

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF STRONGER COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY, 14 JANUARY 2020
IN COUNCIL CHAMBER - CIVIC OFFICES
AT 7.30 - 8.30 PM**

Members Present:	P Bolton (Chairman), , R Bassett, H Brady, R Brookes, D Dorrell, H Kane, S Rackham, J M Whitehouse and R Baldwin
Other members present:	S Kane and J Philip
Apologies for Absence:	M Owen
Officers Present	R Perrin (Democratic Services Officer), J Chandler (Service Director (Community & Partnership Services)), N Dawe (Interim Strategic Director & Chief Financial Officer), D Fenton (Service Manager (Housing Management & Home Ownership)), S Lewis (Customer Services Manager), P Maginnis (Service Director (Business Support Services)), S Mitchell (PR Website Editor), N Richardson (Service Director (Planning Services)) and L Wade (Service Manager People & Performance).

22. 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.

23. SUBSITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Committee noted that Councillor R Baldwin would substitute for Councillor M Owen for the duration of this meeting.

24. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

That the notes of the meeting held 15 October 2019 were agreed as a correct record.

25. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

26. TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME

The Select Committee noted the terms of reference and work programme.

27. DRAFT FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2020/21

The Interim Strategic Director (Finance), N Dawe introduced a report on the draft financial strategy for 2020/21 which included;

- the Medium-Term Financial Strategy of the Authority;
- the Budget for 2020/21;

- Prudential Indicators; and
- the proposed Council Tax Increase.

All of which were linked and formed around the aim of delivering a sustainable growth strategy and acting prudently throughout the planning period. The final figures were awaiting the Governments announcements and allowed for a cumulative net impact of £500,000 on the direction of the Leader and in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Section 151 Officer. Any adjustments that required a value more than £500,000 would be brought back to the Cabinet before being agreed by the Council on 25 February 2020.

The Interim Strategic Director gave further details on the following elements of the Financial Strategy;

Medium Term Financial Strategy

- The prudent estimates in the Medium Term Financial Strategy, particularly in respect of inflation of cost, charges and fees, and the aim to maintain the financial strength of the Authority had been evidenced by reserve balances and would be broadly maintained throughout the MTFS period; and
- There was an increased importance on the income from Qualis in respect of the MTFS and the budget.

Budget 2020/21

- That the approach to cost and income inflation would be 3.0%;
- That rents would increase as per the national formula by 2.7%;
- That car parking income would not rise and awaited the outcome of the parking review;
- That there was a confirmed list of developments for which funding would be released on implementation with details on how they would be prioritised and grouped;
- That the General and HRA capital spend was £26,171,528 with the Council House Building Programme and the Accommodation Strategy being the largest projects planned;
- That the loans to Qualis totalled up to £160m in 2020/21 which were reliant on income from Qualis and the prudent reduction of the estimates in the first year of operation; and
- That the overall funding adjustments for District Development Fund (DDF), savings and contingency were a net draw from DDF of £1,774,906 (£2m forecast last year), £500,000 of savings and the formation of a contingency fund which assumed a spend of £1,095,540.

Prudential Indicators

- That the Council intended keeping the financial strength of the Authority at current levels;
- That the impact of taking and granting loans to Qualis would have a margin of profit for the Authority;
- That there was a general risk price approach to the loans granted to Qualis; and
- That the full set of prudential indicators along with the Treasury Strategy would be presented to the Full Council on 25 February 2020.

Council Tax Increase

- That council tax would increase by 1.5% which was half of the predicted inflation rate for 2020/21; and
- That the options to cease or reduce council tax rates existed although there was an accepted Government expectation on what should be raised from council tax.

Councillor R Bassett asked what the current growth rates were in the District and what were the effects of the delay to the sustainable housing and business growth set out in Local Development Plan(LDP), following the continued discussions with Natural England around the air quality and forest. The Interim Strategic Director advised that the MTFs had been completed on a prudent basis with previous information from the Council's housing and business rate collections being projected forward. The figures were currently below the Council's LDP although it was expected that the figures would improve. The Planning Services Portfolio Holder advised that the Council hoped to go out to consultation on the main modification in the summer, which would hopefully allow the growth to increase.

Councillor R Brookes asked whether the Council would borrow entirely from the Public Works Loan Board(PWLB) or partly from the Council's reserves for Qualis. The Interim Strategic Director advised that all the figures assumed that the Council would borrow at PWLB Fund Rate and the Council would supply Qualis with loans at the market rate, which the Council would be obliged to do so by law. There would be some loans from current cash flows and not the reserves and other sources were available although still being considered.

Councillor R Bassett expressed concern over the rent increase of 2.7%. The Service Manager (Housing Management & Home Ownership Team), D Fenton advised that officers were working with tenants to sustain tenancies with the help of Tenancy Sustainment Officers and working with tenants who were experiencing problems.

Councillor R Bassett asked whether the outstanding Business Rate appeals were of concern, as well as the Governments indicated review of the Business Rate system. The Interim Strategic Director advised the funds to set aside for appeals and liabilities were appropriate and prudent. In regards to the review, the figures had been set out in the budget as neutral until further information was received.

Councillor S Rackham asked what the reference 'from' and 'to' in the reserves columns meant and why there were minus figures. The Interim Strategic Director advised that each year expenditure and income did not match exactly, and the minus figures represented the figures going in and out of the reserves, which was normal practise so long as the reserves were not depleted.

Councillor J M Whitehouse asked what the differences was between the figures set in the three Revenue columns for 2020/21 contained in the Development Summary. Also whether the plus and minus figures reflected an item that was not continuing into future years. The Interim Strategic Director advised that the Development Summary was a detailed summary mainly for finance officers use and represented items submitted by officers. The figures represented a change in-year as well as non-concurrent items.

Councillor J M Whitehouse asked when the changes for the next four year period on the balance sheet would be available. The Interim Strategic Director advised that it would be available shortly.

Councillor R Bassett asked whether the detailed Development Summary could be enlarged, to enable members to understand the detail. The Interim Strategic Director advised that the Development Summary had been intended for internal use and that the individual items, which had been grouped into the three corporate objectives would have detailed information when presented to Council in February. Members were welcome to request this information beforehand if required.

Councillor R Bassett asked whether the Council had any indication of the how the review of business rates would affect the Council's recent purchases and new development sites within the District. The Interim Strategic Director advised that where developments had happened, and purchases had been made, these would be included within budget. As for other items, officers had used previous trends and were awaiting national policies but were being neutral but prudent with the figures.

Councillor J M Whitehouse asked what the additional £3m was for in relation to the Ongar Leisure Centre and why there were no future costs for the Epping Leisure Centre. The Interim Strategic Director advised that the figure of £11m had been provided for the complete replacement and rebuild of Ongar Leisure Centre, which had been indicative figures, as a decision had not been made. The figures of between £1m and £8m were indicative of a refurbishment to the pre-existing leisure centre. Regarding the Epping Leisure Centre, a report would be returning to Cabinet in March 2020 with the current leisure centre remaining in place until the new leisure centre had been provided. The budget included funding for general maintenance and the new leisure centres costs had been included in the loan to Qualis, for St John's Road Development.

Councillor S Rackham asked what the further cost implications for the Council would be in relation to the pension contributions as a result of the review. The Interim Strategic Director advised that the Essex's Pension Fund periodically carried out reviews and the Council had assumed that the contribution rate would increase inline with inflation. The pension fund had recently done slightly better than expected and no unforeseen pressure, changes to national legislation or audit approaches had been expected.

Councillor H Kane asked when the Council would be expecting the outcome of the car parking review. The Interim Strategic Director advised that it would not be in time for the budget.

Councillor R Bassett asked what the benefits, risks and governance arrangements of Qualis would be for the Council. The Interim Strategic Director advised that Cabinet would be receiving a report in February/March 2020 which would set out the governance arrangements, benefits and risks of Qualis. Councillor R Bassett requested that these details were supplied to the Select Committee as soon as they were available. The Planning Services Portfolio Holder advised that Cabinet would consider the details first as Qualis was still in its infancy and that if it required further scrutiny, it may be better placed at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the draft financial strategy for 2020/21 including the Medium Term Financial Strategy, the Budget 2020/21, Prudential Indicators and the Council Tax Increase.

28. CORPORATE PLAN 2018-2023 - PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Service Director (Community & Partnerships), J Chandler reported on the Quarter 3 performance in relation to the Key Performance Indicators & Work Programmes within the Corporate Plan. She advised that the performance measures had been streamlined to enable improved focus on how Corporate Objectives were being met.

The Service Director (Community & Partnerships) reported on an exception basis for all corporate objectives that had red or amber performance ratings for quarter 3 and had invited Service Directors and Service Managers to provide an update on project targets that had not been met;

Stronger Communities**1. Engaging with the changing needs of our customers –**

- Improved Customer first contact resolution – The Service Manager (Customer), S Lewis advised that this measure reflected the contact centre resolution at the first point of contact. There had been an upward trend since September 2019 which had resulted in a 44.13% figure for December 2019. Furthermore, the contact centre was set to gain more service areas throughout 2020 and it was thought that the target would be met by quarter 4.

Stronger Places**9. Improving the district housing offer-**

- To deliver the Council Housebuilding Programme – The Service Manager (Housing Management & Home Ownership), D Fenton advised that there had been delays on phases 2 and 3 and corrective action had been taken. In addition, to mitigate any further delays the Council had improved its internal staffing resources which included employing a Development Manager responsible for the Council House Building Programme and the procurement of an Employer Agent and Architect to reduce costs and delivery time. Officers had also been working to establish clearer financial reporting and how the Right to Buy receipts would be spent. This included either development or purchasing properties. In phase 4, four tenders had been accepted and no delays anticipated.

10. Planning development priorities & 11. Ensuring infrastructure supports growth

- Local Plan Programme – The Service Director (Planning), N Richardson advised that following the receipt of the Planning Inspector's advice on 2 August 2019, the Council had written back to the Inspector on 11 October 2019 setting out the further work to be undertaken to support an updated Habitats Regulation Assessment. It set out a timetable for the completion of the updated Habitat Regulation Assessment (HRA) and Sustainability Appraisal of the proposed Main Modifications to the Plan. This had been scheduled to be completed by Mid May 2020 with the consultation on the Main Modifications from mid June 2020. The Council had recently provided a progress report to the Inspector and the final methodology for the HRA was expected to be established in early 2020. This would enable the Council to undertake the transport modelling and air quality modelling of

various alternative scenarios in accordance with the methodology discussed with Natural England. The Planning Services Portfolio Holder advised that the Council was in a better position with their Local Plan than other adjacent authorities.

12. Supporting business enterprise & attracting investment

- St Johns Road Programme – The Cabinet in December 2019, had been rescheduled to 6 January 2020 due to the General Election on 12 December 2019.

13. People develop skills to maximise their potential & 14. Promoting retail, tourism & the visitor economy

- Growth/Skills/Employment Programme – The Service Director (Community & Partnership) advised that the presentation of the District's Economic Strategy had been deferred to include the initial findings of the recently set up Local High Street Task and Finish Panel.

Stronger Council

15. Enhancing skills & flexibility of our workforce

- People Strategy – The Service Director (Business Services) advised that;
 - (i) the Team Managers were continued to be appointed;
 - (ii) the pilot recruitment module was continuing to be developed;
 - (iii) the Recruitment Policy would begin in quarter 1 - 2020/21;
 - (iv) the Mental Health recruitment and training had begun; and
 - (v) the Job Families work continued.

Furthermore a workshop regarding the People Strategy would be arranged for members of the Committee and Cabinet.

16. Improving performance through innovation & new technology

- Digital Enablement Programme – The Service Director (Business Services) advised that draft ICT Strategy would be presented to Cabinet in March 2020 and the ICT restructure consultation would be beginning towards the end of January 2020.
- The ICT staff had been supporting the staff with mobile and flexible working.

17. Efficient use of our financial resources, buildings & assets

- Accommodation Strategy – The Service Director (Community & Partnership) advised that both the Listed Consent and Planning Applications for the Civic Offices had been agreed with conditions.

Furthermore, the Corporate Objective 7. Keeping the District safe – Community Safety Hub, had seen a 36.7% reduction in residential burglary in the District, which had involved the Council funded Police Officers.

The Committee asked a number of questions in relation to the Corporate Objectives as follows;

6. Provide Culture & Leisure – Increase new leisure centre attendees year on year

Councillor R Bassett enquired about the clarity of figures represented in the table. The Planning Services Portfolio Holder advised that the actual figures represented the number of users, which should increase over the year and the targets represented what had been set as acceptable figures. Although the figures for the December period had not yet been completed due to the deadline requirements for the publication of the agenda. Councillor R Bassett asked that an explanation be included for the Actual and Target figures.

Councillor H Brady asked who had set the targets for the leisure centre attendances. The Service Director (Community & Partnership) advised that the Leisure Management Contract Partnership Board received the detailed reports and she would ask the officer to attend the next meeting to explain the figures.

2. Supporting healthy lifestyles – Delivery of the Epping Forest Health & Wellbeing Strategy Programme

Councillor R Brookes asked who attended the Health & Wellbeing Board and what they monitored. The Service Director (Community & Partnership) advised that the Health & Wellbeing Board was chaired Councillor A Patel and the Board was made up by a number of partners including the Clinical Commission Group (CCG), further NHS commissioned services, Essex County Council Public Health commissioners and other local partners that provided health related services. Beneath the Board, were three action groups that looked at the early years, middle years and old years which encompassed the whole life course. The Board monitored the action plans of these groups; considered their effectiveness; reduced duplication; increased collaborative opportunities; and commissioned new initiatives through CCG and Public Health funding.

9. Improving the district housing offer – To deliver the Council Housebuilding Programme

Councillor D Dorrell asked about the phase 1 site at Ninefields in Waltham Abbey and what was happening with the planning permission due to expiry at the end of January 2020. The Service Manager (Housing Management & Home Ownership) advised that the site at Ninefields was in phase 4 of the Council Housebuilding Programme, although she would investigate and come back to him with further details.

10. Planning development priorities & 11. Ensuring infrastructure supports growth

Councillor H Kane asked who determined the exceptional circumstances for planning applications situated in the greenbelt during the period when the Council awaited adoption of the Local Plan. The Planning Services Portfolio Holder advised that when the Council agreed to the submission of the Local Plan, it was in conjunction with applying reasonable weight to each and every planning decision in terms of the submitted Local Plan. The Planning Inspector's response had set out areas where modifications were required, therefore if an area within the Local Plan was not included in those modifications, a significant amount of weight could contribute towards a special circumstance. Although until the Local Plan had been adopted, areas of designated greenbelt remained, and special circumstances still applied.

Councillor J M Whitehouse asked what the process was for members considering the main modification. The Planning Services Portfolio Holder advised that members had no role in the main modifications as the Planning Inspector determined them including the format and consultation process. The text for the modifications would be provided by the Council, although the Planning Inspector had to validate them with any comments being published alongside the examination document on the Council website.

15. Enhancing skills & flexibility of out workforce – People Strategy

Councillor H Kane asked how much detailed would be provided to members at the proposed People Strategy work shop. The Service Manager (Business Services) advised that it was dependent on what was being brought forward and how the strategy developed.

Councillor R Brookes asked what the pay protection policy was for staff, following the Pay and Benefits Review. The Service Manager (Business Services) advised that it totalled a period of 18 months where pay was reduced by 25% every six months. This had affected 13 staff and had been mainly due to a change in line management or they had either not applied or not been successful in the new structure. Anyone who had dropped more than 1 grade had been placed on an 'at risk' register.

Councillor R Brookes asked how many staff had left the Council in 2019. The Service Manager (Business Services) advised that she did not have the exact figures, but she would send figures to all members of the Committee.

17. Efficient use of our financial resources, buildings & assets - Accommodation Strategy

Councillor R Bassett asked for a briefing document on the Accommodation Strategy with a timescale for the project to be placed in the Members Bulletin.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted the third quarter of 2019/20 in relation to the Corporate Plan (Year 2) Performance.

29. INTERIM COUNCIL & COMMUNITY PLAN 2020

The Service Director (Community & Partnership), J Chandler advised that since the introduction of the Council's Corporate Plan 2018/23, the Council had moved forward significantly in terms of planned development and aspirations for the future.

Consequently, an interim plan had been developed to provide an overview of the initiatives that would continue or commence over 2020. This would enable a period for complete review of the Council's services and functions for the future and an opportunity for the Council to dynamically engage with its' residents and partners with a view to developing a longer-term 'inclusive' strategy for the Council and its' communities through to 2030.

The interim plan also provided an overview of the achievements of the Council against its key aims and objectives stated in the 2018-2023 Corporate Plan, which identified a 100% success rate in delivery.

The Committee commented that the section relating to Qualis needed further explanation, to be clearer to external readers of the document. Also under Stronger Council the addition of staff being equipped with the correct ICT equipment need to be included in the first point.

Finally, the committee asked that the inclusion of other methods of customer contact for residents be considered because not all residents in the District could use the latest technologies.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the Interim Council and Community Plan for 2020 with the amendments and additions stated above.

30. PEOPLE STRATEGY

The Service Director (Community & Partnership), J Chandler advised that an update on this item had been included the agenda item 8 Corporate Plan 2018-23-Performance Reporting.

31. DIGITAL ENABLEMENT STRATEGY

The Service Director (Community & Partnership), J Chandler advised that an update on this item had been included in agenda item 8 Corporate Plan 2018-23-Performance Reporting.

32. DATES OF NEXT MEETING

The Committee noted that the date of the next meeting would be held on 14 January 2020.