

Report to the Council

Committee: Council
Date: 23 July 2024
Subject: Finance & Economic Development Portfolio
Portfolio Holder: Cllr H Whitbread

Recommending:

That the report of the Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder be noted.

1. Finance

Outturn 2024/25

The Council declared the outturn position at Cabinet on 28 May 2024 and published draft Accounts to its website on the same day. Achieving publication before the end of May is a significant achievement, considering the ongoing major delays being experienced across the sector in relation to Audit.

The reported highlighted the good news that the large projected overspend, which had been forecast up until December 2024, had been reversed and the Council ended the year with a surplus, bringing General Fund balances back to their assessed minimum level. The sale of land to Google and the interest generated on that sale receipt, being the largest factor in securing the positive outturn position.

The report sets out a full explanation of the outturn position for the Council, including the Housing Revenue Account and on the Capital Programme.

Budget for 2024/25 and Beyond

It is too early to draw a conclusion on the how the current year will develop but there is positive news. Inflation has now reduced to the Government's long term target level of 2% and this reduces pressure on costs. For now, interest rates remain higher, although expected to reduce later in the year. With the Google receipt still in the bank the higher interest rates continue to benefit the Council. Pay remains an issue with the unions recommending rejection of the national employers' final offer. If the final settlement is negotiated higher, this will put additional pressure on budgets. We continue to watch the position closely. Finally, planning work for the new in-house Waste Collection service continues, including developing detailed operational budgets. The costs of running this service won't be fully understood until daily collections commence, but with such a large and expensive service, we are aware that actual costs might vary significantly from our planning assumptions.

Beyond this, a new incoming Government may want to differently prioritise the financial support given to councils each year. Any policy proposals or changes at a national

Government level will need to be closely monitored and their implications understood as part of developing next year's budget and in terms of updating the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

I expect to bring forward a paper soon which sets out the proposed approach for developing the next year's budget, which embraces our learnings and the best elements from last year's budget setting process.

Audit

Our Auditors finally agreed and signed off our outstanding Accounts for 2020/21 with a clean bill of health. They are now also close to completing 2021/22.

As previously reported, the issue of delayed Audit opinions is a national issue, replicated across the Country. At last count, there were 634 opinions outstanding, (not including Audits for 2023/24). This is completely unacceptable as at a time of heightened financial pressure on Local Government, elected members and residents are not being given the reassurance they need on the financial health of their local council. The Government has proposed a solution which includes a longstop date of 30 September 2024 by which all outstanding audits prior to 2023/24, must be concluded. Unfortunately, the dissolution of Parliament for the General Election on the 4 July 2024 has meant that the necessary legislation could not be passed and so now this date looks unlikely.

We continue to work with our Auditors to reach conclusions well ahead of this expected statutory deadline, but it appears increasingly likely that some Audits, (probably 2022/23), will not be signed off by our Auditors before this date. Whilst this is wholly unsatisfactory, the imposition of fixed dates at least provides reassurance that we might finally move beyond this issue.

I will continue to lobby for an urgent resolution to this wholly unsatisfactory situation.

2. Economic Development

Economic Development Programme

Confirmation has been received from Central Government of funds for the third year (2024/2025) of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

The third-year investment programme includes the development of training and skills programmes in the district's most deprived Lower Super Output Areas, subsidised Project Management and HGV training to support skill growth across the district and the continuation of the small business support programme for a second year. The Team has also developed a comprehensive Third Sector training programme to support the growth and sustainability of local charities and community groups. The third-year programme also includes the development of two new play areas, one on the Limes Farm Estate in Chigwell to support the 'Place Based Approach' to address health inequalities and one in Nazeing.

The Council's approach to the allocation of the UK Shared Prosperity Funding has received positive feedback from central government. Officers have submitted two case studies to central government, the Discover app and the Ninefields playground development, as models of best practice.

As part of the Council's third year of UK Shared Prosperity Funding investment, 9th July will see the launch of an Empowering Epping Forest Female Entrepreneurs Programme. The Programme aims to boost female entrepreneurship in the district by supporting a minimum of sixty female residents through their business journey from the ideas phase to launching products or services. To support the programme, the Council is working closely with Essex County Council's Ambitious Women's Programme, and on the 26th June the first Epping Forest Ambitious Women's Network was held. The event was attended by forty local businesses women.

A new round of Rural England Prosperity Funding has been launched. The fund is open to Town and Parish Councils, Community Groups or Charities based in DEFRA designated rural areas of the Epping Forest district. The funding is to support capital projects and groups can apply for anything between ten to fifty thousand pounds. The closing date for the first round of applications is the 26th July 2024.

A new promotional initiative to utilise the lamp post banners around the district was completed in time for the 2024 RideLondon event. The banners promote the new Discover App on one side and a mix of eight free things-to-do across the district on the reverse. Attractions featured have been in contact with complimentary comments and other local attractions have enquired to be included in future initiatives. Further analysis is to be received from the Discover App team to gauge the impact of the lamp post banner campaign. Additionally, the Discover App continues to operate across the various towns in the district and content on the App is being updated accordingly with local events and offers. Two new additional areas have now been added to the App, Theydon Bois and North Weald.

The district's inward investment website, 'Invest Epping Forest,' is undergoing a comprehensive overhaul. The initial phase, which involved mapping the pages, navigation, and capturing all existing content, has been successfully completed. The subsequent task involves reviewing the content to identify outdated or incorrect information and links that require updates or deletion. New information will be incorporated to reflect recent developments, including the North Essex Economic Board (NEEB), the Google purchase at North Weald Airfield, and the latest materials released by the Innovation Core, which will be integrated into the site.

At the latest meeting for the NEEB's 'Young Entrepreneurs Programme', new initiatives were discussed such as offering young individuals grants of £5,000 to support innovative business ideas, a recognition programme to celebrate and highlight the achievements of 30 young entrepreneurs under the age of 30, promoting their success stories within the community and offering market stalls to young individuals to gain experience of selling face-to-face directly to customers.

Monthly Business E-Newsletter

The Economic Development Team has released the June edition of the 'Business Matters' e-newsletter to over 2,000 local businesses with topics focusing on free business advice and guidance from West Essex Business Support, fully funded HGV courses & PRINCE2 qualifications for residents, Essex County Council's Climate Advice pack for businesses trying to achieve sustainability and the upcoming digital switchover.

The July edition is currently being developed and will be released at the end of the month. If you would like to receive a copy of the monthly e-newsletter, please contact Matteo Pesci at mpesci@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Visitor Economy

The latest tourism value and volume report for the district is due out soon and will give a steer on growth and changing habits of visitors in 2023. The intelligence gained and the overall picture of growth and opportunity will be the catalyst to bring local attraction stakeholders together to launch a reconstituted Tourism Board.

The tourism website continues to achieve visitor views of around 7k+ a week and new pages and attractions are constantly being added. The events pages list all the major known activities throughout the summer and more will be added as they are announced. The site is also used to promote council activities such as Countrycare events and the holiday period 'Play in the Park' offer.

Multiply Funding

The Council has been awarded ten thousand pounds funding from Essex County Council to support the delivery of the Multiply Maths programme to residents in the district. The funding will be used to deliver programmes across the district with a particular focus on residents living in the Council's independent living schemes, adults with disabilities and those who are living in rural areas.

Chamber of Commerce

Officers will be working in partnership with the Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce to develop quarterly business engagement events and an annual business awards programme.

3. Corporate Communications

The Corporate Communications team continues to provide a full programme of media liaison, social media, website, webcasting and marketing services on behalf of the Council.

The 2024 May local elections has been a focus point for the team over the last few months, providing support in the lead up to, on the polling day and throughout the count days. The team published and shared various resources to help voters ensure they were election ready. This included blogs from the Returning Officer with information and reminders about postal votes, photo ID, town and parish council elections and PFCC and what to expect at a polling station.

This support has continued with the announcement of a general election on 4 July, again with corporate communications playing an active role in its planning and promotion.

After the local elections, the team welcomed a new Chairman and Vice Chairman of Council, who already had a host of events to attend in their diaries. This included the Epping Community Fete for Ford Ride London-Essex at the end of May, and a special event at North Weald Airfield at the start of June to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings.

The team organise various celebration, commemoration, and awareness campaigns throughout the year, marking each one by flying a dedicated flag or arranging for the Civic Offices to be lit in a certain colour.

There is a high demand from different organisations and causes for this type of request and with only one flagpole to use (there are two outside the Civic Offices but one must

always have the Union Jack flag flying), it is difficult to represent all campaigns. Chairman of Council is part of the decision process to help ensure there is a balanced representation of interests. Each flag or lighting is accompanied with its own publicity internally and externally.

June is a particularly busy month for commemoration days with flags flying for D-Day 80, Windrush Day, Essex Pride and Armed Forces Day.

Earlier this month, Internal Communications was welcomed back into Corporate Communications, having moved over to the People Team in 2021. Both teams continued to work closely together while under different directorates as many of the projects had internal / external cross overs and look forward to collaborating on future projects.

The team continues to provide specific support for the new waste and recycling contract, shared services, the new Epping Forest Community Lottery and the new Epping Leisure Centre.

Corporate Communications is still exploring the use of links in posts on Facebook. A discussion with Essex communication colleagues revealed that some posts were not getting the expected level of engagement on the Meta platform when they contained a link to a website where followers could action something or get further information. This has led to an on-going experiment – some post with and without links – to test engagement and impression rates.

Social Media Engagement Table

Platform subscribers	February 2024	May 2024
Facebook	4,844	4,896
Instagram	2,629	2,654
LinkedIn	3,438	3,541
X (Twitter)	9,990	9,964
Mailchimp	1,568	1,626

Social media channels are monitored out of hours on a rota by members of the Corporate Communications team, up to 10pm weekdays and 9pm at weekends. The team also provides monitoring and customer response services on bank holidays including Christmas and the New Year.

Webcasting

The Council's YouTube webcasting channel is working well - in the previous 28 days from 28 June it had 382 views. Corporate Communications has an archive of webcast meetings on YouTube dating back to 2018.

Rich webcasting content that include agenda points and links to agendas continues to be provided for the council's main meetings which are streamed live on the Public-i platform.

Webcasts March to June 2024

- 15 live meetings totalling 23 hours 16 minutes
- 8 recorded meetings totalling 11 hours 46 minutes

Top 3 viewed:

- Cabinet 28 May - 311 views (278 Public-i + 33 YouTube) – including 40 live views
- Council 23 May - 311 views (239 Public-i + 72 YouTube) – including 58 live views
- Area Planning Sub-Committee South 12 June - 285 views (231 Public-i + 54 YouTube) – including 94 live views

Using hearing aids at meetings in the council chamber

Corporate communications have successfully tested a new system called **Sennheiser MobileConnect** to help people with hearing aids listen to meetings more clearly. Taking an audio feed from the chamber's microphone system and connects to a smartphone running the MobileConnect app via wifi.

Any councillors or our employees can get help to set up and use MobileConnect, the Corporate Communications Team will be holding a **connect and test session** before Council on 23 July between 6pm and 6.30pm.

Corporate communications would like to thank both the ICT and facilities teams that have helped improve and maintain the technology in the Council Chamber.