.

In response to a Member question regarding a spend comparison between SBC and other local authorities benefitting from Towns Fund monies, the Assistant Director (Regeneration) advised that the Council's spend profile compared well to that of other recipients. He commented that, at approximately halfway through the Towns Fund programme in terms of spend, SBC was amongst the higher performers (helped in part by a fully-resourced Regeneration Team which the Council had boldly

invested in a number of years ago). He stated that SBC's spend level was at 80% of where it expected to be, although some of the larger items in terms of spend would occur in later years. He was cautiously optimistic that SBC was achieving its ambitious Town Fund objectives when compared to other local authorities.

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the progress of the 'Transforming the Town Centre' regeneration programme, specifically the progress of projects which are being delivered using grant funded Towns Fund allocations provided by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), be noted.
2. That the progression of the Cycling and Pedestrian Connectivity (inc. Arts and Heritage Trail) project be authorised, the high-level budgets attributed to the three workstreams be approved, and the future collaboration with Environment and Economy and the Community Select Committees to support the delivery of these interventions be acknowledged.
3. That the reprofiling of the Towns Fund expenditure profile, as shown in the 3rd Quarter 2023/24 capital update report to the Executive, and following endorsement from the Stevenage Development Board, be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

5 HOUSING CONSUMER STANDARDS - SOCIAL HOUSING (REGULATION) ACT 2023

The Executive considered a report in respect of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, which introduced wide ranging changes to the provision and management of social housing.

The Chair (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development) advised that she was sure that Executive Members would share her view that managing safe, secure, and quality homes was a top priority for the Council, which was why associated funds had been set aside to this end within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan.

The Chair commented that, following the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017, the Government published its Social Housing Green Paper. This signalled increased governance for social housing, with particular focuses on safety, along with providing transparency and empowering residents to engage in the management of their homes. The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 laid the foundation for how social housing would be managed and regulated.

The Chair explained that the Council, as a Registered Social Landlord, would be subject to these developments and the report outlined the main changes, along with details of the Council's response and preparation following the introduction of the new legislation and the new Consumer Standards being introduced by the Regulator of Social Housing. The report also included how the Council continued to invest in

its social housing and how it was working to develop and strengthen the approach to the management of tenants' homes, as set out within Paragraphs 3.41 to 3.52.

The Chair drew attention to a proposal in the report regarding the introduction of a new Executive Housing Working Group, to help maintain clear strategic oversight of the Council's response to the Social Housing Regulation Act, and, equally of importance, to ensure the Council delivered the improvements that it committed to, with a particular focus on residents' safety and providing more opportunities for improved engagement, co-production of services and scrutiny.

The Strategic Director (RP) added that, since the report had been drafted, the Government and the Regulator had published a finalised set of Consumer Standards, to come into force on 1 April 2024, including the Safety and Quality Standard; the Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard; the Neighbourhood and Community Standard; and the Tenancy Standard.

The Strategic Director (RP) advised that the Government was still consulting on the Competency and Conduct Standard. The consultation period was closing on 2 April 2024 and the Council would be providing a response to the consultation. Alongside the published standards, the Regulator had also published a Code of Practice, which highlighted the type of evidence that would be expected from Registered Social Housing Providers to demonstrate that the requirements for each of the standards were being met. Work was underway at SBC on the necessary evidence gathering, and some of this evidence would flow from the actions set out in the Action Plan.

The Strategic Director (RP) explained that, in addition to the standards, over 60 associated documents had been published since the end of February 2024, which included details as to how the framework was going to be regulated, provided information about the powers of the Regulator, and set out details of any necessary enforcement action. Officers were working through those documents with a view to enhancing the Action Plan where necessary. Progress against the Action Plan would be reported to the Executive Housing Working Group on a monthly basis.

The Strategic Director (RP) stated that the Regulator had started to notify Registered Social Housing Providers about when they were due to receive an inspection. Once SBC had been notified of an inspection date this would be shared with Executive Members.

It was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the work being undertaken by the Council to prepare for the adoption of the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023, and its implementation through the Regulator of Social Housing and the new Consumer Standards and the Housing Ombudsmen, be noted.
2. That the Housing Consumer Standards Action Plan, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.
3. That a new Member-led Executive Housing Working Group be established, to oversee the delivery of the Housing Consumer Standards Action Plan.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.
Other Options considered: As contained in report.

6 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 3 2023/24

The Executive considered a report in respect of Corporate Performance for Quarter 3 of 2023/24 (October to December 2023).

In the absence of the Leader of the Council, the Chair (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development) advised that the report provided Members with an update on delivery of the Future Town, Future Council Corporate Plan Programme (which remained in place until the end of March 2024), using both quantitative and qualitative information to provide a complete picture of how the Council was performing. As can be seen from the report, the range of areas covered and projects delivered was diverse.

The Chair stated that the new Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan would commence from Quarter One 2024/25, and she looked forward to working with Executive Member colleagues, the wider Council and officers to drive its implementation.

The Chief Executive then gave a slide presentation regarding the report, and reminded the Executive that the Council had 35 performance measures, 17 of which were 2023/24 baseline measures. As at Quarter 2, 15 of the remaining measures were at Green status (meeting or exceeding target), 1 was 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 4.

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; there had been a low rate of return from the contractor despite best efforts; in response to this, four new contractors had been trialled; the trial had been successful so all new voids were to be allocated to the new contractors; the current contractor would be clearing the remaining backlog; and the external voids review had been completed, and an Improvement Plan was being devised.

The Chief Executive referred to the Quarter 3 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 3, as follows:

- Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) – there had been a 22.9% decrease in ASB cases in comparison to the same period in 2022/23;
- Fly tipping – 24 cases had been reported, in comparison with 99 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 – 57% of the Council’s Housing Stock had an EPC rating of C or above;
 - Decent Homes – 84.77% of Council Homes met the national Decent Homes standard;
 - Affordable Housing – the Council had provided 401 new Council/Affordable homes since 2014;
 - Everyone Active-managed leisure facilities – 15,141 visits from children;
 - Customer Services Centre (CSC) – 91.9% of complaints were responded to within deadline and 91.6% of respondents were satisfied with the CSC; and
 - Residential Refuse bins – 99.67% of bins were collected.

In response to a Member’s comment about speeding up the turnaround on voids, the Chief Executive stated that the Senior Leadership Team was focussed on driving better performance in this area and that he welcomed any further suggestions from Members concerning potential improvements which could be made.

In reply to a Member question about lessons learnt from other stock-holding Councils regarding the turnaround on voids, the Chief Executive advised that conversations were held regularly with ARCH (Association of Retained Council Housing) and other Councils. The Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development stated that resourcing in this area, both in relation to securing/retaining Trade staff and, in some instances, specific materials, was a national problem. The Chief Executive was hopeful that the multiple contractor approach would improve voids turnaround, but in any event officers would continue to investigate other opportunities too.

In response to a Member’s request, the Chief Executive agreed to arrange for figures to be provided showing how the number of right to buy properties sold by the Council in recent years compared with the 401 new properties built by the Council (ie. the net effect on the total housing stock).

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the service performance against 35 corporate performance measures and delivery of key milestones in Quarter 3 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 (set out in Appendix B to the report), be noted.
3. That the performance challenges in relation to voids (Section 4.4.2 of the report) be noted, and the planned measures to improve performance be endorsed.
4. That the strategic risk updates (Section 4.8 of the report) be noted.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

7 THIRD QUARTER REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2023/24 - GENERAL FUND AND HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT

The Executive considered a report in respect of the third quarter monitoring of the Revenue and Capital budgets 2023/24 (General Fund and Housing Revenue Account).

In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Transformation, the Chair (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development) advised that the General Fund was showing an increase in expenditure for the year of £171,980. As set out in Section 4.1 of the report, this was made up of a number of variances, but predominately from the reduction in capitalisation of Property staff salaries of £200,000. This change was due to the focus of the team switching to work more on revenue activity, such as the garages and commercial stock. Going forward, this pressure had already been included within the 2024/25 General Fund budget approved by Council in February 2024. Members were also requested to approve a £162,897 transfer to reserves, as highlighted in Section 4.2 of the report.

In respect of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), the Chair stated that this was showing a net increase in expenditure of £1,002,450, mainly due to challenges in dealing with the complexity and the conditions of void properties in the housing stock. This could be seen from the average unit price, which was forecast to be £3,300 at the beginning of the year, but was now projected at £5,000 per property, noting that a considerable volume of properties had become void over the year. A full breakdown could be found in Section 4.5 of the report.

In conclusion, the Chair explained that the report requested the Executive to approve re-phasing of £10.6Million of General Fund and £2.3Million of HRA capital budgets from 2023/24 into future years. The General Fund changes mainly related to Towns Fund projects, implementing the exciting SG1 joint venture to deliver the first phase, and garages refurbishment. For the HRA, this related to Housing investment and health and safety works. A full breakdown could be found in Section 4.7 of the report.

The Chair advised Members of a correction to the table contained in Paragraph 4.2.3 of the report. The figure in the "Less core resources at Budget Setting Report" row should read "(12,380)" instead of "(12,335)", and hence the figure in the "Transfer (to)/from General Fund balances" rows should read "1,363" instead of "£1,408".

It was **RESOLVED:**

General Fund

1. That the 2023/24 3rd Quarter projected net increase in General Fund expenditure of £171,980 be approved.
2. That it be noted that the cumulative changes made to the General Fund net budget remains within the £400,000 increase variation limit delegated to the

Executive.

3. That note the proposed movement on reserves, as detailed in Paragraph 4.2.1 of the report, be noted.

Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

4. That the 2023/24 3rd Quarter net increase in HRA expenditure of £1.002Million be approved.
5. That it be noted that the cumulative increases made to the HRA net budget remains within the £400,000 variation limit delegated to the Executive.

Capital Programme

6. That the General Fund capital budget re-phasing of £10.6Million from 2023/24 to future years be approved.
7. That the Housing Revenue Account capital budget re-phasing of £2.3Million from 2023/24 to future years be approved.

Reason for Decision: As contained in report.

Other Options considered: As contained in report.

8 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None.

9 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.

10 PART II MINUTES - EXECUTIVE - 7 FEBRUARY 2024

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 7 February 2024 be approved as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

11 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

None.

CHAIR