

**MINUTES OF
CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL CABINET**

on 10 October 2023 at 7.05pm

Present:

Cabinet Members

Councillor S Robinson, Leader of the Council (Chair)
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, M Steel, S Sullivan, A, Thorpe-Apps, and R Whitehead

Also present: Councillors P. Clark, C. Davidson, D Eley, J Hawkins, B. Massey V. Pappa

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs M and S Goldman and Cllr Hyland.

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 12 September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record. The decision for Item 7.1 at that meeting had been called in and would be considered at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting on 19th October.

4. Public Questions

One public question was submitted before the meeting. It asked how much extra land had been incorporated into the Compass Gardens play area in South Woodham Ferrers when it had been remodelled, since it had been established at the last meeting that the town had lost nearly 1000 square metres of play area at Saltcoats Park. The relevant Cabinet Member was

asked whether it was now time for the second Liberal Democrat administration to come up with some new ideas for parks, to aspire for greater things and that losing play space to general parkland was not an upgrade. The member of the public asked if it was not right to use some of the district's capital budget to enhance the town's park facilities and stated that less than 1% of the non-earmarked capital money had been allocated to SWF which had nearly 10% of the districts population. They also stated that a new toddler's play space adjacent to the play area was one project the Council should be moving forward on and the Cabinet Member was invited to ask residents what facilities they actually wanted.

In response to the question and points raised, the Cabinet Member for a Greener and Safer Chelmsford stated that the total area within the area referred to was 952sqm of which approximately 660sqm was designated play space with the remainders grass margins. They stated that whilst the perimeter and area of the existing play area remained the same, much of the area was grass open space with sparsely placed equipment. It was noted that the policy had been to integrate and combine smaller age restrictive play areas into larger, more inclusive Neighbourhood schemes had been introduced in 2012 and was still active and in progress. The Cabinet heard that the Council felt the area had an enhanced play value and content catering for all age ranges. The Cabinet also heard that the refurbishment and replacement had followed the normal consultation process, involving local residents with a majority vote for the chosen design. The Cabinet Member also stated that no suitable space had been found in the south west area of the town for an additional facility but the south west part of the town would be given priority when it came to future investment. The Cabinet Member offered to meet with the member of the public on site with other Town Councillors to discuss the matter further.

5. Members' Questions

Four questions were asked at this point of the meeting and other questions were asked by Councillors under the relevant items. Cllr Jeapes asked for clarification on where the City Council was in relation to the Local Plan in the context of its Strategic Housing Needs Assessment in terms of how many houses were required and how many had been built, in light of the significant issues highlighted by the budget in relation to housing. They also asked if work had been undertaken going forward to look at the estimated housing needs up to 2024 and what the numbers were for this.

In response the Cabinet Member for a Growing Chelmsford stated that the housing requirement was 805 new homes per year, equating to 18,515 new homes in the plan period. It was noted that 6,825 new homes had been built up to April 2023 and that the adopted Local Plan made provision for the remaining requirement to be delivered in the period to 2036 as part of existing planning permissions and site allocations. The Cabinet Member also stated that the Council had started a review of the adopted Local Plan covering the period up to 2041. It was noted that it would use the Government's Standard Methodology for deriving future housing numbers which was around 1000 new homes per year for Chelmsford. It was highlighted that the approach had been covered in the Issues and Options consultation document for the review of the Local Plan which had been considered by the Chelmsford Policy Board on 14 July 2022.

The second question was asked by Cllr Massey. They asked with regard to the pressures on the Leisure and Heritage budget, whether the administration could advise on the situation regarding the planned £275,000 investment in the plant at the South Woodham Ferrers pool and reassure residents there were no plans to close the pool.

In response the Cabinet Member for an Active Chelmsford stated that the pool had now been open for nearly 20 years and therefore it had been anticipated that it would require some attention, leading to the programmed £250k. It was noted that any works would require temporary closure, which the Council were keen to avoid and that for now the boiler and pump which were key elements of the pool running were working satisfactorily. The Cabinet Member stated that energy efficient alternatives would continue to be looked into. It was also noted that a bid for external funding was being submitted and the Council were keen to secure the external funding and reduce energy costs in the future. The Cabinet Member also confirmed that there were no plans to permanently close the pool in the future.

The third question was asked by Cllr Pappa and related to issues with bus pick up points for students at the County High School for Girls. They stated that the current pick up point was not safe and that the City Council had not assisted with offering use of their car park rather than the current points along Broomfield Road. It was noted that the current bus stops blocked traffic during peak times and the Cabinet were asked to reconsider and allow modifications to the car park to allow coaches to pick up students.

In response the Leader of the Council stated that there had been various discussions on the topic over recent years and as a local Councillor they had made representations to Essex County Council about the issues with the current bus stops. They stated that Essex County Council had been unwilling to listen to suggestions regarding the rephasing of traffic lights on Broomfield Road which would have led to less queuing. They also stated that a reasonable compromise appeared to be using the outside of Hyatt Place as a pick up point as if the car park was used this would lead to safety issues when turning out of Elm Road. The Leader of the Council clarified though that it was a Highways issue and it was the County Council's responsibility to find a solution.

The fourth question was asked by Cllr Thorpe-Apps and related to the Theatre redevelopment. They stated it had been nearly a year since the refurbishment and sought clarity on the income gains and why no predicted income figures had been provided within the finance report and when these would be available.

In response the Leader of the Council stated that the £1m figure quoted had been an initial estimate and the agreed budget of £3.5m had been adhered to. They also stated that the final accounts had not yet been signed off, due to snagging works still underway and that there would be a report available after then. It was also noted that once a full year of the theatre programme had been completed including the panto, there would be a much clearer idea of what income figures could go into next year's budget.

6.1 Amendment to Housing Allocations Policy (Fairer Chelmsford)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet considered a report seeking their approval for an amendment clarifying the Council's policy for the allocation of homes that had been provided in addition to planned and existing general needs housing stock, with funding intended to meet the need of a specific group from the Housing Register.

Options:

- 1) Retain the existing policy as it is;
- 2) Amend the existing policy to expressly state how other allocations can be made without the need to rely on the delegated authority of the Strategic Housing Services Manager;
- 3) Amend the wording of the policy to specifically allow the Strategic Housing Services Manager to make decisions on the allocation of housing provided through additional funding for specific purposes in general.

Preferred option and reasons:

Option 3 was the preferred option because it avoided the ambiguity of Option 1 and the operational problems of Option 2. The policy grants delegated authority to the Housing Services Manager in exceptional cases, this could be interpreted as events that are unforeseen and unplanned and therefore not apply to cases where additional homes are provided through funding to meet a specific purpose. Option 2 may need to be revised and updated as operational issues change, or new opportunities arise causing delay. Both of the other options could also create a risk of future challenges.

Discussion:

The Cabinet heard that option 3 would be the clearest way to make the change and allow funding to be passed to partners and allocated to the right families whilst avoiding legal challenge. In response to a question it was noted that three of the registered providers had responded, whilst all had been consulted. It was noted that it tended to be smaller local providers that would reply, rather than larger national providers.

RESOLVED to

1. Amend the wording of the policy to specifically allow the Strategic Housing Services Manager to make decisions on the allocation of housing provided through additional funding for specific purposes in general.
2. Change the wording of the policy to, "Allocations of social housing will be through the Housing Register in accordance with the provisions of the Allocations Scheme. The Council recognises that there may be some exceptional situations not covered by the Allocations Scheme. In such instances, The Strategic Housing Services Manager will have delegated authority to make decisions, as they consider appropriate, and these will be fully documented. This will include the allocation of homes that have been

provided to meet the need of a specific group where funding has enabled an additional supply of homes specifically for this purpose.”

(7.30pm to 7.34pm)

7.1 Mid-Year Budget Review and Financial Forecast (Leader)

Declarations of interest:

None.

Summary:

The Cabinet considered a report providing them with an update on the Council's projected financial position in 2023/24 and over the medium term, it also identified actions for the budget process. The report provided a financial forecast to enable members to consider the current financial position and the key issues that could be expected to be reported upon when the Council sets its budget for 2024/25. The report contained a Mid-Year budget review, Housing Temporary Accommodation demand and costs, Background on the wider Local Authority Sector, Medium Term Revenue Budget Forecast and Reserves Forecast, in its appendices. The report summarised the key points and actions that arose from the matters detailed in the appendices.

Options

After consideration of the updated financial forecast the options were:

1. Agree the actions recommended.
2. Propose other amendments to the actions.

Preferred option and reasons:

Approve the actions as recommended, as they will enable the production of a budget for 2024/25

Discussion:

The Cabinet were informed that the report detailed a difficult financial position for all local Council's, due to increased inflation and rising homelessness. The Cabinet heard that in the past when inflation had been lower, it had not been too difficult to close the income gap with relatively easy savings but that was no longer the case. The increasing cost of temporary accommodation was highlighted and that it would continue to increase year on year. The Cabinet were also informed of the significant reduction in funding from central Government for local Government over the last decade. The Cabinet heard that the report detailed actions that needed to be taken but were assured that a balanced budget as in every previous year would be set in January. It was noted that a homelessness action group had been set up with officers from across all departments, the Capital Programme continued to be reviewed, fees and charges may have to rise higher than liked and that the Council would continue to seek the fair funding it had been promised by Government. It was noted that there were significant cost increases simply out of the Council's control but the Council would continue to try and minimise the impact of them upon residents.

In response to questions from the opposition it was noted that;

- Until the financial settlement with Government was finalised it was difficult to state what services were more at risk of budget shortfalls than others.
- Staff redundancies were not foreseen by the administration.
- It was not felt that the redevelopment of some car parks for housing would lead to lower income as the majority of parking income would in effect be moved to other less utilised car parks in the City also in effect leading to lower costs of temporary accommodation.
- The Waterside development continued to be a rare opportunity to develop a sustainable neighbourhood of mixed uses in a central area, where the Council with its partners would be able to deliver much needed housing for residents.
- The figures detailing CHP repairs covered various areas including an agreement with CHP for Private Sector Leased properties where some of the Council's housing stock from private landlords was managed by CHP and the Council had an arrangement with CHP to pay them for necessary repairs.
- Housing Benefit often met the cost of rent, but could not be used to cover service charges which often meant this was difficult to collect as some residents would not be able to afford the rising costs.
- The overspend on casual staff has been an ongoing matter, exacerbated by staff costs rising rapidly due to high inflation and the difficulty predicting the demand for courses and other elements at the Council's Leisure Centres.
- The charges at the Cemetery and Crematorium were still cost competitive and the number of deaths had been in line with national trends, rather than residents using facilities in other areas.
- The introduction of a charge to use the newly refurbished tennis courts at Oaklands Park was part of the agreement with the Lawn Tennis Association that led to them paying for the refurbishments. This investment had allowed the courts to go back into use and if the agreement had not been made the courts would still be out of use. It was noted that there were other tennis facilities elsewhere in the City that remained free, but the courts at Oaklands offered a higher level facility for residents.
- The high level of reserves would continue to be helpful when setting a balanced budget. Income from the Council's action against HMRC on Vat, that had improved the financial reserves position.

RESOLVED to

1. Note the update financial forecast and
2. Approve the actions recommended.

(7.35pm to 8.08pm)

8. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

9. Reports to Council

None of the items were subject of recommendations to the Council.

The meeting closed at 8.09pm

Chair