

COUNCIL MEETING held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN on 25 FEBRUARY 2016 at 7.30pm

Present: Councillor S Harris – Chairman
Councillors K Artus, H Asker, G Barker, S Barker, R Chambers, J Davey, P Davies, A Dean, T Farthing, M Felton, M Foley, J Freeman, R Freeman, R Gleeson, J Gordon, N Hargreaves, E Hicks, S Howell, D Jones, M Lemon, B Light, J Lodge, A Mills, S Morris, E Oliver, E Parr, J Parry, J Redfern, H Rolfe, G Sell and L Wells

Officers in attendance: R Harborough (Director of Public Services and Interim Head of Service), D Barden (Communications Officer), A Knight (Assistant Director Finance), M Perry (Assistant Chief Executive – Legal), P Snow (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager) and A Webb (Director of Finance and Corporate Services)

Also in attendance: D French (Chief Executive designate)

C64 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Anjum, Goddard, Knight, Loughlin, Ranger and Ryles.

Councillors Asker, R Freeman and Morris each declared their membership of Saffron Walden Town Council.

C65 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

The Minutes of the meetings held on 17 December 2015 and 11 January 2016 were received and signed as a correct record.

C66 MATTERS ARISING

(i) Minute C60 – Motion on the Kier Appeal Decision Costs

Councillor Lodge asked the Chairman and the Leader to comment on whether they considered that remarks made about him by another councillor at the meeting on 17 December were appropriate.

The Chairman reiterated that she had called for good behaviour at the time of the debate, which had been ill tempered at times, but did not intend to comment upon each individual incident.

The Leader commented only that he expected all debate to be conducted in a civilised manner.

(ii) Minute C57 – Reports from the Leader and Members of the Executive

Councillor Dean asked whether any progress had yet been made on the work of the group set up to consider community engagement arrangements.

In reply, the Leader gave a commitment that the member group would meet soon.

(iii) Minute C61 – Motion on Local Police Service

Councillor Sell commented on the impact of reductions in the number of Police Community Support Officers being funded in Essex from 250 to 90 and in Braintree and Uttlesford from 26 to nine.

He said that Stansted Parish Council had provided financial support for a PCSO post in Stansted but the officer concerned had now been unsuccessful in keeping his position. The Chief Constable had given a renewed commitment to local policing and he asked Councillor S Barker to comment on that commitment given the underfunding of the Police service in Essex and disparities between the larger number of PCSOs in place in Suffolk which had a much smaller population than Essex.

In her reply, Councillor S Barker said that a meeting with the Chief Constable was taking place on 10 March and she would ensure any relevant information was reported to members. She expressed the hope that the new Police and Crime Commissioner taking office after the election in May would visit the district.

C67 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman asked members to join with her in extending wishes for a speedy recovery to Councillor Loughlin following her recent sudden illness.

She reminded members about the civic dinner at Bishop's Stortford Golf Club on Friday 22 April. Councillor Jones asked why the civic dinner was taking place at a venue outside the district. Councillor Harris replied that the venue was the only one available on the preferred date.

C68 REPORTS FROM THE LEADER AND MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE

Councillor Redfern updated members on various housing developments taking place across the district as listed below:

- Reynolds Court, Newport – 1st phase of demolition now underway
- Hatherley Court, Saffron Walden – discussions in progress with contractors
- Mead Court, Stansted – on target for completion at the end of May
- Caton Lane, Saffron Walden – due for completion by May
- Walden Place, Saffron Walden – sheltered housing redevelopment
- Wendens Ambo – single development on a plot to be sold to raise capital for use elsewhere in the district

- Sheds Lane garage site in Saffron Walden – for the provision of affordable homes including one for a special needs family

The Leader welcomed Dawn French to the meeting as Chief Executive designate taking up her post on 29 February.

A briefing on the Local Plan had taken place immediately before this meeting. This would be followed by an Extraordinary Council meeting on 21 March to progress a consultation strategy hopefully agreeable to all political groups.

There would be a briefing on devolution on 10 March. He reminded members that a devolution proposal for Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk was already progressing. In her role as the Greater Essex devolution officer working group lead, Nicola Beach would be addressing members at the briefing.

In concluding his remarks, the Leader welcomed Janet Drysdale from the EESET LSP group for a presentation later in the meeting. There would follow a report from the Health and Wellbeing LSP group at the April meeting.

C69 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, MEMBERS OF THE EXECUTIVE AND CHAIRMEN OF COMMITTEES

Councillor Parr asked the Leader to comment on the intended reorganisation of children's centres in Essex leading to a proposal to close two centres altogether.

The Leader said he intended to start a dialogue with the County Council about the proposals. His understanding was that Essex intended to turn the centres concerned into complete age group centres and he would seek assurances from the County Council about their intentions.

Councillor Dean expressed his frustration about delays in determining planning appeals on two strategic sites called in for decision by the Secretary of State. The outcome of these appeals would influence the Council's view about the merits of a single settlement.

The Leader agreed and said he would lobby Sir Alan Haselhurst MP to obtain an early determination of these two important strategic sites. However, there was no indication the Government was awaiting a decision from the Council on the prospect of a single settlement being selected as a possible option in its local plan.

C70 LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP – EMPLOYMENT, ECONOMY, SKILLS, ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT GROUP

Janet Drysdale spoke to members about the work of the EESET LSP group. She was supported by Simon Jackson as the lead officer supporting this group. She commented on the wide brief of her group involving an inevitable degree of overlap but said it was possible to deal with individual subjects in depth when necessary.

The key role of EESET was to co-ordinate activities, network where needed, and contribute to consultations. The objective was to achieve the best outcome possible from the resources available to the group. Uttlesford was in the middle of the M11 corridor incorporating scientific research facilities, manufacturing and an international airport at Stansted.

Uttlesford was fortunate in enjoying full employment but still contained pockets of deprivation. There were also some mental health concerns involving parts of the community not connected to the general prosperity of the area. The EESET group was generally Saffron Walden centric and her aim was to spread benefits wider within the community.

Simon Jackson then outlined the five areas of economic development coming within his remit as follows:

1. Help for small businesses to start and stay in business
2. Access to superfast broadband
3. Focus on town centre viability and vitality
4. Help for businesses to expand and attract investment
5. Persuade more visitors to come to Uttlesford to enjoy the heritage attractions on offer

Janet Drysdale then outlined the activities undertaken in collaboration with local schools. Quarterly meetings were held with local secondary school heads. A careers event had recently taken place using the local business links already established. Links had also been established with Jobcentre Plus and with the local CAB service. A new business space for small business start-ups had been created at Northside.

A large number of jobs had been created at Stansted Airport, many in customer service, and 300 jobs had been created at the Hilton Hotel. A new site for Harlow College was being created with many opportunities for apprenticeships, especially in engineering.

Many of those working at the airport were involved in volunteering, including a number of senior managers in a mentoring role. The volunteer centre was supporting a number of projects aimed towards the effective delivery of services. The latest initiative involved the training of super volunteers to take on and train two or three people needing help to volunteer leading to a placement when they had gained the confidence needed to work independently.

Members then asked a number of questions and these were answered by Janet Drysdale.

C71 BUDGET 2016/17

Council Howell presented the series of reports comprising the 2016/17 budget as the executive member for finance and administration. He said that the process of putting together the budget had been particularly challenging as it had been accompanied by an unprecedented level of uncertainty. He thanked the Director

of Finance and Corporate Services, the Assistant Director - Finance and their team for their hard work in preparing the budget and all related reports.

The reports being presented contained a single interlinking narrative. He wished to highlight in particular the confirmation of New Homes Bonus (NHB) with no cuts or adjustments, the continuation of the £3,000 ward members' allowance, the Local Council Tax support mechanism, and the generous level of support to the voluntary sector. There was also funding for an extension to the Lower Street car park in Stansted, major work at Saffron Walden Castle, extra funding for enforcement, and protection for the highway rangers scheme.

However, the Council was two years away from a significant reduction in Government funding continuing to the 2020 election and beyond and would have to face that challenge. The scale and timing of that challenge was becoming clearer. It may no longer be possible to continue delivering some services. The remedy was to utilise reserves to generate more income.

He said he did not believe in putting money on the precept. All available tools should be used. However, it had become necessary to apply gradual and managed increases in Council Tax. He referred to the consultation on NHB and the need to review the Medium Term Financial Strategy, as well as the position of uncertainty on the retention of business rates.

Government formula grant would be reduced and then phased out by 2018/19, only partly offset by additional funding through the rural services grant.

Councillor Howell thanked Councillor Dean and the Scrutiny Committee for their robust review of the budget. He was grateful to the Liberal Democrat group for their helpful support of the highway rangers service and would propose an amendment to the budget proposals to protect the funding available both for highway rangers and the Local Highways Panel.

He then proceeded to introduce the six separate budget reports being presented in addition to the Corporate Plan.

These were as follows:

- Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Reserves: No budget could be free from risk and uncertainty but the forecast presented was considered to be more realistic this year. The waste and recycling budget forecast was considered to be at high risk of a budget variance occurring. It was intended to establish three new reserves in 2016/17. These were NHB contingency; Special Purpose Vehicle Reserve; and a Pension Deficit Reserve.
- Medium Term Financial Strategy: The MTFs was based on assumptions around expected Government announcements on the future of NHB and the localised retention of business rates. There was reasonable confidence that income would exceed expenditure for the next two years and the position would thereafter become less benign causing deficits to occur. This was illustrated in the table on budget modelling on page 73 of the report.

- Treasury Management Strategy 2016/17: The strategy had been recalibrated to increase the income from investments but not increase the risk.
- Capital Programme 2016/17 – 2020/21: The planned capital programme was appended to the report at page 102.
- Housing Revenue Account 2016/17 Budget and Five Year Business Plan Strategy: This was a shared report with Councillor Redfern as the portfolio holder for Housing. The five year capital programme set out in the report represented the largest in the Council's history.
- General Fund and Council Tax: The meeting was asked to note the outcome of the consultation with residents and the risk associated with the result of the Stansted Airport Appeal expected in 2016/17. An increase of 1% in Council Tax was being proposed. This would result in an increase on a band D property from £138.74 to £140.13. This was a steady as she goes budget containing no rash decisions. It was important not to just predict the weather for the next Council but to build the ark as well.

Councillor Howell proposed adoption of each of the recommendations contained in the reports as listed above. The recommendations for items 11 to 16 inclusive would be taken as a block. The proposal on the General Fund Budget and the calculation of Council Tax would be taken separately as a recorded vote was required to be taken. In relation to that proposal he wished to add the words: 'The Council agrees to allocate for 2016/17 the sum of £118,010 from the Strategic Initiatives Fund to provide match funding with Essex County Council for the Local Highways Panel'. He also drew attention to Appendix G of the report circulated since publication of the agenda as the Essex Fire service had not set its precept until the evening of 17 February.

The Leader then presented the updated Corporate Plan. He said the document set out the four key themes of sound financial management, high quality services, sharing the benefits of growth, and maintaining thriving communities. He then proposed adoption of the recommendation in the report.

Councillor Chambers seconded all of the proposals but called upon the Administration to find a more publicly understandable name for the new company rather than keep referring to SPV and other civil service jargon.

Councillor Dean said that he was content with the budget as presented. He recognised that efforts had been made to meet the challenges ahead and the Scrutiny Committee had been given full opportunity to comment on the budget proposals.

He did, though, consider that the Corporate Plan should be smarter and more focussed on outcomes rather than themes. He also felt the Special Purpose Vehicle Reserve should have a wider remit than simply acting as a money earner. The main purpose of the reserve must be to deliver improvements for the overall benefit of the district. Councillor Dean welcomed the capital scheme to extend the car park at Lower Street in Stansted.

Councillor R Freeman welcomed the budget as both robust and commendable. However, he drew attention to a number of references in the Corporate Plan to

services and desired outcomes that were not within the Council's gift. For example, the plan referred to keeping communities safe and healthy and to improved broadband provision. He also mentioned the sometimes inadequate state of road surfaces in Uttlesford compared to elsewhere in Essex. These corporate aims did not always add to the Council's credibility.

Councillor Rolfe responded that the Corporate Plan was a one page document stating broad objectives but that beneath the outline lay a wealth of more detailed plans.

One example of this in action was the financial support provided to maintain the PCSO service and the general level of good co-operation with the Police service resulting in the Lodge building at London Road being offered for use as a focus of police activity in the district.

Close liaison with stakeholders gave the Council influence in external service areas. Another example of this in operation was the lobbying of West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group to provide a seven day service at the Radwinter Road hospital.

He understood the problems associated with the upkeep and repair of road surfaces and acknowledged the changes to reporting structures made by County had not been helpful.

Nevertheless, the track record for getting things fixed was a good one. He would be meeting with Councillor Bentley at Essex soon to raise the broadband issue.

Councillor Lodge acknowledged that it been a difficult year. A number of factors such as future funding cuts to NHB and business rates would have a significant impact on budgets. The Council was acting prudently and he agreed with the additional £118k in support of highways funding. He welcomed and supported the budget proposals.

Councillor Sell confirmed the support of the Liberal Democrat group for the budget as presented. He thanked Councillor Howell for his hard work and for the welcome he had extended.

In referring to the amendment he had submitted as tabled at the meeting, Councillor Sell said that he wished it to be recorded that he had agreed to withdraw the amendment on the basis that the Administration had agreed to protect the highways panel budget.

Uttlesford was the biggest district geographically in Essex and contained many miles of roads. The highway rangers scheme had been set up four years ago and he wished to acknowledge the work accomplished in that time by a small group of people. He now had personal experience of the value of the lifeline service as his mother had had recent need to use the service.

Councillor Light acknowledged the hard work of members and officers and said the budget was prudent. However, given that a 1% increase in Council Tax

would raise only £48k she could not see any reason for a rise this year. For this reason she would vote against the budget.

She asked why no background papers were listed in the report. In her judgement there was insufficient information to enable her to make a decision and some items listed did not match the stated aim.

Councillor Hargreaves asked why no specific sum had been earmarked to cover the risk associated with the Local Plan as listed in the risks section of the Robustness of Estimates report. The text in paragraph j) of the report was incorrect as no structure presently existed. Any overspill costs would come out of the planning reserve and this indicated a lack of financial control. He asked for a budget sum to be added to account for all relevant Local Plan costs, or for wording to be added saying no specific sum could be allocated.

In reply, Councillor Howell said that expected risks were set out on pages 42-43 of the report and the overall risk of a budget overrun was indicated. The various reserves were set out on page 52. The sum of £1,063,000 had been set aside for any planning costs. This sum was intended to cover exceptional costs in determining planning applications and planning appeals, and would also cover any Local Plan budget overrun.

Councillor Hargreaves again remarked that there was no specific budget for risks associated with the Local Plan.

The Leader commented that paragraph 7.1 of the report set out in full the General Fund reserves plan. The Director of Finance and Corporate Services was establishing the cost incurred on the Local Plan in 2015/16 and this would be reported to the Planning Policy Working Group early in the new financial year so as to ensure total transparency regarding the costs of the Local Plan.

He expressed confidence in the level of Council Tax to be collected this year but there were difficult times ahead. The extra £48k being collected in 2016/17 would increase the tax base and would be recurring.

Councillor Asker joined other members in commending Councillor Howell and officers for their hard work. Members of the Scrutiny Committee had questioned the Corporate Plan and had taken the view that a one page document was insufficient. She had been told that more information would be provided but that had not happened. She said that background papers should have been supplied.

Councillor Rolfe said a clear direction of travel was indicated. There was a substantial body of documentation providing evidence to support the strategies adopted.

Councillor Chambers observed that the comments made by Councillor Asker highlighted the difference between a good administration and a bureaucratic one. The Corporate Plan previously contained many pages of text but all that was needed was a simple statement of priorities. He congratulated the Leader and Councillor Howell for producing an excellent budget. It was nevertheless

necessary not to raise expectations too high by maintaining careful financial controls.

Councillor Hargreaves spoke again to comment on the general budget presentation. He suggested that a number of improvements could be made to simplify the figures presented and make tables more coherent and readable. The reports overall contained a number of discrepancies and many iterations.

Councillor S Barker indicated an interest as a member of Essex County Council.

The debate was then summed up by Councillor Howell. In future, he would refer to the Special Purpose Vehicle Reserve as the Special Purpose Company as he hoped that would be simpler.

The budget this year came with risks but also rewards. Councils could now use their assets effectively for the benefit of their locality, by seeking suitable investment opportunities. The Council had made a surplus this year but the picture would be very different in two years' time, when deficits were expected. For all of these reasons it was important to maintain a consistent approach.

A vote was then taken on item 11 to approve the Corporate Plan with 21 members voting in favour and none against.

Next, members voted unanimously to approve items 12 to 16.

Finally, a recorded vote was taken on item 17, General Fund and Council Tax requirement for 2016/17 with the following outcome:

In favour of the motion: Councillors Artus, Asker, G Barker, S Barker, Chambers, Davey, Davies, Dean, Farthing, Felton, Foley, J Freeman, R Freeman, Gleeson, Gordon, Harris, Hicks, Howell, Jones, Lemon, Lodge, Mills, Morris, Oliver, Parr, Redfern, Rolfe, Sell and Wells

Against the motion: Councillor Light

Abstained: Councillors Hargreaves and Parry

RESOLVED to approve the Corporate Plan 2016-21

RESOLVED to approve the following recommendations in relation to the budget 2016/17:

Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Reserves

- a) Take account of the advice in the report when determining the 2016/17 General Fund budget and Council Tax.
- b) Approve the risk assessment relating to the robustness of estimates as detailed in the report
- c) Set the minimum safe contingency level for 2016/17 at £1.234 million.
- d) Adopt the attached Reserves Strategy.

- e) Agree that no transfers to or from the Working Balance should be built into the 2016/17 budget.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

Approve the Medium Term Financial Strategy

Treasury Management Strategy 2016/17

Treasury Management Strategy 2016/17, Appendix A.
Prudential Indicators, Appendix A1.
Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Statement, Appendix A2
Economic Forecast, Appendix A3

Capital Programme 2016/17 – 2020/21

Approve the Capital Programme and associated financing of the programme as set out in the report.

Housing Revenue Account 2016/17 Budget and Five Year Financial Strategy

Approve the HRA Revenue Budget and Five Year Financial Strategy

General Fund and Council Tax 2016/17

- a) The General Fund Budget and Council Tax requirement of £4,827,584 summarised in paragraphs 15 – 19 and detailed in Appendices A - E.
- b) The schedule of fees and charges in Appendix F.
- c) The Council Tax Resolution as set out in Appendix G.
- d) Allocation of the sum of £118,010 from the Strategic Initiatives Fund to provide match funding with Essex County Council for the Local Highways Panel.

C72 PAY POLICY

Councillor Howell proposed adoption of the pay policy as set out in Appendix One of the report.

Councillor Morris drew attention to the reference in the report to the median salary of £20,849 at Uttlesford as compared with the median salary in local government of £27,600. She said that Uttlesford was in the bottom quartile of pay in local government and asked for an assurance that this disparity would be addressed.

The Interim Head of Paid Service confirmed that a report would be brought before members on this subject in due course.

RESOLVED to approve the Pay Policy as set out in Appendix One

C73 INTERIM REVIEW OF POLLING PLACES AND DISTRICTS

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager reported on difficulties that had arisen in relation to three polling places as designated in the Council's approved scheme in relation to the scheduled polls in 2016. There was insufficient time before those polls for a full interim polling review to take place.

At Saffron Walden Castle East, the school authorities had indicated that Dame Bradbury School would no longer be made available as a polling location.

At Stansted East, the Adult Learning Centre at the Peter Kirk site had been vacated pending the development of a new school.

At Saffron Walden Audley South, the Assembly Hall at the Friends' School would be unavailable for the EU Referendum on 23 June because of scheduled exams during that week. This would necessitate a mobile unit being located at the Friends' School car park.

RESOLVED to approve the following changes to designated polling places to be incorporated into the Council's polling scheme with immediate effect:

- a. Designate the Homebase site off Elizabeth Way, Saffron Walden as the polling place for Saffron Walden Castle East polling district to replace the Sports Hall at Dame Bradbury's School
- b. Designate St John's Church Hall, at St John's Road, Stansted as the polling place for Stansted East polling district to replace the former Adult Learning Centre (Peter Kirk site)
- c. Note that the Assembly Hall at the Friends' School, Mount Pleasant Road, Saffron Walden (Audley South polling district) would not be available for use at the EU Referendum on 23 June 2016 but would revert to the Assembly Hall thereafter

C74 COMMITTEE TIMETABLE 2016/17

The timetable of proposed committee meetings in 2016/17 was submitted for approval.

RESOLVED to approve the timetable of meetings for 2016/17, subject to the date of the Council meeting in December being changed from 15 to 8 December; this would have the effect of changing the preceding Cabinet meeting from 7 December to 30 November (although this was not a matter to be decided by Council)

C75 EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING ON 21 MARCH 2016

RESOLVED to schedule an Extraordinary meeting on Monday 21 March to consider a new settlement option for the Local Plan

The meeting ended at 9.35pm.