

EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Date:** Tuesday 24 October 2023

Place: Council Chamber - Civic Offices **Time:** 7.00 - 9.50 pm

Members Present: Councillors D Wixley (Chairman), J McIvor (Vice-Chairman), I Hadley, S Heap, S Heather, H Kane, M Markham, S Murray, C Nweke, J Parsons, A Patel, J H Whitehouse and R Brookes

Members Present (Virtually): Councillors C McCann

Other Councillors: Councillors I Allgood, S Kane, C Whitbread, H Whitbread, K Williamson and R Balcombe

Apologies: R Baldwin, R Bassett, C McCredie and R Pugsley

Officers Present: G Blakemore (Chief Executive), A Small (Strategic Director, Corporate and Section 151 Officer), N Cole (Corporate Communications Officer), L Kirman (Democratic Services Officer) and C Hartgrove (Interim Chief Financial Officer)

Officers Present (Virtually): T Larsen (Democratic Services Officer), J Lewis (Team Manager - Benefits Operations), N Richardson (Service Director (Planning Services)), P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services)) and R Pavey (Service Director (Customer Services))

[A RECORDING OF THIS MEETING IS AVAILABLE FOR REPEATED VIEWING](#)

19. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee noted that Councillor Brookes had been appointed as substitute for Councillor Baldwin.

20. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman reminded everyone present that the meeting would be broadcast live to the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings.

21. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Council's Members' Code of Conduct.

22. MINUTES

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 July 2023 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

23. MATTERS ARISING AND OUTSTANDING ACTIONS

Resolved:

The Committee noted that the following action points were outstanding:
18 July 2023:

- (4) To investigate and report back on whether a summary of the project closure reports could be produced – Project Team Manager.
- (5) Confirmation of the date for a member briefing on the redevelopment of Whipps Cross Hospital

Post meeting update:

Member briefing on the redevelopment of Whipps Cross Hospital scheduled on 23 November 2023 at 6:30 pm. This will be a virtual meeting on MS TEAMS

- (6) An update on the measures to reduce bad debt referred to by the Portfolio Holder on the 18 July 2023 was requested by The Chairman.

24. PUBLIC QUESTIONS & REQUESTS TO ADDRESS THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee noted that no public questions or requests to address the meeting had been received.

25. EXECUTIVE DECISIONS - CALL-IN

The Committee noted that no executive decisions had been called-in for consideration since the previous meeting.

26. LOCAL COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME 2024/25

The draft Cabinet report was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee by R Pavey and J Lewis. The key aspects of the report were highlighted, this provided a simplified approach where the household type and income level determined the discount available. It was noted that severely disabled people, with an income below the £400 threshold, would receive the maximum 75% discount.

The Committee were advised that an additional recommendation, to disregard Child Benefit as income in new scheme, would be included in the final report.

The Committee

- welcomed the simplified approach and acknowledged the new scheme would reduce the administrative burden, simplify the process and help people to enter the system.
- received confirmation that:
 - the scheme applied to working age people only
 - there was a separate national scheme for pensioners
 - the single person householder reduction to Council Tax was outside of the scope of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme
 - the armed forces disability allowance would be disregarded as income for the scheme, in line with council policy.
 - there was limited impact on single parents with children, and the exceptional hardship scheme had a level of discretion for individual circumstances.
- were advised that the modelling used for the development of the scheme showed that with the revised recommendations on child benefit, 88% of claimants would be the same or better off.
- welcomed the retention of the hardship fund.
- noted that consultation had concluded 76% were in favour of introducing the new scheme with 15% against and 9% stating no preference, and the proposal to disregard of child benefit as income for the scheme had stemmed from the conclusion.

- suggested that an update on the outcomes of the new scheme should be included in the work programme for the next municipal year

Resolved:

The Committee was supportive of the recommendations of the draft Cabinet report and endorsed the additional recommendation to disregard of Child Benefit as income for this scheme.

27. QUARTER 1 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2023/24

The Chairman advised the Committee that the information contained in the Quarter 1 budget monitoring report had been superseded by the Quarter 2 budget monitoring report, which was on the agenda.

Resolved:

The Committee noted the report.

28. QUARTER 2 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2023/24

The Chief Financial Officer presented the Budget Monitoring report for quarter 2 of 2023/24, to the Committee, and highlighted several key points based on the position at 20 September 2023.

- The General Fund, revenue, had a forecast budget overspend of £1.307 million. High interest rates were the most significant factor to the forecast position. Service pressures were limited at this stage, although there was an anticipated shortfall of £0.935 million in Planning fee income and there was a risk associated with employee costs pending agreement of the national pay award. The funding position was mixed; a surplus income of £646,000 was expected from Business Rates and a shortfall of £225,000 anticipated on the payments that the Council receives from preceptors as part of the Essex Council Tax Sharing Agreement (CTSA). The forecast outturn balance was £1.883 million, significantly below the Council's formally adopted contingency balance of £4.0 million.
- The HRA account was projected to record a small budget overspend of £0.013 million; increasing costs of major void repairs was a pressure. The outturn balance was forecast at £4.584 million, above the minimum contingency balance of £2.0 million in the HRA Business Plan.
- Capital spending was subdued, the drawdown of Qualis loans was the biggest factor behind the forecast underspend of £13.9 million on the general fund and £35.8 million on HRA.
- Wider financial performance and risk indicators were detailed.

The Committee

- raised several queries and received clarity that staff vacancies would be expected in any year, and any associated underspend could be used to respond to and manage the in- year overspend, depending on the service need.
- were advised that there was a recovery plan for local tax collection. There was a cyclical nature to collection, but a higher rate of collection was anticipated in this financial year.
- requested transparency on any specific in year budget proposals and mitigation strategies being developed by Service in relation to the in-year budget pressures.
- were assured that planning applications were being encouraged to be brought forward to mitigate the income shortfall

- discussed the impact of interest rates on loans and the impact on development through Qualis.

The Leader of the Council advised the Committee that budget process would be difficult and tough decisions would be needed, the scrutiny of any proposals would be essential.

Resolved:

The Overview and Scrutiny committee noted:

1. The General Fund revenue position at the end of Quarter 2 for 2023/24, including actions being undertaken or proposed to ameliorate the position where significant variances have been identified.
2. The General Fund capital position at the end of Quarter 2 for 2023/24.
3. The Housing Revenue Account revenue position at the end of Quarter 2 for 2023/24, including actions proposed to ameliorate the position, where significant variances have been identified.
4. The Housing Revenue Account capital position at the end of Quarter 2 for 2023/24; and
5. The wider position on Financial Performance and Risk at the end of Quarter 2 be noted.

Action:

- 1) Detailed breakdown of the underspend of the 'Bricks and Mortar Scheme' would be circulated - Chief Finance Officer.

29. MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL PLAN 2024/25 – 2028/29

The Chief Finance Officer outlined the first iteration of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2024/25 to 2028/29, which had been presented to Cabinet on 9 October 2023. This provided a framework for the development of the 2024/25 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budgets.

- The forecast showed a deficit of £3.720 million on the General fund for 2024/25, this was due to spending pressures, financing capital costs, high level interest rates and the expected increase in waste costs, when the contract with Biffa expires. It was highlighted that if a balanced budget was achieved in 2023/24, without drawing on reserves, a further budget gap would be expected from 2025/26 in the range of £0.376 million to £0.557million annually.
- The HRA showed a planned deficit in 2025/26 and 2026/27, before regaining a balanced position in 2027/28 and 2029/29, the HRA balance could withstand the planned deficits.
- It was highlighted that the budget pressures were part of a national picture and not isolated to Epping Forest District Council and that that this would be difficult and challenging budget.

The Committee commented on and acknowledged the ongoing pressures on the budget.

The Leader of the Council detailed the budget process to the Committee and welcomed the input of Scrutiny into the budget process.

The Chairman of the Committee encouraged members to come forward with ideas for the budget.

Resolved:

The committee noted and the first iteration of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MFTP) 2024/25 to 2028/29.

30. CAPITAL PROGRAMME UPDATE 2024/25 – 2028/29

The Chief Finance Officer introduced the indicative Capital Programme 2024/25 to 2028/29, as present to Cabinet on 9 October 2023, in line with the agreed financial planning framework.

The updated Capital programme provided context and was a key part of budget preparation for 2024/25. There was a total investment of £210.258 million (General Fund £53.913 million and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) £156.345 million) for 2024/25 to 2028/29.

It was noted that ICT budgets had not been automatically rolled forward pending the review of the ICT strategy.

Resolved:

The Committee noted the Capital Programme update 2024/25 to 2028/29.

31. CORPORATE PLAN - 2023/24 QUARTER 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Committee reviewed the quarter 2, July – August 2023, Corporate Performance Report.

The Committee

- received assurance the waste management transitional arrangement was on track. There was a high level of project governance and quality assurance associated with the project.
- were advised that the new telephone system had gone live as part of the omnichannel project. The new system would provide access to new data sets to better understand customer feedback, further work would be undertaken and a detailed report would be brought to this Committee.
- acknowledged that the review and target setting for KPI was an annual process.
- received a verbal update on planning KPI's. The percentage of applications determined within the agreed timescales for quarter 2 were: 100% for Major applications; 81.4% Minor applications and 84% other applications. Changes in performance were linked to staff turnover and vacancies, and applications that were called into Committee would rarely meet the deadlines.
- questioned the timescales and comparative performance of processing planning applications and were advised that Major applications should be determined within 13 weeks from registration, the timeline could be extended if the applicant agreed to an extension of time. Minor and Other applications had an 8 weeks target from registration to decision. Comparison with other authorities with better performance data showed they had a greater proportion of delegated decisions by officers.
- queried the underlying reasons behind the low level of self-declaration in relation to equalities monitoring data and were advised that renewed efforts and alternative methods to encourage disclosure including communications to increase understanding of the value of this data, would be developed. The Chief Executive advised that there had been a cultural shift Council's

approach to diversity, inclusion and equality including the development of specific equality groups and initiatives that had been set up by staff.

- Were informed that the labour market across the public sector was tight, with specific issues in some professional areas, recruitment and retention was a challenge. New collaborative work with other organisations for recruitment and wider opportunities could assist moving forward.
- received clarification that sickness absence had reduced. Work and non-work related mental health issues were recorded and the short and long term sickness figures could be segregated.
- were informed that officers were conducting a review of data sets and available performance information data for the new municipal year. A suite of KPI's and data that could provide insight to assist the committee, would be brought to a future meeting. This would provide an opportunity to consider the value of the inclusion of long- and short-term sickness measure, the number and status of staff vacancies, and would include the revised targets for KPIs

Resolved:

That the review of the Corporate Performance Report for quarter 2 of the Corporate Plan for the period 2023-27 be noted.

Actions:

- (2) To investigate and report back on specific geographical or service issues that impacted on low customer satisfaction - Service Director - Customer Services, R Pavey
- (3) To investigate and report back on the impact from the new policy in relation to rent in advance- Interim Housing and Property Director -S Balu
- (4) To investigate and report back on the reasons for the levels of homelessness – Homelessness Team Manager – D Blake
- (5) The target for customer services would be corrected to read 70% and all other targets would be checked for accuracy – Project Team Manager, C Graham.

32. CHAIRMEN TO REPORT ON THEIR SELECT COMMITTEE BUSINESS

(a) Communities Scrutiny Committee

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr A Patel, reported on the progress made against the work programme.

- A presentation from the Community Champions detailing a wide range of projects and community support was highlighted. The Chairman and Committee commended the work of the Community Champions for the benefits and value they brought to the communities and the district.

The Committee had

- endorsed the five Landlord Health and Safety Compliance Policies and commended these to Cabinet, and
- received an annual update on the Social Housing Annual Letting for 2022/23 and a report on the first year review of the Housing Allocation Scheme.

(b) Place Scrutiny Committee

The Chairman of the Committee, Cllr H Kane, reported on the progress made against the work programme. On 19 September 2023 the Committee

- considered an update on the transfer of grounds maintenance and commented on the proposed improvement plan provided by Qualis Property Solutions Ltd;
- endorsed and welcomed the recommendation for the introduction of the Public Space Protection Orders for Dog Control across the district, and for the specific nuisance in Debden Broadway, pending the outcome of consultation,
- were advised on the consultation for the Essex Draft Waste Strategy.

Resolved: T

The Committee noted the progress of the respective Scrutiny Committee work programmes.

33. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME

Resolved:

The Committee noted the work programme and agreed the additional meeting scheduled for 21 November 2023

34. CABINET BUSINESS

Leader Portfolio: Interim Polling Districts as a result of the Boundary Review

The Committee queried the timing of the decision review and sought assurance that Members would be engaged in the process.

Resolved

The Committee reviewed the Executive's Forward Plan

Action

(6) Member briefing on the interim polling districts to be scheduled- Strategic Director, Corporate and Section 151 Officer - A Small

CHAIRMAN