

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 11 June 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Robin Parker CC (Vice-Chair), Myla Arceno, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Forhad Chowdhury, Sarah Mead, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand and Anne Wells

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.05pm
End Time: 7.20pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Peter Clark, Lynda Guy and Carolina Veres.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 19 March 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 TERMS OF REFERENCE

A Member asked a question regarding changes made to the Terms of Reference compared to the previous year. The Scrutiny Officer confirmed that there had been no changes.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Terms of Reference for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as approved at the Annual Council meeting held on 22 May 2024, be noted.

4 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2024/25

The Committee considered a report in respect of its Work Programme for 2023/24.

The Chair introduced the Work Programme and advised the Committee that the programme consolidated discussions from the Committee meeting in February 2024 and outlined the planned areas of focus for the year.

The Chair noted that the timetable would depend on the size of meeting agendas, with particularly heavy agendas anticipated for July and September. An effort would be made to schedule items on lighter agendas but there was potential for additional meetings to be required.

The Strategic Director (CF) highlighted an amendment under Statutory Budget & Policy Framework Items where the HRA and Rent Setting and Budget Options items should have read 2025/26.

A Member asked a question regarding the YourSay Councillors Complaints System item listed under Scrutiny Review items. The Strategic Director (CF) responded that the new complaint system would see improved functionality for reporting and information flow between residents and the Council. This system aimed to address previous issues raised by councillors and to meet new housing standards.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for 2024/25, as set out in the agenda, be noted.

5 **PART I DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee considered the following Part I Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 5 June 2024:

2. MINUTES - 13 MARCH 2024

The minutes of the meeting of the Executive held on 13 March 2024 were noted.

3. MINUTES OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY AND SELECT COMMITTEES

The minutes of the Overview & Scrutiny and Select Committees were noted.

4. LOCAL PLAN REVIEW AND REVISED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT SCHEME

The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) informed the Committee that the local plan was adopted in 2019 and that, as it was 5 years old, the review was needed to ensure it remained fit for purpose for the plan period up to 2031.

The Committee were informed that the review ultimately came out with two major points. Firstly, that no new housing sites were needed and secondly that climate change had been promoted to give it the highest possible weighting within the local plan.

The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised the Committee that whilst

the report referenced a consultation commencing mid-June for six weeks, it had been agreed at the Cabinet meeting that the consultation would run from just after the General Election through to mid-August. The Planning Policy Manager advised the Committee that the consultation would commence on 5 July, seeking focused comments, with all feedback being duly considered.

The Planning Policy Manager added that the key drivers of change included climate change, sustainability, and the incorporation of the Station Gateway Area Action Plan. The Committee were advised that legal advice had been sought to ensure the revised local plan was sound, with a focus on key amendments based on significant changes in policy and practice.

A Member expressed concerns about the perceived predetermined nature of the consultation process, questioning its purpose if substantial changes were unlikely. They highlighted past consultations where feedback appeared to be disregarded and stressed the importance of effective communication and transparency in the consultation process, including the terminology used and the need for meaningful public engagement. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) acknowledged the concerns and explained the rationale behind the partial review, which was a mid-point check to ensure the local plan was still fit for purpose. He clarified that a full review was a lengthy and costly process that would occur before the end of 2031. The current consultation aimed to address key areas of change and ensure the public could provide input on relevant issues. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) spoke of providing clear explanations and a glossary where possible. He noted the necessity of legal terminology in some cases but emphasised the importance of effective communication. He highlighted the success of digital consultations, which had garnered significant responses, that contrasted with the lower response rates of past methods. He explained that the goal was to blend detailed and light-touch engagement methods to maximise public input. He stated that digital platforms and social media had proven effective in increasing engagement, and efforts would be made to continue using these methods to gather a wide range of feedback. The Planning Policy Manager added that the consultation would use various methods, including digital platforms, to reach a wide audience. Efforts would be made to clarify terminology and provide plain English explanations where possible. The consultation would seek detailed and general feedback, aiming to blend both approaches for effective engagement.

A Member asked a question related to young people and whether they would be specifically consulted on the local plan. He suggested involving the youth mayor, schools, and colleges to ensure comprehensive youth engagement, and emphasised the importance of including teenagers and young adults up to the age of 30. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) responded that there would be an effort to engage young people which included coordination with the youth mayor. He acknowledged the broader need to involve various educational institutions and reiterated the importance of capturing youth perspectives. The Planning Policy Manager agreed with the importance of youth consultation. He spoke of the use of the Commonplace platform in previous consultations, which included a separate youth survey tab and highlighted ongoing efforts to improve youth engagement through community contacts and outreach, which aimed to incorporate these

methods in the consultation process.

A Member asked a question relating to the consultation process, with specific regard to responses from local businesses and developers. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) confirmed that local businesses and developers would be involved in the consultation through established networks and stressed that all comments would be considered equally regardless of the source.

A Member raised further points regarding to the consultation process and subsequent feedback to responders. They highlighted concerns from residents related to unsurety that followed a consultation relating to the redevelopment of the Oval. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) acknowledged the need to find a way to directly inform individuals who provided feedback about the council's response to their comments. He advised the Committee that after the consultation, a consultation statement would be prepared, summarising key points, what the council had done or not done, and the reasons for those decisions. This document would be available to both Members and the public. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) clarified that the local plan designated the Oval for redevelopment, it outlined general objectives like better space, affordable housing, and new retail units, but did not delve into specific project details. He assured that the Housing Development team would follow up with detailed responses to any specific queries regarding the Oval.

A Member asked questions relating to the balance between growth with sustainability. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) addressed the balance between growth and sustainability and noted that growth could be positive if done sustainably. He emphasised Stevenage's existing sustainable infrastructure and the importance of directing growth to the right places with the right terms, such as using Brownfield sites and ensuring high-density developments. He highlighted the focus on energy efficiency, water conservation, and sustainable building practices in the new climate change policies, despite potential governmental pushback.

A Member asked a question regarding the identification of areas for biodiversity net gain. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) affirmed that the plan aimed to identify biodiversity net gain sites within Stevenage before 2031 to balance out development impacts.

A Member commented on the maintenance of Council owned buildings and highlighted the need for better upkeep.

A Member asked a question related to the budget allocated for legal advice. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) confirmed the procurement of the same legal team that had assisted with the original local plan, which provided continuity and potentially reduced costs. He advised the budget for legal advice was at around £50,000, with additional funds available if needed, especially in the event of legal challenges or delays like those experienced with the previous local plan.

A Member inquired whether any sites had been potentially marked for removal from the local plan or if that option would be considered during the review. The Assistant

Director (Planning and Regulation) confirmed that the proposal did not include changes to existing sites, the addition of new sites, or the removal of sites. The only adjustment was around the station area gateway, specifically policy TC4, where the terminology was being refined to better reflect requirements for the station area. He noted that if consultation responders proposed changes or suggested different uses for a site, those suggestions would be considered. Any new site introduction would depend on changes to housing numbers, which current evidence did not support.

A Member highlighted a lack of consideration for disabled users in the transport strategy, pointing out that there were no representations of mobility scooters or wheelchairs in the transport imagery. They emphasised that mobility transport was distinct and should be included in planning discussions, especially regarding accessibility like curb design and infrastructure that catered to all forms of mobility. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) acknowledged the observation and committed to incorporating considerations for disabled users more reflectively in future plans. A Member suggested integrating the feedback into the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) to ensure comprehensive coverage of all transport modes, including those for disabled users.

A Member raised a query regarding the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) rates, and noted that Stevenage's rates were very low compared to other authorities and inquired about the review timetable and potential rate increases. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) confirmed that the timetable for the CIL review was detailed in Appendix C of the local development scheme. He indicated that viability work was underway, with reports expected to be presented to the Cabinet in September or October for consultation on the rates. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised the Committee that residential rates were likely to increase, and noted that current rates were tied to house prices, which are 20-30% lower in Stevenage than in other parts of Hertfordshire. He added that the review would also consider increasing rates for office spaces, reflecting the town's growth in employment spaces.

The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) offered Members a detailed briefing, extending an invitation to the Planning and Development Committee and Environment and Economy Committee and to all Members interested in the review of the local plan.

5. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 4 2023/24

The Strategic Director (RP) advised the Committee that the Cabinet had received the final quarterly corporate performance report for the fiscal year 2023/24, presented by the Chief Executive. The presentation had also highlighted progress against the council's former corporate plan, known as the Future Town Future Council plan.

The Committee were informed that the Council was actively regenerating several play areas and special emphasis was being placed on the installation of equipment that catered to children with additional or specific needs.

The Strategic Director (RP) advised the Committee that there had been a noticeable reduction in fly-tipping incidents. The Cabinet discussion had been centred on whether the reduction could be attributed to increased opening hours at the household recycling centre in Stevenage. He informed the Committee that this aspect was under review, and discussions with Hertfordshire County Council were ongoing.

The Strategic Director (RP) informed the Committee that five recommendations has been proposed and accepted as set out in the report.

A Member as a question related to the play park regenerations, specifically focussed on the accessibility aspect. The Strategic Director (RP) clarified that while efforts were made to include accessible equipment, not all parks would be fully accessible. The Member asked if future plans could include fully accessible parks, citing examples from Barnet. The Strategic Director (RP) responded that he would discuss this with the relevant portfolio holder as part of the new park strategies being developed.

A Member raised a concern about the lack of play areas within their ward. He mentioned that residents with children had to travel an inconvenient distance to access play areas and identified a potential space for a new play area. The Strategic Director (RP) responded that there was a play area improvement programme based on decisions made by the Cabinet regarding the sustainable number of play areas considering other capital priorities. He suggested the Member discuss the specific need with the relevant Portfolio Holder.

A Member emphasised the need for Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) to ensure consistent and well-communicated opening hours for the household waste depot to prevent residents from dumping waste due to unexpected closures. The Strategic Director (RP) agreed to share the concerns with HCC.

A Member highlighted the lack of disability access at the household waste depot, which discouraged disabled individuals from using the facility. The Strategic Director (RP) acknowledged the concern and committed to raising it with HCC.

A Member inquired about when the Council expected to receive a response from Hertfordshire County Council regarding the impact of the household waste depot opening hours and what the mechanism would be for updating Members. The Strategic Director (RP) advised the Committee that the response would likely come through an email and that the Committee would be informed as and when the response was received. He noted that it would take time to determine the true impact on fly-tipping and highlighted ongoing discussions with the HCC about graffiti management.

A Member inquired if the Councils fly-tipping enforcement processes had become more robust and how they compared to other authorities. The Strategic Director (RP) explained to the Committee that the council focused on education and getting people to remove fly-tipping voluntarily, which had resulted in fewer penalty notices. He believed this proactive approach was contributing to a reduction in incidents but noted that the situation was being closely monitored.

A Member expressed satisfaction with the improvement in repairs, which the Strategic Director (RP) noted and promised to pass on the commendation.

6. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

The Committee noted there had been no Urgent Part I Business at the Cabinet meeting.

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

There were none.

7 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was 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 DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee considered the following Part II Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 5 June 2024:

8. IMPROVEMENT TO ACCESS LINKS BETWEEN OLD AND NEW TOWN

The Head of Estates presented a report to the Committee. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the Strategic Director (CF).

9. COUNCIL TAX AND SUNDRY DEBT WRITE OFFS GREATER THAN £10,000

The Assistant Director (Finance) presented a report to the Committee. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the Assistant Director (Finance) and the Strategic Director (CF).

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

There were none.

11 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR