
Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 10.15am on Thursday, 25 May 2023 in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Chelmsford.

Present:

County Councillors:

Chris Pond (Chairman)
Tom Cunningham
Mike Garnett
Sam Kane
Mike Mackrory (Vice Chairman)
Aidan McGurran
Clive Souter
Mike Steptoe
Marshall Vance

Justin Long, Senior Democratic Services Officer, and Jasmine Langley, Democratic Services Officer, were also present.

1 Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest

The report on Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations was received and it was noted that Councillors Chris Siddal and Andrew Wiles had left the Committee, and Councillors Fleming and Land were now substitute members.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Ivan Henderson (for whom Aidan McGurran substituted), Lewis Barber, Simon Crow, Jaymey McIvor.

Councillors Anthony McQuiggan and Wendy Stamp were joining the meeting remotely.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chairmen

Nominations were invited for vice-chairmen to serve for the 2023/24 municipal year.

- Councillor Garnett nominated Councillor Steptoe to be a Vice Chairman of the Committee, which was seconded by Councillor Pond.

- Councillor McGurran nominated Councillor Mackrory for the second Vice Chairman post, and this was seconded by Councillor Pond.

There being no further nominations and by general consent, it was agreed that Councillors Steptoe and Mackrory were each (re)elected as vice-chairman of the Committee for the 2023/24 municipal year.

3. Minutes

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 27 April were approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman of the meeting.

4. Questions from the public

There were no questions from the public.

5. 2022-23 Provisional Outturn Report

The Committee considered report CPSC/11/23 comprising the 2022/23 Provisional Outturn report, as presented to Cabinet on 23 May 2023 and a presentation which can be found [here](#).

The following joined the meeting for the duration of the item:

- Councillor Chris Whitbread, Cabinet Member, Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs.
- Stephanie Mitchener - Director, Finance
- Adrian Osborne - Head of Strategic Finance & Insight

It was noted that the latest inflation figures had been released the day after the 23 May Cabinet meeting by the Office of National Statistics. These showed that the headline rate of inflation had fallen from 10.1% to 8.7% (taking it into single digits for the first time in eight months); however, it was now widely forecast that Interest Rates would rise above 5% in 2023. These factors and the ongoing cost of living pressures provided the macro backdrop for the Council's financial position.

Members were invited to ask questions and provide comment on the presentation. Key points raised during this discussion included:

- (i) It was confirmed that a council's level of reserves was at the discretion of the S151 officer with no nationally set targets in place; however, it was noted that the government was exploring options to provide more comparative and benchmarking data to local authorities on the subject.
- (ii) It was agreed that officers would provide information on whether reciprocal arrangements were in place with other councils to support the cost of SEN students.
- (iii) It was confirmed that the additional £3m for Highways reserves was 'new' money earmarked from the £11.472m net underspend in the Revenue account. It was suggested that this might be an area for inquiry for the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee.

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- (iv) The Cabinet Member confirmed that work was underway to close the £75million budget gap predicted for 2026/7 and the Council had a strong track record of delivering savings and meeting budgets.
 - (v) It was queried whether budget papers could be considered by the Committee *before* they were agreed by Cabinet.
 - (vi) It was agreed that officers would provide further information on the underspend on Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport. This should include whether there had been an increase in revenue from bus usage as well as wider information on income from bus services.
 - (vii) Members noted that the outturn position would have been far less positive without the delivery slippage in the capital programme (and the resulting fall in borrowing costs) and without the additional income due to higher than budgeted interest rates.
 - (viii) Members noted that the absence of a multi-year funding settlement from central government was leading to increased uncertainty and made long-term planning very challenging. The Cabinet Member confirmed that lobbying efforts were continuing on this subject including with Essex MPs.
 - (ix) Officers agreed to provide further information on the cost of children's services and out-of-county school placements.
 - (x) It was agreed that more detail would be provided on the 29% increase in registered appeals in relation to SEN in the academic year 2021/22.
 - (xi) It was noted that 1% of council tax generated around £8million.
 - (xii) It was reported that the 2030 work referenced in the report was focused on transformation work and £742,000 was allocated to the Technology and Digitisation reserve to support ongoing digital transformation. It was agreed that further information would be provided on the Social Care platform programme.
 - (xiii) The lack of capacity within the domiciliary care market was raised, and it was noted that this was an issue regularly discussed by the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee.
 - (xiv) It was agreed that further information would be provided on the £618,000 unutilised Members Locality Funding.

- (xv) It was agreed that where appropriate acknowledgement should be given to other councils that have financially supported projects, such as the investment by Chelmsford City Council in Beaulieu Park Station.
- (xvi) It was agreed that an update on the commercial property portfolio should continue to be a part of the Committee's work programme.

The Cabinet Member and supporting officers were thanked for their attendance and then left the meeting.

6. Work Programme

The Committee received and noted report CPSC/12/23 comprising the current work programme.

It was noted that the item on Developer Contributions and the Infrastructure Funding Statement would take place as a private briefing on 29 June with details to be confirmed.

It was reported that an item would be added to the work programme on the cost of insurance claims relating to vehicle damage due to highways defects.

Members requested that an item on Digital Transformation be added to the work programme.

At this point the gender imbalance on the Committee was noted, and it was agreed that whilst this was primarily an issue for Groups/Group Leaders it could be considered by the Scrutiny Board.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting would be at 10.15am on Thursday 29 June 2023 in Committee Room 1 at County Hall.

8. Urgent Business

No items were raised.

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Chairman