

**COUNCIL
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 18 December 2024

Time: 7.00pm

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, Kamal Choudhury, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Coleen Houlihan, Mason Humberstone, Lin Martin-Haugh, Conor McGrath, Andy McGuinness, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Anne Wells, Nigel Williams and Jade Woods

Start / End Time: Start Time: 7.00pm
End Time: 9.35pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for Absence were received on behalf of Councillors Sarah Mead, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Loraine Rossatti, Tom Wren and Deputy Youth Mayor Frankie Duncan.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 16 October 2024, the Special Council Meeting on 16 October 2024 and the Special Council Meeting on 2 December 2024 be approved as correct records 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 16 October which had been circulated at the meeting and he provided a verbal report on a number of highlights including:

- The Paskong Pinoy Stevenage Annual Christmas gathering;
- Sakhi Milap Hertfordshire Diwali Party Celebration;
- Stevenage Men's Choir and the Christ the King Singers Concert – the Mayor informed Council that the Choir were keen to recruit new members;

- Upcoming events including 8 February – a film showing Stevenage as it was in 1967; a Ceilidh Dance on 1 March and the Arts Guild Musical Evening on 31 March and the Interfaith Event on 9 March;
- The Mayor also advised that he would be running the London Marathon in April on behalf of his charities.

At this juncture the Mayor invited the Youth Mayor to give a brief update on her activities alongside the Deputy Youth Mayor since taking up the role in May 2024. These included:

- The D-Day Beacon Lighting which had honoured the sacrifices made by veterans;
- Stevenage Day;
- Tri-partite Town Twinning hosted by Stevenage this year;
- A number of events targeted at the progression and development of STEM careers and experiences in Stevenage including a visit to Airbus;
- Firework Night at Fairlands Valley Park;
- Remembrance Sunday.

4 **COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS**

Council received a presentation from Jill Borchers, Tina Walker and Teun van Leeuwen from Cycling UK Stevenage following a resident survey they had undertaken over the summer of 2024 regarding people's views on cycling in Stevenage.

Council was informed that the results of the survey gave insight into the journeys that people cycled and wheeled, how they used the cycling infrastructure in Stevenage, and how they saw the future of cycling and wheeling in the town. Cycling UK advised that the presentation would help the Council with vital resident insight in support of its regeneration plans, potentially encouraging a modal shift in line with health, economic and climate change strategies, and ensuring Stevenage remained an inclusive and accessible place to live, work and visit.

In response to a number of comments and questions, the following answers were given:

- The Council would be resuming a regular contact with Officers and Members through liaison meetings with Cycling UK Stevenage;
- In the presentation the statistics relating to the difference between utility and leisure cycling had been very useful;
- In relation to electric bikes, the presenters advised that their view was that e-bikes enabled users to cycle and the positive usage statistics for the new Beryl Bike scheme had been encouraging although the parking bays for the bikes should be continually monitored;
- Maintenance of the cycle paths was a County Council responsibility. Regular meetings were held with HCC and a combined SBC and HCC group was being considered to look at all aspects of encouraging people to cycle;
- Tonight's presentation would be shared with all SBC and HCC Members following the meeting. Meetings with Ward Councillors could be arranged to look at issues around individual wards particularly where bikes were parked in front

gardens which could reflect a lack of safe and secure parking for bikes in that area;

- The Council's Stevenage Sustainable Travel Town ambitions were key;
- In relation to e-scooters, Cycling UK advised that although they were moving people away from car usage, they were currently. Safe and legal use of micro mobility should be encouraged where appropriate;
- In response to concerns regarding cycling on pavements it was recognised that although the practise was illegal, if the roads were unsafe, the Police would take no action if they were riding sensibly and safely.

The Mayor thanked Jill, Teun and Tina for their presentation and thanked Members for their comments and questions and wished the group well in their ongoing activities to promote and improve cycling facilities across the Town.

5 PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

There were no petitions or deputations.

6 QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL

The Council noted that a response to the question from the Youth Mayor regarding STEM Skills had been published in the Supplementary Agenda for the meeting.

The Youth Mayor asked the following supplementary question: What work was being done by the Council in relation to support for areas other than STEM such as the creative industry or legal sector. The Leader of the Council responded that work was ongoing with Herts Leaders to further develop the creative sector, and what could be done to encourage young people to become involved in those areas. He advised that a film offer was also being developed in Stevenage in collaboration with the College and Schools.

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: Does the Leader of the Council agree that the Government's latest proposals on devolution and the deadline of 10 January 2025 for responses to be sent in response to the consultation regarding local government reorganisation is grossly undemocratic and would destroy the link between elected local councillors and the people they serve. It also paved the way for the end of Stevenage Borough and similar district councils.

The Leader of the Council replied that current speculation on the Government's White Paper on Devolution had resulted in many meetings and email exchanges being held this week. The priority for the Leader was to make Stevenage Even Better, continue with the Regeneration of the Town, building Council homes, the creation of jobs and developing the Town's Leisure and Cultural Offer. Working to

ensure the best interests and opportunities of the Town and its residents. The view of the Leader of Hertfordshire Council that a single Unitary Council should be established was not the view of other authorities across the County and an urgent meeting of all Hertfordshire Leaders was being convened where the issue would be discussed.

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

- Health and Safety Courses;
- Follow the Star;
- Pioneering Young STEM Futures (PYSF);
- Social Inclusion Partnership;
- Household Support Fund;
- Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor;
- Mission 44;
- Leisure and Sports Centre;
- Underpass Competition;
- Progress at Independent Living Scheme;
- Shephall View Development Site;
- Environmental Strategies; and
- Regeneration.

9 **UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS**

Councillor Lin Martin-Haugh, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee advised that at its recent meetings, the Committee had considered the following issues:

- The decisions of the Cabinet including the Local Plan, Climate Change, Budget Monitoring, Performance Monitoring, Council Tax Support Scheme and Fees and Charges;
- ICT Provision and Cyber Security;
- Relocation of the Customer Service Centre; and
- SBC Website.

In the absence of the Chair, Councillor Rob Broom, Chair of the Environment and Economy Select Committee gave an update on the work of the Community Select Committee including consideration of:

- A presentation from Everyone Active;
- An update on Damp and Mould reporting;
- Housing Asset Management;
- Anti-Social Behaviour Policy; and
- An item related to Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion to be considered in the New Year.

The Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee advised that the Committee had been continuing its work on:

- Climate Strategy focusing on the reduction of carbon emissions;
- Climate Change mitigation and action;
- Management of Green Spaces and bio-diversity; and
- The Skills agenda.

10 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Labour Government's Autumn Budget

Councillor Ceara Roopchand moved and Councillor Jade Woods seconded the following motion:

On Wednesday 30th October, Chancellor of the Exchequer Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP delivered a Labour Government Budget for the first time in 14 years. With a strong mandate from the electorate in July, including 17,698 voters in Stevenage, the Chancellor vowed to restore stability to our economy and to begin a decade of national renewal, to fix the foundations and deliver change through responsible leadership in the national interest.

Council notes the significance of having the first female Chancellor in history deliver the budget, and what that signifies to young women and girls across the UK about unlocking opportunities and aspirations.

Council believes this is the first budget in 14 years to truly back the ambitions of Stevenage, from supporting residents with the cost of living to building affordable homes to supporting local industry to investing in key services such as health, education and transport.

The budget restored economic stability, plugging the devastating £22 billion black hole left behind by successive previous administrations whilst not raising a single tax on workers pay packets. Council notes this strong approach to fiscal responsibility is projected to lead to consistently low inflation and high growth which we will all benefit from.

Council supports the increase in the minimum wage that puts an extra £1,400 into the pockets of the lowest paid full-time workers, the freezing of fuel duty, £500 million investment into fixing potholes, £5 billion allocated to build new affordable homes, the largest increase in the carers allowance since its inception and the commitment to the triple lock on pensions which will lead to a £470 increase next year.

Council recognises that the £1.3 billion invested into local government marks a clear turning point from an era of austerity where councils will finally be given the funds needed to properly run services and support communities.

Council endorses the £22.6 billion increase to the healthcare budget, £6.7 billion increase to the education budget, £1 billion uplift for SEND provision and £650 million allocation for public transport as decisions that demonstrate the

Government's commitment to deliver on its promises to fix the foundations of our broken public services.

Lastly, Council celebrates the wide ranging support the budget gave to sectors that are prominent in Stevenage, namely £2.9 billion more for the defence sector, £1 billion for the aerospace industry, £2 billion for the automotive industry, £520 million for the life sciences sector and £6.1 billion for the medical sector.

Overall, this was a budget that comprehensively delivered for working people whilst starting to repair 14 years of economic ruin.

Council resolves to:

Endorse the Chancellor's Autumn Budget and recognise it as a critical step toward economic recovery, growth, stronger services and national prosperity for all.

In moving the motion, Councillor Roopchand advised that the Government's Budget Statement had signalled a clear commitment to the long term prosperity of the nation and addressed the needs of the local community. She stated that the budget focussed on empowering local government and there would be a substantial increase in funding to ensure Councils could continue to meet the growing demand for services particularly in key areas such as children's services and homelessness prevention. Cllr Roopchand referred to the additional funding particularly relevant for Stevenage including for the defence sector, the aerospace industry and the life sciences sector. She advised that the budget would help to create a fairer society and put local government at the heart of the vision for the future.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Woods stated that the budget was a welcome departure from the years of austerity which could not be sustained by local authorities. She referred in particular to the additional funding going to the NHS. She also welcomed the changes to the Right to Buy regime.

Councillor Phil Bibby advised that although he welcomed parts of the budget, he was of the view that the statement did not make economic sense. He stated that the Labour Government had inherited the fastest growing economy in the G7, with mortgage interest rates falling and inflation back to the Bank of England target.

Councillor Booth, Leader of the Opposition stated that although many things within the Budget were welcomed, a number of important Groups had been affected negatively including Pensioners, employers, women with pensions and farmers.

A number of Members responded to the Motion with the following comments:

- Economic growth would be less under this Government than the previous Government;
- The budget delivered was the first for 14 years that backed the ambitions of the Town and the Council;
- The budget would help home ownership; the fuel duty had been frozen; triple lock on pensions was guaranteed and carers would be supported;

- The budget from a strong fiscally responsible Government addressed the problems of budgets in the public sector by providing an injection of funding at an essential time.

Upon being put to the vote, the Motion was carried.

Labour Government's Autumn Budget

Councillor Phil Bibby moved the following Motion:

The Council notes that the labour Government inherited the fastest growing economy in the G7, with mortgage interest rates falling and inflation back to the Bank of England target, after the impact of the COVID pandemic and the energy price crises because of the war in Ukraine.

The independent Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) forecasts that growth will now be lower, inflation will rise and mortgage interest rates will increase as a result of the Chancellor's budget on 30 October.

The OBR also forecasts that the policies in the budget directly:

- Increase tax take to an historic high at 38 per cent of GDP by 2029/30;
- Lower medium-term GDP growth to 1.5 per cent;
- Push up CPI inflation, projected to rise to 2.6 per cent by 2025;
- Increase borrowing by £19.6 bn this year and by £32.3 bn over the next 5 years;
- Reduce real household disposable income by 2029;
- Raise the bank rate and 5 year gilt yield higher than forecast; and
- Cut wages by £7.5 bn as a result of a hike in employers' national insurance.

The council rejects the Chancellor's tax on jobs, which will hit businesses workers in Stevenage. According to the OBR, "*policy changes leave nominal and real earnings growth lower over the remainder of the forecast, as employers pass on the national insurance contribution rise.*" The OBR further notes, "*in 2025/26 firms will pass on 60 per cent of the higher costs to workers and consumers, via lower wages and higher prices.*"

Council believes this budget is a tax on working people.

The Motion was not seconded and therefore not debated.

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

The Council received a question from Councillor Phil Bibby regarding the Multi Storey Car Park in St George's Way. The response to the question had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

Supplementary Question: has any thought been given to what would be the cost of sprinklers and what sort of timescale where we looking at?

The Portfolio Holder for Economy and Transport advised that the Council was committed to reviewing options for fire safety and the detail would be shared once the review had been completed.

12 **APPOINTMENT OF MONITORING OFFICER**

The Council considered a report in respect of the Appointment of Monitoring Officer in accordance with S5 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

The Chief Executive advised that the Council's current Monitoring Officer Simon Pugh would be retiring at the end of January 2025 and the report was for the Council to agree to the appointment of Victoria Wilders to the post with effect from 6 January 2025.

Victoria had been appointed as part of the Herts County Council and Stevenage Borough Council shared legal service as Assistant Chief Legal Officer with Lead responsibility for Stevenage and she was now eligible for appointment as the Council's Monitoring Officer.

If agreed, there would be a handover period ending on 31 January during which time Simon Pugh would act as Deputy Monitoring Officer.

The Chief Executive then, on behalf of the Council's Officer team and Members, thanked Simon for his work over the past 2 years. The Chief Executive stated that he was hugely grateful for all that he had done.

It was moved by Councillor Richard Henry, and seconded by Councillor Jeannette Thomas, and **RESOLVED** that Victoria Wilders be appointed as the Council's Monitoring Officer with effect from 6 January.

13 **MID-YEAR TREASURY MANAGEMENT REVIEW AND PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS 2024/25**

The Council considered a report in respect of the Mid Year Treasury Management Review and Prudential Indicators 2024/25. 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 Mid Year Treasury Management Review and Prudential Indicators 2024/25 be approved.

14 **AUDIT COMMITTEE MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 6 November 2024 were received.

15 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

It was **RESOLVED**:

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 involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1 to 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, as amended by SI 2006 No. 88.
2. That having considered the reasons for the following item being in Part II, it be determined that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

16 **REMUNERATION OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

The Council considered a Part II report in respect of the Remuneration of the Chief Executive.

The Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive left the Chamber during consideration of the item.

It was clarified that the new salary would come into effect following the appointment of the new Chief Executive.

Following further debate and upon being put to the vote it was **RESOLVED** that, the recommendation for the Appointments Committee proposing a revised pay scale for the recruitment of a new Chief Executive, be approved.

CHAIR