

The Leader's Report of Cabinet Issues

1. 2014/15 Financial Overview at the Half Year Stage

Cabinet noted the forecast financial position of the Council for 2014/15, based on the position at the half year stage, as set out below:

- a projected underspend of £15.2m on the revenue budget, but reduced to £13.1m (or around 1% of net budget) after exclusion of Dedicated Schools Grant (which is ring-fenced for schools).
- Planned expenditure on the capital programme was materially on track at £208.3m, which marginally exceeded the current approved budget by £5.0m or 2%.

The Cabinet agreed various technical adjustment to move funds between reserves and a proportion of the underspend to reserves, resulting in an underspend for the year of £2.3m. Within this projection, the Emergency Contingency of £0.8m was assumed fully committed, recognising that the risk of unforeseen events such as winter pressures and extreme weather events was in the second half of the financial year. With regard to the capital programme, Cabinet also agreed capital slippage of £9.7m, budget additions of £23.3m, budget reductions of £3.8m and advanced works of £2.0m.

2. Education Estates Strategy: Guiding Principles

Cabinet has approved the guiding principles for the build and expansion of schools in Essex. The principles will be applied to all future projects approved by the Cabinet, unless a deviation has been approved as part of the business case considered when a decision about potential capital investment is taken.

3. ECC Commercial Strategy

The Cabinet has approved the Council's Commercial Strategy, which brings key objectives for the Council's commercial activity in line with current thinking. The new strategy represents a refresh of the previous Procurement Strategy to reflect the new Target Operating Model and to help meet the ambitions and challenges faced by the Council as a commissioning organisation. The change to a Commercial Strategy aligns with the new role played by the former Procurement Team (now known as the Commercial Team) in the delivery of the Council's strategic priorities.

4. ECC Commissioning Strategies

The Cabinet has approved a new suite of seven Commissioning Strategies for the Council for the period 2014 – 2018, noting the findings from a supporting programme of consultation and scrutiny, and its impact on strategy development.

5. NHS England Tender: Framework Agreement for Commissioning Support Services

Cabinet has approved a number of recommendations in relation to bidding to become part of the NHS Lead Provider Framework to supply End-to-End Commissioning Support Services to a range of public sector organisations, including Clinical Commissioning Groups.

6. Negotiate and Issue the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme financial year 2015/16

Cabinet has agreed to delegate authority to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation, in association with the Director for Commissioning Transport and Infrastructure, to negotiate and agree with bus operators a concessionary bus pass scheme to take effect from 1 March 2015. This is as required by the National Concessionary Travel Scheme legislation. Cabinet noted the options for a scheme of reimbursement, including any legal challenges that might arise.

Cabinet welcomed the proposal to allow the concessionary travel scheme to continue to operate from 9am.

7. Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Framework

Cabinet approved the Council signing up to the Voluntary and Community Sector Strategic Framework and to commit to delivering the principles set out within the Framework. Cabinet also agreed to the development of an approach to implementing the recommendations of the Framework by 31 March 2015.

The framework had been developed in conjunction with voluntary and community sector partners with the aim of helping all parties to work better together. The Strategy focussed on the most effective use of resources to encourage strong and resilient communities which can support themselves.

8. A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon Improvement Scheme

In June 2013, the Government published a document called 'Investing in Britain's Future', which included a commitment to improve the A14 between Cambridge and Huntingdon subject to the scheme demonstrating value for money and deliverability.

Cabinet has agreed to make a £1m contribution to the cost of this scheme, due to the status of the A14 as a nationally important strategic route, the improvement of which would support the delivery of Outcome 5 of the Council's Corporate Outcomes Framework 2014 – 2018 (Sustainable economic growth for Essex communities and sustainable environment).

It is unusual to fund a highways scheme outside the County boundary, and also to commit financial resources beyond five years (30 years in this case). However, the Cabinet believes that improvement of this strategically important route will be of considerable benefit to Essex, given that 17% of the traffic using the section of the A14 affected by the scheme has an origin or destination in Essex.

9. Getting Around in Essex: A Bus and Passenger Transport Strategy – approval to consult on a new strategy

Cabinet has approved the publication for consultation of the document 'Getting Around in Essex – A Bus and Passenger Transport Strategy'. The document sets out for consultation, as part of the broader integrated transport agenda:

- the role that buses and passenger transport play in Essex and the benefits they deliver; and
- the eight proposed areas of strategic action which are intended to grow the bus network and passenger numbers.

Cabinet noted that the consultation was intended as a genuinely open process.

The consultation would be launched in early December and run for around eight weeks. The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation would then consider the outcomes of the consultation and agree the final content of the strategy.

10. Corporate Fees and Charges Policy

The Council's Financial Regulations require Executive Directors to establish a charging policy for the supply of goods or services and to undertake an annual review. Until now, there has been no clear corporate charging policy or framework to support Executive Directors to undertake this, ensuring alignment to strategic priorities and outcomes. Historically, individual service areas have set their own policies without reference to a corporate framework.

In order to address this gap, and having been persuaded of its benefits, Cabinet has agreed to adopt a corporate fees and charges policy and framework.

11. Council Tax Sharing Agreement

Cabinet has authorised the Director of Financial Services to enter into council tax sharing agreements with the Borough, City and District Councils of Essex, covering the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2018.

The Council had initially entered into a similar agreement covering the period 2013 – 2017. This would now be replaced by the new, three-year agreement from 1 April 2015, covering a wider range of initiatives, in particular relating to fraud prevention.

Councillor David Finch
Leader of the Council