

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 24 September 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Myla Arceno, Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Lynda Guy,

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7:08pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors Robin Parker CC, Andy McGuinness, Phil Bibby CC, Sarah Mead, Ceara Roopchand, Nigel Williams, Tom Plater and Anne Wells.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING – 30TH JULY 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 30 July 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **PART I DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee considered the following Part I Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 24 July 2024:

2. *MINUTES – 24 July 2024*

The minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 24 July 2024 were noted.

3. *MINUTES OF OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY AND SELECT COMMITTEES*

The Cabinet's review of the minutes of the following Overview & Scrutiny and Select Committee meetings was noted:

Overview & Scrutiny Committee, 16 July 2024
Community Select Committee, 30 July 2024

4. WORKFORCE STRATEGY

The Head of Human Resources informed the Committee of the newly developed workforce strategy for 2024-2027. This strategy was approved by the Cabinet with the recommendation that delegated authority be granted to the Heads of HR in consultation with the Portfolio Holder to develop annual implementation plan to recognise the dynamic and changing work environment. This will also include an annual workforce plan.

Members asked how Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) could position itself as an employer of choice beyond those seeking public sector careers or living nearby. The Officer explained that while the concept of being an employer of choice was included in the previous Corporate Plan, the current strategy focuses on staff retention through quarterly surveys and aims to attract new talent. With the adoption of new ways of working, the Council could broaden its appeal to a wider geographic and younger pool of candidates. It was emphasized that reflecting these new work practices would be essential to attracting future applicants.

There was a question about whether the dementia training was intended for specific staff members or all staff. The Officer clarified that the training was designed for all employees. The training will primarily be conducted via Teams, which allows for recorded sessions. This way, if any staff members are unable to attend the live training, they can access the recordings later.

5. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ACTION PLAN – PROGRESS UPDATE

The Corporate Policy and Research Manager stated the Cabinet received a report highlighting the progress made in advancing equality, diversity and inclusion across the council since the introduction of the EDI plan for 2023/24, whilst also looking to the Council's proposed EDI actions for the next year as part of the EDI Action Plan 2024-25.

Members noted that while various groups were being targeted, young people were identified as an important demographic that needs more attention, particularly regarding efforts to encourage voting among them, given the low voter turnout in the community. In response, the Officer emphasized that resident engagement was crucial and will be integrated into the action plan moving forward. The strategy aims to strengthen connections with Stevenage communities, focusing on better outreach to young people.

6. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE – QUARTER 1 2024/25

Scrutiny Members were informed that the Cabinet was presented with a report highlighting the Council's performance across key priorities and projects for Quarter 1 2024/25 and received an update on progress against Cost of living support for residents and current strategic risks.

Members raised several questions about the funding for graffiti removal. Officers clarified that SBC allocated £30,000 for this purpose, sourced from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. These funds support both graffiti clearance and artistic projects on utility boxes throughout the town. The resources were being used to target graffiti removal across Stevenage, but the effectiveness relies on residents reporting incidents. When graffiti was reported, SBC acts quickly to remove it and conducts analysis on areas with high occurrences. Currently, SBC was also removing graffiti in areas under Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) jurisdiction where they have obtained permission to do so.

There were questions about whether SBC was considering adding more officers to address issues related to collecting and providing assistance around priority debt. Officers explained that during the pandemic, SBC increased staffing resources and adjusted their approach to better target households at risk of falling into debt and to address early stages of debt. Members emphasized the importance of supporting residents in claiming discretionary housing payments, especially given the current cost-of-living increases affecting many households.

Following national media coverage, Members asked questions regarding how aggressively Councils pursue repayment of council tax. Officers explained that SBC employs good practices among its enforcement officers, such as using body cameras, avoiding visits before 7 AM, and refraining from entering premises with children present. However, in cases where residents do not respond, SBC may involve enforcement agencies, particularly for Council Tax and Business Rates. Additionally, if officers believe circumstances warrant it, they encourage residents to apply for Council Tax Support (CTS).

7. GENERAL FUND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY REVIEW

Cabinet received a report on the projected General Fund (GF), Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Capital 2024/25 net expenditure which sought approval to amend the General Fund, HRA and Capital budgets as part of the quarterly revenue monitoring review. The report also gave an update on the reserves and balances available to support revenue expenditure and sought approval for revisions to the allocated reserves.

The Strategic Director (Section 151 Officer), Clare Fletcher, updated the Committee verbally on the way the Council Tax Support Scheme would be approached the next Municipal year, and for 2026-27.

Members sought clarity on the timelines for the Banded schemes. The Officer explained that the Council Tax Support Scheme typically goes to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as a piece of policy development work before being presented to Cabinet but noted that the current scheme will remain unchanged. A report will be prepared in November, proposing a Banded Scheme for 2026/27 to be reviewed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and Cabinet. It was mentioned that preparing

a new scheme would take approximately 6 to 9 months to complete all necessary steps.

Councillors raised several questions about Council Tax, particularly regarding the recovery of arrears. They inquired if courts impose attachment of earnings for this purpose and whether some Council Tax debts might remain unrecoverable. The Officer responded that while it's standard practice for the Council to pursue these debts, the effectiveness largely depends on employers' cooperation. Courts do have the authority to order payment of arrears.

It was also emphasized that collection rates have not fully recovered since the pandemic, with Council Tax debts increasing from £47 million to £96 million. The Officer noted that arrears are a widespread issue affecting all Councils.

8. FIRST QUARTER REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2024/25 (INCLUDING FIRST QUARTER CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2024/25)-

Scrutiny Members were informed that the Cabinet received a report on the projected General Fund (GF), Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and Capital 2024/25 net expenditure which sought approval to amend the General Fund, HRA and Capital budgets as part of the quarterly revenue monitoring review. The report also gave an update on the reserves and balances available to support revenue expenditure and sought approval for revisions to the allocated reserves.

9. ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW OF 2023/24 INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL CODE

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee were informed that Cabinet received a report reviewing the operation of the 2023/24 Treasury Management and Investment Strategy. The report confirmed that there had not been any breaches to treasury limits and the council had no liquidity difficulties during the year. This report had already been to audit committee, which has responsibility for the scrutiny of this report, and they made no further recommendations.

10. URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

Scrutiny Members were informed that the Leader updated the Cabinet regarding the Executive's decision in July 2023 which had agreed to extend the conditional phase of the SG1 Development and start the process of forming a Joint Venture to bring forward the 'Plot A' site of the former Swingate House. The Strategic Director informed Members that the Leader reported to Cabinet the positive news that the negotiations had completed and both organisations had signed legal documents to allow works to begin on the site in early October 2024.

Members were advised that the build would take approximately two and a half to three years to complete with residents moving into the homes from 2026. It was noted that the Swingate Car park would be closed from 7th October for the duration

of construction. In response to a question, it was advised that the Council would be working with season ticket holders and Everyone Active to highlight alternative parking facilities nearby. Officers would also be asked to ensure there was a clearly signposted disabled access through to the Gordon Craig Theatre. Overview and Scrutiny members welcomed the Cabinet's comments regarding signage and the positive news regarding the start of SG1.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part I Decisions of the Cabinet were noted.

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

There were none.

5 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There were none.

6 **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.

7 **PART II MINUTES - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 30 JULY 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 30 July 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

8 **PART II DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Part II Minutes of the Cabinet 24 July 2024 be noted.

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

There were none.

10 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There were none.