

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL CABINET MEETING MINUTES

Monday 5 February 2024, 7.00 pm - 8.57 pm

Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping

Members Present:	Councillors C Whitbread (Chairman), N Bedford (Vice-Chairman), R Balcombe, S Patel, J Philip, H Whitbread and K Williamson
Other Councillors:	Councillors R Brookes, S Heap, S Murray, J H Whitehouse, J M Whitehouse and D Wixley
Apologies:	None.
Officers In Attendance:	Georgina Blakemore (Chief Executive), Louise Baker (Internal Communications Assistant), Surjit Balu (Interim Housing and Property Director), Tom Carne (Corporate Communications Team Manager), Christopher Hartgrove (Interim Director Finance / Deputy 151 Officer (Shared Services)), Melissa Kemp-Salt (Service Director - ICT & Transformation (Shared Services)), Vivienne Messenger (Democratic Services Officer), Steven Mitchell (PR Website Editor) and Andrew Small (Strategic Director, Corporate and Section 151 Officer)
Officers In Attendance (Virtually):	Jennifer Gould (Strategic Director and Chief Operating Officer) and Laura Kirman (Democratic Services Officer)
Also in Attendance:	A Marshall-Smith (Contractor)

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

95 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.

96 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

97 MINUTES

That the minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 15 January 2024 be taken as read and signed by the Leader as a correct record.

98 REPORTS OF PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

There were no verbal reports made by Members of the Cabinet on current issues affecting their areas of responsibility.

99 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.

100 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reported that members had scrutinised the quarter 3 Corporate Performance Report, the Draft Budget for 2024/25 and reviewed its own work programme on 23 January 2024. The Chairman of the Communities Scrutiny Committee, Councillor A Patel, had reported about the pre-scrutiny of the HRA Business Plan. The Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder, Councillor J Philip, had also announced the Council's sale of land at North Weald Airfield to Google. The Committee's next meeting would be held on 23 April 2024 when the Youth Council would be making its annual presentation.

101 HRA BUSINESS PLAN

The Housing and Strategic Health Partnerships Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, introduced the report and stated that the Council was working with partners to maximise affordable housing and shared home ownership. Historically Council-owned garage sites had been developed as they were brownfield sites. Many had gone through the planning process and developments were being built. It was important with the new social housing regulations that the housing stock was up to the required standards. The HRA Business Plan was an overarching review of how the Council was managing its housing and was a working business plan that would evolve over time.

The Interim Director of Housing and Property, S Balu, advised that a bespoke HRA model was used to provide a reasonable cashflow projection for the 30-year plan. A recent independent stock condition survey, which included thermal efficiency, had been undertaken when 50% of Council properties had been surveyed to establish their condition and to forecast over 30 years a profile of expenditure that should be future-proofed. With the increasing social housing legislation there was a need to invest in the Council's housing stock.

The HRA business plan had been developed in partnership with the Council's Finance Team and its retained consultant Abovo-Consult. Consultant A Marshall-Smith presented the HRA Business Plan to the Cabinet.

The Leader stated there had been dramatic changes over the last two years since the original 30-year plan had been approved in 2022 including the war in Ukraine, high interest rates and Covid pressures, and queried if there were any potential difficulties that could make the business plan veer off course, or policy-wise? The Interim Director of Housing and Property replied there were key challenges from balancing the green agenda and the target around net zero with the business plan. The Regulator of Social Housing had also increased the focus on gas and electric appliances, so the Council needed to make homes as efficient as possible.

The report set out the options considered, if any, and the reasons for the recommendation and the decision.

Decisions:

- (1) That the Cabinet noted the Safe and Prudent HRA business plan.
- (2) That the Cabinet approved the HRA Business Plan.

- (3) That the Cabinet received a yearly performance update, which would include stringent stress testing.
- (4) That the Cabinet noted the opportunity to improve our estates which would improve the life span of our assets and feed into our ongoing work to 'create great places where people want to live'.

102 HOME OWNERSHIP STRATEGY 2023/24 TO 2028/29

The Housing and Strategic Health Partnerships Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, introduced the report and stated that this would be the Council's first formally agreed Home Ownership Strategy, as it was good practice to have one. The strategy showed how the Council dealt with the sale of council residential properties, as well as the calculation and collection of leaseholder service charges, providing information to solicitors and supporting Section 20 consultations for planned works where needed. The report detailed that there had been 341 completed Right to Buy (RTB) applications since 2010/11. It was noted that there were no questions raised.

The report set out the options considered, if any, and the reasons for the recommendation and the decision.

Decision:

- (1) That the Cabinet approved the Draft Home Ownership Strategy 2023/24 to 2028/29.

103 INDEPENDENT LIVING FOR OLDER PEOPLE STRATEGY 2023 TO 2028

The strategy would give direction and a framework to the Independent Living Service for modernising housing services for older people and, the independent living schemes that the Council provided. The Housing and Strategic Health Partnerships Portfolio Holder introduced the strategy, which contained a high-level Annual Delivery Plan that would be developed further in 2024. Priorities included making sure the housing stock was fit for purpose to meet an increase in demand of affordable housing for older people and also ensure the independent living scheme accommodation went to local people first.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse commented that older people who had previously lived in or had relatives that lived in the district had been able to apply for the housing supplementary list, so it would be useful to keep this option. Also, why was the issue with mobility vehicles not going to be addressed by the Council until 2030? Councillor H Whitbread replied that regarding the supplementary list, where there was a family connection in the district the Council did need to have this ability. Following the Grenfell Tower fire, stricter regulations concerning communal corridors had been implemented. The Interim Director of Housing and Property advised that the Asset Management Strategy, which would go before the Cabinet on 18 March 2024, would be looking at the volume of storage space in relation to the number of mobility scooters. Councillor N Bedford suggested a scheme for people to be able to book a mobility scooter that was secured in a specific area, as this would satisfy fire regulations. Councillor H Whitbread thought this was an excellent suggestion.

The Leader remarked that this was an excellent strategy including the Annual Delivery Plan, which should be kept under review annually, so it was fit for purpose.

The report set out the options considered, if any, and the reasons for the recommendation and the decision.

Decision:

- (1) That the Cabinet considered the Independent Living for Older People in Epping Forest Strategy 2023/24 to 2028/29 should be reviewed annually, so that it was fit for purpose.
- (2) That the Cabinet approved the Annual Delivery Plan, summarised within the appendices of the strategy document.

104 FIT FOR THE FUTURE - EFDC TRANSFORMATION PORTFOLIO

The Leader, Councillor C Whitbread, remarked that other councils were looking at the transformation progress and the report brought together a number of strands mainly for the north Essex councils and partnership working especially with Braintree District Council and Colchester City Council. The Covid crisis had caused a change with a move to a hybrid way of working, using digital options and having virtual meetings. However, progress and change were good as this was the best option for our future. There were challenging financial decisions to be made now and in the future. The transformation portfolio was looking at the next four to ten years. The report would formalise our partnerships with other councils by creating a new, shared back office for the corporate services referenced in the report and with the creation of a reserve of up to £3 million for the purposes of investing in the Council's Fit for the Future Portfolio. There would also be greater opportunities for being a digital council especially through ease of access for our customers, and perhaps by having one website portal for several councils including Essex County Council.

Councillor S Heap commented this was more a question for Qualis, but the residents had not been consulted and would there be an opportunity for Buckhurst Hill to move to Redbridge Borough Council? The Leader replied that he did not believe the residents in Buckhurst Hill would want to move to Redbridge BC. This was about the structure of this Council and working in partnership and being closer together with other councils to get the best value for our residents. Qualis brought in a substantial return and managed our business estate which was therefore important for the future.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse commented that shared services would be scrutinised by the Audit and Governance Committee this March, which would provide more clarity. Why was a reserve figure of £3 million decided upon and what would be the criteria for taking money out of this reserve? The Leader replied that there was no particular reason for the £3 million reserve figure, but it was reached after due consideration and would be worked with over a period of time. It was important this was a transparent process that would be regularly scrutinised.

The report set out the options considered, if any, and the reasons for the recommendation and the decision.

Decision:

- (1) That the Cabinet agreed to the creation of a Reserve of up to £3 million for the purposes of investing in the Council's Fit for the Future Portfolio. The Reserve was to be created using part of the initial windfall of interest income created from the sale of part of the employment land at North Weald. Funding would be taken from the Revenue Budget over a period of two years, as far as delivering a balanced budget allowed.
- (2) That the Cabinet agreed that funding in 2024/25 of up to £40,000 would be considered as part of the 2024/25 budget process, for the purposes of establishing a post to collectively represent North Essex Councils (appendix A)

and to establish a detailed terms of reference for NEC and develop a clear programme of work.

- (3) That the Cabinet agreed the Council should work with Braintree District Council and Colchester City Council to develop a full business case and proposed approach to delivery for a single shared back office for the corporate services referenced in this report and to approve the release of £180K from the Transformation Reserve to support development of the business case.
- (4) That the Cabinet noted that a full governance proposal for the Fit for the Future transformation reserve would be presented to the Cabinet for agreement in March 2024.

105 ADJOURNMENT OF CABINET MEETING

The Cabinet agreed to adjourn the meeting to 6 February 2024 and resume at 19.00 to consider the remaining agenda items below:

- Quarter 3 Budget Monitoring Report
- Any Other Business: Draft Budget Proposals for 2024/25
- Exclusion of Public and Press: Any Other Business – Draft Budget Proposals for 2024/5 (Appendix Eii)

106 QUARTER 3 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2023/24

The Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder, Councillor J Philip, reported that in respect of the capital position, the sale of the land to Google at North Weald Airfield had made a significant change and had an encouraging effect on the rest of the municipal year in that the Council had more than £4 million in reserves. Therefore, the quarter 3 forecast represented a positive outlook. This income though did not affect strategic tax changes the Council had to make. These were detailed in the report along with the General Fund Revenue Budget that forecast overspends on Planning & Development (£1,034,467), HRA Recharges (£310,000) and Customer Services (£325,200). In addition, the underspend forecasts included Corporate Services, mainly ICT, (£445,460) and Community & Wellbeing (£397,709) because of the Government's homelessness grant received by the Council. The Portfolio Holder outlined the changes in the HRA revenue forecast, General Fund Capital Programme, HRA Capital Programme, and the wider financial performance and risk also specified in the report. No questions were raised by other Cabinet members or councillors present at the meeting.

The report set out the options considered, if any, and the reasons for the recommendation and the decision.

Decision:

- (1) That the Cabinet noted the General Fund revenue position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2023) for 2023/24, including actions being undertaken or proposed to ameliorate the position, where significant variances had been identified (including Appendix A).
- (2) That the Cabinet noted the General Fund capital position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2023) for 2023/24 (including Appendix B).
- (3) That the Cabinet noted the Housing Revenue Account revenue position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2023) for 2023/24, including actions proposed to ameliorate the position, where significant variances had been identified.

- (4) That the Cabinet noted the Housing Revenue Account capital position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2023) for 2023/24 (including Appendix C).
- (5) That the Cabinet noted the wider position on Financial Performance and Risk at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2023).

107 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

(a) Draft Budget Proposals for 2024/25

The Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder remarked that the Fit for the Future programme was a key part of the draft budget. Through transformation some of the financial impacts would decrease and the Council might be able to reduce staff numbers through natural wastage rather than by redundancies. The General Fund MTFP included a £2.152 million contribution to the Transformation Revenue Reserve. The report listed the budget cuts, but this draft budget was allowing the Council to preserve the Police for a short time, keep the Highway Rangers and allocate funding to some of the Youth Council's projects. Inflation would continue, as would Council costs continue to rise. With staff salaries likely to increase next year, the Council must continue to balance outgoings with incoming revenue.

The Housing and Strategic Health Partnerships Portfolio Holder welcomed the retention of the Police for a further year and was of the opinion the Council should publicise the achievements of the Police, who continued working on County Lines operations and dealing with anti-social behaviour in The Broadway, Loughton. The Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder stated it was important that residents understood the importance of the Police achievements especially in the rural areas of the district, such as with thefts of farm vehicles, and the additional services provided to our residents.

Several Cabinet members praised the exceptional services the Highway Rangers provided, which benefitted the district and helped local councils save money. Councillor N Bedford commented that from the increase in fees and with more planning applications coming into Planning (Development Management), this would all help to increase revenue. The Leader and Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder had been reluctant to increase Council Tax, but it was proposed to go up by 2.99%, which equated to 9 pence per week for a Band D property. Income from Qualis and the Government grants announced on 5 February all contributed to the Council's income.

Councillor S Murray thanked the Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder for the draft budget but voiced his concern over the removal of grants to Citizens Advice (CA) and Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) which helped people in the district. Councillor J Philip replied that all service directorates had been tasked with making savings. Therefore, it was unfair for voluntary groups not to have a reduction, but the impact had been reduced for this municipal year and to lessen the impact further, the Council could schedule in the payment reductions.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse welcomed the news on the Highway Rangers but the proposed reduction in funding for CA and VAEF would be significant for residents. There was often no other alternative for residents other than CA. She was also concerned about the proposed savings in Democratic Services and with their staff reduction last year would feel reluctant to increase their workload, e.g. with a Task and Finish Panel. Councillor J Philip recognised it was not ideal for the funding reductions proposed for CA and VAEF and might relook at these. He continued that greater savings on Member allowances would be achieved as only 54 councillors would be elected this May, so the impact on Democratic Services would be less. It was important scrutiny members looked at their options on what could be achieved by reviewing particular reports or policies, so that time could be freed up for a Task and Finish Panel if this was what they wanted to do. In reply to Councillor D Wixley's query on scrutiny,

Councillor J Philip would not tell Overview and Scrutiny what to scrutinise, but it might help to establish if there was enough support and interest to scrutinise something or scrutinise in a different way.

Councillor R Brookes remarked that there was still much to be done on The Broadway redevelopment, which had been allocated some funding in the budget. Councillor J Philip agreed that the Council needed to preserve the funding for the development of The Broadway.

The report set out the options considered, if any, and the reasons for the recommendation and the decision.

Decision:

- (1) That the Cabinet considered the final revenue and capital budget proposals for 2024/25 as presented in Appendices A to E of this report, together with the comments received from the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.
- (2) That the Leader and the Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder (in conjunction with other Cabinet members if necessary) could agree any further minor changes prior to the Draft Budget 2024/25 being recommended to Full Council for approval.
- (3) That the Cabinet recommended to Council:
 - (a) The budget for 2024/25 and the updated Medium-Term Financial Plan; and
 - (b) The level of Council Tax increase for 2024/25.

108 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

(b) Any Other Business: Draft Budget Proposals for 2024/5 (Appendix Eii)

The Leader announced that the Cabinet would go into private session as questions were to be raised regarding Appendix Eii, which included exempt information as defined below.

Decision:

That in accordance with Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the item of business set out below on grounds that it would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the following paragraph(s) of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act (as amended) or are confidential under Section 100(A)(2):

Agenda Item No	Subject	Exempt Information Paragraph Number
13 a	Any Other Business – Budget Proposals 2024/5 – Appendix Eii	3

CHAIRMAN