

**COUNCIL  
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 31 July 2024

Time: 7.30pm

Place: Council Chamber

**Present:** Councillors: Jim Brown (Mayor), Nazmin Chowdhury, (Deputy Mayor), Myla Arceno, Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Philip Bibby CC, Stephen Booth, Robert Boyle, Leanne Brady, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Peter Clark, Akin Elokolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Coleen Houlihan, Mason Humberstone, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Loraine Rossati, Graham Snell, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells, Nigel Williams, Jade Woods and Tom Wren

**Start / End** Start Time: 7.10pm  
**Time:** End Time: 8.45pm

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

The Mayor invited those present to observe a moment's silence to reflect on the tragedies this week in Southport.

Apologies for absence were received from Kamal Choudhury, Forhad Chowdhury, Lin Martin-Haugh, Simon Speller, and from Lahaina Sutherland, Youth Mayor.

2 **MINUTES - ANNUAL MEETING - 22 MAY 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Annual Council Meeting held on 22 May 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

3 **MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS**

The Mayor referred to a list of seventy events he had supported since May which had been circulated at the meeting and gave a report on a number of highlights including:

- The 8<sup>th</sup> birthday of Stevenage Parkrun at Fairlands Valley Park;
- The NHS Charity Rainbow Run and Wollenwick's Colour Run;
- Stevenage Day;
- Town Twinning Visit;
- Two visits with the Air Ambulance charity;
- Presentations at Marriotts School;
- Covid Cobra 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary;

The Mayor also reminded Members of the Stevenage Rotary Club charity quiz on 7 September, his Garden Party on 29 September and the Together Awards on 26 October 2024.

4 **COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS**

There were no community presentations.

5 **PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS**

There were no petitions or deputations.

6 **QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL**

There were no questions from the Youth Council.

7 **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

There were no questions from the public.

8 **LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE**

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Stephen Booth, asked the following question:

“What meetings does the Leader of the Council have planned with the new Labour Government and does he expect next year’s local financial settlement will ensure the Council can avoid cutting essential services and delaying capital projects to balance the budget?”

The Leader of the Council replied that a number of contacts had been made with the new Government including a visit that morning from a senior Minister from the Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Later in the meeting he would be giving an update on the work carried out by Kevin Bonavia, the new Stevenage MP to represent the residents and aspirations of the Town. A further meeting with representatives from the Department of Business and Trade would be taking place the following week to discuss the work in the Town with the Space and Defence Industry and Life Sciences Sector. Alongside this the Leader was planning to maintain a strong connection to Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Housing.

In relation to the financial settlement, it was hoped that a longer term, possibly three year, settlement would be announced in the Autumn Budget by Rachel Reeves the new Chancellor which would allow local authorities to better plan for the future.

The Council then received updates from the relevant Executive Portfolio Holders on the following matters:

- Cycle Hire Scheme;

- Co-operative Neighbourhood Management;
- Building a Better Bedwell;
- Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor;
- Equalities;
- Stevenage Day;
- Aqua Parc;
- Stevenage Theatre wins National Award;
- Museum Exhibitions;
- Brodie Court;
- Resident Engagement Strategy;
- Green Spaces Strategy.

## 9 **UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS**

In the absence of the Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Rob Broom, Chair of the Environment and Economy Select Committee (who was also a Member of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee) advised that, at its meeting held in June, the Committee had finalised its work programme for 2024/25 as well as scrutinising the decisions of the Cabinet. Council was informed that one-off performance reviews of ICT including the Council's website, the Customer Complaints System alongside a review of how well the move by the Customer Services Centre to the main reception would be undertaken.

Councillor Sarah Mead, Chair of the Community Select Committee advised that, at its meeting held in June 2023, the Committee had received a presentation on the Housing Allocations Policy and the Resident Engagement Strategy. During the coming year the Committee would be considering Equalities and Diversity, Neighbourhood Wardens, the new Leisure Contract as well as holding the statutory Crime and Disorder and Public Health meetings.

The Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee advised that the Committee had commenced its 2024/25 work and over the course of the upcoming year would be looking at the Skills Agenda concentrating on technical qualifications relating to the Life Sciences sector and local employers offering roles with a strong Science, Technology, Engineering and maths) STEM content, local access to returning to work, continuing its review of local bus services alongside a watching brief on the Council's response to the climate emergency.

## 10 **SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24**

In the absence of the Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Sarah Mead, Chair of the Community Select Committee moved that the Annual Scrutiny Report for 2023/24 be noted.

In moving the report, thanks were given to Members for their robust work on pre-scrutiny and scrutiny and also thanks to officers for their support and evidence.

Councillor Rob Broom seconded the report.

Councillor Stephen Booth questioned the length of the Overview and Scrutiny agendas and suggested that additional meetings should be considered to spread the workload. The Leader, Councillor Richard Henry acknowledged the point but reminded members that the General Election had delayed some items coming forward earlier and that there were legal requirements on the timing for the consideration of some of the reports.

It was **RESOLVED** that the work undertaken by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees during 2023/24, as set out in the report, be noted.

## 11 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

### Code of Conduct

Councillor Phil Bibby moved a motion concerning the Code of Conduct.

In moving the Motion, Councillor Bibby stressed the importance of Councillors treating each other with respect and integrity.

The motion was not seconded and therefore was not debated.

### New Labour Government

Councillor Richard Henry moved and Councillor Sandra Barr seconded the following motion

“On 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2024, after 14 years of disastrous, draconian and divisive Conservative government, the country chose change. It chose hope. It chose Labour.

The people of Stevenage also chose Labour and, for the first time in 14 years, the Stevenage constituency will have an MP worthy of the title. Kevin Bonavia will reset the expectations of what a good local MP should be: one who works full time for Stevenage; one who works with the local authorities in his constituency, not against them; one who is accessible and accountable to local people.

We congratulate Kevin Bonavia on his election. He is one of 411 Labour MPs in the House of Commons who, with Sir Keir Starmer as Prime Minister, a talented front bench team and a clear mandate, will bring the change and stability that the people of this country want and need.

We also congratulate the former Leader of the Council, Baroness Taylor of Stevenage, on her appointment as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Department of Housing, Community & Local Government.

The new Government has hit the ground running. In the King’s Speech on 17<sup>th</sup> July, the Government set out its priorities. They are ambitious and diverse priorities. In particular, those that affect Stevenage Borough Council directly include:

- A Renters’ Rights Bill that will abolish Section 21 “no-fault evictions” and empower tenants to challenge rent increases “designed to force them out by

the back door”.

- Respect orders – a revamped form of Asbos – will give police powers to place restrictions on adults to tackle anti-social behaviour.
- A Planning and Infrastructure Bill to speed up the planning process and planning committees will be modernised, with resources to do their jobs.
- A commitment to housing – including social and affordable housing.
- A devolution bill for England,
- An Employment Rights bill, recognising that Labour values workers’ rights.
- Nationalisation of our railways.

The Labour Manifesto, published prior to the general election, gave commitments that a Labour Government would work collaboratively with local government. The manifesto emphasises the importance of stable funding, decision-making flexibility, and partnership with local leaders and communities to drive growth and provide essential services. The King’s Speech has opened the door to that collaboration, and, in Stevenage, we warmly welcome it.

This Council resolves that:

1. We look forward to a collaborative relationship with the newly elected Labour MP and Government to meet the Council ambitions for housing, growth and regeneration, and for the benefit of the people of Stevenage.
2. The Leader of the Council writes to Kevin Bonavia, MP for Stevenage, congratulating him on his election to Parliament and that SBC looks forward to a close working relationship.
3. The Leader of the Council writes to Baroness Taylor of Stevenage upon becoming Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Department of Housing, Community & Local Government and wishes her every success with her new role.

In moving the Motion, Councillor Richard Henry referred to the austerity programme which had been introduced in 2010 and the lack of support for Local Government throughout the 14 years of the Conservative Government. He advised Members that Kevin Bonavia, the new MP for Stevenage was working pro-actively to support the Council.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Sandra Barr advised that Kevin Bonavia had advised that he would welcome all Members regardless of party, to approach him as the Stevenage MP with any issues they might need his assistance with.

The Leader of the Opposition advised that the New Government’s proposals and targets on house building were welcome but that they should give careful consideration to the Right to Buy legislation and the potential of building on Green Belt Land.

Following further debate, and upon being put to the vote, the Motion was carried.

The Council received four questions from Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders. The responses to the four questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

(A) Question from Councillor Robin Parker CC re: lighting in Fairlands Valley Park

Supplementary question – what is the timescale on this matter and could a regular progress report come to members to keep them updated. In the absence of the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance, the Deputy Leader agreed that a written response would be sent to Councillor Parker.

(B) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth re: a four day working week for Council officers

Supplementary question – “Subject to the outcome of the research and ongoing studies would the Council be in favour of the four day week for officers?”

The Deputy Leader advised that the Council would continue to monitor research and developments in this regard noting, as per the written response, that the South Cambridgeshire four day week trial only commenced in January 2023, therefore it would be some time before the longer term implications could be properly assessed to inform a local decision.

(C) Question from Councillor McGuinness regarding land sales.

Supplementary question – could the Portfolio Holder outline in a bit more detail where the capital receipts were actually spent and were any of the spends ringfenced for similar programmes where the assets came from originally?

The Deputy Leader advised that the sale of land had helped to fund projects such as parks and open space schemes, vehicles and plant, fire protection works at Cavendish Road and spend on commercial and operational buildings. All information could also be found in the quarterly monitoring reports submitted to Cabinet. The majority of the £6m receipt related to the sale of the Marshgate Car Park and was ringfenced for regeneration projects in the Town. Councillor Thomas agreed to send the full details in her response to Councillor McGuinness in writing.

(D) Question from Councillor Bibby concerning the use of grey belt land.

Supplementary question – in relation to green belt land in neighbouring authorities, does the Portfolio Holder expect other authorities to build on this land and would SBC be objecting to those green belt developments?

In the Portfolio Holder’s absence, the Deputy Leader agreed to arrange for a written response to Councillor Bibby.

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## **HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 2024/25 AND ON-GOING COST PRESSURES**

The Council considered a report in respect of the Mid Year Treasury Management Review 2023/24, including the Prudential Indicators. It was noted that the report had

been endorsed by both the Audit Committee and the Executive.

It was moved by Councillor Jeannette Thomas, and seconded by Councillor Jackie Hollywell, that the Recommendation in the report be approved.

In response to questions and comments by Members, Councillor Thomas advised that in relation to a deposit scheme for tenants, this would be difficult due to the financial situation of some tenants. Councillor Thomas replied that in relation to costs for professional services, due to changes of situation and unexpected circumstances such as the Covid pandemic this could fluctuate.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That the request for in-year growth due to HRA 2024/25 budget pressures of £2,434,050 as detailed in paragraph 4.11.2 of the Cabinet Report at Appendix A to the Council report be approved.
2. That an additional £400k of HRA expenditure for the remainder of 2024/25 be approved.

#### 14 **APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT PERSON FOR STANDARDS COMMITTEE**

The Council considered a report in respect of the extension of the term of appointment of an Independent Person for Standards in accordance with the Localism Act 2011.

It was moved by Councillor Jackie Hollywell, and seconded by Councillor Myla Arceno, that the Recommendations in the report be approved.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That Dr Robert Cawley's term of office as the Council's independent Person be extended for a further term of four years with effect from 5 October 2024.
2. That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to seek to recruit a second Independent Person to act as a deputy to Dr Cawley.
3. That the deputy Independent person be paid an annual allowance of £749, which is 50% of the allowance paid to the principal Independent Person.

#### 15 **AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 4 June 2024 were received.

#### **CHAIR**