

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 20 February 2024

Subject: Finance, Qualis Client & Economic Development Portfolio Holder

Portfolio Holder: Councillor John Philip

Recommending:

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

Finance:

Budget for 2023/24 and 2024/25

In respect of Finance, my work has been dominated by the development of a Budget for Council to consider at this meeting. As has been said on numerous occasions, this budget has been exceptionally challenging due the impact of higher prices and borrowing costs on the Council. If this hadn't been complicated enough then the completion of the partial disposal of North Weald Airfield, and the substantial capital receipt that came with it, has added even greater complexity, (if a welcome problem to have). It also offered the potential temptation to avoid some of the hardest choices the budget necessarily contains.

The proposals presented tonight avoid the temptation to duck the difficult issues and focuses instead on creating a sustainable budget that balances the Council's expenditure with its regular income. Whilst not reliant on the receipt, it has provided some welcome flexibility and allowed for an extended timeframe to implement some of the most challenging proposals. Cabinet has worked jointly with Overview and Scrutiny Committee to develop a set of Budget proposals which are as inclusive as possible and, given the scale of the challenge faced by the Council, I believe the proposals represent a sensible and practical balance.

Audit

Whilst we continue to inch towards 'sign-off' on the Accounts for 2020/21, as at the date of writing this update, we are unfortunately still not there. I met with our Auditor and the Local Government Lead within Deloitte during the past month to express my displeasure at the delays. I was given some reassurance and an update on the issues delaying completion for us and the majority of other councils in the Country. I will continue to press them until the matter is resolved.

Economic Development Programme:

Allocations from the Rural England Prosperity Fund for 2023/24 have been awarded to the following groups:

- **Ongar and District Association** - To improve facilities at Budworth Hall including a disabled toilet and accessible entrance.

- **Nazeing Cricket Club** - To support the enhancement of the new club pavilion, enabling the club to improve community access to the site through an enhanced entry system and improved parking and Wi-Fi.
- **Theydon Garnon Parish Council** - To support roof repairs to the Grade 1 listed All Saints Church in Theydon Garnon.
- **Epping Upland Parish Council** - To extend the cemetery and create a community green space through improved access, paths, historical interpretive boards, covered areas and a wild garden for the scattering of ashes.
- **Matching Parish Council** - To undertake a project to protect the Matching village green.
- **Theydon Mount Parish Council** - To renovate the Red Telephone Box, a local landmark for the community.
- A new round of funding will open in April 2024 with a closing date for applications in September 2024.

The Rural Regeneration Report contract has been awarded to Deyton Bell Ltd. The contract will see Deyton Bell develop six reports that will assess current economic performance, challenges and opportunities for economic growth in the following key target areas:

- North Weald
- Abridge
- Theydon Bois
- Roydon
- Nazeing
- Chigwell

The contract for the West Essex Business Support Programme in Partnership with the West Essex authorities has been awarded to NWES. The programme will provide more face-to-face interaction for local businesses. Support will include advice on how to access business grants and loans, and guidance in respect of local skills opportunities.

Epping Forest District Council, Harlow Council and Uttlesford District Council have jointly awarded Anglia Ruskin University the contract for Voluntary Sector Training. The project will see the University deliver a range of training programmes for community and voluntary groups which will up-skill volunteers to fulfil vital roles.

Epping Forest District Council's Customer & Community service area will facilitate a 'Meet the Buyer' event on the 14 March 2024 at the Civic Offices. The event will be an opportunity for small and medium enterprises to meet site developers and contractors in order to build relationships and bid for future contracts.

Federation of Small Business Subsidised Membership Scheme

On Tuesday 19 December 2023, a successful promotional drop-in session was held for businesses at the Oakwood Hill Industrial Estate in Loughton between 10:30am and 3:30pm. Council staff attended the FSB's monthly meeting on 12 January 2024, which was held at Grangewood House in Loughton. Additionally, the FSB were present at the Epping

Chambers event on 23 January 2024, where they were able to network and promote the subsidised Membership Scheme to local businesses.

Further promotional activity is planned to promote the scheme including a joint event with Link Workspace in Epping, working with the Theydon Oak Public House in Epping to host an event and a summer event at the Crate in Loughton and an event in partnership with Regus.

Meet the Buyer Event

The Meet the Buyer event will take place on 14 March 2024. A stakeholder database has been created and save-the-date invites have been sent out. Developers and principal construction companies have been invited to take part by having a stall or other presence. The event will go live towards the end of January with a programme of marketing and an online site for attendees to find out more and sign-up. All aspects of the event are being provided at no cost to participants and the audience.

Monthly Business E-Newsletter

The Economic Development Team has released the January edition of the 'Business Matters' e-newsletter to over 2,000 local businesses with topics focusing on, a free workshop from Colbea for business start-up-success, how businesses can ensure that they have valued their property with the Valuation Office Agency, a public survey from Visit Essex to help shape tourism for the county in the future and a callout from The Greater South East Net Zero Hub for local installers of low carbon heating systems to benefit from their Government-funded programme. If you would like to receive a copy of the monthly e-newsletter, please contact Matteo Pesci at mpesci@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Visitor Economy

At the recent Visit Essex meeting for Local Authority Members, two presentations were made, firstly by Visit England to explain the benefits of Essex now being a Local Visitor Economic Partner (LVEP), and secondly by The Essex Film Office to report on progress and new developments. Both presentations demonstrated the commitment being made to the Visitor Economy by Essex and the benefits that are already being seen in terms of economic well-being from inward investment. The opportunities opening via new sources of support at regional and national level, and the contribution being made to encourage and build our creative industries and related skills and careers are also being seen as a significant area.

The Epping Forest District tourism website, visiteppingforest.org, had one of its best Christmases since its creation as the district hosted more events than ever. Around forty festive events were listed at any one time in the lead-up to Christmas Day, which also saw over 40,000 pages visited by 18,000 users. The top pages visited, which accounted for 8,000 views, were the Epping Forest Retail Park, Christmas at the Royal Gunpowder Mills, Epping Ongar Railway Light Fantastic, Epping Christmas Market, Carols on the Green, North Weald Market and the Ongar Christmas Tractor Run.

Economic Digest

Following previous work and amendments made to the Economic Digest in December 2023, the main findings of the report will be presented to the Senior Leadership Team on Monday 29 January 2024.

Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ)

The Digital Innovation Zone has recently held two particularly well-attended Advisory Board sessions. The December session received a presentation from Watford BC and Digital Urban on their digital twin model for planning, development management and for innovative engagement with communities on development proposals. Across the initial session, and three subsequent replay sessions, over 40 attendees saw the presentation which also included a number of videos of their initiatives and experiences to date. This was followed in

January with a presentation from Hertfordshire County Council on the Herts Living Lab project and, in particular, its application to issues of air quality monitoring and reporting - 39 people attended the session.

The next online DIZ Smart Place Seminar 'How Can Data Transform Our Place?' will take place on 8 March 2024 via Teams Live and will feature keynote presentations from the Local Government Association (LGA) and London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI). Further speakers will be added to the agenda over the coming weeks and the link to book places at this free event is the following: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/how-can-data-transform-our-place-a-diz-smart-place-seminar-tickets-796080306627>.

ICT:

Shared Service – Fit for Future

Collaboration continues between EFDC and Colchester City Council. We can already see numerous benefits, including the exchange of ideas and skills. Both councils can share their knowledge and can collaboratively work with third parties to make joint decisions on aligning the two councils i.e. Monthly, Microsoft Meetings.

EFDC and Colchester City Council have also undertaken the development of projects to address familiar challenges and to explore innovative technologies, for the benefit of the broader community. By sharing best practices, we can share successful policy implementation, Strategies, and an approach to address familiar challenges faced by the ICT Industry in local government.

ICT Projects

Priorities for ICT to deliver in the next few months continues:

- Ensuring our ESRI mapping application has all ward boundary updates for upcoming local elections
- Moving to a Software-as-a-Service, for our payments application (Pay360)
- The Corporate Document Management Solution major upgrade
- Museum migration to Trust
- Supporting the Waste project (in-house)
- Lone working application replacement
- Freedom of Information application replacement (working with Colchester City Council)
- Requirement gathering for internal room booking application replacement (working with Colchester City Council)
- Delivery a new website platform which can be used by Epping and Colchester City Council.

PMO Corporate Update

The Project Management Office (PMO) provides governance and project management resources. The PMO is currently working with service areas and the Senior Management Team (SMT) to review, align and agree key projects to EFDC's corporate objectives so that time, effort, and money can be directed and supported on the right projects.

Through the collaborative work that is underway, 13 projects are noted as EFDC's 'Corporate Priority Projects' which will be strategically aligned to EFDC's Corporate Objectives. Corporate Priority Projects will be reported on a quarterly basis through Overview and Scrutiny as well as being governed through our internal project framework. The Corporate Priority Projects are:

1. Housing and Asset Management Project (HAM's)

2. Shared Services Programme
3. M3 Replacement Project
4. Omnichannel Customer Contact Experience (Previously Telephony) – In closure stage.
5. Epping Leisure Centre Project
6. Waste Services Programme
 - a. Workstream 1: Future Waste Services Delivery
 - b. Workstream 2: Environment Operations Hub
 - c. Workstream 3: Procurement of Waste Fleet Vehicles
7. Finance Systems Replacement Project
8. Pay 360
9. EFDC Website Replacement
10. File Server Data Cleanse (Migration to Cloud based storage and improved data Governance and Compliance)
11. Infrastructure Architecture (Review of the Council's ICT platforms)
12. The Big Switch Off
13. Project Management Application Tool

The programme management office continues to work to align resources with all Projects to ensure correct prioritisation and the appropriate allocation of resources. This work will help inform the critical path with a view to complete a forward plan.

The PMO is considering new tools, that will provide EFDC with a platform where all our processes, tools, and teams work together to boost teams' alignment, efficiency, and productivity. This is being considered as a shared project across EFDC, Colchester City Council and Braintree District Council. A Project Brief has been submitted and approved by EFDC's Portfolio Steering Group and an Outline Business Case will be submitted in February to outline options for consideration.