

MINUTES OF CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL CABINET

on 30 January 2024 at 7pm

Present:

Cabinet Members

Councillor S Robinson, Leader of the Council (Chair)
Councillor M Goldman, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Connected Chelmsford
Councillor N Dudley, Cabinet Member for an Active Chelmsford
Councillor L Foster, Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford
Councillor I Fuller, Cabinet Member for a Growing Chelmsford
Councillor R Moore, Cabinet Member for a Greener and Safer Chelmsford

Opposition Spokespersons

Councillors, J Jeapes, J. Raven, M Steel, S Sullivan, A, Thorpe-Apps, R Whitehead and P. Wilson

Also present: Councillors H Clark, C Davidson, D Eley, S Goldman, J Hawkins, R Hyland, B Massey, A Sosin and M Taylor

1. Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

2. Declarations of Interest

Members of the Cabinet were reminded to declare at the appropriate time any pecuniary and non-pecuniary interests in any of the items of business on the meeting's agenda.

3. Minutes and Decisions Called-in

The minutes of the meeting on 14 November 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

4. Public Questions

No public questions were asked at the meeting.

5. Members' Questions

Two questions were asked at this point of the meeting and other questions were asked by Councillors under the relevant items. Cllr Massey asked about the projected cost detailed in the Budget report of £6.8m for the development of the crematorium. They asked that given

the increase in low-cost no fuss cremations, and the time of financial stringency, was this a service the City Council should be investing nearly £11m of taxpayers money into. In response the Cabinet Member for a Greener and Safer Chelmsford stated that the Capital Programme was not as restrictive as the revenue budget, but of course the Council would only proceed, if there was a sound business case. They also stated that the important local service operated at no net cost to taxpayers and there would be a reasonable payback on any investment made.

Cllr Massey asked a second question regarding litter on the side of the A132 near the Rettendon Turnpike and asked if the litter picking schedule for that area could be shared with South Woodham Ferrers Town Council. In response, the Cabinet Member for a Greener and Safer Chelmsford agreed to send the schedule after the meeting.

6.1 Annual Council Tax Support Scheme (Connected Chelmsford)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet was informed that the Council was required to approve, by 11 March 2024, a Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2024-25. It was proposed that the Scheme adopted for 2023-24 be retained in its current form.

Options:

Retain the present scheme or adopt an amended version.

Preferred option and reasons:

The existing scheme would be affordable to the Council and fair to recipients of Council Tax support.

Discussion:

The Cabinet heard that the Council would of course prefer to make the scheme more generous, but this was not possible in the current financial climate. In response to a question on if the scheme supported more or less working age households than in previous years, the Cabinet Member for Connected Chelmsford, stated this would depend on who applied for support. They detailed that there had been a more significant drop in those asking for support that were of pensionable age rather than working age. In response to a further question on possible changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme regulations, the Cabinet Member for Connected Chelmsford stated they would look into this and send a response after the meeting.

RECOMMENDED TO THE COUNCIL that the Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2023-24 be retained as the Scheme for 2024-25.

(7.03pm to 7.08pm)

6.2 Council Tax premiums on second homes and empty properties (Connected Chelmsford)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet considered a report asking them to confirm the extension, as agreed by Cabinet and Full Council in 2023, of Council Tax premiums levied in respect of empty properties once a property has been empty and unfurnished for 12 months or if a property is empty, substantially furnished and nobody's main residence (a second home), and to clarify implementation dates and exceptions.

Options:

1. To confirm the implementation dates of extended 100% Council Tax premiums as detailed in the recommendations.
2. To agree local exceptions to the 100% Council Tax premiums as detailed in the recommendations.
3. To note proposed statutory exceptions to the 100% Council Tax premiums and agree delegated powers to implement them.

Preferred option and reasons:

The changes would use financial penalties as a method to encourage owners to bring under-used accommodation back into general residential use. Having declared a housing crisis in February 2022. The Council is obliged to use appropriate available methods to increase the supply of residential accommodation to its residents.

Discussion:

In response to a question on what would happen if an owner was to move back into a property for two months and whether that would stop the clock on any financial penalties, the Cabinet Member for Connected Chelmsford, stated they would ask officers this question and then respond after the meeting. In response to a further question the Cabinet Member for Connected Chelmsford stated that they were only aware of the local exception listed in the report.

RECOMMENDED TO THE COUNCIL that

1. That the imposition of a Council Tax premium of 100% after a property has been empty and unfurnished for 12 months is effective from 1 April 2024.
2. That the imposition of a Council Tax Premium of 100% in respect of unoccupied dwellings, which are substantially furnished and nobody's main residence (second homes), is effective from 1 April 2025.

RESOLVED that Cabinet notes the proposed statutory exceptions to the imposition of Council Tax premiums and agrees an additional local exception in respect of second homes where planning constraints do not permit sale or lease of a property.

(7.08pm to 7.13pm)

7.1 Private Rented Sector Offer Policy (Fairer Chelmsford)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet considered a report which detailed a Private Rented Offer Policy which provided a framework to effectively enable the Council to end their main homelessness duty with an offer of accommodation within the Private Rented Sector, without the applicant's consent.

Options:

1. Approve the Private Rented Sector Offer Policy as presented.
2. Approve the Private Rented Sector Offer Policy with amendments.
3. Decline to approve the Private Rented Sector Offer Policy.

Preferred option and reasons:

Option 1 was the preferred option as the policy provides the Council with the opportunity to discharge homelessness duties through offers of accommodation into the private rented sector and extending accessible housing options outside of the District.

Discussion:

The Cabinet heard that this was an option now that the Council needed to action, it had been checked by Counsel and would offer further assistance to those who may wish to move elsewhere and not remain in Chelmsford. In response to a question, the Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford stated that, they were not expecting large numbers to benefit from the change in policy, but it would help some and figures could be reported back in the future. In response to a further question on building new Council housing, the Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford stated that, the main issues continued to be a lack of suitable land, funding and speed. It was noted that housing issues were a current problem, not a future one and strategies such as this one would help to alleviate the problem.

RESOLVED that the Private Rented Sector Offer Policy be approved as presented.

(7.13pm to 7.19pm)

8.1 Revocation of Air Quality Management Areas (Greener and Safer Chelmsford)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet considered a report which asked them to consider the revocation of the two AQMA's in the area of Chelmsford City Council at the Army and Navy and A414 Maldon Road, Danbury, following the production of a report for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) regarding Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA).

Options:

1. To revoke of the Air Quality Management Areas.
2. To retain the Air Quality Management Areas.

Preferred option and reasons:

Option 1 was the preferred option as following a review of the air quality monitoring data and the air quality technical guidance it was considered appropriate to revoke both the AQMAs at The Army and Navy and at A414 Maldon Road, Danbury.

Discussion:

The Cabinet Member for a Greener and Safer Chelmsford stated that work would still continue to monitor and improve the air quality in Chelmsford, but that at these two sites the situation had improved to the point where the AQMA's could be revoked. They also thanked officers for their hard work in this area and for the detailed appendix that accompanied the report. In response to questions, the Cabinet Member for a Greener and Safer Chelmsford stated that sites would continue to be monitored for any increases as there was a duty to do so under the Council's Air Quality Strategy. They also stated that if levels were to increase then they would act again, but across Essex there had been a generally positive trend in recent years.

RESOLVED that the Director of Public Places be authorised to revoke the two Air Quality Management Areas within the Chelmsford City Council area.

(7.20pm to 7.25pm)

9.1 Travelling Showperson Sites Planning Advice Note (Growing Chelmsford)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet considered a report that presented feedback from consultation on the Council's Travelling Showperson Sites Planning Advice Note and that sought their approval for the proposed changes and publication of the Note.

Options:

1. Cabinet agrees the proposed changes to the Planning Advice Note attached at Appendix 3 of this report and approves the publication of the Travelling Showperson Sites Planning Advice Note in accordance with those changes, pending any subsequent minor textual, presentation or layout amendments to the final version.
2. Cabinet do not agree the proposed changes to the Planning Advice Note attached at Appendix 3 of this report and approve the publication of the Travelling Showperson Sites Planning Advice Note without the changes, pending any subsequent minor textual, presentation or layout amendments to the final version.
3. Cabinet does not approve the publication of a Travelling Showperson Sites Planning Advice Note.

Preferred option and reasons:

Option 1 was the preferred option as the Planning Advice Note would help meet the Council's responsibility to identify and address the accommodation needs of different groups of the community, including Travelling Showpeople.

Discussion:

The Cabinet Member for a Growing Chelmsford stated that the advice note supported the Local Plan and Planning Obligations Supplementary document, and provided answers and guidance for emerging sites, of which there were 24 plots within various strategic sites in the Local Plan. The Cabinet heard that the advice note would ensure sites were delivered to the high standards expected for residential sites and would suit the lifestyle of residents.

RESOLVED that Cabinet approve for publication the Travelling Showperson Sites Planning Advice note set out at Appendix 2 of the report with the changes set out at Appendix 3.

(7.25pm to 7.28pm)

10.1 2024/25 Budget (Leader)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The report to the meeting contained recommendations for the setting of the Revenue and Capital Budgets for 2023-24 and the level of Council Tax for that year.

Options:

Agree or vary the proposals contained within the report but with regard to the financial sustainability of any amendments.

Preferred option and reasons:

The recommended budget would be prudent and in the best financial interests of the city.

Discussion:

The Leader of the Council introduced the 2024/25 Budget and started by thanking the Finance team and all budget holders across the Council, who had helped with proposals to save money, with ways that affected service levels as little as possible. They also thanked all Chelmsford City Council staff, who played a key role in running services for the district, through challenging recent years and highlighted that the staff at Chelmsford often went above and beyond what was expected of them.

The Leader highlighted the recent financial impacts of the pandemic and inflation that had significantly impacted the Council. They highlighted the budget gap of £7.5m, detailed the changes they would be making and stated that as referred to by Council Leaders across the Country, that the next budget cycle would be the last one where the books could be balanced without significant changes to services. They detailed a number of proposed actions, which included the use of reserves, business rate retention income, a review of the Capital programme, increases to fees and charges and further efficiencies, which had helped to set a balanced budget for 2024/25.

The Leader stated that central Government funding had continued to fall in real terms, with all Council's significantly worse off as a result, and highlighted the continue lobbying across the Country for greater assistance from the Government. They also referred to the estimated extra £226k that would be received. It was stated that this would be used to remove the planned reduction in frequencies of street cleaning and that the recommendation would be amended accordingly to reflect this.

The Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford detailed the challenges faced by the Council in preventing homelessness and providing temporary accommodation. They detailed the assumption that by March 2025, 620 households would be in temporary accommodation and that this was a best working assumption. They highlighted the ever rising costs in this area and stated that they recognised the problem and as a result were reviewing policies and had formed a Council wide Housing action group.

The Leader detailed other cost pressures such as the rise in minimum wage and also highlighted the budget reductions that had been achieved in each of the last 5 years, in total leading to £6m of annual savings on the base budget since 2019. The Cabinet also heard that the Capital and Investment programmes remained ambitious, with tree planting, affordable homes, homelessness prevention and other areas still at the forefront of the Council's future. They also detailed that even with potential borrowing being required in the future, the Council's debt would rise to 3.4x of its core spending, compared to the current 1.6x but still much lower than the County wide average of 5x. The Leader also referred the Cabinet to Section 8 of the report which detailed the view from the S151 Officer that the proposed budget was both robust and sustainable.

In response to a question on the £4m element of the aspirational budget for the Army and Navy redevelopment and the Council's commitment to the project, the Leader stated that this had been placed in this section as the money was simply not yet required by the County Council. It was stated that if the £4m had been placed in the revenue budget, then this would have led to costs of £400k each year and by not doing so it meant that a decision could be made at a later date instead as it was beyond the 3 year Medium Term Financial plan currently.

The Leader of the Opposition stated that they would save their detailed questions for discussion at the next Full Council meeting, but did highlight that their group understood the budget problems being faced by all Councils, especially on issues such as homelessness. They also referred to the increases in fees and charges and highlighted that the specific figures hadn't been detailed, in response the Leader agreed to share this information. The Deputy Leader of the Council highlighted the continued problems with Central Government and Civil servants not understanding the intricacies of Local Government finance and stated that it would be much easier if Central Government had a greater understanding of the issues being faced by all Council's.

In response to a further question on four housing budgets, being grouped together, it was confirmed that this was simply for reporting purposes and to make it clear what the housing budgets were, but that no delegations had been changed.

RECOMMENDED TO THE COUNCIL that:

1. the contents of Appendix 1 to the report to the meeting, the Budget Report, be approved, and specifically the following be agreed:
 - i. The new Capital investments in Council services shown in **Section 5**

- ii. The delegations to undertake the new capital schemes identified in **Section 5**, Tables 13 and 13a.
- iii. The Revenue Budgets in **Section 10** and Capital Budgets in **Section 11**
- iv. An increase in the average Band D level of Council Tax for the City Council to £221.52, the maximum allowed before a referendum, in **Section 9**
- v. The movement in reserves shown in **Section 7**
- vi. The Budget forecast in **Section 7** and **Section 8** the s151 officer's review of the budget, which Members are required to note.
- vii. Special expenses, parish and Town Council's precepts as identified in **Section 9**, Table 22 (Parish precepts are not available until Full Council).
- viii. Delegation to the Chief Executive to agree, after consultation with the Leader of the Council, the pay award for 2024/25 within the normal financial delegations.

RESOLVED that:

1. A delegation to the S151 Officer to update the budget report for parish precepts, changes to final Government settlement, Business Rate Retention income, following completing of NNDR1 statutory return to Government, and new Parish precepts after consultation with the Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford.
2. A delegation to S151 officer to prepare a legal resolution for submission to Council for consideration after consultation with the Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford.
3. A delegation to S151 officer in consultation with the leader, authority to amend the budget report to Council, should the extra Government funding for 2024/25 exceed £95,000 then the proposal to reduce Street Care frequencies proposed in the budget should not be implemented. The saving will be removed. Any of the extra funding not utilised will reduce the use of unearmarked reserves in 2024/25.

(7.29pm to 8.05pm)

10.2 Capital, Treasury Management & Investment Strategies 2024/25 (Leader)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet received a report setting out a proposed approach to the management of the Council's cash, capital investments (the capital expenditure programme) and other types of investment, including property.

Options:

1. Accept the recommendations contained within the report
2. Recommend changes to the way the Council's investments are to be managed

Preferred option and reasons:

The proposed Strategies met statutory requirements for the production of a treasury management strategy that achieved an acceptable balance between risk and return and capital and investment strategies that ensured the proper financial management of the Council's resources.

RECOMMENDED TO THE COUNCIL that the Capital, Treasury and Investment Strategies 2024-25 as submitted to the meeting be approved.

(8.06pm to 8.09pm)

11. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

12. Reports to Council

Items 6.1, 6.2, 10.1 & 10.2 were subject of a report to Council.

The meeting closed at 8.09pm

Chair