

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 10th October 2024

Time: 6:00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Members: Councillors: L Martin-Haugh (Chair), P Bibby CC, M Arceno, S Booth, F Chowdhury, P Clark, L Guy, S Mead, C Roopchand and A Wells.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies of absence were received from Councillors Robin Parker CC and Tom Plater.

2. MINUTES – 24 SEPTEMBER

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 24 September 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 1 Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 9 October 2024.

2. MINUTES - CABINET - 18 SEPTEMBER 2024

The minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 18 September were noted.

3. MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY AND SELECT COMMITTEES

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny and Select Committee were noted: 9th September and 24th September.

4. PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON REVISED SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENTS AND PROPOSED REVOCATION OF THE IMPACT OF

DEVELOPMENT ON BIODIVERSITY SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING DOCUMENT

The Assistant Director for Planning and Regulation explained that this report was intended to align relevant policies alongside the SBC Local Plan as it goes through a review and update, and confirm that all supplementary planning documents (SPDs) are current. Revisions were proposed to three SPDs, specifically updating the Parking SPD, the Developer Contributions SPD, and the Design SPD. Officers noted that these proposed revisions align with central government guidance. Notably, sustainable travel components have now been incorporated into the developer contributions SPD, and the parking SPD has been revised accordingly.

In relation to the Biodiversity SPD, the Council is committed to the theme of biodiversity and had adopted an SPD owing to limited national guidance or requirements and to achieve benefit for the local area. However, as of April this year, more comprehensive central government guidance has been established, which takes precedence. Therefore, the SPD is no longer required.

5. COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY (CIL): PRELIMINARY DRAFT CHARGING SCHEDULE - PUBLIC CONSULTATION

The Assistant Director for Planning and Regulation explained that CIL is an infrastructure tariff that councils can choose to implement, and SBC had been charging CIL since 2020. It was stated that there was a delicate balance between setting a rate that doesn't hinder viable development while also securing enough funding for necessary infrastructure. The Council is proposing an updated scheme and currently is in the first of two rounds of consultation to increase the charges. The proposed adjustments were based on viability evidence to ensure that development remains feasible, and the scope has now been expanded to include offices and industrial areas that previously were not subject to any charges.

Councillors queried whether CIL viability was based on lower land values than surrounding areas, and why Stevenage CIL rates are lower than surrounding areas. Officers explained that when considering costs and profitability, land in Stevenage offers lower margins related to the sales prices of the finished properties that influence profitability, rather than the purchase price of the land itself. Members asked how much was currently in our CIL fund and whether it is being utilized effectively. It was explained one of the advantages of the CIL is that all smaller contributions were automatically consolidated, without the time constraints that apply to Section 106 agreements or limitations on

specific types of infrastructure. There were two key components: local CIL, which is about 15% and is currently allocated to community climate change projects, and strategic CIL, which focuses on major infrastructure. Currently, significant contributions were coming from developments north of Stevenage, in the town centre, and the former Icon building project and figures would be published on the Council website by December.

6. CLIMATE CHANGE - ANNUAL UPDATE - OCTOBER 2024

The Assistant Director for Planning and Regulation explained that a detailed update was presented to the Cabinet and would also be taken to the Environment and Economy committee in November. The report included an overview of nine levels of climate change interactions, along with examples and case studies showcasing SBC efforts and support for community initiatives. SBC were on a promising path to reduce their carbon emissions, as highlighted in sections 4.14 and 4.15 of the Cabinet report, demonstrating the effective interventions. Officers noted substantial progress in the aim to achieve net zero by 2030, with some offsetting. Additionally, there were several appendices with updates, including an approval request for the biodiversity action plan.

Councillors queried what the key changes had been. The Officer stated that one of the most significant achievements had been the agreement made earlier this year, which begins this month, to switch from diesel to a low emission sustainable fuel. This transition should improve both air quality and carbon emissions for residents. There was a cost associated with this change, which Members had agreed to cover when the Council's general fund budget was agreed in February 2024. The biodiversity action plan was another positive initiative, showcasing SBCs commitment to protecting biodiversity by planting over 4,000 trees by 2030 and implementing various physical improvements.

Moreover, the efforts by the Portfolio Holders and Members to promote climate action at the local level have led to grants that support community climate improvement projects.

Members were also informed that there is a £70,000 climate change grant available for small businesses to invest in carbon reduction projects related to their core business activities.

Members queried what progress the Council was making regarding retrofitting the housing stock. The Assistant Director for Planning and Regulation informed Members that the Council had secured funding, were working with

others in Hertfordshire, but acknowledged that the overall cost of retrofitting the housing stock would be over £200 million and would require central government funding to be achieved.

7. FEES AND CHARGES 2025/26

The Head of Commercial stated that the report discussed the proposed approval of fees and charges for the 2025/26 year, which relates to both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account. It was noted that fees and charges are established annually and play a crucial role in the council's financial stability, as the Council aims to achieve a savings target of £1.285 million for the general fund in 2025/26. The Housing Revenue Account also requires savings to cover service costs. In this period, the Council will face rising operational and resource expenses, and will review fees and charges on a detailed, case-by-case basis.

The Council adheres to principles regarding fees and charges, which included a commitment to covering taxpayer costs and striving for full cost recovery when feasible. In September, the Council's financial security group, comprised of Members from various parties, convened to assess the proposals for fees and charges for both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account. Both the financial security group and the Cabinet supported the recommendations, and the report includes equality impact assessments as appendices.

The Committee noted the decisions of the Cabinet meeting held on 9 October 2024.

4. ICT PART 1

The Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director, Chief Technology Officer, Matt Canterford regarding the journey that the joint ICT service with East Herts Council has been on since it began operating in 2012.

Over the past 18 months the IT service had focused on making IT terminology more accessible and addressing the challenges SBC had faced. The governance structure for the shared service is the Joint ICT Committee, which was comprised of three Members from each Council who oversee governance and operational issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic had led to a 350% increase in service demand, exacerbating existing issues. For context, the demand for Microsoft Teams

surged by 700%. This spike necessitated a rapid increase in resources, going from about 50 to 900 laptops in just three months.

In 2022, SBC commissioned a full review by SOCITIM to assess the Council's needs. This included systems like the Council's Wi-Fi. As a result, it had embarked on a replacement programme for outdated infrastructure. In response to the most recent report, East Herts District Council and Stevenage Borough Council collaborated with SOCITIM Advisory to design the Future Operating Model for the Joint IT Service.

The partners would be investing £629,795 over the next two years in order to fill all roles in the new structure by March 2026. This investment was a key part of the Councils' efforts to modernise and improve their IT services to better serve their communities.

Councillors questioned whether there were any efforts underway to assess our emissions related to IT usage, including hardware, software, storage, and cloud services. Additionally, what initiatives are being implemented to support SBC's goal of achieving net zero by 2030. It was stated that when moving systems into the cloud, it is challenging to record the true levels of carbon footprint.

5. URGENT PART I DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There were none.

6. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

There were none.

7. 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.

8. **PART II DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee considered the following Part II Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 9 October 2024:

10. FUTURE VOIDS DELIVERY MODEL

The Assistant Director, Building Safety and Housing Property Services updated the Committee on the plans for the future delivery model of the Voids programme. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the AD Building Safety and Housing Property Services.

11. MAJOR PROJECT UODATE – BRENT COURT GARAGES

The Assistant Director, Housing Development updated the Committee on the delivery of the development project at Brent Court Garages. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the AD Housing Development.

12. MAJOR PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME UPDATED PIPELINE PROJECTS RESOURCING

The Assistant Director, Housing Development updated the Committee on the future delivery of the pipeline of major development projects in the town. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the AD Housing Development.

13. TOWNS FUND PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Assistant Director, Regeneration updated the Committee on the progress of the Towns Fund projects. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the AD, Regeneration.

9. **ICT UPDATE PART II**

The Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director, Chief Technology Officer, Matt Canterford. Members asked a series of questions that were answered by the AD, Chief Technology Officer.