

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**COUNCIL  
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 16 October 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, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Coleen Houlihan, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater CC, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Loraine Rossati, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells, Nigel Williams, Jade Woods and Tom Wren

**Start / End** Start Time: 7.15pm  
**Time:** End Time: 10.10pm

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

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Kamal Choudhury, Mason Humberstone, Lin Martin-Haugh and Graham Snell.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 31 July 2024 and the Special Meeting on 2 September 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

3 **MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS**

The Mayor referred to a list of events he had supported since the last Council meeting on 31 July which had been circulated at the meeting and he provided a verbal report on a number of highlights including:

- Sargam Stevenage Onam Festival (Kerala) – 600 people had attended the event which had been held at Barnwell School;
- Launch of the Beryl Bike Scheme and unveiling the Sish lane underpass murals;
- Kadoma Link visit celebrating 35 years of friendship between Stevenage and Kadoma;
- Nayrouz – The Coptic New Year Celebration at St Margaret's Church in Westminster; and

- The Mayor's Garden Party with the WGC Brass Band which had been held indoors at the Poplars Community Centre.

#### 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**

##### **Question 1 from Jennifer Huygen**

The Council noted that a response to the question submitted by Jennifer Huygen regarding lighting in Fairlands Valley Park had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Jennifer Huygen was present at the meeting and asked the following supplementary question: Following the outcome of the bat survey and if there were no further hurdles to overcome, what was the expectation of the Council of the earliest possible implementation of the lighting in Fairlands Valley Park?

Councillor Simon Speller, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance, advised that early in 2025 through the budget setting process, funding would be allocated to be spent in the next Municipal Year. In relation to the bat survey, a further comprehensive study would be undertaken as it had been discovered that there were at least 8 species of bats in the Park and that collaborative work was being undertaken with the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust on the related implications. The lighting options would also be considered fully for all of the Valley including the lakes area and he confirmed that Ms Huygens would be consulted.

##### **Question 2 from Rebecca Watts**

The Council noted that a response to the question submitted by Rebecca Watts regarding biodiversity assessments had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Rebecca Watts was present at the meeting and asked the following supplementary question: Following the Council's biodiversity report, has the Council followed the Government's recommendations to have a network of reports on biodiversity?

Councillor Speller responded that the Council's Cabinet had recently approved the Climate Change Action Plan which included the new Biodiversity Action Plan. The Council had also approved a Design Guide for public consultation and Cllr Speller

advised that it was his aspiration that all new developers met biodiversity standards to aid the achievement of net zero.

### **Question 3 from Mr Teun van Leeuwen**

The Council noted that a response to the question submitted by Mr Teun van Leeuwen regarding cycling infrastructure had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Mr Teun van Leeuwen was present at the meeting and asked the following supplementary question: People of all abilities used bikes. Access to the East side of the town centre was not accessible for all cyclists. Is Stevenage Council doing all it can in this respect?

Councillor Speller, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance advised that he recognised Mr Leeuwen's aspiration. Officers had consulted all stakeholders including Cycling UK on the design process for the Town Centre but he would be happy to organise an on-site walkabout to look at the issues Mr Van Leeuwen had raised.

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

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Stephen Booth, asked the following question: Does the Leader of the Council agree that the Government's launch of new Employment Legislation would do nothing to encourage growth in the economy at a time when Britain urgently needed to raise productivity and exports. He advised that there had been no mention of Profit Sharing Schemes, works councils or other initiatives to break down the barriers between employers and employees and asked if the Leader of the Council agreed that the legislation should have been delayed?

The Leader of the Council replied that this issue related to National policy. He further stated that it would be advisable to take stock concerning the broader economic and employment offer post the October budget statement. A written answer would be prepared for Councillor Booth concerning the potential impacts of this legislation on the SBC workforce.

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

- Green Business Grants
- Beryl Bike Scheme
- Co-operative Council and Neighbourhoods
- Older Peoples Day/Age Friendly Communities
- Stevenage Equalities Commission
- Leisure Health and Wellbeing – Awards and Funding
- Arts and Culture
- Community Tree Planting
- Fairlands Valley Lighting Petition
- Switch Over from Diesel fuel to HVO Fuel
- SG1

- Co-Space

Following a request from Councillor Booth, it was agreed that the Updates above would be circulated following the meeting.

## 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 recent meetings, the Committee had considered the following issues:

- Resident Engagement Strategy
- Housing Annual Report
- Homelessness & Rough Sleepers Strategy 2025-2030
- Tenancy Policy
- Responsive Repairs & Maintenance Policy
- Corporate Performance Suite
- 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Monitoring Report & Gen Fund & HRA
- And 3 Part II Cabinet decisions on (i) Social Housing Decarbonisation Prog. Contract Award (ii) Towns Centre – Skills Enterprise & (iii) Investing in the Town Centre Assets

Members asked several questions on these policies and strategies and recognised the increased burdens that have been placed on the Council as a social landlord and were supportive of the changes that were being put in place and would continue to scrutinise these crucial policies to support local residents.

The meeting held on 24 September considered the decisions of the Cabinet held on 24 July which included:

- Workforce Strategy
- Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion Action Plan
- Corporate Performance, Quarter 1 2024-25
- General Fund & MTFS Review
- First Quarter Revenue Budget Monitoring
- Annual Treasury Management Review
- Urgent Part 1 Business – SG1 Plot A – former Swingate House building works starting.

Members asked a number of questions regarding these items and were particularly interested in (i) how the Council could position itself as an employer of choice (ii) recognising that young people be identified as an important demographic that needs more attention regarding the EDI Action Plan, (iii) the ongoing work towards graffiti clearance and artistic projects on utility boxes throughout the town and (iv) staffing levels regarding collecting and providing assistance around priority debt.

Councillor Sarah Mead, Chair of the Community Select Committee advised that, at its meeting held in September the Committee had received an excellent update on the work of the Community Wardens and she advised that Members were looking forward to the new style of Community Neighbourhood meetings. The Committee's

next meeting in November would be to scrutinise the developments made by Everyone Active and she advised that all Members would be welcome to attend.

The Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee advised that the Committee had been continuing its work on the Skills Agenda in Stevenage and received a presentation from Citizens Advice and Barnardo's Children Centre on support and ease of access to the local labour market. Members also received an update concerning the Stevenage Works programme which highlighted how the Council, North Herts College and Job Centre Plus were working together to provide training and employment opportunities for young people. The Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor had also attended to give the views of young people. Visits had been carried out to North Herts College and the next meeting of the Committee would include a meeting with the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance to consider progress against the Council's ambition for net zero.

## 10 **NOTICE OF MOTIONS**

### **Winter Fuel Allowance**

The Mayor advised that he had agreed to Councillor Phil Bibby's request to withdraw Motion 1 concerning the Winter Fuel Allowance.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century New Towns**

Councillor Jackie Hollywell moved and Councillor Simon Speller seconded the following motion:

'In 1946 the post war Labour Government had a vision to address the housing crisis arising from the aftermath of the Second World War and subsequently Stevenage as Britain's first New Town was conceived.

In 2024 we are facing another housing crisis with many Stevenage residents on a the housing waiting list. The new Labour Government has looked at that inspirational post war time house building programme to launch a New Towns Commission to plan a new generation of new towns fit for the 21st Century.

We were delighted that Stevenage was chosen as the launch place for the New Towns Commission.

These towns will be "well-connected, well-designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live, as well as having the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities."

As Britain's first New Town we welcome this initiative and call on the Government to learn from our lived experience of nearly 80 years and still growing.

We ask the housing cabinet member and the Leader to write to Sir Michael Lyons to offer support for the development of the commission particularly from the learning of

the building of the UK's first new town.'

In moving the motion, Councillor Jackie Hollywell referred to Stevenage being designated the Country's first new town in 1946. She welcomed the changing diversity of the Town. She recognised that the pedestrianised town centre although innovative when first built was now being redeveloped with partners to reflect the Town's ambitions with exciting regeneration projects happening throughout Stevenage. She advised that she was proud to report that Stevenage was a leading Town for industry and life sciences including Cell and Gene Therapy companies. Many of these companies were working in partnership with schools and the college to develop the skills of the Town's young people.

The Portfolio Holder was pleased to report that the cultural offer had also been increased around Stevenage with many new artworks appearing around the Town.

Councillor Hollywell advised that her ambition was to see Stevenage continue to grow and prosper and be a safe and happy place for everyone to live, work and play and was confident that the new Government was addressing the current housing crisis by launching the New Towns Commission to plan a new generation of new towns fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Speller advised that he had come to Stevenage in the 1970's and had met and begun working with many new town pioneers who had helped build the town, with the ambition of leaving a lasting legacy. He referred to the importance of not having to depend on organisations such as the Development Corporation but that the New Towns should be based on a garden city/co-operative model.

Councillor Booth advised that the Liberal Democrat Group would be happy to support the motion and the Government's proposals for a New Towns Commission. He stressed the importance of getting the infrastructure right for the new towns and that jobs, amenities and services would need to reflect and support the numbers of homes being built.

Councillor Bibby also advised that he would be supporting the motion as a Portfolio Holder at the County Council of the County Council which had already been supporting the development of new major housing schemes in the County. He stressed that master planning was essential to the new developments.

A number of other Members shared their positive experiences of living, working and playing in Stevenage and all spoke in support of the motion. Upon being put to the vote, was unanimously carried.

### **Winter Fuel Allowance**

Councillor Andy McGuinness moved and Councillor Phill Bibby seconded the following motion concerning the Winter Fuel Allowance:

'In July, ahead of the October Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced her decision to end universal Winter Fuel Payments and restrict eligibility to only

those in receipt of Pension Credits and other benefits. This was implemented through a Statutory Instrument which came into force on 16th September 2024.

Whilst many agree that universal Winter Fuel Payments are not necessary for some, Council is deeply concerned that many pensioners on lower and middle incomes will now not receive the payments. Across England and Wales the number of people eligible for Winter Fuel Payments will fall by 10 million, from 11.4 million to only 1.5 million.

In Stevenage the number of pensioners affected by the change totals over 11,000. This means around 86% of local pensioners currently eligible for Winter Fuel Payments in Stevenage will no longer be able to claim this much needed support, at a time when fuel bills are still high. This not only risks leaving many vulnerable pensioners across the town in financial hardship but will disproportionately affect the health and well-being of our poorest older residents.

Council understand that no public consultation has taken place, despite Age UK estimating that 2 million pensioners who badly need the money to stay warm this winter will now not receive it.

Council believes that the Labour Government has set the threshold at which pensioners do not qualify for Winter Fuel Payments far too low. Only those receiving a pension of less than £218.15 a week (or £332.95 a week for couples) are eligible for pension credits. This is significantly lower than the living wage rate.

Council is also concerned by the low take up of pension credit with only 63% of those eligible nationwide receiving them – and over 880,000 pensioners not doing so. Council recognises the role we have to play to increase awareness of benefits such as Pension Credit to ensure people are aware of the support they are entitled to.

Council welcomes the recent motion passed at Labour Conference on 25<sup>th</sup> September calling on the Government to reverse this damaging policy.

Council further notes that the Energy Price Cap is due to rise by 10% in October, which combined by the removal of Winter Fuel Payments will push thousands of local pensioners into fuel poverty.

Council resolves to:

- Instruct the Chief Executive to write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the policy on linking Winter Fuel Payments to Pension Credit receipt to be immediately paused and introduce a new threshold to determine eligibility for Winter Fuel Payments. Council further requests the Chief Executive write to the local MP Kevin Bonavia asking him to give his formal support to halting the changes to the Winter Fuel Payment eligibility.
- Request all group leaders within Stevenage sign a joint letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer calling for the new Winter Fuel Payment policy to be suspended and reviewed.

- Urgently commence a significant awareness campaign to maximise uptake of pension credits. This will include use of Council noticeboards, social media, promotion in local press and also targeted letters to those who may be eligible.

In moving the Motion, Councillor McGuinness referred to the Government's cut in the winter fuel allowance for some of the most vulnerable people in the town. He advised that Age UK had reported that 2.5million pensioners across the UK would no longer be eligible to receive the money. In Stevenage over 11,000 pensioners would be affected and no longer eligible for the payments which could affect the health and wellbeing of these residents. Councillor McGuinness advised that although not all pensioners were reliant on the allowance, the uptake of pension credit was far lower than it should be and urged to Council to undertake a significant awareness raising campaign to help to address this.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Phil Bibby reminded Council that in 2010 the Government had no option but to go into a period of austerity to address the funding situation. This was followed, more recently, by the Covid pandemic and the War in Ukraine. Since then however, improvements had been made to unemployment figures, the budget deficit, interest rates and inflation levels.

The Mayor advised that the tabled amendment by the Labour Group had been withdrawn.

A number of Members responded to the Motion and spoke of the funding reduction forced on local Councils over recent years along with the reported £22billion unfunded spend commitments the new Labour Government had inherited resulting in the need to take difficult decisions and actions quickly. Members referred to the Winter Fuel Allowance Toolkit which would be rolled out to those pensioners affected alongside the Government's campaign of joint working with local authorities for all to claim any benefits they were entitled to.

Upon being put to the vote, the motion was lost.

## 11 **QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO CHAIRS/PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

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

- (A) Question from Councillor Phil Bibby re: Defence Industries in Gunnels Wood Road

Supplementary question: Does the Portfolio Holder know how the Government's position to restrict the sale of arms is having on our defence industries.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Skills and Transport advised that he would send a written response to Councillor Bibby.



(B) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness re: Town Centre Regeneration

Supplementary question: Can we communicate more to the general public around the positivity of the town regeneration and is the Council confident it can spend all the Towns Fund money by the deadline of 2026?

The Leader of the Council advised that the Regeneration Team were working hard to communicate progress being made in the delivery of the regeneration programme referencing a video which had been recently launched to the public. Further work would continue on communications particularly on social media. He also advised that the Council was on track to spend the Towns Fund money with a planned programme in place.

(C) Question from Councillor Robin Parker re: UK Shared prosperity Fund

Supplementary question: What was the availability of funds for some wards and the amounts allocated per ward under the UKSPF for Stevenage. These amounts had not been made clear to local Members.

The Portfolio Holder for Co-operative Council and Neighbourhoods advised that the UKSPF money had been allocated based upon evidenced need and that she had visited many areas personally. Local Members had been invited on these visits and meetings had been held with those members to ensure money had been allocated appropriately with final decisions having been made by the engaged ward councillors.

(D) Question from Councillor Tom Wren re: Garage Block Charges

Supplementary question: Why, when faced with large numbers of reports that garage block cleaning was not being undertaken satisfactorily, does the Council continue to charge residents for this work?

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance advised that he was aware of some of the reports and welcomed an opportunity to visit with the ward councillor and appropriate officers the garages that Cllr Wren referred to.

(E) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth re: Flooding

Supplementary question: Have any thoughts been given to a local flood reporting body which could be activated following heavy rainfall?

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance advised that many flooded areas were the responsibility of different authorities. He suggested that anyone becoming aware of a flooding problem should be reporting the issue but he would be happy to meet with Councillor Booth to consider the best way of reporting flooding in specific areas if helpful.

(F) Question from Councillor Graham Snell re: Garage Improvement Programme

Supplementary question: On behalf of Councillor Snell, Councillor McGuinness

asked if the Portfolio Holder was content with only a percentage of garage improvements undertaken and would the budget be available for the remaining Improvement Programme?

The Portfolio Holder for Environment and Performance advised that full details of the programme would be set out in a Cabinet report to be submitted in November/December.

12 **ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW OF 2023/24 INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL CODE**

The Council considered a report in respect of the Annual Treasury Management Review 2023/24, including the Prudential Code. It was noted that the report had been endorsed by both the Audit Committee and the Cabinet.

It was moved by Councillor Jeannette Thomas, and seconded by Councillor Carolina Veres, that the Recommendations in the report be approved.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED** that the 2023/24 Annual Treasury Management Review be approved.

13 **AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES**

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

**CHAIR**