

MINUTES OF
CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL CABINET

on 8 July 2020 at 7.00pm

Present:

Cabinet Members

Councillor S J Robinson, Leader of the Council (Chair)
Councillor M C Goldman, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Connected Chelmsford
Councillor C K Davidson, Cabinet Member for Fairer Chelmsford
Councillor R J Moore, Cabinet Member for Greener and Safer Chelmsford

Cabinet Deputies

Councillor M Bracken, Economy and Small Business
Councillor N Dudley, Community Engagement
Councillor C Tron, Affordable Housing

Councillors

K Bentley, P Clark, W Daden, S Dobson, J Galley, R Hyland, R Massey, I Roberts,
M Sismey, M S Steel, M Watson, R T Whitehead and S Young

1. Attendance and Apologies for Absence

The attendance of members was confirmed. Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor M J Mackrory (Cabinet Member for Sustainable Development), Councillors A Davidson and S Rajesh (Cabinet Deputies), and Councillors R J Poulter and J M Raven (Opposition Spokespersons).

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 2 June 2020 were confirmed as a correct record. No decisions at that meeting had been called in.

4. Public Questions

Written questions had been received on the following matters:

- (a) The decision of the Council to fine the A Canteen for displaying A boards to advise customers of the new rules and to social distance. Whilst it was accepted that the City Council had a policy of clearing pavements of advertising matter, the Cabinet member was asked whether she was aware that the Government had advised councils to relax such rules to allow businesses to operate in the current climate and whether, at a time when it was essential for businesses to survive, the Council would reconsider the fine so as to avoid the impression that it was anti-business.

The Cabinet Member for Greener and Safer Chelmsford described the context in which the Council had helped traders in the City Centre and the business community generally through the administration of the financial support provided to them by the government during the coronavirus pandemic. She also referred to the steps the Council had taken with others to ensure that the public felt safe to return to the City Centre when the lockdown had eased and to facilitate the reopening of businesses.

The purpose of the restrictions on A boards in the City Centre was to enable more vulnerable people, including those with disabilities, to move around safely and without obstruction. Whilst some planning and licensing restrictions had been eased during the crisis, they did not relate to A boards. In accordance with the usual procedure, the A Canteen had been warned about the boards before being issued with a fixed penalty notice when it failed to remove the boards. Such notices could be appealed against in the Magistrates' Court.

The Cabinet Member emphasised the Council's wish to support local business during this challenging time but said that it also had a duty to look after the interests of those using the City Centre, which the restriction on the siting of A boards aimed to do.

- (b) How many trees had been planted by the Council alongside Creekview Road in South Woodham Ferrers in January 2020 with the aim of 'forming a new woodland for all to enjoy'; how many had 'taken' and were growing; and how and when the project was expected to become the new woodland.
- (c) I have been concerned to see the deplorable condition of Creekview Green in South Woodham Ferrers. This once beautiful space has been ruined—hardly an environmental success.

I would like to know

- How much ratepayers' money was spent on the initial preparation and planting?
- How many trees were planted at Creekview Green?

- How many have died?
- What plans are in place to replant the area or return it to greensward and at what cost?

Also, in view of the Council's stated ambitions for tree planting across Chelmsford, what actions are being taken to ensure this sorry situation does not happen elsewhere?

In response to the questions, the Cabinet Member for Greener and Safer Chelmsford said that the planting of the woodland at Creekview Green was part of the Council's 10-year campaign to significantly increase the amount of woodland and the proportion of tree cover in Chelmsford. With regard to the specific questions raised:

- 2,660 trees had been planted at the former hay meadow in Creekview Green between November 2019 and February 2020;
- 65% were establishing well. Some losses were to be expected but the proportion had been higher than normal owing primarily to the extremes of weather experienced since they had been planted. It was not possible to water individual whips but work had been carried out to give them the best possible chance to establish; and
- the cost of planting had been £2,557, the provision of fencing had cost £1,606 and work to gap up between whips and to plant new ones had cost £884, a total of £5,041.

The Cabinet Member said that the woodland was intended to be naturalistic and would establish over the next two to three years, with its current appearance improving as grass and flowers grew around the trees and mulch and other materials left over from the planting washed into the soil. Like other planting schemes, the new woodland at Creekview Green would ultimately provide environmental benefits and improve the quality of life of those living nearby or visiting the area.

(7.04pm to 7.24pm)

5. Members' Questions

Councillors who were not members of the Cabinet asked the following questions:

- (a) Councillor R Massey on whether the Cabinet Member for Greener and Safer Chelmsford had visited Creekview Road to look at the planting scheme, and whether she was aware that Essex and Suffolk Water had laid a pipeline in the vicinity a few years ago that could potentially be damaged by oak saplings planted nearby.

The Cabinet Member said that she has assisted with the planting and had seen a recent video of the scheme. The presence of the water pipes had been taken into account when the planting had taken place and whilst it had not been intended to plant oak trees as part of the scheme any that affected the pipework would be removed.

- (b) Councillor I Roberts on when the public consultation on the Making Places and Planning Obligations Supplementary Planning Documents would be carried out.

The Leader of the Council said that Councillor Roberts would be given the precise dates after the meeting.

(7.24pm to 7.28pm)

6.1 Capital Programme Update and Provisional Outturn for 2019/20 (Fairer Chelmsford)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The report to the meeting detailed capital expenditure incurred in 2019/20 and the resources used to finance it; set out variations to approved capital schemes and the Asset Replacement Programme; and presented a budget for asset replacements in 2020/21.

Options

The report was factual and the consideration of options was therefore not relevant.

RESOLVED that the following be approved:

1. a new scheme and cost increases of £178,000, shown in Appendix 1 of the report to the meeting and detailed in paragraph 3.1 of the report; and
2. the proposed Asset Replacement Programme for 2020/21, the increase in scheme costs of £106,000 and the rephasing of spend of £129,000 from 2019/20 as shown in Appendix 3 and detailed in paragraph 4.2 of the report.

RECOMMENDED to the Council that it note:

1. the latest proposed budgets for capital schemes of £144.656m, shown in Appendix 1 and detailed in paragraph 3.1;
2. the outturn on the 2019/20 Asset Replacement Programme of £3.181m, shown in Appendix 3 and detailed in paragraph 4.1;
3. the Asset Replacement Programme for 2020/21 of £4.285m as shown in Appendix 3 and detailed in paragraph 4.2; and
4. the method of funding of the capital expenditure incurred in 2019/20, as set out in the table in paragraph 5.

(7.28pm to 7.33pm)

6.2 Treasury Management Outturn 2019/20 (Fairer Chelmsford)

Declarations of Interest:

None

Summary:

The report to the meeting detailed the findings of the annual review of the Council's Treasury Management function and the rates of return on investments in 2019/20.

Options:

The report was factual and no options were presented.

Discussion:

The Cabinet Member for Fairer Chelmsford reported that value of the Council's investments in the CCLA property fund had fallen by £200,000 in 2019/20 and had reduced further since. The fund was closed at present but was expected to reopen. Whilst the fund had been less beneficial to the Council recently, it had proved to be a good long-term investment and its performance would continue to be monitored by the Treasury Management and Investment Sub-Committee.

RESOLVED that the Treasury Management Outturn report for 2019/20 be noted and that the Council be recommended to endorse it.

(7.33pm to 7.36pm)

6.3 Medium-Term Financial Strategy (Fairer Chelmsford)

Declarations of Interest:

None

Summary:

A Medium-Term Financial Strategy for the period 2021/22 – 2025/26 was presented which was intended to serve as the framework for delivering a stable and sustainable financial position to enable the Council to achieve its strategic objectives and help to support the preparation of the 2021/22 budget.

The report also set out a Medium-Term Financial forecast, but recognising that the course of the coronavirus pandemic, and its effects on the Council's finances, were extremely difficult to predict, the Strategy would be further reviewed in the third quarter of 2020/21, ahead of budget setting for 2021/22. This would allow the assumptions used within the forecasting model to be refined using the most up-to-date data. It was important, however, that the Council considered the risks to its

financial position in a timely manner and put measures in place early to secure a sound financial position.

Options:

Approve or amend the Strategy submitted as Appendix 1 to the report.

Chosen Option and Reasons:

The proposed Strategy provided a framework to commence preparation of the detailed budget for 2021/22, taking account of the latest financial projections over the medium-term and the financial risks facing the Council.

Discussion:

The Cabinet Member for Fairer Chelmsford emphasised that the figures given in the report were likely to change as the financial effects of the pandemic became clearer and when the anticipated government support to local authorities was clarified. It was not possible to forecast the effect of the pandemic on the Council's finances over the coming years but the report gave a range of possible scenarios and it contained measures to balance the Council's budget in 2021/22.

In response to a question, the Cabinet Member said that the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) did not have an interest element associated with it. He explained that the life of an asset was not necessarily the same as the life of the borrowing for it and the MRP wrote off the asset over the period of its life in a variety of ways. The interest effect came from the broader impact of the cash balances on the Council, so that where more cash was going out and less coming in, there would be a reduction in income from investments. Given the current level of interest rates, however, the impact would be small.

Opposition Spokespersons expressed support for the Strategy and said that they would join Cabinet Members in making representations to the government for a fair system of financial support to the Council during the pandemic crisis. They also echoed the Cabinet Member's thanks and appreciation for the work of officers in Financial Services for preparing the Strategy and ensuring that the Council had adequate financial resources to maintain its services.

RESOLVED that

1. the Medium-Term Financial Forecast and the principal issues and risks associated with the forecast and considered in preparing the Strategy be noted; and
2. the Director of Financial Services, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Fairer Chelmsford, be authorised to update the forecast and make any consequential changes to the report in light of measures arising out of the emergency budget expected on 8 July 2020, before presentation of the report to Council 22 July 2020.

RECOMMENDED to the Council that it approve:

1. the Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2021/22 – 2025/26 in Appendix 1 to the report to the meeting;
2. the approach to reserves set out at section 7 and at Appendix 4, including the transfer of reserves in both 2019/20 and 2020/21 to support the General Fund balance set out in paragraph 7.13;
3. the updates to the capital strategy set out in Appendix 3, which reflect the additional internal borrowing as a consequence of the transfers above; and
4. the budget guidelines for preparation of the 2021/22 budget set out at Appendix 5.

(7.36pm to 7.57pm)

7. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business

8. Reports to Council

The three reports at Item 6 required reference to the Council.

The meeting closed at 7.58pm

Chair