

**STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL**  
**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**MINUTES**

**Date:** Wednesday 13 December 2017

**Time:** 6.00 pm

**Place:** Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

**Present:** Councillors L Martin-Haugh (Chair), P Bibby CC (Vice-Chair), J Brown, M Downing, A Farquharson, J Fraser, ME Gardner, J Lloyd, S Mead, A Mitchell CC and R Parker CC

**Start and End** Start Time: 6.00pm

**Time:** End Time: 7.27pm

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H Burrell and L Harrington.

There were no declarations of interest received from Members.

**2. MINUTES**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, held on held on 29 November 2017, are approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

**3. PART I DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE**

This report had not been circulated to Members five clear days before the meeting nor had it been made available for public inspection. The Chair determined however that given the short time left before the end of the call-in period on 20 December 2017, it could be considered on this occasion.

**(i) Budget and Policy Framework Item – Council Tax Support Scheme (Agenda Item No.3(4))**

The Council's Assistant Director (CF) introduced the report.

It was reported that it had been confirmed to the Executive that the Council would be maintaining the existing scheme and that a description of the scheme would be detailed in future reports. A Member asked that it be highlighted that the current scheme was assessed on 91.5% of maximum liability and that, for all working age customers, this meant that they had to pay at least 8.5% of their liability, as demonstrated in the report.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part 1 decisions taken by the Executive at its meeting on 12 December 2017 be noted:

- (ii) **Article 4 Directions – Change of Use from Office to Residential (Agenda Item No.3(5))**
- (iii) **Article 4 Directions – Change of Use from Light Industrial to Residential (Agenda Item No.3(6))**

The Council's Assistant Director (ZA) introduced both reports simultaneously as each set out to inform Members of the outcome of the public consultation on the making of an Article 4 Direction, removing permitted development rights for office to residential conversions and light industrial to residential conversions. In response to a Member's question, officers confirmed that a separate article 4 direction had been granted by the Council with regards to the licensing of houses of multiple occupation.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part 1 decisions taken by the Executive at its meeting on 12 December 2017 be noted:

- (iv) **Budget and Policy Framework Item – Draft HRA Rent-Setting and Budget Report (Agenda Item No.3(7))**

The Council's Assistant Director (CF) introduced the report, which updated Members on the draft proposals in respect of the HRA budgets and rent-setting for 2018/19, to be considered by Council on 30 January 2018. It was reported that, as part of the review, the Executive had asked for transparency around caretaking and other charges. Officers clarified what "caretaking" charges related to.

In response to Members' questions in respect of the level of service charge increases applied and interest rates applicable to borrowing on the HRA, it was stated that service charge increases were applied on a block-by-block basis dependent upon the caretaking requirements required in each case and that fixed interest rates were applied on maturity. In response to a supplementary question, officers advised Members that the average rate applied was 3.4% as this allowed headroom in borrowing in case of emergencies, which effectively would allow the Council to borrow, if required.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part 1 decisions taken by the Executive at its meeting on 12 December 2017 be noted.

- (v) **Corporate Performance – Quarter Two 2017/18 (Agenda Item No.3(8))**

The Council's Assistant Director (RP) introduced the report, which highlighted the Council's performance across key priorities and themes for Quarter Two 2017/18.

Members raised questions in respect of the following:

Whether voids were open to all bands at all times

What, if anything, had changed in approaching Quarter Three?

Was the Council performing better or not (Quarter 1 figures as a comparison

would have been helpful)?

Sickness levels within the Council and whether or not dentist and GP appointments were classed as sickness leave

Who decided where new play equipment is erected?

Repairs to general and sheltered housing stock and yearly void turnover figures

How the Council's three-stage complaints process operated and was managed

What did "housing all under one roof mean"?

Levels of sick pay paid to full-time, part-time and temporary staff

Responsible authority for clearing roads and pathways in times of severe weather

In response, Members were advised as follows:

With regard to voids, these were not open to all bands at all times for the reasons as stated. It was noted that Quarter 3 performance should benefit from the appointment of a new empty homes project officer and that they would be working closely on voids and re-letting times.

In response to whether the Council was performing better or not, it was noted that performance in quarters one and two was broadly similar.

With regard to the number of points raised in respect of sickness levels in the Council, it was noted that levels of sickness absence were going in the wrong direction, that dentist and GP appointments were not classed as sickness leave and that the main areas of recorded sickness amongst staff were stress-related illness and short-term ailments such as colds and flu. In addition, it was confirmed that the Council's flexi-time policy was to be used in those instances where dentist and GP appointments were necessary.

Members were advised that the Executive had discussed how the County Council dealt with sickness levels there and it was highlighted that the County Council did not pay an employee for the first two days sickness recorded. It was noted that the Council was to sign-up to the "time to change" pledge and to review its current policy to identify ways in which the levels of sickness recorded could be reduced.

With regard to levels of pay received by staff recorded as sick, it was confirmed that full-time employees received full pay for up to an initial six-months' leave, followed by half-pay thereafter and that this was pro-rata for part-time employees.

Members considered the possible addition of a scrutiny of sickness levels within the Council. In response, the Council's Strategic Director (MP) suggested that Members may wish to consider Quarter 3 and 4 figures prior to committing to a scrutiny noting that the quarter 2 figures may represent a blip in performance and that a new sickness / absence policy was being implemented which would take some time to bed in prior to an assessment being made regarding its effectiveness. Further to this the Chief Executive had indicated at last week's staff roadshows that a conversation concerning this matter would have to take place to understand what officers could collectively

do to improve performance.

With regard to who decided as to where new play equipment was to be erected, it was confirmed that this was determined by the ward order previously presented post the Member Ward tours, which determined the priority areas. It was **agreed** that the order approved would be circulated to Members along with a list of those areas still to be done and that the Residents' Survey 2017 results would be looked at as this may influence a change in priority areas. )

In response to the issue of repairs to general and sheltered housing stock and yearly void turnover figures, it was reported that the yearly void turnover figure was around 400. It was stated that significant remodelling, particularly around bedsits, was being carried out as was the reconfiguration of the interiors of such properties. In relation to tenancy termination on void sheltered property, it was noted that 23.5 days was required to make the property good for re-letting but that the problem lay on the side of demand in that in some cases the length of time to re-let these was longer than projected.

Officers advised Members as to how the Council's three-stage complaints process was operated and managed. It was stated that, at Stage One, a complaint would ordinarily be sent to the relevant service manager to look into and respond to within a prescribed period of time. If the complainant was unhappy with the response received, they could escalate the complaint to Stage Two, where it would be referred to the relevant Assistant Director to respond to. Again, if the complainant remained unsatisfied with the response given, the complaint could be further escalated to Stage Three, at which, it would be referred to another Assistant Director or Strategic Director to respond to.

Whilst the number of complaints received by the Council was comparatively low, it was recognised that there was a need to give clarity to managers about making the right judgement in such instances. The Assistant Director (CW) who was responsible for managing the Council's complaints procedures advised Members that a scrutiny review was ongoing and the findings would be reported to a future meeting. She added that a business review of Customer Services was being undertaken and although the level of complaints received was low this was still a serious matter.

Officers confirmed that "housing all under one roof" (HAUOR) was the former "excellent council homes for life FTFC programme". HAUOR was made up of a number of projects, with outcomes. The CSC would receive an update on progress at its meeting to be held on 8 January 2018.

Strategic Director (MP) provided an update as to how the Council's services were recovering from the effects of the recent severe weather, in particular, refuse collection services, which had been hit as dustcarts could not access some residential roads and streets with heavy snow and ice.

A Member asked that it be made clear in future that the responsibility for

clearing of snow and gritting of roads lay with the County Council and not the Borough Council. In recognising this, the Vice-Chair, who was Deputy Cabinet Member with responsibility for Highways, said that the County Council's vehicles, and volunteers, began gritting roads on Saturday 9 December, the day before the heavy snowfalls and had to continue to do so until now.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part 1 decisions taken by the Executive at its meeting on 12 December 2017 be noted.

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

None.

5. **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

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 item of business on the grounds that it 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 EXECUTIVE**

This report had not been circulated to Members five clear days before the meeting. The Chair determined however that given the short time left before the end of the call-in period on 21 December 2017, it could be considered on this occasion.

(i) **Part II Minutes of the Executive of 28 November 2017**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II decisions taken by the Executive at its meeting on 28 November 2017 be noted.

8. **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

**NONE**

**CHAIR**