

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 1 November 2011

Subject: Finance and Economic Development Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Gagan Mohindra

Recommending:

That the report of the Finance & Economic Development Portfolio

Holder be noted

Accountancy

The Financial Issues Paper is the formal start of the budget cycle and this was presented to the Finance & Performance Management Cabinet Committee on 26 September. The recommendations from that Committee will be considered by Cabinet on 24 October. If those recommendations are adopted the Continuing Services Budget for 2012/13 will be capped at £14.9 million and net spending from the District Development Fund will be capped at £0.8 million. Progress towards the savings target of £1.3 million for 2012/13 has been good and already over £1 million has been identified. Several ideas are being explored that will contribute to net savings in 2012/13 and subsequent years. The consultancy work being undertaken by PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Ernst and Young is still being concluded, but these projects are expected to yield further ideas.

Members may be aware that the Government has again offered a grant to support authorities in freezing their Council Tax. There is a concern that this funding is just for one year and not consolidated in ongoing funding, but it is still likely that the offer will be accepted.

Benefits

Following consideration by both the Finance & Performance Management Scrutiny Panel and the Finance & Performance Management Cabinet Committee a detailed response was submitted to the consultation on the localisation of Council Tax Benefit. In addition to this Council's own response a joint response was also agreed with the other Essex districts and Essex County Council.

The next meeting of the Finance & Performance Management Scrutiny Panel on 15 November will receive the second quarter performance data. The two key indicators for Benefits are the time taken to process new claims and the time taken to process changes of circumstance. For new claims the average performance of 26.7 days is above the target of 23 days and efforts will be made to get back closer to the target in the second half of the year. Average performance on changes of circumstance is 8.2 days and is close to achieving the target of 8 days.

Revenues

The consultation response to the Local Government Resource Review, which I mentioned in my previous report, was delayed to allow consideration of a joint response by the Essex Leaders Strategic Finance Group on 13 October. A draft response, incorporating the Essex view where possible, has been issued as a supplementary report for Cabinet on 24 October.

The second quarter collections statistics for Revenues are encouraging and if the progress is maintained the full year targets should be achieved. At the end of September 52.7% (2010/11 52.4%) of Council Tax had been collected and 56.2% (2010/11 56.1%) of Non Domestic Rates.

Economic Development

The Council continues to make good progress with its work to support the local economy working through One Epping Forest with our partners such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Business.

The new Business Charter was launched successfully at a special event at the White Water Centre. Work is now underway to increase the number of public sector bodies and local businesses who are signatories to the Charter. A Procurement Masterclass has been arranged in January at Epping Forest College which will bring local suppliers and businesses together with Officers responsible for procurement from major public sector organisations in the area.

In order to support local independent traders at a challenging economic time a new 'shop local' website is being commissioned to promote local shops and enable residents to access discounts online. This will be built with financial support from the Council via partners on One Epping Forest and run by the Chamber of Commerce.

In order to develop closer working relationship with economic development and business organisations in North London the Leader/Chairman of One Epping Forest has been holding a series of meetings with Members and Officers from the North London Strategic Alliance (NLSA). A number of options for areas of joint work and support are being examined before final recommendations are brought forward but Officers are now sharing data/research etc and information about ongoing and planned projects that may have implications/opportunities.

Following the excellent news that the West Essex Alliance has been awarded Enterprise Zone status for sites in Harlow, district members of the Alliance Board are currently working to ensure that benefits of the Zone are managed and shared effectively across West Essex. The latest meeting of the West Essex Alliance Board was hosted here at the Civic Offices. We are also aware that the current Chairman of the West Essex Alliance has now been appointed as Chairman of the whole Southeast Local Enterprise Partnership. It is good to know that someone who is intimately aware of the strengths and opportunities of the West Essex corridor has now assumed such an important and pivotal role in the wider LEP.

The successful West Essex Future Jobs project is now coming to an end and meetings are being organised by the Government's new contractors in the Eastern Region on the single programme to maintain effective provision for supporting unemployed people back into work. A bid to Jobcentre Plus for a new local programme is also being prepared.

The White Water Canoe Centre Economic Development Study was presented to the Local Development Framework Cabinet Committee on 3 October and the Olympic Regeneration Officer's work schedule was approved for the next 6 months. This includes submitting a first stage application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for the Town Heritage Initiative in an effort to secure funding for public realm and listed building improvement works and heritage related training and practical conservation skills attainment courses.

Waltham Abbey Town Partnership, other Partners and EFDC will be discussing opportunities for funding yearly events, such as the successful Great British Cucumber Festival held in September, aimed at supporting and promoting our important business sectors.

The Council will continue to work closely with its partners to identify new ideas and opportunities to support and strengthen the local economy.

Performance Management

Value For Money and Data Quality Strategies 2010/11-2012/13

The Finance and Performance Management Cabinet Committee and Scrutiny Panel have reviewed progress against the Council's Value For Money and Data Quality Strategies, which were adopted in September 2010. The Value For Money Strategy sets out the Council's approach to providing value for money services, and the Data Quality Strategy details arrangements to secure the quality of the data used to manage functions and services. The strategies build upon previous work to address issues arising from former assessment and inspection frameworks, and highlight areas of best practice.

The majority of actions in the strategies were intended to be completed during 2010/11, and were achieved by 31 March 2011. It was not anticipated that further actions would be adopted for the remaining years of the strategies, and Members did not consider it necessary to identify further value for money or data quality actions, although progress against outstanding or ongoing actions will be reported at the end of 2011/12. However, it is possible that additional actions or activities may arise through the work currently being undertaken by PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Ernst and Young. The recommendations arising from these exercises will be considered by the Cabinet shortly.

Key Performance Indicators 2011/12

The Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Panel has also reviewed progress against the Council's Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for the first quarter of 2011/12. The three-month position with regard to the achievement of target performance for the twenty-eight quarterly monitored KPIs for 2011/12, is as follows:

- (a) 15 (53.57%) achieved the first quarter performance target for 2011/12;
- (b) 12 (42.86%) did not achieve the first quarter performance target for 2011/12; and
- (c) 1 (3.57%) could not be reported for the first quarter of 2011/12. This outstanding information will therefore be reported to the next meeting of the Scrutiny Panel.

In accordance with usual practice at the end of the first quarter each year, the Scrutiny Panel has also considered the improvement plans for each of the KPIs that did not achieve the first quarter performance target for 2011/12.

The Corporate Strategy Guide is now live on the Council's website, and has been updated with the first quarter KPI performance reports for 2011/12. The publication of the guide provided an opportunity for a full review of the description and associated definition for each KPI to be undertaken, in order that information is presented in as simple and transparent way as possible.

Facilities Management & Estates

The major task of the five year property survey and the associated updating of the maintenance programme is underway. Good progress is being made and a full report should be available for Cabinet in December.

This report is being written before the meeting of the North Weald Airfield and Asset Management Cabinet Committee on 25 October. If there are any significant outcomes from that meeting I will provide an oral update.