

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 17 December 2024

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Philip Bibby CC, Myla Arceno, Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Lynda Guy, Sarah Mead, Ceara Roopchand and Nigel Williams

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.27pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 20 November 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the following inclusion:

Members requested that Cabinet report page numbers be included on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agendas.

3 PART I DECISIONS OF THE CABINET

The Committee considered the following Part I Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 11 December 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. Corporate Performance – Quarter 2 2024/25

The Strategic Director (RP) advised the Committee that the Cabinet had received a presentation from the Chief Executive outlining corporate performance for Quarter 2. The update covered the performance suite and progress against the Council's corporate plan. Key areas of focus included improving tenant satisfaction, which will be supported by actions following the recent housing inspection.

The Cabinet discussed:

- Ensuring accessibility of parks, play areas, and open spaces for all groups, particularly adults with learning disabilities.
- Reviewing the framing of automated debt messaging to align with the Council's values.
- Positive feedback on the Ellis Avenue development, noting its alignment with the surrounding area.
- Acknowledgement of extensive resident consultation and engagement activity, which was well-received.

The Committee heard that the Cabinet approved all four recommendations outlined in the report.

A query was raised regarding resident feedback on developments. It was clarified that responses were typically mixed but informed design decisions, particularly around the Oval redevelopment, with a planning application anticipated for 2025/26.

At this juncture, the Chair noted difficulties with accessing visual elements of Cabinet presentations via YouTube. It was suggested that the presentation materials, already available on the Council's website, be made more accessible to address this issue.

The Committee noted the Corporate Performance – Quarter 2 2024/25.

5. Council Tax Base 2025/26

The Assistant Director (Finance) advised the Committee that the Cabinet considered a report on the council tax base for 2025/26, which was calculated at £28,571.8 Band D equivalent properties. This figure included an allowance for a 98% collection rate. The Cabinet approved the recommendations in the report and the council tax base would be included in the draft 2025/26 report, which was scheduled to be presented to Cabinet in January 2025.

The Committee noted the Council Tax Base 2025/26.

6. Housing Revenue Account (HRA) – Draft Budget and Rent Setting 2025/26

The Chief Financial Officer advised the Committee that the draft HRA budget for 2025/26 reflected pressures highlighted in the HRA Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) presented in November 2024.

The Committee heard that the average rent increase for 2025/26 was set at 2.7%, significantly lower than the 7.7% increase in 2024/25, due to a lower Consumer Price Index figure (1.7% in September 2024).

The Chief Financial Officer added that further budget pressures included potential increases in national insurance (pending confirmation from the finance settlement)

and rising costs related to responsive repairs and disrepair demands. These would be incorporated into the final budget, which would be presented to the January 2025 Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

A question was raised regarding improved rent collection rates. It was noted that rent collection had increased but remained a challenge, particularly as more tenants transitioned from housing benefit to Universal Credit.

Approximately 90% of tenants in arrears were on Universal Credit, presenting challenges as Universal Credit payments were made directly to tenants, unlike housing benefit, which was passported to the HRA.

The Chief Financial Officer informed the Committee that the Council was actively managing this issue through an income recovery plan, focusing on tenant support, repayment plans, and avoiding repossession proceedings where possible.

7. Housing Inspection Outcome

The Strategic Director (RP) advised the Committee that the Council underwent a housing inspection between July and October 2024, with the regulatory judgement issued on 27th November 2024. The Council received a C2 grading. The Cabinet was informed of the outcome and the need to meet with the regulator in January 2025 to agree on a Provider Improvement Plan (PIP).

Providing context for the grading, the Strategic Director (RP) advised that Stevenage was one of nine stock-owning authorities to receive a C2 rating, with the majority of other authorities graded at C3 or C4. Only one authority, Barnsley, achieved a C1 rating. They added that the Council was on track to achieve a higher grading in future, with improvement plans already in progress.

The Committee heard that a Provider Improvement Plan would address identified weaknesses, focusing on tenant engagement, property maintenance, and compliance. New strategies for tenant participation were approved in July 2024, with updated scrutiny and engagement frameworks now in place. Complaint-handling processes had been strengthened with fortnightly clinics to identify and address key drivers, such as roofing backlogs, and to monitor cases reviewed by the Housing Ombudsman or Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

The Committee were informed that rising labour and material costs, alongside increased demand for specialist works such as damp and mould remediation, were contributing to financial pressures within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

The Cabinet had approved all five recommendations in the report.

8. Repairs and Maintenance Policy – Approval

The Assistant Director (Building Safety and Housing Property Services) informed the Committee that the report presented to Cabinet sought approval for the final version

of the Responsive Repairs and Maintenance Policy, following a consultation process involving tenants and leaseholders.

The Committee heard that a pre-consultation draft of the policy had been reviewed by Cabinet earlier in the year. The consultation received 343 responses, and feedback was incorporated as far as possible into the final version of the policy.

Changes to the policy, reflecting consultation feedback, were outlined in the report. Those amendments aimed to address the concerns and suggestions raised during the consultation process.

Cabinet approved the final policy, along with the recommendations set out in the report.

A Member commented on clarity of the consultation process, specifically whether it included feedback on the proposed responsibilities outlined in the policy or if it was limited to repair satisfaction surveys. In response, it was clarified that a broad consultation was conducted due to the absence of new tenant engagement mechanisms. This included sending out letters and quick guides to all tenants and leaseholders, holding in-person sessions (albeit with limited attendance), and conducting an online survey.

The consultation garnered 343 responses, with general agreement that responsibilities were clearly outlined. Some feedback included objections to charges for missed appointments and the clarification of specific responsibilities, such as drain blockages and infestations. Suggestions were made to ensure future reports transparently documented consultation outcomes, as tenants expected to see evidence of their participation.

Members raised queries about how the new policy, set to take effect on 1st January, would be communicated. Concerns included whether it would be made available in advance and whether the council would cater to tenants without digital access. It was confirmed that while the policy formalised existing practices, there were plans to publicise it via the council's website and a hard-copy newsletter. Efforts will be made to communicate notable changes, such as the new fencing policy, to tenants.

Members highlighted the need for a simplified version of the policy to increase accessibility for tenants, particularly those with complex needs, such as learning difficulties, illiteracy, or other vulnerabilities. Suggestions included creating a brief summary of responsibilities in a printed format and expanding the use of SMS notifications for appointment reminders, drawing on examples from NHS practices.

Members emphasised the importance of identifying and supporting vulnerable tenants, including those with physical disabilities, mental health issues, or financial difficulties. It was noted that while the Council held significant tenant data, there was room for improvement in using this information to tailor services and provide reasonable adjustments. Testimonies were shared, highlighting positive outcomes when housing officers were made aware of tenant vulnerabilities, underlining the need for tenants to feel encouraged to disclose their support requirements.

Members concluded the discussion reiterating the importance of effective tenant engagement and clear communication. The discussion underscored the need to balance cost considerations with accessibility and transparency while ensuring tenants are informed of their responsibilities and council services.

The Committee noted the decision of the Cabinet to approve the Repairs and Maintenance Policy.

9. Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy

The Strategic Director (RP) advised the Committee that the Council was required to produce a homelessness and rough sleeper strategy every five years. The new strategy covered the period 2025–2030 and included an associated action plan, which would be reviewed annually to ensure it remained current and effective. The strategy and action plan must be approved and published on the Council's website by the end of December 2024, as agreed with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The Committee heard that consultation for the strategy included input from the Community Select Committee. Based on feedback, improvements to the accessibility and clarity of information on the Council's website were implemented. A new online tool now tailored advice based on users' needs, offering general guidance before direct engagement with services.

The Strategic Director (RP) informed the Committee that the Council engaged with rough sleepers through its dedicated Rough Sleeper Team, often in collaboration with other agencies such as the police, adult social care, and voluntary organisations. For rough sleepers from outside the area, the Council coordinated with their originating local authority to ensure they received appropriate support. Challenges included complex needs such as mental health issues, which could hinder engagement and uptake of housing offers.

The five recommendations were approved by Cabinet, including delegating authority to the Strategic Director (RP), in consultation with the Portfolio Holder (Housing), to make final amendments before publication.

Members commended the Rough Sleeper Team for their hard work and dedication in addressing homelessness and complex cases within Stevenage. Acknowledgement was made of the difficulty in resolving entrenched rough sleeping cases, particularly for individuals with mental health challenges.

The Committee noted the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part I Decisions of the Cabinet be noted.

4 **STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL - WEBSITE**

The Head of Customer and Digital Services provided an update on the Council's website, touching on its evolution over the last 30 years. Originally serving as a

basic directory, the website had grown into a significant resource, now containing over 11 million words and more than 1,000 pages. It served a wide range of purposes, including providing information, advice, and guidance about Council services, promoting key services and events, and ensuring transparency through governance and regulatory information.

A major point highlighted was the behaviour of website visitors. Most users accessed the site via Google, particularly searching for topics like bin collections, housing, council tax, and waste management. Housing-related content was the most frequently visited, followed by payment options and news events. Notably, two-thirds of visitors use mobile phones, primarily iPhones, and the website must be optimised for small screen devices, especially for short, transactional tasks like reporting missed bins.

The Head of Customer and Digital Services also addressed the ongoing efforts to simplify the website's content for better accessibility. The team aimed for a reading age of nine, though the average reading age on the site is currently 12.4 years. There was ongoing work to simplify and reclassify complex information, such as Council housing or planning services, making it easier for the public to navigate.

Accessibility remained a core focus, with particular attention to ensuring the site works for users with disabilities, including those who rely on screen readers. The team used various tools, such as Google and Microsoft analytics, to monitor user behaviour and identify areas for improvement, including search functionality and the presentation of events and services.

Looking ahead, The Head of Customer and Digital Services mentioned potential improvements in areas such as search functionality, where a more conversational query system (e.g., "I'm in council tax debt, what should I do?") could enhance user experience. The Council also aimed to update photos and videos, ensure relevant content was displayed, and improve the way events were presented to engage visitors more effectively.

In conclusion, the website was seen as a key tool for delivering services and information to the public, and the Council was focused on making it more user-friendly, accessible, and responsive to the needs of its visitors.

The Chair thanked the Head of Customer and Digital Services for their presentation and invited the Committee to ask questions.

A Member raised questions about the placement of the "Find Your Refuge," "Recycling Dates," and "Local Councillors" sections in the same area of the website. It was noted that this layout might confuse users into thinking the Councillors are involved in these services directly, leading them to contact Councillors for issues like missed bin collections. The Head of Customer and Digital Services responded, acknowledging the feedback and indicating that such changes could be considered to improve clarity and user navigation.

A Member commented about the user experience on different devices. They highlighted the 18-second average time visitors spend on a page and asked about

the frequency of testing pages on different devices, networks, and iOS/Android versions. The Head of Customer and Digital Services explained that while there was automated performance testing, it was limited, and some issues may be addressed on a case-by-case basis. He acknowledged the challenges with mobile payment functionality, noting that specific issues, like difficulties with council tax payments via mobile, could be linked to network providers. The Member confirmed that they had experienced issues with multiple networks but not on a laptop.

Another query focused on whether the website offered a dark mode feature, and if not, whether it could be considered for future updates to improve accessibility. The Head of Customer and Digital Services confirmed that dark mode was not currently available but agreed that it could be considered in future accessibility improvements.

A Member noted the significant difference between the usage of mobile devices for general browsing (87%) and the lower percentage (49%) for benefit claims. The Head of Customer and Digital Services suggested that benefit claims might be more complex, requiring users to sit down at a desk and fill out forms, which could explain the preference for other devices like laptops or desktops. He acknowledged that this insight could guide future improvements to make the claims process more suitable for mobile users, possibly by simplifying or adjusting the form for smaller devices.

A Member asked a question concerning the fault reporting system on the website, specifically whether users can track the progress of reported issues. The Head of Customer and Digital Services explained that it varied by service, but for services like environmental nuisance or park maintenance, users received a receipt with a reference number. Officers would then update the progress of the issue, and those updates were communicated back to the user. However, the effectiveness of this system depended on the Officers updating their own IT systems, and some delays might occur in the process.

A question was raised about improving the website's search function, which many users found ineffective, leading them to rely on Google instead. A suggestion was made to explore using Google's search functionality on the Council website for a small fee. The Head of Customer and Digital Services responded that this was technically possible and noted that some councils did use Google's search capabilities. However, he also mentioned the potential for more advanced AI-based technologies to offer more personalised and summarised answers, although caution was needed with the marketing of such technologies.

A Member suggested that the website had too many steps to complete a payment, which could be simplified. The Head of Customer and Digital Services acknowledged this issue, noting that saving card details could streamline the process, but the cost of this feature was currently high. He also agreed that some elements, like accessing balance information, could contribute to the complexity. A Member also raised an issue with the "rapid" page, which contained many forms that are not relevant to online payments, and the Head of Customer and Digital Services promised to investigate the issue.

A Member suggested changing the wording of the "Report a Repair" button to "Request a Repair," as the former could imply the repair has already occurred. The

Head of Customer and Digital Services acknowledged this and agreed it would be a useful change.

The idea of having a more curated section of the website for community engagement was raised. Members suggested that, while this would involve some cost, it would help improve communication and foster a more cooperative image for the council. The Head of Customer and Digital Services agreed with this point, indicating that more could be done in this area.

It was **RESOLVED** that the presentation from the Head of Customer and Digital Services be noted.

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 Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 20 November 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

9 **PART II DECISIONS OF THE CABINET**

The Committee consider the following Part II Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 11 December 2024:

12. HOUSING BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS AND SUNDRY DEBT WRITE OFF GREATER THAN £10,000

The Committee received a report from the Assistant Director (Finance)

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II Decisions of the Cabinet be noted.

10 **STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL - WEBSITE**

It was **RESOLVED** that the presentation from the Head of Customer and Digital Services be noted.

11 **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.

12 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR