

**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held at COUNCIL CHAMBER - COUNCIL OFFICES,
LONDON ROAD, SAFFRON WALDEN, CB11 4ER, on TUESDAY, 13
FEBRUARY 2024 at 7.00 pm**

Present: Councillor N Gregory (Chair)
Councillors M Ahmed, G Bagnall, C Criscione, B Donald,
R Gooding, R Haynes, S Luck, A Reeve and G Sell.

Officers in attendance: R Auty (Director of Corporate Services), C Edwards (Democratic Services Officer), J Etherington (Director of Finance, Revenues and Benefits), P Holt (Chief Executive), A Knight (Director of Business Performance and People), S Lewin (Economic Development Manager) and A Webb (Strategic Director of Finance, Commercialisation and Corporate Services).

Also in attendance: Councillor J Evans (Portfolio Holder for Planning) Councillor N Hargreaves (Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Economy) and P Lees (Leader of the Council).

SC36 PUBLIC SPEAKING

Shara Vickers from Saffron Walden Business Improvement District (BID) addressed the meeting; a copy of her statement has been appended to the minutes.

Ms Vickers added that she would welcome the opportunity to work with the Council to come up with alternative plans.

The Chair received permission from the meeting to continue over the two hour threshold.

The Chair said that Councillor Reeve was absent because of a prior engagement, caused when the meeting date had been moved from the original date.

SC37 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence received.

The Chair said that all Members had an interest due to everyone being users of the car parks and refuse services.

There were no other declarations of interest.

SC38 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the Scrutiny meeting held on 11th January 2024 were approved as an accurate record.

Councillor Donald gave an update on Walden Place, she said she was meeting with residents and contractors on Wednesday 14th February 2024, along with the Director of Housing, Health and Communities. She said she would be able to provide a full update at the next meeting.

The Chair said that he was concerned having read the minutes that the Community Safety Partnership was an exercise in accountability rather than adding any value.

SC39 **CABINET FORWARD PLAN**

The Cabinet forward plan was noted.

The Chair drew the meetings attention to the following items:-

- The concrete issue at the Lord Butler Leisure Centre.
- Corporate Core Indicators for quarter three.
- Saffron Walden Air Quality Management Area.
- The Voluntary Support Group in respect of voluntary grant funding.

The Chair said he was very impressed with the governance and due diligence of the Voluntary Support grants having discussed this with the Community Development Officer.

SC40 **SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

The Scrutiny Work Programme was noted.

The Chair said that in addition to those items listed for the April meeting there would be a report on Local Plan Governance.

In response to a question from a Member, the Chair said that the Operational Resilience Review was expected to come to the April meeting with an update and a detailed report at the first meeting in the next Council year. He said that this would be more fully discussed in the upcoming item.

SC41 **CAR PARK REVIEW CONSULTATION RESPONSE**

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Economy presented the report.

He said that further to the many responses to the consultation and the recent petition, he was making the following changes:-

- The 30 minutes parking in Saffron Walden would continue.

- The proposed season ticket charges would be reduced so that the new monthly amount was £45, the 3 and 6 month tickets would be pro-rated from the £45 and the annual charge would be £450.
- To retain the long stay option at Crafton Green in Stansted Mountfitchet including season tickets. This would be subject to a 21 day notice of variation.

He said that Waitrose would continue to refund the full hour of car parking for Waitrose customers.

He said that in order for the Council to adhere to value for money principles, Catons Lane Car Park would no longer be free, currently the Council pays for the upkeep and maintenance.

The Chief Executive joined the meeting at 7:25pm

In response to Members questions the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Economy and Officers made the following comments:-

- There would be charges at London Road car park because if it remained free people would choose to park their reducing income at other car parks.
- The car park charges would not necessarily be put up each year but would be reviewed.
- The flat rate for Sunday and Bank Holidays of £1.50 was for the whole day and £1 in Dunmow and Stansted.
- Due to the cost of carrying out the review it was decided to build in factors of inflation for the future so that car park charges would not need to be increased every year.
- The 3 day ticket had not been covered in the report but could be delegated to Officers and would not constitute a substantial change to the amounts in the papers.
- The changes he had proposed reduced the predicted income by £25K.
- The Parish and Town Councils who would be affected by the increase in parking charges had been sent a report a year ago setting out the intention to raise car parking charges.
- The report produced by the consultants said that there could be a small reduction in footfall initially when charges were raised, however, there would be greater churn of cars and people which could be beneficial to businesses.
- The net profit for car parks was in the budget papers on page 125.
- Income from penalty notices were received by the Council but there was a Service Level Agreement charge paid annually.
- You do not need an 'app' to pay for parking, just a debit or credit card.
- North Essex Parking Partnership enforced the parking, they were not incentivised but there were regular meetings to assess performance. The Chief Executive agreed that it would be a good idea to look at incentives to ensure that parking was being enforced but with some tolerance and allowances made for cars being parked without a ticket for short amounts of time.
- A percentage of the income from the Waitrose car park went to a charity called the Pig Market who then distributed that money to support need within the district, the Citizens Advice Bureau was an example. The Chief Executive advised against advertising this in the car park.
- The amount raised for the charity was a percentage of the income from the car park in the region of £35k per year.
- An agreement had been made with Saffron Walden Town Council regarding Catons Lane, and if the proposals were accepted there would be a profit share once all expenses had been deducted.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Economy thanked the Director of Business, Performance and People for all the work that had gone into the review.

In response to Members concern that the consultants recommendations were not followed the Chief Executive said that he had insisted that there were two additional sets of options to allow a meaningful choice for Members. He said this did not contradict the consultation but was an extension of the options they provided.

The Chair summarised the discussion, he said that this report would be sent on to Cabinet with the following comments:-

- The report was noted.
- The concerns expressed by BID were noted.
- The proposed changes were noted which would be subject to a notice of variation.
- Other matters arising would be taken up with Officers and Parish Councils.
- The changes to car park charges as set out in the meeting were welcomed.

SC42 **OPERATIONAL RESILIENCE REVIEW (PRESENTATION)**

The Leader of the Council apologised for the disruption to the refuse collection within Uttlesford District Council (UDC), she said that the waste crews were blameless. She thanked the Customer Services staff for taking the large number of calls about the service and Widdington Recycling and Braintree District Council for their help. She said that lessons would be learnt across the whole district but asked that staff were not used as political pawns.

The Chief Executive gave a presentation; a copy has been appended to the minutes.

He made the following points:-

- The review would look to identify other potential single points of failure within the organisation.
- The identified issues would be prioritised and solutions written and recorded so that everyone had confidence that there were plans in place and sufficient resilience to make sure there were also back up plans in place.

The Leader said that Members would now have the opportunity to look at operational issues as well as the normal policy and budget items. She said that after the recommendations from the review were implemented, there would also be an internal audit.

In response to a question from the Chair who was concerned that dramatic things kept going wrong. The Leader agreed and made the following comments:-

- They were improving each time, learning more and trying to promote good practice going forward.
- Cabinet Members were questioning more and looking into operational matters. The reviews remit would be across the whole Council and would aim to record all

potential mandatory issues that could be a problem in the future and would make sure there were plans and back up plans in place.

The following comments were made by Members:-

- The reputational cost to the Council would take a long time to heal.
- They asked how to restore the Council's credibility with residents.
- Suggestion of an external independent enquiry.
- Concern around the lack of resources because UDC was a small Council.
- They supported the review and the intention to build resilience into all the Council's procedures.
- The need for Members to support the Chief Executive and Officers with the process of undertaking the review.
- To have clear terms of reference for the Task and Finish Group that would be set up to look into the problems with the waste service and possibly the wider remit of the review.
- To review the ways of working in the authority and to address the problem of staff not always being physically in the same room.

The Chief Executive made the following comments:-

- He had drafted the terms of reference for the Task and Finish Group
- He said that the group should be able to meet within weeks and not months.
- He anticipated that there would be the need for 2 to 3 meetings.
- He asked that the Task and Finish Group looked at the evidence and made an initial report and then if it was decided that the remit needed to be broadened, or there needed to be a separate external review that would then be considered.
- He suggested that some meetings were held in public and evidence gathered from residents and some were held in private so that the management issues which were confidential could be discussed.
- Initially the portfolio member would be the Portfolio Holder for the Environment and Climate Change, however if the remit broadened the Cabinet Member for Communities and Local Partnerships could also become involved.

In response to Members questions the Chief Executive made the following comments:-

- In addition to the Council's refuse fleet, (two vehicles covering commercial waste, ten residential and one small vehicle going to harder to reach areas), there were also vehicles from Braintree District Council that after completing their rounds were then helping with the backlog in UDC. The number changed daily but between three to five vehicles a day.
- Epping Forest had very good Business Continuity plans and would be coaching UDC through the process.

The Chief Executive clarified that it was coincidental that the budget had proposed the extra vehicles and was not related to the recent problem with the licence that caused the issues with bin collection. Councillors Sell and Luck said that it had come as a result of the Scrutiny meeting in November when the Director of Environmental Services had given an update and said that the service was stretched and needed extra vehicles urgently.

The Leader said that she wanted to clarify that no member of the public had been belittled for their views either positive or negative towards the situation. She said that she had wanted to acknowledge that it had been a difficult situation

and Customer Services had taken the majority of the calls, some of which had been understandably angry.

The Chair received consent from the meeting to set up a task and finish group.

The Chair proposed that the membership of the task and finish group was:-
Councillors Criscione and Donald – Joint Chair
Councillor Driscoll and Sell – Members

The terms of reference would be decided in consultation with the Director of Corporate Services and the Chief Executive and draft terms of reference would be approved by circulation to the Scrutiny Committee Members.

He proposed an oral report in the April meeting with a substantive written report in June or alternatively an extraordinary meeting could be called if it was considered necessary.

Councillor Criscione said that they should aim to have the written report for the April meeting.

The Members gave their consent to all the proposals.

The Chair noted that a number of Members wanted an independent element to the process through external involvement, however it was suggested that to begin with it was kept in-house, and external witnesses would be called upon to give evidence.

Councillor Donald said that the task and finish group needed to have achievable aims so that the report was readable, easily understood, and clearly showed what had been learnt from the process.

SC43 **CORPORATE PLAN**

The Leader of the Council presented the Corporate Plan.

She made the following points:

- Previous feedback had been taken on board.
- It was a four year live document that further to feedback now included how each item would be achieved and how it would be measured.
- All the operational details, strategies and links would be included before publication.

In response to Members questions the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive made the following comments:-

- The Scrutiny Committee had a fundamental role in holding the executive to account, there were a number of ways that this happened:-
 - The Chair of Scrutiny attended every Cabinet meeting and was able to ask questions.
 - The reports that were taken to Cabinet could also come to Scrutiny.
 - Every Cabinet Member would be checking the milestones and deliverables that they were responsible for within their portfolios.

- The Leader of the Council was ultimately responsible to make sure that these were carried out and completed.
- The role of Scrutiny was not a post decision making committee but should be included before to be part of the decision making process.
- Performance Indicator reports had been redirected by the Chief Executive, to Cabinet and therefore came under the remit of Scrutiny Committee.
- There was a public consultation of Regulation 19 before it was submitted.

The Chief Executive said that there were three levels of maturity within the Scrutiny function. This Council had moved away from the call in system to the second level which was pre-scrutiny decision making, the next stage was a policy development role. He suggested that there was further discussion around the final role at another meeting.

Councillor Gooding said that the policy development role was a difficult role to take on as a small Council.

The Chair said that this item would be remitted to Cabinet with the comments that had been made.

SC44

MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2024-2029 AND ANNUAL BUDGET 2024-25.

The Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Economy presented the report, he made the following comments:-

- He thanked the Director of Finance and other Officers for preparing the budget papers.
- The proposed rise for Council Tax was 2.99%.
- The cost of living discount scheme would continue, the underspend this year would be transferred into the new budget.
- Extra provision for the additional bin crew was £137K.
- Capital expenditure included three extra bin lorries, £885K.
- A proposal to build more Council houses, included £1.08million to be spent at Takeley and £2.3million for other schemes.
- Council Rents would be increased by 7.7%.
- Blueprint Uttlesford had £2.1m savings in place.
- There was uncertainty about future funding from the Government, there were two main issues:-
 - Business Rates which had not been reset for 11 years
 - The fair funding review which had been planned for over 10 years.

The hit to the budget could be in the region of £6.7million and had been included in budget as the worst case scenario.

- The selling of an asset was in the report but would not affect this year's budget.
- The MTFS reserves had received some alterations and at the end of 2025 would now be £7.04million and not the £7.18million within the current papers.

In response to Members questions the Portfolio Holder for Finance and the Economy, the Chief Executive and Officers made the following comments:-

- The mention of Walpole and Little Canfield in the budget papers within the ad-hoc repairs sections was to reflect that some maintenance could be required even on new properties.
- The Housing Revenue Account was in a better position than 12 months ago.

- The 60 year life of the housing stock was on a rolling basis and based on an estimated average for the whole of the stock.
- The repair costs within the budget were based on an above inflation increase as a result of detailed work carried out by the housing team, although there was always an element of estimation.
- The paragraph entitled Environmental, Social and Governance Policy was a generic paragraph added because the government expected more consistency from councils because of the risk of taking big decisions, it was a more prudent approach.
- The eight new Council houses proposed in Takeley were the conversion of an existing building.
- The criteria for the cost of living support fund could be widened. Although it was being publicised there were a number of reasons why it was not being spent.
- There would be in the region of 20% fewer staff in 4 years time. In the current year it was likely that there would be 4 redundancies.
- There would be less resilience with a smaller number of staff, however a risk based focus identifying where the biggest risks were would be vital along with support from other Councils.
- Letting out more of London Road would be an additional income stream as the Council would receive rent and the tenant would pay the running costs.
- All opportunities to maximise income and generate new income were being explored.
- All grant policies would be reviewed to make sure that they were working effectively and this would include the current tenant who was residing in London Road rent free.

The Chair said it was an impressive budget in difficult times. There were issues and concerns that need to be addressed but it was reasonably robust.

The budget would be remitted to Cabinet.

The meeting ended at 22.15.