
Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee, held at 9am on Thursday, 24 November 2022 in Committee Room 1, County Hall, Chelmsford.

Present:

County Councillors:

Chris Pond (Chairman)
Tom Cunningham
Jane Fleming
Mike Garnett
Sam Kane
Daniel Land
Mike Mackrory (Vice Chairman)
Anthony McQuiggan
Chris Siddall
Wendy Stamp
Mike Steptoe (Vice Chairman)
Marshall Vance
Andrew Wiles

The following members from other scrutiny committees were also present:

Councillor Carlo Guglielmi (Vice Chairman of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee)
Councillor Jeff Henry (Chairman of the Health Overview Policy and Scrutiny Committee)
Councillor Clive Souter (Vice Chairman of the Health Overview Policy and Scrutiny Committee)

The following joined the meeting virtually via Zoom:

Councillor Alan Goggin (Chairman of the Place Services and Economic Growth Policy and Scrutiny Committee),
Councillor Ray Gooding (Chairman of the People and Families Policy and Scrutiny Committee)
Councillor Ivan Henderson.

Graham Hughes, Senior Democratic Services Officer, and Emma Hunter, 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 noted.

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Ivan Henderson who was unable to attend in person but joined virtually by Zoom.

2. Minutes

The draft minutes of the meeting held on 22 September 2022 were

approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman of the meeting subject to the addition of Councillor Wendy Stamp being shown as present.

3. Questions from the public

There were no questions from the public.

4. Everyone's Essex Update - Quarter 1 2022- 23

The Committee received report CPSC/25/22 which provided the latest performance update on the aims, aspirations and targets within the Everyone's Essex Strategy.

The following joined the meeting to introduce the item:

Councillor Kevin Bentley, Leader of the Council (via Zoom)
Richard Puleston – Director, Policy
Suzanne Barcz - Head of Performance and Business Intelligence

The Leader introduced the item by highlighting some key headlines from the latest performance update including improvements in the numbers undertaking training and those being supported into entry level jobs through a social value scheme, increased number of health checks completed for those over-40 years of age, the success of the Year of Reading programme and Essex climate actions recently being recognised by the Carbon Disclosure Project.

During questioning and discussion, the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted:

- (i) In terms of further encouraging positive climate actions the County Council would be facilitating change through explanation rather than trying to compel change. Part of that would be to continue to encourage the use of Park and Ride. Some discussions were underway with local businesses to look at the viability of customer's shop purchases being directly transported to the Park and Ride similar to that happening at airports.
- (ii) Further encouragement was needed to facilitate increasing the levels of physical activity although this was not just solely the responsibility of the County Council and further close working with districts, and other partners, was also needed. Such closer working could be assisted by further devolution.
- (iii) Some members suggested greater focus on community and locality-based budgets.

- (iv) Further devolved funding into local areas would help improve and expand skills provision although demands and needs would vary between areas.
- (v) People needed to be helped to understand early what skills were needed for job entry into new technology industries, including alternative energy such as solar and wind. In addition, retraining options such as converting gas fitters to heat pump fitters, for example, needed to be highlighted and facilitated. Discussions were ongoing with local universities and colleges on facilitating development of these skills.
- (vi) Whilst Essex had business growth opportunities through the Freeports and airports in the County, it needed to ensure that the opportunities created were all-age.
- (vii) Youth re-offending was lower than in previous years (partly as crime reduced during lockdowns) but those that re-offend were committing more crime. There was ongoing work with The Police Fire and Crime Commissioner to further reduce reoffending and to drill down more into understanding causes and reasons for offending.

Conclusion

The Leader had welcomed and appreciated the more strategic based lines of questioning. It was agreed that the following further information would be provided:

- (i) A link to the updated Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.
- (ii) Data on estimated levels of loneliness, better identification and measures being planned and taken.

The Chairman highlighted that elsewhere on the agenda was an update on Levelling Up from the Deputy Leader which would link into some of the discussion with the Leader. It had not been possible to combine the two updates this time, but every effort would be made to do so in future.

The Leader and supporting officers were thanked for their attendance and they then left the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 9.50am and reconvened at 10.05am.

5. 2022/23 Financial Overview as at the Half Year stage

The Committee considered report CPSC/22/2022 comprising the 2022/23 Half Year Financial report presented to Cabinet on 18 October 2022.

The following joined the meeting to introduce the item:

Councillor Christopher Whitbread, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources and Corporate Affairs;
Stephanie Mitchener, Director of Finance
Adrian Osborne, Head of Strategic Finance and Insight.

During the opening presentation and subsequent questioning and discussion, the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted:

- (i) The Council continued to operate in a high inflation environment and reserves had been drawn upon during the year to meet cost pressures. Inflation pressures of £17.4m had been identified, impacting Transport providers and fuel costs, energy costs for street lighting and the ECC estate, and Adult Social Care.
- (ii) There was a forecast over spend of £2.9m (0.3%), against a net revenue budget of £1.1bn. However, the underlying overspend before one-off funding from reserves was closer to £14m.
- (iii) There were significant overspends in Residential Care, Nursing Care and Reablement driven by demand and cost pressures, market capacity issues and potential non-delivery of savings and increased placement costs in Children's Services and early Years because of increased numbers of children being supported.
- (iv) There had also been delays in achieving property rationalisation savings.
- (v) There had been a partial offset of the overspends due to the positive impact of increasing interest rates on interest receivable and the impact of capital slippage on borrowing and interest payable.
- (vi) There was a Capital under spend of £22.2m against the latest budget of £288m. The capital spend could also have a significant impact on the revenue budget and a prudent view needed to be taken in delivering important projects for the County.
- (vii) There were indications that the Fair Funding Review would not be progressed during the next Government funding round and the implications of that were being worked through.
- (viii) Housing growth had been assumed to be 1.1% and had been built into the current year financial forecasts. District Councils would provide their latest updated housing forecasts in mid-December with a further opportunity to amend them in January before they were built into the next years' budget. Collection rates and the number of households receiving Council Tax Support was important in estimating revenue from Council Tax.

- (ix) Reserves were kept under review and the proposed levels of reserves for 2023/24 would be part of the draft budget being presented to Full Council in February 2023.
- (x) Members were keen to see how significant increases in energy costs were in proportion to the whole budget. Some energy subsidies were being paid to service providers. Members questioned whether providers should be pressurised more to find ways to work more energy efficiently. Further information on the domiciliary care sector would be provided.
- (xi) Members were keen to see a breakdown of s106 developer contributions being held and how it was broken down into service areas such as education, passenger transport, highways, and the NHS as well as by district and any reprofiling. This could link into the discussion at the next meeting on the draft Capital and Treasury Management Policy and the assumptions on s106 monies being received to fund projects.
- (xii) The possible opportunities for closer joint working with District Councils was highlighted, including using vacant sites for step-down accommodation and more locality-focussed funding.
- (xiii) Some initial headlines were provided from the Government Autumn Statement the previous week including a new Social Care Grant and a delay in Social Care Charging reforms. The increase in National Living wage had been higher than expected and would increase the price of contracts with suppliers.

Conclusion

It was agreed that further information would be provided:

- (i) To breakdown Council Tax collection including a list of Council Tax collection authorities, collection rates and percentage of collections collected/received.
- (ii) On the total amount of funds drawn from reserves during the current financial year.
- (iii) On the number of vacancies across the organisation, broken down into service areas (e.g. Highways, youth services etc) and an indication of any impact on the service.
- (iv) On the proportion of the £200m earmarked for climate actions that was externally financed.
- (v) On the reasons for project slippages in work programmes of Local Highways Panels.

- (vi) Further to (xi) above, in the meantime, officers undertook to liaise with the Planning team regarding further breaking down the s106 developer contributions data.

There was then an adjournment at 10.55 for five minutes.

6. Levelling Up update

The Committee received report CPSC/23/21 comprising Levelling Up actions being planned and taken, a Locality Fund update and some responses to the cost-of-living challenges.

The following joined the meeting to introduce the item:

Councillor Louise McKinlay, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Community, Equality, Partnership and Performance
Richard Puleston – Director, Policy

During the presentation and subsequent questioning and discussion, the following was acknowledged, highlighted and/or noted:

- (i) It was important to try and embed levelling up as a key component and priority within the County Council and partners and consider everything that is done through that lens.
- (ii) No one organisation had the ability to solely drive change. Projects would need to align with and seek collaboration with partners and the Essex Partnership Board.
- (iii) A Levelling Up Investment Fund had been established with £11m of one-off seed funding, with £5.01m so far committed.
- (iv) Members stressed the importance to them of the specific locality funding available to each member. Local funding of projects would need to continue to align with ECC priorities and offer value for money.
- (v) County wide launch events had been held at eight different locations and 23 projects had been subsequently launched.
- (vi) Key underpinning drivers of levelling up were supporting skills, education, employment, community and literacy. The programme would seek to target delivery at root causes and some examples of projects were the Essex Year of Reading, promotion of physical health through Active Essex, and local projects in Canvey Island, Harlow and Tendring.
- (vii) The priority themes identified varied area to area with the priority in the Braintree area, for example, being more about rural outreach and connectivity. Some members suggested that more

profile could be given to connectivity and links with economic development. It was, however, an expensive part of levelling up and was also a significant part of other strategic priorities.

- (viii) A report would be issued next year on the work of the Multi-Disciplinary Team pilot project in Tendring that had been set up to look at more targeted support for certain vulnerable people.
- (ix) In Year 2 of the Levelling Up Programme the focus would move to targeting identified priority cohorts.
- (x) The cost of public transport could be a barrier to accessing training and apprenticeships. Reference was made to some courses possibly being offered on a hybrid basis with virtual attendance available as an option.
- (xi) Some discussions had started with Adecco Employment Agency regarding helping young people raise their aspirations and helping them develop soft basic communications skills.
- (xii) One local food bank had specifically started to offer some help with energy costs. Other support was available including from the Essential Living Fund and Household Support Fund (which would continue to offer meal vouchers during school holidays).

Conclusion

The Cabinet Member agreed to look at how to share information more widely with members on projects being launched to help raise broader awareness of what was happening across the county.

The Deputy Leader and supporting officer were thanked for their attendance and they then left the meeting.

7. Work Programme

The Committee received report CPSC/24/21 comprising the current work programme of the Committee which was noted.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting was scheduled to be held on Thursday 8 December 2022.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 11.46am

Chairman