

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 18 March 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Lin Martin-Haugh (Chair), Andy McGuinness (Vice Chair), Myla Arceno, Stephen Booth, Rob Broom, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Lynda Guy, Tom Plater, Nigel Williams, Anne Wells.

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm

Time: End Time: 6.58pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ceara Roopchand and Sarah Mead.

Councillor Tom Plater declared that within his current occupation he worked for the MP of Stevenage, Kevin Bonavia.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 18 February 2025 be agreed 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 12 March 2025:

4. CORPORATE CO-OPERATIVE PROCUREMENT STRATEGY REVIEW

The Corporate Procurement Manager introduced the report, which supported the delivery of the Making Stevenage Even Better plan and addressed the legal changes from the Procurement Act 2023. The Committee was informed that Cabinet had agreed the recommendations set out in the report.

In response to a question regarding the reason for the delegated authority, it was advised that due to the tight timescales, the strategy needed to be approved by Cabinet in March 2025.

A member sought clarification on whether the strategy would impact the procurement of agency worker contracts. It was clarified that the strategy set out how the Council procured services, with a focus on social value, insourcing and

cooperative principles within the legal framework.

A further question was raised about the climate policies and emission considerations in the Council's supplier contracts. Officers explained that pre-market engagement and selection questionnaires allowed the council to assess supplier sustainability and incorporated social value into the procurement process. The council would also seek to embed these priorities throughout the contract lifecycle.

5.. CONFIRMATION OF AMENDMENT TO TWO ARTICLE 4 DIRECTIONS TO REQUIRE CHANGES OF USE FROM CLASS E (G) (I) (OFFICES) AND CLASS (E) (G) (III) (LIGHT INDUSTRIAL) TO CLASS C3 (RESIDENTIAL) TO OBTAIN PLANNING PERMISSION

The Assistant Director for Planning and Regulatory Services introduced the report, which ensured that from January 2026, planning permission would be required for changes from light industrial/office use to residential plans. Cabinet had agreed the recommendations set out in the report.

A member requested clarification if this item was driving further training for elected members of the Planning and Development Committee. It was noted that it was a separate matter, but further details on the required training were to be provided, and National Planning Policy updates were expected to be brought to cabinet in June for further clarification.

A question was raised about whether any specific buildings had been identified in relation to the report. The Assistant Director for Planning and Regulatory Services explained that the published Article 4 Directions included a map showing the specific protected buildings across the town.

6. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE QUARTER 3 2024/25

The Strategic Director introduced the report, providing an update on the Council's performance suite. Cabinet was asked to note the improvement plan with the regulator for Social Housing following the previous year's housing inspection.

At this juncture, it was noted that there has been a slight increase in the garage void rate, however renewed efforts were underway to improve occupancy through proactive marketing. The Strategic Director outlined the commended work on the Arts and Heritage Trail, particularly the artwork on utility boxes and encouraged members to identify other suitable boxes for similar projects.

A question was raised regarding the reason behind garage voids across the town. It was explained that the increase had been triggered by several factors, including rent prices, specific location preferences and repair issues. It was noted that works were taking place to make garages more lettable, and that the Council was in the process of procuring a new garage maintenance contract. Officers also explained that void levels were low compared to other authorities.

A member asked whether issues such as lighting and conditions of the units were

being considered, and it was noted that these factors were under review. Officers also tracked reasons for termination.

7. THIRD QUARTER REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING 2024/25 (INCLUDING THIRD QUARTER CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING 2024/25) .

The Assistant Director for Finance introduced the report and provided an update on the Council's financial position for 2024/25. The Committee was informed that Cabinet had agreed the recommendations set out in the report.

8. VOIDS POLICY AND LETTABLE STANDARDS

The Assistant Director for Building Safety and Housing Property Services introduced the report on the new Void Management Policy and revised Lettable Standard which had been submitted to the Cabinet for approval. The policy outlined how the Council managed properties when they became vacant, while the Lettable Standard aimed to manage future tenant's expectations and ensure consistency in property standards upon re-letting.

9. AIDS AND ADAPTATIONS POLICY

The Assistant Director for Building Safety and Housing Property Services provided an update on the policy review, which aimed to support tenants and ensure the Council was fulfilling its legal and regulatory obligations.

At this juncture, a question was raised regarding the revisions being made to reflect legal requirements and to improve transparency on decision making. Officers confirmed that the updates aimed to align with best practices and new consumer standards, including the requirement to offer an adaptations service.

10. HIGH STREET RENTAL AUCTIONS

The Head of Planning Policy provided an overview of the process, which came into effect in December 2024. Local authorities in England were granted powers to hold High Street Rental Auctions for vacant town centre properties, aiming to revitalise high streets and bring long-term vacant properties back into use. It was noted that the Council had proposed designating the Town Centre and Old Town High Street, in line with the local plan policies, as potential High Street Rental Auction areas.

A question was raised about whether pieces of land would be included in the process, and officers confirmed that further clarification would be sought due to the new legislation.

A further question was raised about working with uncooperative landlords, to which officers explained that the legislation included a 22-week process with several opportunities for the property owner to appeal. The Council could require the

freeholder to enter a lease but would not take ownership of the property. It was noted that the legislation had not yet been tested in practice, with around 11 pilot areas expected to provide insights into potential legal challenges from freeholders. Further clarification on the process when available.

Members raised a question regarding the Council's responsibilities as commercial landlords to fill vacant plots under the new legislation. Officers clarified that the legislation primarily targeted private landowners and was intended as a last resort.

Officers also explained that the Council's estate management had an occupancy rate of around 95%, with some properties being held on short-term lets due to regeneration plans. The process could only be initiated after a property had been vacant for 366 days, and several conditions would need to be met. The guidance for the legislation, which included an appeal process, was provided in the report for reference.

11. URGENT PART I DECISIONS

An update was provided on an urgent report presented to the Cabinet, which delegated permission to the Leader of the Council to make an interim submission to the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government regarding Hertfordshire's proposals for local government reorganisation and devolution. The Cabinet considered the short urgent report and delegated the responsibility to the Leader for the interim non-binding decision.

Members asked a series of questions and commented on the potential merits of various options being put forward by the 10 district and borough Council's and the County Council to MHCLG.

Members thanked the officers involved including the Chief Executive and Strategic Directors for the urgent work undertaken with this matter since the invitation from MHCLG for a submission from authorities in a very short timeframe and for the content in the report.

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

There was no Urgent Part 1 Decisions authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

5 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

6 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

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.

7 PART II DECISIONS OF THE CABINET

The Committee considered the following Part II Decisions of the Cabinet taken on 12 March 2025:

12. PROVISION OF AGENCY WORKERS

The HR Manager updated the Committee on the procurement process for the supply of the Council's agency workers. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the HR Manager.

13. SPORTS AND LEISURE CENTRE – DESIGN AND PLANNING SUBMISSION

The Regeneration Manager updated the Committee on the design and development of the Sports and Leisure Centre. The Committee asked a number of questions regarding this item, which were answered by the Regeneration Manager.

14. SBC LAND AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (LOCALITY REVIEW UPDATE)

The Assistant Director for Housing Development updated the Committee on the Council's Land and Development Programme as part of the locality review update.

The Committee noted the decision of the Cabinet.

15. MAJOR PROJECT – BRAGBURY END

The Assistant Director for Housing Development introduced the report on the Development project at Bradbury End. A number of questions were asked regarding this item, which were answered by the Assistant Director for Housing.

16. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

The Committee noted there had been no Urgent Part II Business at the Cabinet Meeting.

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

The Committee noted that there had been no Urgent Part II Decisions authorised by

the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

9 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR