

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 20 November 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, Sarah Mead, Tom Plater and Ceara Roopchand

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 7.40pm

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

The Chair opened the meeting with a minute of silence in memory of Councillor Graham Snell.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Phil Bibby, Andy McGuinness, Robin Parker, Anne Wells and Nigel Williams.

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 10 October 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 13 November 2024:

2. MINUTES - CABINET 9 OCTOBER 2024

The Committee noted the Minutes – Cabinet 9 October 2024.

3. MINUTES OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY AND SELECT COMMITTEES

The Committee noted the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny and Select Committees.

*4. LOCAL PLAN PARTIAL REVIEW AND UPDATE: REGULATION 18
CONSULTATION FEEDBACK AND REGULATION 19 CONSULTATION*

The Committee heard that the Local Plan, adopted in May 2019, outlined the Council's spatial development strategy up to 2031, including housing, employment, infrastructure, and environmental goals.

Recent updates to planning policy, including the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), had necessitated the plan's review.

The Head of Planning Policy advised the Committee that a Regulation 18 consultation had been conducted between July and August 2024, and feedback had informed the necessary amendments to the plan. The proposed Regulation 19 consultation would run from 21 November 2024 to 29 January 2025, extending over 10 weeks to allow sufficient engagement, including during the Christmas period.

The Committee heard that the review process aimed to mitigate risks such as speculative developments and policy uncertainty due to the plan's age and national changes. If no significant changes arose from the Regulation 19 consultation, the plan would proceed to submission for examination in 2025.

Responding to a question regarding the proposed NPPF publication date, the Head of Planning Policy advised that the date remained speculative. Despite this uncertainty, the Council was progressing the Local Plan Review to ensure timely implementation and compliance with national policies.

In response to a question related to delegated authority and the next steps, the Head of Planning Policy advised the Committee that, post-consultation, the council would review all feedback and make minor adjustments if needed. Significant changes would require further consultation and Cabinet review before submission to the Secretary of State. An examination and potential hearings would follow, with an anticipated adoption timeline by late 2025.

Members commented about the Local Plan's length (approx. 560 pages) and the absence of a detailed index. While the plan included an index upon adoption, suggestions were made to streamline interim documents and improve accessibility via platforms like "Commonplace," alongside distributing physical copies and response forms for public engagement.

Members commented on the allocation of 18 homes at the Drake's Drive Scout Hut site that had drawn significant community objections, particularly regarding traffic and infrastructure constraints. The Head of Planning Policy advised the Committee that the site was pre-allocated in the 2019 Local Plan and removing it would necessitate identifying alternative housing sites.

Responding to questions related to Biodiversity Net Gain, the Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised that while the regulations focussed on on-site provision, the Council would identify and manage areas for net gain without prematurely designating them in the plan. Members commented that a lack of clear designations might limit biodiversity efforts.

Members asked questions regarding the level of engagement for climate change elements of the Local Plan. In response, the Committee heard that climate change

policies attracted strong engagement, particularly from youth. Feedback had informed carbon efficiency measures and other environmental initiatives. The Council continued to prioritise outreach through multiple platforms to engage as many residents as possible in understanding and shaping the Local Plan.

The Committee noted the update on the Local Plan Review.

5. SECOND QUARTER REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2024/25 (INCLUDING SECOND QUARTER CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2024/25)

The Assistant Director (Finance) advised the Committee that the Cabinet had approved updates to the working budgets for both the General Fund and HRA revenue accounts. The Committee heard that Cabinet also approved the updated Capital programme and approved the rephrasing of capital works for both the General Fund and HRA into future years.

Two new projects had been introduced, funded through external contributions and grants and approval had been given for a General Fund capital virement for the Leisure Scheme.

The Committee noted the Second Quarter Revenue Budget Monitoring 2024/25 (Including Second Quarter Capital Budget Monitoring 2024/25).

6. MID YEAR TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW 2024/25

The Assistant Director (Finance) advised the Committee that the report covered the performance of the Treasury Management for the first 6 months of the year. The Cabinet had reviewed and noted the recommendations that had come from the Audit Committee who had the responsibility for scrutinising the report. The Cabinet had recommended the report onto Council for formal approval.

The Committee noted the Mid-Year Treasury Management Review 2024/25

7. COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME REVIEW 2025/26

The Chief Financial Officer informed the Committee that the existing scheme would be retained for 2025/26 financial year due to the required length of consultation and preparation. The only update would be annual uprating. A new scheme was planned for 2026/27, with a timeline and process outlined in the report.

The Committee heard that the revised scheme would include a banded system to simplify administration, particularly for Universal Credit claimants whose circumstances frequently changed. This aimed to avoid repeated rebilling due to minor changes in income.

Addressing the consultation, the Chief Financial Officer advised the Committee that it was necessary to consult prior to any changes to the scheme and that it had an estimated cost of £33,000. The Chief Financial Officer had written to the Hertfordshire Constabulary and Hertfordshire County Council, requesting contributions to cover their proportional benefit from council tax but noted that they

were not obligated to contribute.

The Chief Financial Officer informed the Committee that findings from the consultation process and the proposed scheme for 2026/27 would be brought back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for further review and policy discussion.

Responding to a Member question regarding the success rate of obtaining contributions from the Hertfordshire Constabulary and Hertfordshire County Council, the Chief Financial Officer advised that, since the scheme's inception, there had been no changes requiring such contributions.

The Committee noted the Council Tax Support Scheme Review 2025/26.

8. HRA MTFS REVIEW

The Chief Financial Officer advised the Committee that the Cabinet had approved a set of measures detailed in the report that included immediate measures that the Council needed to take to stabilise finances for 2025/26.

The Committee heard that the Cabinet had approved the introduction of flexible rents for new tenancies which would result in a gradual increase in rental income over time.

The Chief Financial Officer informed the Committee that the report also included a set of measures for future years that included a review of the sheltered schemes and associated costs.

The Chief Financial Officer concluded that the financial challenges faced by The Council's HRA were not unique and that many HRA's across the country were dealing with similar issues.

Members commented on the reduced budget for aids and adaptations and the potential risk of failing to meet policy requirements if the budget was depleted.

In response, Officers clarified that prioritisation stemmed from statutory obligations, such as building safety, fire safety, and decent homes standards, which must take precedence under regulatory requirements.

Historically, the council had been more flexible in granting adaptations. However, with tighter budgets, this flexibility was no longer feasible. Members requested clear communication with tenants about changes in the application of the policy to manage expectations and avoid confusion.

The Committee were advised that stock condition surveys were being conducted to better match existing properties with tenant needs, optimising resource use.

Officers assured Members that the situation would be closely monitored, with the possibility of revisiting the budget allocation if necessary. However, this would require identifying other areas to reduce spending, which posed its own challenges.

The Committee noted the HRA MTFS Review

9. BALANCING THE BUDGET OPTIONS 2025/26

The Chief Financial Officer informed the Committee that the savings target for the General Fund 2025/26 was £1,285,000 with a gap of £201,000 still to be addressed. Members were advised that this figure might fluctuate based on an upcoming financial settlement as, based on recent announcements from Central Government, the potential council tax cap of 5% (including the social care element) could allow an increase from 1.99% to 2.99%, potentially contributing an additional £60,000 towards the gap.

The Committee heard that the increase in National Insurance had affected both the General Fund and HRA budgets.

The Chief Financial Officer explained the decision to delay reporting further updates to the budget until January 2025, due to the timing of the finance settlement. This would allow for better-informed decisions based on whether the settlement alleviated or exacerbated the current shortfall.

The Committee noted the Balancing the Budget Options 2025/26.

4 WORK PROGRAMME ITEM - CUSTOMER SERVICE CENTRE RELOCATION

The Committee received a presentation from the Head of Customer and Digital Services on the Customer Service Centre Relocation. The presentation highlighted the context for the changes, the adjustments made, and the outcomes observed so far.

The Committee heard that pre-pandemic the Customer Service Centre, located near the HSBC bank, was a large walk-in facility handling high volumes (up to 200 visitors daily). However, face-to-face interactions decreased significantly due to the pandemic, as services shifted online and via telephone. Subsequently, the original location was underutilised for visitors, while staff areas lacked adequate capacity. Furthermore, the isolated nature of the Centre hindered collaboration between customer services and other teams, such as repairs and housing officers. The main reception at Daneshill House, originally designed for corporate visitors, had seen declining use due to increased video conferencing and remote working.

The Head of Customer and Digital Services advised the Committee that in late 2022, customer services and telephony teams were relocated to the main reception area, with repairs and housing teams joining them in the adjacent atrium. This fostered better collaboration and optimised space usage. New measures, such as CCTV, alarmed meeting rooms, and combined security training for staff, were implemented to ensure safety in the relocated setup. In the main reception area, the permanent desk layout was refined to avoid congestion, and additional seating was added to improve the customer experience.

The Committee were informed that the new centre included self-service computers and a document scanning station to streamline processes like benefit applications

and document submissions. Unused television screens in reception were being repurposed to advertise council services, such as garage rentals. Enhanced meeting rooms accommodated specialist officer consultations, families, and individuals with accessibility needs.

The Head of Customer and Digital Services advised the Committee that customer service appointments now represented 10% of pre-pandemic levels, as online and remote processes had replaced in-person visits. However, housing-related services, lettings, and benefits remained significant reasons for face-to-face interactions. Around 30 unplanned visitors were seen daily, with common reasons including clarifications on council correspondence or non-council enquiries (e.g., registrars or magistrates court). Analysis of meeting room usage revealed unexpected peaks on Thursdays, prompting a review of how appointments were scheduled to better accommodate demand.

Members commented on the new layout and suggested the addition of some plants and more prominent signage to help orient visitors upon arrival.

Responding to a question regarding the usage of self-service equipment, the Head of Customer and Digital Services advised Members that usage of self-service options, such as scanners and public computers, remained low. Possible reasons included customers already having access to better tools at home and some visitors preferring face-to-face interaction. Approximately 10 users per week used the self-service scanner, demonstrating some utility but also room for growth.

Members suggested the incorporation of multilingual signage and translation services for non-English speakers. The Head of Customer and Digital Services acknowledged that increased use of telephone translation services indicated a growing demand for such resources.

The Committee noted the presentation on the Customer Service Centre Relocation.

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

There were no Urgent Part I Decisions authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

6 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

7 **EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

It was **RESOLVED** that:-

1. That under Section 100(A) 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 Members consider the reasons for the following reports being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

8 **PART II MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10 October 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

9 **PART II DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee considered the following Part II Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 13 November 2024:

11. PART II DECISIONS OF THE CABINET

The Committee noted the Part II Decisions of the Cabinet.

12. APPROVAL OF PROCUREMENT

The Committee received a short presentation from the Assistant Director (Building Safety and Housing Property Services).

The Committee noted the Approval of Procurement.

13. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There had been no Urgent Part II Business at Cabinet.

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

There were no Urgent Part II Decisions authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

11 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR