
Essex County Council

13 February 2024

Order Paper

Agenda item 4

Public Speakers

The following question will be asked by a member of the public registered to speak in accordance with Standing Order 16.12.8.

Question 1: from **Jill Waight**, a Parish Councillor from Rayleigh, who is to ask a question on the subject of fines for parents of children who do not attend school. The question is:

‘For the Academic year 2022 / 2023, there was a total £694,920 paid in fines by Essex parents due to “student non-attendance.” Following my discussion with the Leader on the 10th January, can he please confirm whether this money goes back into the Essex Educational budget or is it taken by Central Government?’

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Leader of the Council and Cllr Andrew Sheldon, Deputy to the Cabinet Member for Education Excellence, Life Long Learning and Employability will respond.

Question 2: from **Richard Hyland**, a Chelmsford City Councillor from Galleywood, who is to ask a question on the subject of social media issues. The question is:

‘Will Essex County Council publish the measurement metrics/criteria, that was used to demonstrate the Social Media (Harris) contracts were seen to be value for money expenditure of public funds?’

Cllr Kevin Bentley, Leader of the Council will respond.

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Agenda item 8

Budget 2024/25

Members have been sent an addendum to the budget report with revised recommendations. This was produced following assessment of the impact of the final local government finance settlement and the Non Domestic Rates (NNDR) information from Brentwood and Colchester Councils.

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Agenda item 8**Budget 2024/25**

Amendment to the Budget – Labour Group Amendment

An amendment to be moved by **Cllr Dave Harris** and seconded by **Cllr Ivan Henderson**.

That the net effect of the budget resolution be amended for the reasons and purposes set out below:

1. Highways Quality Assurance

Increase to the 2024/25 Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport revenue budget of **£53,000**, on a one-off basis to support an independent review of the criteria assessment used by Ringway Jacobs. The review will assess the quality criteria applied when approving maintenance and repairs, carried out under the existing Ringway Jacobs contract to quality assure their remedial work.

This would require an increase in the budget for the Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport portfolio of **£53,000** which will be funded through a withdrawal from the earmarked Ambition Fund reserve.

Increase to the annual Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport revenue budget for two years, from 2024/25 to 2025/26, of **£45,000** per annum. This is to fund twice yearly, independent inspections of highway repair work carried out under the existing Ringway Jacobs contract, sampling a range of completed repairs across the county.

This would require an increase in the budget for the Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport portfolio of **£45,000** per annum which will be funded through withdrawals from the Ambition Fund Reserve for 2024/25 and 2025/26, a total reduction to the reserve of **£90,000**.

2. Youth Service

An increase to the Youth Service revenue budget of **£525,000** to enable the setup of a dedicated team to target specific areas of high deprivation and mental health in young people. This will fund one Senior Targeted Youth Advisor, ten Targeted Youth Advisors and ancillary costs.

This would require an increase to The Arts, Heritage and Culture portfolio budget of **£525,000** per annum and a reduction of the same sum to the budgeted appropriation to the Transformation Reserve.

3. Highways Rangers

Increase to the annual Highways Maintenance and Sustainable Transport revenue budget from 2024/25 of **£1.2m** per annum. This is to fully reinstate the previous service offer of Highways Rangers. Since the service has been discontinued, work on maintaining the aesthetic and safety of our roads,

such as clearing paths, trimming vegetation at the side of the road and cleaning signs, is not being carried out.

This reinstatement is proposed on a permanent basis and will be funded through withdrawal of **£1.2m** from the Ambition Fund Reserve in 2024/25, becoming base from 2025/26 acknowledging that this will grow the gap from 2025/26.

S151 Officer's Commentary on the Budget amendment Proposal

The proposals have set out clearly the funding sources, which will amend the following tables in the Annual plan and Budget 2024/25:

Highways, Infrastructure and Sustainable Transport

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 1,471 | | | Infrastructure | | |
| | | | Localism | 1,200 | 1,200 |
| 13,292 | 14,556 | 14,672 | Roads And Footways | 15,439 | 15,317 |

The Arts, Heritage and Culture

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 3,390 | 3,355 | 3,147 | Youth Services | 4,925 | 4,106 |

Other Operating Costs

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| | | | Approps To/(From) Reserves and Restricted Use Funds | | |
| 4,027 | 9,925 | (1,326) | Ambition Fund Reserve | (1,298) | (1,298) |
| 10,375 | 11,820 | 5,921 | Transformation Reserve | 18,295 | 18,295 |

Reserves

| | 2024/25 | | | | | 2025/26 | 2026/27 | 2027/28 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--|---------------|-----------------|----------|----------|---------|
| | Balance at 1 April 2023 | Balance at 1 April 2024 | Budgeted (Contributions) / Withdrawals | Assumed usage | Closing balance | | | |
| | £000 | £000 | £000 | £000 | £000 | £000 | £000 | £000 |
| Reserves earmarked for future use | | | | | | | | |
| Ambition Fund | (10,551) | (6,874) | 1,298 | 3,576 | (1,999) | - | - | - |
| Transformation | (58,880) | (52,410) | (18,295) | 25,000 | (45,705) | (32,000) | (18,295) | (4,590) |

- £1,298,000 withdrawal from the Ambition Fund, taking the balance on this reserve to £2m at the end of 2023/24, with further proposed withdrawal of £45,000 in 2025/26. It is currently assumed that the balance of the reserve is fully drawn down by the end of 2025/26, however it is not fully committed so this does not change our planning assumptions.

- £525,000 reduction in the annual budgeted appropriation to the Transformation Reserve across the MTRS. Proposals will reduce the balance of the reserve to £45.7m at the end of 2024/25. By 2027/28 the balance of the reserve will have reduced to £4.6m (currently assumed as £6.7m in the Annual Plan).

The reduction in the annual budgeted appropriation to the Transformation Reserve will impact the capacity to invest in change to enable financial sustainability given the £51m gap over the medium term and the ambition of Whole Council Transformation.

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Amendment to the Budget – **Liberal Democrat** Group Amendment

An amendment to be moved by **Cllr David King** and seconded by **Cllr Mike Mackrory**.

- 1 That the net effect of the budget resolution be amended as set out for the reasons and purposes set out below:
 - 1.1 We recognise the enormous pressures facing all Councils following a very disappointing Local Government Settlement. A welcome, but minor and late adjustment was made to the Settlement after many requests for a substantial uplift in funding, supported by the Leaders of all thirty three County Councils, including Essex, and the Unitary Authorities and many Members of Parliament, including Essex MPs. Each made the case for a step change in Government support to local government. Given Council Tax has been capped at well below inflation and service costs, and demand continues to soar. Including vital services such as Social Care, Childrens Services and home to school transport. All on top of the over 40% cut in local government funding in recent years. The additional adjustment to the settlement, by way of additional Social Care Grant, can be used to fund the majority of investments we propose. This grant of £12.332m has been placed into the Early Intervention and Prevention Holding Account (EIPHA).
 - 1.2 We further recognise that some 52% of the revenue budget is directed at Social Care and Health. And that reduces the scope to address many other vital services, including highways.
 - 1.3 Mindful that the Section 151 officer estimates that the authority faces a budget shortfall of £22m in 2025/26, after savings of £52m, and by 2027/28 that will have widened to £51m, the Liberal Democrat Group's amendment recognises those financial pressures. And restricts additional funding to addressing the most pressing of many concerns for our residents:

Youth Services
Support for families

Pavement and highway repairs
 Surface water flooding and gully cleansing
 Children and young people's Mental Health

- 1.4 We propose additional help and support as detailed below for 2024/25 baseline budget and for each year that follows.
- 1.5 By utilising the additional Social Care Grant of £8.8m, reprofiling £0.3m from the Transformation Reserve and £0.25m from the Everyone's Essex Reserve this, with an additional £12.75m funded through borrowing for capital investment will enable a total of £9.35m to be made available for the budget in 2024/25. These are one off calls on reserves, and from 2025/26 onwards further savings or calls on reserves will be required. The following revenue and capital investment proposals are to be funded and the budget recommendation be amended as detailed in the Section 151 officer's commentary and statement below.
- 1.6 To increase protection for low income families from the impacts of the increases in Council Tax by **doubling ECC's investment into the district led hardship scheme**, adding an additional £300,000 to the cost base. This scheme is in partnership with Essex District, Borough and City Councils who in past years have generously supported many households, so reducing hardship and the pressure of their Council Tax bills.

2 Supporting the mental health needs of children and young people

- 2.1 **An increase in the Children and Families base budget by £3m (or 2%).** Mindful the significant and sustained increase in numbers of young people requiring advice and treatment for mental health issues is well documented. That the after effects of the coronavirus are still prevalent. And that current demand is not being met fast enough as shown by waiting times, to the detriment of those young people. Pressures made worse by the impact on wider NHS capacity. It is accordingly proposed that:
 - 2.2 £1m of this additional funding to enable **more vital work with children and young people with mental health issues**, in the knowledge that any such measures may reduce the risk of harm and suicide prevention, and benefit the NHS. Looking to match fund this significant additional investment with the Integrated Care Systems. Our proposal that with their help we make available a mental health practitioner or access to shared resources, in all schools, to help identify and address mental health issues at an early stage. An investment in prevention that will reduce demand on services in the future.
 - 2.3 £1m additional **investment in the Family Innovation Fund**, working with children and young people to achieve stable, resilient and safe family environments, delivering services including coaching, mediation, conflict

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- resolution and counselling through 1:1, group and family/parent/couples work.
- 2.4 A further **£1m invested in Essex Short Breaks**, a service that provides clubs and activities for young people with SEND and also offers parents and carers of children and young people with special educational needs and/or disability a break from their additional caring responsibilities which enables them to maintain their ability to support their children and manage work and family life balance.
 - 2.5 An increase of **£2m for Active Essex** (Levelling Up and the Economy portfolio), specifically to invest in sport and activity by extending school and club capacity and resource in the community. In the knowledge that this exercise and connection to others materially contributes to health and physical and mental wellbeing.
 - 2.6 An increase of **£1m for Youth Services** (The Arts, Heritage and Culture portfolio). To enhance the provision of Youth Service projects including, support, mentoring and respite for young carers, school lunchtime clubs/drop in sessions run by youth workers and outreach work, including detached working.
 - 3 Investing in additional social care capacity
 - 3.1 An increase of £1m in **the adult social care base budget** (Health, Adult, Social Care and ICS Integration portfolio) to address care and support for older people, specifically to invest in additional social care bed capacity. In addition, **£1.5m for the Discharge Fund** which, through our Better Care Fund partners, would further support additional bed capacity and enhance outcomes by expediting hospital discharges.
 - 4 Investing in our response to the climate emergency
 - 4.1 An investment of **£250,000 into the Essex Forest Initiative** with a priority for greening our towns and cities, to reduce heat island impacts, and to make them better places to live work and visit, through urban tree planting and “tiny forest” initiatives. Recognising the gravity of the Climate Emergency and increasing public engagement and awareness of our work.
 - 5 Investing in our infrastructure and quality of life
 - 5.1 **A one off increase of £5m** in the Highways Capital programme provision for Road Maintenance (Highways, Transportation and Active Travel portfolio) to include **increased gulley cleansing and surface water prevention measures**. So doing to reduce the backlog of repairs that can make life intolerable for our residents.

- 5.2 **To increase footway maintenance spend** by £3m as the most neglected and in need of repair area of highways. And as a contribution to the wider aims of Active Travel, by an additional one off capital investment of £2m.
- 5.3 **To help Local Highways Panels delivery** with an additional £2m invested to enable delivery of priority highways schemes in local areas.
- 5.4 An increase in our **capital investment in new cycling and walking infrastructure** of £750,000 improving thus our prospects of attracting match and grant funding from Government and other partners, such as the NHS.

6 Cost and Use of Reserves

- 6.1 These measures contained within this proposal will be an increase of £9.35m to the 2024/25 budget (some 0.8%) and are funded in full by reprofiling the Everyone's Essex and Transformation Reserves. The call on these reserves is supplemented by the late change to the Local Government Settlement for Social Care Grant which provides the County Council with an additional £12.332m, which will be held in the Early Intervention and Prevention Holding Account (EIPHA). One off capital investments will be funded through borrowing and there will be no draw on unrestricted reserves.

7 Section 151 Officer's Commentary on Liberal Democrat Budget Amendment

- 7.1 It is proposed that the revenue amendments to budget of £9.35m are to be funded from additional Social Care Grant monies and from reserves. The proposed investments will have an ongoing impact on the Medium Term Resource Strategy (MTRS) from 2024/25 onwards as detailed in the table below:

| Investments and source of funding for 2024/25: EIPHA: Early Intervention and Prevention Holding Account EE: Everyone's Essex TR: Transformation Reserve | | 2024/25 £'000 | 2025/26 £'000 | 2026/27 £'000 | 2027/28 £'000 |
|--|-------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Supporting low income families | EIPHA | 300 | 300 | 300 | 300 |
| Investment in children's mental health services | EIPHA | 1,000 | 1,000 | 1,000 | 1,000 |
| Investment in children's family support | EIPHA | 2,000 | 2,000 | 2,000 | 2,000 |
| Investment in children's sport and activity | EIPHA | 2,000 | 2,000 | 2,000 | 2,000 |
| Investment in youth services | EIPHA | 1,000 | 1,000 | 1,000 | 1,000 |
| Social care bed capacity | EIPHA | 1,000 | 1,000 | 1,000 | 1,000 |
| Discharge Fund | EIPHA | 1,500 | 1,500 | 1,500 | 1,500 |
| Investment in climate change emergency | EE | 250 | 250 | 250 | 250 |
| Additional capital expenditure, interest on borrowing | TR | 300 | 599 | 599 | 599 |
| Additional capital expenditure, Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) | TR | 0 | 440 | 440 | 440 |
| Total Cost | | 9,350 | 10,089 | 10,089 | 10,089 |

- 7.2 The impact on reserves in 2024/25 is shown in the table below, with the 2024/25 budget increasing by £9.35m. The impact on future years is £10.089m.

| Reserves | 2024/25 | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------|--|
| | Current Estimated Closing Balance £'000 | Proposed Additional Usage £'000 | Revised Estimate Closing Balance £'000 |
| Early Intervention and Prevention Holding Account | 12,332 | 8,800 | 3,532 |
| Transformation Reserve | 46,230 | 300 | 45,930 |
| Everyone's Essex | 22,928 | 250 | 22,678 |

- 7.3 The impact of the proposed amendments to the 2024/25 capital programme is detailed in the table below

| Capital Investment Description | Current Budget 2024/25 £'000 | Proposed Budget 2024/25 £'000 | Increase/ (Decrease) £'000 |
|--|------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Road maintenance including gully cleansing and surface water prevention measures | 42,155 | 47,155 | 5,000 |
| Footways maintenance | 9,000 | 12,000 | 3,000 |
| Active Travel | 7,011 | 9,011 | 2,000 |
| Local Highways Panel investment | 3,400 | 5,400 | 2,000 |
| Cycling and walking infrastructure | 1,483 | 2,233 | 750 |
| Total cost | 63,049 | 75,799 | 12,750 |

- 7.4 The estimated revenue borrowing costs for the additional capital expenditure of £12.75m have been calculated using the assumption that MRP is charged over 30 years and using the 2024/25 budgeted interest rate of 4.70%. These costs are set out within the revenue investment summary table above. There is no assumption as to ongoing revenue commitment from the incremental capital spend proposal in 2024/25.

- 7.5 The following table summarises and reconciles the proposed budget amendment as set out above across the life of the MTRS;

| Budget amendment reconciliation | 2024/25 £'000 | 2025/26 £'000 | 2026/27 £'000 | 2027/28 £'000 |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Budget amendment proposals | | | | |
| Revenue investments | 9,350 | 10,089 | 10,089 | 10,089 |
| Proposed funding streams | | | | |
| Social Care Grant (Additional) | 8,800 | | | |
| Reduction of Transformation Reserve | 300 | | | |
| Reduction of Everyone's Essex Reserve | 250 | | | |

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|--------|--------|--------|
| Total remaining funding gap | 0 | 10,089 | 10,089 | 10,089 |
|-----------------------------|---|--------|--------|--------|

7.6 These amendments do add to the pressures and funding gap in 2025/26 onwards which must be addressed by the County Council, through further savings and or call upon reserves.

Appendix A: Amended tables in Annual Plan and Budget 2023/24

Revenue Budget Summary

Children's Services and Early Years

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| | | | Childrens Services | | |
| 16,250 | 18,368 | 18,583 | Childrens Family Support | 24,088 | 24,074 |
| 2,034 | 2,008 | 2,008 | Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service | 3,015 | 3,008 |

Climate Czar, Environment, Waste Reduction and Recycling

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 40 | | 286 | Green Infrastructure | 739 | 600 |

Health, Adult Social Care and ICS Integration

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 123,547 | 103,454 | 104,748 | Care and Support Older People | 344,756 | 124,269 |

Levelling Up and the Economy

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 771 | 246 | 243 | Sports Development | 2,884 | 2,244 |

The Arts, Heritage and Culture

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 3,390 | 3,355 | 3,147 | Youth Services | 5,400 | 4,581 |

The Chancellor of Essex

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 10,489 | 10,918 | 12,465 | Finance | 17,091 | 11,226 |

Other Operating Costs

| 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2023/24 | | 2024/25 | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Actuals £000 | Original Budget £000 | Latest Budget £000 | | Gross Expenditure £000 | Total Net Expenditure £000 |
| 21,245 | 28,494 | 28,494 | Interest Payable External Interest Payable | 26,822 | 26,822 |

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Amendment to the recommendation – Labour Group Amendment

An amendment to be moved by **Cllr Aidan McGurran** and seconded by **Cllr Ivan Henderson**.

(The words deleted are shown ~~struck through~~ and additions are shown underlined)

That the recommendation be amended to read:

‘This Council, given the media interest and public disquiet and being ever mindful of the need to spend taxpayers’ money wisely, requests an urgent investigation by the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee into the circumstances in which Essex County Council engaged Mr Simon Harris and others in contracts and ~~payments~~ other agreements amounting to ~~£493,000~~ £1,027,867 to provide social media ~~posts~~ engagement from ~~June-2020~~ January 2018 until ~~April 2023~~ now. The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to pay particular regard to the following:

By what selection process was Mr Harris initially awarded these contracts and other commissions, who made the decision and what background checks were made given his reputation as a comedian and prankster?

What selection processes were used for the others carrying out social media engagement functions? Who made the decisions and what background checks were carried out?

What precisely were these contracts and agreements awarded for, who signed them off, what due diligence was carried out and what value for money ~~was~~ assessments were carried out before further contracts, commissions or payments were awarded?

Were declarations of interest correctly recorded by those directly authorising the payments and commissioning the work? If this was not the case what action was taken as a result?

Why wasn’t the in house ECC Communications Team given the additional resource to carry out the work by Mr Harris given that it was for a corporate public health awareness messaging campaign? Why were they not involved in any way?

Why given Mr Harris doesn’t appear to have been vetted was he allowed to make payments to third parties? Given that Essex CC did not know who he was paying how could they know these payments were in keeping with normal Council practices and procedures?

What analysis of the viewing data is available, considering the average view of a typical Facebook page is three seconds, and in particular Mr Harris’s

Facebook coverage in Essex? The Committee should consider use of an independent data analyst to be engaged as a witness to the committee to verify how meaningful published reach data is.

It has been reported that serious concerns were raised in 2021, why did payments continue until ~~2023~~now?

What is the usual budget for social media engagement and how much has been spent on social media since April 2023? What is the budget for social media engagement for next year?

Does the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee consider this expenditure to be value for money, and if so, how?

In the interests of completeness, the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee should also investigate the payments made under the heading Summary of Payments ECC made to non-social media suppliers in the Council document Spending and Council Tax: Spending on Digital Community in the Pandemic.

What learning so far has been taken and what changes made or are being explored in procurement processes?

(The recommendation, if amended, would then read:)

‘This Council, given the media interest and public disquiet and being ever mindful of the need to spend taxpayers’ money wisely, requests an urgent investigation by the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee into the circumstances in which Essex County Council engaged Mr Simon Harris and others in contracts and other agreements amounting to £1,027,867 to provide social media engagement from January 2018 until now. The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to pay particular regard to the following:

By what selection process was Mr Harris initially awarded these contracts and other commissions, who made the decision and what background checks were made given his reputation as a comedian and prankster?

What selection processes were used for the others carrying out social media engagement functions? Who made the decisions and what background checks were carried out?

What precisely were these contracts and agreements awarded for, who signed them off, what due diligence was carried out and what value for money assessments were carried out before further contracts, commissions or payments were awarded?

Were declarations of interest correctly recorded by those directly authorising the payments and commissioning the work? If this was not the case what action was taken as a result?

Why wasn't the in house ECC Communications Team given the additional resource to carry out the work by Mr Harris given that it was for a corporate public health awareness messaging campaign? Why were they not involved in any way?

Why given Mr Harris doesn't appear to have been vetted was he allowed to make payments to third parties? Given that Essex CC did not know who he was paying how could they know these payments were in keeping with normal Council practices and procedures?

What analysis of the viewing data is available, considering the average view of a typical Facebook page is three seconds, and in particular Mr Harris's Facebook coverage in Essex? The Committee should consider use of an independent data analyst to be engaged as a witness to the committee to verify how meaningful published reach data is.

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In the interests of completeness, the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee should also investigate the payments made under the heading Summary of Payments ECC made to non-social media suppliers in the Council document Spending and Council Tax: Spending on Digital Community in the Pandemic.

What learning so far has been taken and what changes made or are being explored in procurement processes?

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Amendment to the recommendation – Conservative Group Amendment

An amendment to be moved by **Cllr Holly Whitbread** and seconded by **Cllr Lewis Barber**.

(The words deleted are shown ~~struck through~~ and additions are shown underlined)

That the recommendation be amended to read:

'This Council, given the media interest and public disquiet and being ever mindful of the need to spend taxpayers money wisely, requests an urgent investigation by the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee into the circumstances in which Essex County Council engaged Mr Simon Harris in contracts and payments amounting to £493,000 to provide social media posts from June 2020 until April 2023. The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to pay particular regard to the following:

1. By what selection process was Mr Harris initially awarded these contracts, who made the decision and what background checks were made given his reputation as a comedian and prankster?
2. What precisely were these contracts awarded for, who signed them off, what due diligence was carried out and what value for money was carried out before further contracts or payments were awarded?
3. Were declarations of interest correctly recorded by those directly authorising the payments?
4. Why wasn't the in house ECC Communications Team given the additional resource to carry out the work by Mr Harris given that it was for a corporate public health awareness messaging campaign?
5. What analysis of the viewing data is available, considering the average view of a typical Facebook page is three seconds, and in particular Mr Harris's Facebook coverage in Essex? The Committee should consider use of an Independent data analyst to be engaged as a witness to the committee to verify how meaningful published reach data is.
6. It has been reported that serious concerns were raised in 2021, why did payments continue until 2023?
7. What is the usual budget for social media and how much has been spent on social media since April 2023?
8. Does the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee consider this expenditure to be value for money, and if so, how?
9. The effectiveness of opposition member scrutiny of this expenditure?
10. What learning so far has been taken and what changes made or are being explored in procurement processes?

It is acknowledged that the above list is not exhaustive and therefore, the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee should ensure that a full and thorough examination is undertaken and allow any Member to bring any evidence or questions they have forward.

This Council therefore calls on the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to report and publish the outcome of its investigation.'

(The recommendation, if amended, would then read:)

'This Council, given the media interest and public disquiet and being ever mindful of the need to spend taxpayers money wisely, requests an urgent investigation by the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee into the circumstances in which Essex County Council engaged Mr Simon Harris in contracts and payments amounting to £493,000 to provide social media posts from June 2020 until April 2023. The Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to pay particular regard to the following:

1. By what selection process was Mr Harris initially awarded these contracts, who made the decision and what background checks were made given his reputation as a comedian and prankster?
2. What precisely were these contracts awarded for, who signed them off, what due diligence was carried out and what value for money was carried out before further contracts or payments were awarded?
3. Were declarations of interest correctly recorded by those directly authorising the payments?
4. Why wasn't the in house ECC Communications Team given the additional resource to carry out the work by Mr Harris given that it was for a corporate public health awareness messaging campaign?
5. What analysis of the viewing data is available, considering the average view of a typical Facebook page is three seconds, and in particular Mr Harris's Facebook coverage in Essex? The Committee should consider use of an Independent data analyst to be engaged as a witness to the committee to verify how meaningful published reach data is.
6. It has been reported that serious concerns were raised in 2021, why did payments continue until 2023?
7. What is the usual budget for social media and how much has been spent on social media since April 2023?
8. Does the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee consider this expenditure to be value for money, and if so, how?

9. The effectiveness of opposition member scrutiny of this expenditure?

10. What learning so far has been taken and what changes made or are being explored in procurement processes?

It is acknowledged that the above list is not exhaustive and therefore, the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee should ensure that a full and thorough examination is undertaken and allow any Member to bring any evidence or questions they have forward.

This Council therefore calls on the Audit, Governance and Standards Committee to report and publish the outcome of its investigation.'