

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL CABINET MINUTES

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 22 December 2020

Place: Virtual Meeting on Zoom

Time: 7.00 - 8.15 pm

Members Present: C Whitbread (Chairman), N Avey, N Bedford, A Patel, J Philip, S Kane and H Whitbread

Other

Councillors: R Brookes, L Burrows, S Heap, S Heather, H Kauffman, S Murray, S Neville, D Plummer, C C Pond, C P Pond, J Share-Bernia, D Stocker, J M Whitehouse and D Wixley

Apologies:

Officers Present: G Blakemore (Chief Executive), N Dawe (Chief Operating Officer), A Small (Strategic Director Corporate and 151 Officer), S Jevans (Strategic Director), Q Durrani (Service Director (Contracts & Technical Services / Commercial & Regulatory)), J Gould (Service Director (Community & Wellbeing)), C Hammond (Museums, Heritage & Culture Specialist), C Hartgrove (Interim Chief Financial Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), S Kits (Lead Corporate Communications Officer - People), V Messenger (Democratic Services Officer) and A O'Connor (Museums, Heritage & Culture Specialist)

111. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Leader of Council made a short address to remind everyone present that the meeting would be broadcast live to the internet, and would be capable of repeated viewing, which could infringe their human and data protection rights.

112. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Pursuant to the Council's Member Code of Conduct, Councillor C C Pond declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 13 – Waltham Abbey Community and Cultural Hub, by virtue of being the Chairman of the Holocaust project and also as County Councillor. The Councillor had determined that his interest was non-prejudicial and that he would stay in the meeting for the consideration of the item.

113. MINUTES

Decision:

The Minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 16 November 2020 be taken as read and would be signed by the Leader as a correct record.

114. REPORTS OF PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

The Planning and Sustainability Portfolio Holder, Councillor N Bedford, noted that he had recently signed off the Air Quality Mitigation Strategy but that had now been called in. An informal meeting had been arranged in a couple of days' time between the lead member of the call-in and himself to see if they could find a way forward.

The Housing and Community Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, reported that there had been some delay due to the tier 4 restrictions on the free school meals programme and there have been some changes to what she had described at the full Council meeting. She reported that 31,000 free meal vouchers from Essex County Council have been provided to vulnerable families.

115. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS TO ADDRESS THE CABINET

The Cabinet noted that no public questions or requests to address the Cabinet had been received for consideration at the meeting.

116. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

There was no report from the Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee as there has not been a meeting since the last time Cabinet had met.

117. DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS 2021/22

The Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder, Councillor Philip introduced the draft budget proposals for 2021/22. He noted that this had been a most taxing year for a budget for a long time. Things would change between now and February such as the unexpected move to Tier 4 recently imposed. He would try and stay as true as possible to his initial Medium Term Finance Strategy but moving into Tier 4 may have significant impact going forward.

The report would proceed for consideration by the Stronger Council Select Committee on 19th January 2021, before returning to Cabinet. Once Cabinet had considered the views of the Stronger Council Select Committee, and the budget has been updated for the latest developments, the final Budget proposals and an updated MTFs will be submitted to Council in February.

The budget was less well developed than would normally be expected, and publication deadlines were being squeezed in order to get greater certainty, to ensure a reasonable trade-off between refinement and the need for meaningful scrutiny.

He highlighted that employee cost had gone up. They had also put in for the first time the pension fund deficit reduction payment so that we could see the impact of what's happening there. It would have a significant impact with a net cost to the general fund of just under a half million pounds. There was some detailed work on fees and charges carried out, such as not having any increase in car parking charges. With the introduction of the vaccine there was some hope of having the leisure centres back in operation, but now with Tier 4 in operation we shall have to wait and see. They had now determined the base for Council Tax for 2021/22, still assuming a £5 increase in a band D property. They have upped the support that we would get from government for around £1.4million and a contribution from the council's reserves of about £1million to enable the council to balance its budget.

Councillor Brookes said that government money was available for the leisure industry and asked if we could re-coop some of our costs for the leisure centres. She was told that we had already recovered some money from the Government for the leisure area.

Councillor Brookes then asked about the loss on the HRA account for the current year and asked for more detail. She was told that this budget paper was for next year

and officers would know much more in February about what is happening in the HRA as this has not been a typical year.

Councillor Wixley asked if there was any indication on when the residents in the districts would have received the vaccination, as this would affect the use of the sports centres. He was told that the vaccinations were being rolled out as quickly as possible, starting with the older generations, who also used our sport centres.

Councillor Heap noted that rates were historically low at present and asked if we could use it to help in the refinancing event. He was told that this was for the HRA and would not help the general fund.

Decision:

- (1) The Cabinet considered the draft budget proposals; and
- (2) requested that the Stronger Council Select Committee consider the draft budget proposals, and the emerging Medium-Term Financial Plan, and make comments to Cabinet for their consideration.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To set a framework within which the Council can develop and set its Budget for 2021/22 and update its Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

Options for Action:

None at this time.

118. TELECARE PROVISION

The Housing and Community Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, introduced the report on the provision of Telecare for the district.

In October 2019 Essex County Council's Cabinet agreed to invite tenders for the delivery of a county-wide care technology service.

This affected EFDC's provision of a telecare service to private residents within the District and a paper was brought to Cabinet in June 2020 which recommended the cessation of EFDC's own telecare service to private residents subsequent to the mobilisation of a new county-wide provision.

Since the onset of the current Covid-19 pandemic, the procurement of Essex County Council's new care technology service had experienced delays and had also forced reconsideration of the requirements a new care technology service originally set out.

This development did not change the impact of a county-wide provision on EFDC's own telecare service nor the decision to cease EFDC's own service once it was mobilised.

However, this development did impact on the original timescales for the cessation of EFDC's own provision which was originally anticipated to have been by the end of the fiscal year 2020-21.

EFDC's own provision was now unlikely to cease before the end of Q1 2021-22 to allow for mobilisation of the full county-wide service by June 2021 and the subsequent work transitioning customers from EFDC's own provision to a different provider to ensure that Epping Forest residents were not left for any period without any telecare provision.

Councillor Murray sought reassurance that our own services could still deliver the services during this extended period. He was given this assurance.

Decision:

(1) The Cabinet noted the update in relation to Essex County Council's procurement of a new care technology service for adult social care and the subsequent impact on EFDC's telecare provision; and

(2) Agreed to the continuation of EFDC's own telecare service until June 2021 in light of Essex County Council's postponed procurement activity.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To ensure residents in the District receive continuity of telecare service.

Other Options:

Not to agree the continuation of EFDC's telecare provision until June 2021 which would mean a potential gap in service provision for District residents who rely on a telecare service to enable them to safely live independently for longer.

119. CHANGE IN AGENDA ORDER

For ease of consideration the Cabinet agreed to reverse the order of the remainder of the agenda and to take item 13, then item 12, 11 and 10 in that order.

120. WALTHAM ABBEY COMMUNITY AND CULTURAL HUB

The Housing and Community Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, introduced this report.

She noted that a feasibility study had been undertaken in line with the 2020/21 Budget, by officers for the creation of a Community and Cultural Hub in Waltham Abbey "the hub", will see the District Museum combine with Waltham Abbey Library, owned and managed by Essex County Council.

This proposal was seen as a key opportunity to provide improved Council services to local residents in the area and at the same time, provide a mechanism for supporting economic and community regeneration of the town centre through new and additional footfall to Sun Street and provision of a multi-purpose community learning and skills space.

This report sought Cabinet approval to continue dialogue with Essex County Council in respect of a potential Service Level Agreement (SLA) and to enable officers to progress discussions with appropriate parties (including Qualis) in respect of funding capital works.

Councillor S Kane commented that it was important that we did this as it would mirror the hub we would be setting up in Epping. He asked if there was any indication of a timeline. He was told that no timescale had been set as yet, officers had been talking to Essex CC for some time and were awaiting tonight's Cabinet decision.

Councillor Philip welcomed the scheme but noted that there was a potential cost of about £1.5million and he wondered where we were going to fund this from; and had it been put into the Capital budget for next year? This should be made as a recommendation for a bid for Capital support. A regular income had been projected for 2022/23 which was encouraging, with a return of about 13%, a very good return; and we could add to that some savings. But he wanted to make sure that the costs were factored into next year's budget. Councillor H Whitbread said that this was in line with the 2020/21 budget in investing for the future. However, it was agreed that this would be added as a recommendation.

Councillor Patel welcomed the report and was keen that this type of model went through to the rest of the district and was glad that we were taking the lead on libraries.

Councillor Bedford suggested that officers should also look at having a police/fire presence at the hubs maybe giving home fire safety advice.

Councillor H Whitbread remarked that sustainable hubs across the district was vital and agreed with Councillor Bedford about having a police/fire presence.

Councillor Plummer welcomed the report and asked if there was still the intention to buy the Police Station to use as a community asset. He noted that the arts and creative industries would have a massive economic and social benefit and would like to see something around this brought into a social hub. Councillor H Whitbread was unsure as to where the Council was in its negotiations on the Police Station. She had noted his comments and would take them on board. Mr Dawe said that the Police Station was subject to another offer but that we would continue to register our interest.

Councillor Murray said this was an excellent report. He reminded the meeting that Loughton also existed. It was the biggest town in the district with a struggling parade in the Broadway, and two wards with high levels of social deprivation. Could the concept of cultural hubs be extended towards Loughton and have a library in there and not run by the college. Councillor C Whitbread said that they have had massive investment in the Loughton swimming pool and the investment in Debden Broadway and other investments in Loughton over the years. All done by a conservative administration with no representation in Loughton. No part of the district was forgotten.

Councillor Chris Pond welcomed the report but the space under discussion for the Library was much too small. He thought the idea of including the Police in this was a good one. Councillor H Whitbread noted his point on the provision of a good Library for the town.

Decision:

1. In line with proposals outlined in the 2020/21 Budget, that the Cabinet agreed to support the creation of a Community and Cultural Hub in Waltham Abbey as part of phase 1 of the regeneration of the Town Centre. This would be achieved by combining Epping Forest District Museum (39-41 Sun Street) with Waltham Abbey Library (37 Sun Street), subject to Essex County Council contributions and statutory

agreements; this would strengthen the community hub approach to service delivery currently being created with the Civic Office at its heart;

2. The Cabinet noted the bid for £1,540,000 for the 2021/22 budget to undertake the light refurbishment specifications, and that this included a 10% contingency for any unexpected costs.

3. The Cabinet agreed that officers be authorised to further explore the operational and management model for the hub with Essex County Council and associated service level agreement between EFDC and ECC for operation of the hub; and

4. That officers undertook further work as to the financing and completion of the project, noting that required resources were included in the current 2021/22 Budget Assumptions to meet any set-up costs and the borrowing costs that support the proposed capital expenditure.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The Council has a unique opportunity to improve local services to its residents in Waltham Abbey through the establishment of a Community and Cultural Hub that will extend the community hub model currently being built with the Civic Office at its heart. The Waltham Abbey hub will incorporate Essex County Council Library Services, EFDC Customer Services as well as space for partners (e.g. VAEF and EFCA) and the wider community which can be used for learning and skills, drop-in workspace, activities and events.

This hub will be a catalyst for increasing footfall to the Town Centre and supporting the long-term sustainability of retail and local business.

This proposal therefore brings together the benefits of; strengthening the community, assisting regeneration of the high-street and the approach to using the District's buildings as community hubs wherever practical.

Other Options for Action:

Not to proceed with the proposal. However, this will prevent the opportunity for the Council to provide much needed Customer Services and learning opportunities in a disadvantaged area of the district, which is significantly limited by public transport services.

121. WALTHAM ABBEY TOWN CENTRE

The Chief Operations Officer, N Dawe, explained that this was the first in a series of reports for each of the district's conurbations. Other would follow in the coming months. These were very action orientated on purpose, with precise targets to be achieved and similar reports were envisaged for other town centres. Some consultations have already happened, although they had been difficult to carry out in the current circumstances.

Councillor Patel noted that this partly came under his Covid recovery work. He welcomed this report and noted that the money already allocated to Town Centre Managers showed the Cabinet's commitment to this. It was important that the actions being set had robust timelines and that an appropriate Scrutiny Committee would also monitor the work being undertaken and the progress made. In terms of the work

being undertaken it would be useful to understand what money would be made available to the Town Centre manager as this was not clear. He would also like to know how the consultants were appointed. As for engagement with stakeholders, he would like the Chamber of Commerce and others also included; not just the Town and Parish Councils. He noted the comparison of vacant units between 2019 and 2020, and asked how did we get to that figure, as they could be vacant for various period of time, 1 or 2 or more months? Mr Dawe replied that as for targets, timelines and resources would form the basis of a separate report. We were using current resources to carry out the actions named in the report. Any additional amount would be identified for the next stage. As for the how the consultants were chosen, he could not remember at present and would have to get back to the councillor. Vacant units were effectively identified by repeat spot surveys to give a sense of the position of the High Streets. Councillor Patel reiterated that he wanted measurable targets and did not want lack of resources as a reason to not achieve this.

Councillor Philip confirmed that these were 'point in time' surveys of occupancy and were not detailed analyses. He noted that a Town Centre Manager would not be managing the Town Centre but managing projects for the Town Centre, he should really be called a Town Centre Project Manager. If we decide to go ahead, we should bring another report to Cabinet with the project plan and the project fully costed.

Councillor S Kane agreed it should be costed and scheduled, but it should not delay the quick wins we could still do.

Councillor Plummer said that this was a good report, but it was the first time he had heard of this and it would have been nice if he had been consulted as he had been very involved in local businesses in recent years. Councillor C Whitbread noted that a lot of this had come from the Covid Recovery Portfolio Advisory Group, with representation from all groups.

Decision:

1. The Cabinet considered the report produced by independent business consultants, Studio 3, on the economic viability of Waltham Abbey Town Centre, which includes recommendations to improve short and medium-term sustainability of businesses in Sun Street;
2. That Cabinet agreed to proceed with the recommended actions contained within the report, including the proposal to introduce a Town Centres Project Manager, (Waltham Abbey and Ongar), on a fixed term basis for a period of 3 years at a cost of c £50k per annum. This postholder would organise and deliver on the specific project targets to lead and implement a phased programme of work in each of the Town Centre's across the district in conjunction with town and parish councils, businesses and other interested policies; and,
3. The Cabinet noted the bid for the 2021/22 budget that £150,000 be earmarked from the unallocated General Fund balance, to the District Development Fund Reserve, to fund the initiative – at £50,000 per annum – for three-years commencing 2021/22.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

This report forms part of the Council's Covid Economic Recovery Programme, which had been designed to help support and improve economic viability of Town Centre's across the district. The study conducted by Studio 3, was a completely independent

view of the status of the economy in Sun Street, Waltham Abbey and identifies what was necessary to increase footfall; support local businesses and help sustain high street viability in the medium term.

Other Options for Action:

Cabinet could decide not to proceed with the recommendations, or, to agree to some and not others.

122. TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION - GENERAL REPORT

The Leader of the Council, Councillor C Whitbread introduced the report noting that this went with the last item, the Waltham Abbey Town Centre report. Asked if he would like to comment, Councillor Patel said that his comments would be the same as the last report. It was the right thing to do, bringing forward these reports.

Councillor Philip was happy with the report and to bring this work forward in the future under the Economic Development banner as that team were doing the majority of the work. As per paragraph 5 of the report officers had already spoken with the Parish/Town Councils of Epping, Loughton and Buckhurst Hill. In order to ensure that we were successful in our endeavours, with the resources that we had it was easier to carry out the work sequentially rather than trying to do it all at one time. We will do the best for all areas in our District but take them one at a time.

Councillor Neville asked if the timetable for the completion was known and could be expanded on. Councillor Philip replied that this was a very difficult question to answer at this time. They were looking at the areas after Waltham Abbey; once they had something in place for Waltham Abbey, it would be easier to work on the other areas; although they are currently doing things for other areas at the same time they worked on Waltham Abbey.

Councillor S Kane commented that it was important that we get there as quickly as possible.

Decision:

The Cabinet noted the progress and issues that would arise in current and subsequent individual town centre reports.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

This report does not require a decision or recommendation.

Other Options for Action:

N/a

123. POST COVID PROJECTS, WALTHAM ABBEY TOWN CENTRE, WALTHAM ABBEY TOWN CENTRE HUB

The Cabinet noted this report as being the covering reports for the above town centre reports.

They agreed that the sums of money mentioned be noted as bids for the 2021/2 budget.

Decision:

The Cabinet noted the covering report on Town Centres projects and initiatives.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

This report does not require a decision or recommendation.

Other Options for Action:

N/a

124. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

It was noted that there was no other urgent business for consideration by the Cabinet.

CHAIRMAN

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