



Essex County Council

## Corporate Policy and Scrutiny

<b>11:30</b>	<b>Tuesday, 24 November 2020</b>	<b>Online Meeting</b>
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The meeting will be open to the public via telephone or online. Details about this are on the next page. Please do not attend County Hall as no one connected with this meeting will be present.

**For information about the meeting please ask for:**

Peter Randall, Senior Democratic Services Officer

**Telephone:** 033301 36131

**Email:** democratic.services@essex.gov.uk

### Essex County Council and Committees Information

All Council and Committee Meetings are held in public unless the business is exempt in accordance with the requirements of the Local Government Act 1972.

In accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, this meeting will be held via online video conferencing.

Members of the public will be able to view and listen to any items on the agenda unless the Committee has resolved to exclude the press and public from the meeting as a result of the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972.

### How to take part in/watch the meeting:

**Participants:** (Officers and Members) will have received a personal email with their login details for the meeting. Contact the Democratic Services Officer if you have not received your login.

### Members of the public:

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## Accessing Documents

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Please note that an audio recording may be made of the meeting – at the start of the meeting the Chairman will confirm if all or part of the meeting is being recorded.

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1	<b>Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest</b>	4 - 4
2	<b>Minutes</b> To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the meeting held on 27 October 2020.	5 - 10
3	<b>Questions from the Public</b> A period of up to 15 minutes will be allowed for members of the public to ask questions or make representations on any item on the agenda for this meeting. No statement or question shall be longer than three minutes and speakers will be timed. If you would like to ask a question at the meeting, please email <a href="mailto:democratic.services@essex.gov.uk">democratic.services@essex.gov.uk</a> before 12 Noon the day before the meeting (Monday 23 November).	

**4                      Local Government Reform - update and position statement                      11 - 12**

Members to receive report (CPSC/13/20) alongside a presentation from Cllr Dick Madden, Cabinet Member for Performance, Business Planning and Partnerships and Margaret Lee, Executive Director for Corporate and Customer Services.

**5                      Date of Next Meeting**

To note that the next Committee meeting will be on Tuesday, 26 January 2021. It is expected that the meeting will be held online, via Zoom.

**6                      Urgent Business**

To consider any matter which in the opinion of the Chairman should be considered in public by reason of special circumstances (to be specified) as a matter of urgency.

**Exempt Items**

(During consideration of these items the meeting is not likely to be open to the press and public)

The following items of business have not been published on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information falling within Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972. Members are asked to consider whether or not the press and public should be excluded during the consideration of these items. If so it will be necessary for the meeting to pass a formal resolution:

**That the press and public are excluded from the meeting during the consideration of the remaining items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information falling within Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972, the specific paragraph(s) of Schedule 12A engaged being set out in the report or appendix relating to that item of business.**

**7                      Urgent Exempt Business**

To consider in private any other matter which in the opinion of the Chairman should be considered by reason of special circumstances (to be specified) as a matter of urgency.

**Committee:** Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee

**Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

**Recommendations:**

To note

1. Membership as shown below
2. Apologies and substitutions
3. Declarations of interest to be made by Members in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct

**Membership**

(Quorum 4)

Councillor M Mackrory (Chairman)  
Councillor J Abbott  
Councillor M Buckley  
Councillor G Butland  
Councillor M Garnett  
Councillor S Lissimore  
Councillor D Louis  
Councillor M Maddocks  
Councillor V Metcalfe (Vice-Chairman)  
Councillor J Moran  
Councillor M Platt  
Councillor R Pratt  
Councillor A Turrell  
Councillor J Young (Vice-Chairman)

## **Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held online, on Tuesday 27 October 2020**

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### **Present**

Councillor M Mackrory (Chairman)  
Councillor A Turrell  
Councillor M Buckley  
Councillor G Butland  
Councillor M Garnett  
Councillor J Abbott

Councillor V Metcalfe (Acting Chairman)  
Councillor J Moran  
Councillor M Platt  
Councillor S Lissimore  
Councillor D Louis  
Councillor J Young

### **1. Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

It was noted by the committee that since the last meeting Cllr A Sheldon had left the committee, to be replaced by Cllr D Louis. The Chairman thanked Cllr Sheldon for his contribution to the committee and welcomed Cllr Louis.

Also in attendance for item 4 were Cllr J Reeves, Cllr A Brown, Cllr J Baker and Cllr L Wagland.

Apologies were received from Cllr Pratt.

No declarations of interest were noted.

### **2. Minutes**

Members approved as a correct record Minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2020.

### **3. Questions from the Public**

There were no public speakers

### **4. Home Working and Staff Wellbeing**

Members received report CPSC/11/20

The panel for this item was:

- Cllr Susan Barker, Cabinet Member for Customer, Corporate, Culture and Communities
- Pam Parkes, Director, Organisation Development and People
- Alison Woods, Head of People BP and Employment Practise
- Ben Unsworth, Head of Service Transformation

Members of the committee received a presentation from Cllr Barker and other officers. Key points raised included:

- Changes to the way we work at ECC were brought about because of lockdown. Many have been successful and there is some desire to keep them. This is however, dependent on what the service is, and whether or not it adversely affects services to our residents.
- Early staff survey and desktop research found that most (77%) employees felt they were able to do their work from home.
- A hybrid approach was found to be the best model in the long term.
- High level findings from research and survey results found that:
  - o Remote working works best when it's by choice and not everyday
  - o Managers lead by example to either help or hinder remote working
  - o The right technology can reduce stress and frustration amongst employees
  - o Companies that adopt remote working see an increase in efficiencies and business process
  - o Women spend more time on childcare responsibilities at home
  - o Reduced social interaction can lead to social isolation and impact job satisfaction
  - o There are issues around the suitability of spaces to work at peoples homes.
  - o Promoting wellbeing when working from home will take a change in approach from previous strategies.
- Following employee feedback, since March the organisation has:
  - o Created better plans for the safe reopening of our workplaces
  - o Developed a home-working support package
  - o Ensured risk assessments are carried out for employees working in our offices and remotely
  - o Launched the My Wellbeing Portal
  - o Launched the new ECC Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) virtual network
  - o Launched the new Parents Network - a virtual network for parenting-related discussion and resources. It currently has 230 members.
  - o Launched O365 and Teams across the organisation
  - o Developed a package of holiday support for working parents
  - o Launched a second survey (open from 24<sup>th</sup> September to 15<sup>th</sup> October) to better understand shifts in needs, wellbeing and working experience overall

Following the presentation, Members of the committee were invited to discuss the item with officers. Key issues raised included:

- Induction of new starters – members raised concerns around how new members of staff would be made to feel comfortable in a new workplace outside of a physical office. This was particularly important with regards to young people and apprentices who likely had little or no

experience of working as part of an office team. Officers assured members that new teambuilding and training regimes would take this into account moving forward, while also building in semi-regular opportunities for teams to meet in the future.

- Risk assessments and suitable working environments – while employees have raised concerns around the suitability of space (noise, shared office space, no dedicated office space, childcare responsibilities at home etc.), members were assured that all employees had completed a number of health and safety/DSE assessments to ensure that they had all that they needed to work comfortably and safely. Additional budgets were made available to all employees to purchase items that they did not have at home.
- Customer service – member raised concerns around how our customer facing roles have adjusted to home working and the extent to which service might have suffered. Members were assured that line management processes had effectively adapted to ensure that productivity hadn't suffered. Certain services have obviously been paused (weddings etc.), but other services have seen a significant increase in engagement with online services (libraries etc.).
- New wellbeing strategy – members were informed that this was comprehensive and stressed healthy working patterns when working remotely and from home.
- The number of women ECC employs – ECC has a 75% female workforce. This has not changed materially since the last audit.
- Long meetings – guidance is being developed to ensure that regular breaks are ensured in all longer meetings and that agendas remain an appropriate length.
- Environmental/cost saving impact – this hasn't yet been adequately measured, but colloquially we're seeing marked improvements. Travel costs alone have fallen dramatically.
- Disposal of real estate – this is currently being investigated, but a new strategy has to come first.
- Home insurance issues with home working – members noted that a number of policies can be voided due to home working. ECC is investigating and will release guidance when more is known.
- Returning to the office – this will be taken on a case by case basis. The hybrid approach is favoured, with individual employee needs and wishes taken into account.

**ACTION** – Officers agreed to bring the results of the second survey back to the committee before any actions are taken as a result of findings.

Cllr Mackrory thanked officers for their time in attending the session and for their work throughout the pandemic.

## **5. Financial Overview as at the Half Year Stage**

Members of the committee received report CPSC/12/20.

The panel for this item was:

- Cllr Christopher Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance
- Nicole Wood, Executive Director, Finance and Technology
- Adrian Osborne, Head of Strategic Finance and Insight
- Christine Golding, ECC Chief Accountant

Cllr Mackrory began by acknowledging the strain that has been placed on council finances as a result of the pandemic.

Members received a presentation from officers outlining ECCs current financial position.

Key points raised by Cllr Whitbread and officers included:

- Revenue over spend of £2m (0.2%) predominantly driven by COVID-19 pressures.
- Uncertainty – impact of COVID-19 on demand for services and future income means it continues to be challenging to provide a forecast for the year.
- Still some potentially significant unquantified COVID-19 commitments to come, including Home to School Transport and impact of the end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.
- Emergency government funding of £73m has been received to date – does not cover the value of COVID-19 commitments we currently have. Allocation of £1bn fourth tranche of emergency funding recently announced a further £11.8m.
- ECC will receive £3 per head of the population for being a “High” level COVID alert area – “to support proactive containment and intervention measures”.
- Capital under spend of £5.8m (2.6%) against the latest budget of £228m.

In relation to the financial impact of Covid-19:

- Decisions totalling £76.1m made in relation to COVID-19
- £57m originally in relation to Adult Social Care – Q2 report returns £3.3m of reserves provided as demand lower than anticipated and income received from CCG, partially offset by loss of residential income
- £15.6m of decisions for loss of income – estimated income losses greater than original decisions – pressure reflected in Q2 over spend
- First claim made for Fees and Charges income loss compensation scheme – For April-July claim of £1.6m submitted
- Emergency funding to date is £73m – however latest allocation will take to £85m, should cover current pressures but impact is changing all the time
- Recommendation in the report adds £4.5m to the Recovery Reserve – support COVID recovery strategies
- Loss of Council Tax base a significant concern – current data estimates a £25m loss on collection fund for 2020/21, which will create



pressure in future years –still no guarantees have been given to support the loss of tax base in 2021/22. There are also no guarantees on continuation of the fees and charges loss compensation scheme in 2021/22.

Following the presentation, members of the committee were invited to discuss the item with the Cabinet Member and Officers. Key points raised included:

- The rolling over of capital underspends – members were assured that these are being reviewed.
- Future plans to meet budget gap arising from covid-19 spending – members were informed that there is still uncertainty around what future budgets will look like. The picture will be clearer once council tax receipts for the year are finalised.
- Council tax income – members were informed that, while there is still little clarity, early reports suggest that even from usually high collection authorities, the amount has dropped considerably. It is estimated that the drop in collection is around 2.5%. It is unclear what impact the government's job retention scheme will have on collection rates.
- Redundancies at ECC – no core employees were made redundant, but some staff from our commercial activities were placed on furlough.
- Funding streams associated with covid-19 – members raised concerns around how much money was coming in relating to covid-19 with little or no oversight over how it was being spent. Assurances were provided that greater and more timely detail would be provided in future.

**ACTION** – Members raised questions around what is happening with the waste reserve now that litigation with related parties has come to a conclusion. A confidential briefing note was promised to support future discussions.

## **6. Date of Next Meeting**

The next full committee day was noted as Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> November. In a change to usual time the committee would begin at 11.30, on the rise of cabinet.

## **7. Urgent Business**

None received

## **8. Urgent exempt Business**

None received

**Close of meeting**

The formal meeting closed at 12.30

<b>Report title:</b> Local Government Reform – Update and Position Statement	
<b>Report to:</b> Corporate Scrutiny Committee	
<b>Report author:</b> David Finch, Leader	
<b>Date:</b> 24 <sup>th</sup> November 2020	<b>For:</b> Discussion
<b>Enquiries to:</b> Gavin Jones, Chief Executive	
<b>County Divisions affected:</b> All Essex	

### 1. Purpose of Report

To update Corporate Scrutiny Committee on ECC's position with regard to LGR.

### 2. Session aims

For the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to note ECC's position.

### 3. Summary

On 3<sup>rd</sup> July, the then Minister for Local Government, Simon Clarke MP, gave a speech to the LGA Conference setting out the Government's vision for local government – building on commitments made in the Conservative Party manifesto.

He confirmed that the Government would be issuing a White Paper on devolution and local recovery in the autumn that would set out plans for “many more elected mayors and more unitary councils following in the footsteps of Dorset, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire so that we can remove the complexity of governance and reduce costs to the taxpayer while making space for town and parish councils to be genuinely empowered.”

In a bilateral meeting with the Leader of Essex County Council, Simon Clarke expressed strong interest in Essex developing a local government reform (LGR) proposal and being amongst an early wave of potential LGR candidates.

Following this steer from the Minister both about national policy and about the prospects for Essex specifically, the County Council convened a meeting of Leaders from across the city, borough and the district councils and the two unitaries of Southend and Thurrock to discuss LGR. Cllr David Finch set out the case for LGR in Essex as follows:

*“Across Essex we have one of the most complex political and organisational geographies in the UK – 1 county council, 12 city, borough and district councils and 2 unitary councils. We all agree that a sustainable solution for Greater Essex is needed and the opportunity Local Government Reform presents us with can help us unleash our reform potential, deepen community engagement, have more control over funding and streamline processes for*

*residents. It is important that we act now and progress with developing proposals so that we are taken seriously by Government and aren't left behind and ensure that Essex is well positioned for future opportunities which see all residents and businesses benefit."*

Following the meeting of Leaders, some initial preparatory work was taken forward on LGR as a collaborative exercise involving all city, borough and district councils and the two unitaries. This was intended to explore the design options around LGR and the potential benefits for residents from LGR to enable Essex to submit an LGR following the expected publication of the White Paper. This preparatory work has included financial modelling exploring the potential efficiency savings from different unitary configurations across Greater Essex.

Since the summer, the Government's position on LGR has shifted and LGR has been relatively deprioritised. The promised White Paper has been delayed and the Secretary of State for Culture and Communities, Robert Jenrick MP, recently indicated that only three areas – Somerset, Cumbria and North Yorkshire – will initially be approved for unitarisation.

Essex County Council continues to support the principle of LGR for Essex on the basis that it can deliver a simpler, more transparent and more cost-effective form of local government than we have now. However, we have not yet reached a conclusion, either internally or with our partners, about the optimum design of LGR for Essex that would maximise benefits for our residents.

In view of the Government's deprioritisation of LGR, we have paused our preparatory work on LGR and we are focusing resources on the pressing public health, economic and operational issues arising from the resurgence of Covid-19. We believe that collaboration with partners in Essex should be focused on these pressing issues for the coming months rather than on structural reform. However, we remain open to resuming work on LGR in future should the Government come forward with a White Paper setting out a framework for LGR that we think is achievable in Essex and that would deliver benefits for our residents. And we remain interested in pursuing non-structural reform discussions with partners through the Essex Partnership Board and other mechanisms.

This paper reflects ECC's position. Partners across the county will have their own views as to the viability and relative priority of this work at this time and there is a continuing dialogue with Essex Leaders and CEOs on this matter.