

MINUTES OF CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL CABINET

on 15 October 2019 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 J Deakin, Cabinet Member for Safer Chelmsford
Councillor M J Mackrory, Cabinet Member for Greener Chelmsford

Cabinet Deputies

Councillor M Bracken, Economy and Small Business
Councillor R J Moore, Recycling and Ecology
Councillor C R Tron, Affordable Housing

Councillors

K Bentley, P Clark, G B R Knight, L A Mascot, R J Poulter, I C Roberts,
T E Roper, M Sismey, M S Steel, M Watson and R T Whitehead

1. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Galley and R J Hyland, Opposition Spokespersons.

2. **Declarations of Interests**

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 10 September 2019 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair. No decisions at that meeting had been called in.

4. **Public Questions**

A member of the public asked when the play area in Avon Road park, to be funded from a planning contribution of £55,576 from a nearby development, would be provided. The questioner also expressed concern that the park would be threatened by the construction of a road to serve the proposed Warren Farm development and that there was inadequate infrastructure to support that development.

The Leader of the Council replied that the value of the contribution had now increased to around £83,000. It was held by the Council for the construction of a play area in Avon Road and would be used for that purpose.

The Leader reiterated his commitment to ensuring that adequate housing and its associated infrastructure was provided through the Local Plan, that such development would be genuinely sustainable, and that communities were engaged in that process through the master planning process and were provided with the necessary facilities.

5. **Members' Questions**

Councillors who were not members of the Cabinet asked questions or made statements on the following matters:

Councillor P Clark on whether the Cabinet would follow the lead of Basildon Borough Council and provide funding to enable all street lights to be kept on throughout the night. He said that the original financial argument in support of reducing the hours during which the lights were on had been overtaken by the health and safety argument in favour of keeping them on.

The Cabinet Member for Safer Chelmsford said that whilst she would be happy to discuss the suggestion, there were no plans to provide funding for that purpose. The idea was better addressed to the County Council as the responsible authority and in her view the environmental arguments in favour of retaining the present situation were also a consideration. The Leader added that an assessment was necessary of whether resources spent on keeping street lights on all night were the most effective means of addressing crime and disorder concerns.

Councillor M Bracken on the part played by officers in the Sustainable Communities directorate in helping to secure £218 million from the Housing Infrastructure Fund to support the provision of Beaulieu Station and a North-East By-pass.

The Cabinet agreed that its grateful thanks to Liz Harris-Best, Stuart Graham, Jeremy Potter, Claire Stuckey, Laura Perry, Gemma Nicholson, Andy Bestwick, Karen Short, Vanessa Wilson and David Green for their work in supporting the bid for the funding should be placed on record.

Councillor K Bentley on whether the Council would work with other local authorities to provide improved roads, better crossings and more 20mph zones around schools, especially in South Woodham Ferrers, to encourage people to travel by means other than cars. He also asked whether it would look to the funding available from the Local Highways Panel and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to help meet the cost of doing so.

The Cabinet Member for Greener Chelmsford said that he supported the sentiments behind the question. Master Plans gave communities the opportunity to propose ways of making development more sustainable and he said that the measures suggested could be put forward as part of that. Neighbourhood Plans also provided the means by which additional CIL monies could be allocated to those areas, like South Woodham Ferrers, where development was planned. A less likely source of funding was the Local Highways Panel, which already had a substantial backlog of schemes competing for limited resources and where road safety was a prime consideration in the selection of schemes.

Councillor R T Whitehead on why the Council had withdrawn invitations issued by the Women's Institute to two local Members of Parliament to attend tree planting ceremonies.

The Cabinet Member for Safer Chelmsford said that these ceremonies were held by the Council for the benefit of local communities. It had not been appropriate for the Women's Institute to issue invitations to what were intended to be small and intimate events to which only local people should be invited. The Members of Parliament were invited to other events, where appropriate.

Councillor G B R Knight on whether the Cabinet was aware of and looking to learn from the affordable housing scheme in Norwich that had won the 2019 Royal Institute of British Architects Sterling Prize.

The Leader of the Council said that he knew of the scheme and that the Council would be talking to developers to encourage the delivery of low- or zero-carbon dwellings.

6.1 **Medium Term Financial Strategy (Fairer Chelmsford)**

Declarations of Interest: None

Summary: The Cabinet considered a proposed financial strategy for 2020/21 to 2024/25 which it was intended would provide the framework for delivering a stable and sustainable financial basis for the achievement of the Council's strategic objectives and supporting the preparation of the budget for 2020/21. The report assessed the national and local context in which the Strategy had been produced and the risks which needed to be mitigated to protect the Council's financial position. It also provided a medium term financial forecast and proposed funding for initial work to promote digital innovation in service delivery

Options: Approve the draft Strategy, with or without amendment.

Chosen Option and Reasons: The draft Strategy provided a sound financial basis for the Council's strategic objectives and took into account all relevant considerations.

Discussion: Members of the opposition groups expressed concern that the Strategy envisaged borrowing money to fund the Administration's spending plans. The view was expressed that other options, such as reducing costs and selling under-performing assets, should be considered first. A more prudent, business-like approach, rather than a politically-driven one, should be taken to the management and use of the Council's resources. Clear reasons were needed for the borrowing, what it would be used for and how it would be repaid.

The Cabinet Member of Fairer Chelmsford did not agree with the comments made. The previous Administration had acknowledged that the Council would be moving from one that was debt free to one that would need to borrow to meet its spending plans. Borrowing in itself was not a bad thing, but it needed to be carefully planned and the Council's remaining assets and resources properly managed. The Administration would be putting forward specific proposals for borrowing and spending in due course. These would follow the five key principles and supporting actions set out in the Strategy to ensure that the financial approach was prudent and sustainable.

RECOMMENDED TO THE COUNCIL that the Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2020/21 to 2024/25 detailed in Appendix 1 to the report to the meeting be approved.

RESOLVED that:

1. the Medium Term Financial Forecast and the principal issues and risks associated with it and the Strategy be noted; and
2. £150,000 be approved to pilot an approach to increasing digital innovation in service delivery, the funding to be held in a Service Transformation Reserve.

7.27pm to 7.46pm

6.2 **Business Rates Pooling for Non-Domestic Rates in 2020/21 (Fairer Chelmsford)**

Declarations of Interest: None

Summary: The report to the meeting assessed the risks and benefits to the Council of participating in an Essex Business Rate Pool for 2020/21.

Options: Join or not join the Business Rate Pool.

Chosen Option and Reasons: Participation in the Pool would be in the Council's financial interests by increasing the non-domestic rating income.

RESOLVED that:

1. the principle of the Council joining an Essex Business Rate Pool for 202/21 be approved; and
2. the Director of Finance, after consultation with the Cabinet Member for Fairer Chelmsford, be authorised to finalise the pooling arrangements and documentation to give effect to resolution 1.

7.46pm to 7.47pm

7. **Chelmsford Masterplan Procedure Update (Greener Chelmsford)**

Declarations of Interest: None

Summary: At its meeting on 3 October 2019, the Chelmsford Policy Board had recommended to the Cabinet that it approve proposed amendments to the procedure for the preparation of masterplans for development allocations in the emerging Local Plan. The report before the Cabinet also set out progress with masterplans currently in production.

The Cabinet was informed that amendments made at the Policy Board had been incorporated into the procedure but that one that would require developers or promoters actively to engage with all interested bodies was subject to Cabinet approval.

Options: Approve or not the proposed amendments.

Chosen Option and Reasons: The proposed amendments would support the provision of high quality and sustainable development in Chelmsford.

Discussion: Reference was made during discussion of this item to what many people in South Woodham Ferrers regarded as the inadequate measures planned for crossing the B1012 from the existing town to the new development area. With traffic from development sites in Maldon increasingly using that road there was a growing belief locally that the best option would be to re-route the road to the north of the proposed development.

The Cabinet Member for Greener Chelmsford said that the time to put forward such a proposal was at the master planning stage. It would, however, need to be supported by the local highway authority. The question of increased usage of the B1012 as a result of development elsewhere in Essex was beyond the control of the Council.

RESOLVED that, subject to the insertion of the words in bold below in the part on page 4 of Appendix 1 in which it appears, the amendments to the Masterplan process set out in that appendix be approved and welcomed

“Engagement with relevant stakeholders to be led by the site developer/promotor. This should include statutory bodies, service providers
....”

7.47pm to 8.00pm

8. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

9. **Reports to Council**

Item 6.1 on the Medium Term Financial Strategy would be referred to the Council.

Exclusion of the Public

RESOLVED that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for item 10 on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information falling within paragraph 3 of Part 1 of the Schedule 12A to the Act (information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person including the authority holding that information).

10. **Sale of Retail Assets in the City Centre (Fairer Chelmsford)**

Public interest statement: It is not in the public interest to release details of this report at present, on the grounds that the report contains information that is commercially sensitive and to place the information in the public realm will be detrimental to the negotiations to be undertaken by the Council in acquiring this land.

Declarations of Interest: None.

Summary: The Cabinet was requested to consider the principle of acquiring two parcels of land that had future development potential.

Options: Enter into negotiations for the possible acquisition of the land, do not pursue the purchase or seek a development partner with which to acquire the land.

Preferred Option and Reasons: The negotiations would provide more information on whether the acquisition would be in the Council's best financial interests.

Discussion: Opposition spokespersons raised a large number of questions about this proposal. They centred on the seeming lack at this stage of clear plans for the future of the sites, a proper assessment of the financial and other implications and a willingness to enter into negotiations for the purchase without a sound business case. The report to the meeting gave insufficient information on the financial aspects of the proposal, what a joint venture would entail and how the £175,000 figure for the due diligence work was arrived at. Consideration had not been given, as an alternative, to advancing the development of sites already in the Council's ownership

The Cabinet Member for Fairer Chelmsford said that the opportunity to purchase the sites was one that rarely occurred. The recommendation to open negotiations would mean that that opportunity was not lost. It did not, however, commit the Council to the purchase of the site and much of the information that the opposition spokespersons said was required would be provided as part of the proposed due diligence work.

After further discussion the Cabinet accepted the need for a business case before a decision was taken on whether to progress the purchases. It was considered that £50,000 would be sufficient to meet the cost of its production.

RESOLVED that a capital budget of £50,000 be approved to meet the cost of developing a business case for acquiring the parcels of land referred to in the report and it be considered by the Cabinet before a decision is made on whether to open negotiations for their purchase.

8.00pm to 8.43pm

The meeting closed at 8.43pm

Chairman