

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Environment and Communities Committee**
held on Tuesday, 30th January, 2024 in the Committee Suite 1,2 & 3,
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor M Warren (Chair)
Councillor J Snowball (Vice-Chair)

Councillors J Bird, M Brooks, L Buchanan, T Dean, S Gardiner, D Jefferay,
B Posnett, H Seddon, L Smetham and J Clowes

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Tom Shuttleworth, Interim Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods
Chris Allman, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Ralph Kemp, Head of Environmental Services
David Malcolm, Head of Planning
Tracey Bettaney, Head of Regulatory Services
Tracy Baldwin, Finance Manager
James Thomas, Principal Solicitor
Josie Lloyd, Democratic Services Officer

122 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hayley Whittaker.
Councillor Janet Clowes attended as a substitute.

123 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In the interest of openness and transparency the following Councillors
declared that they were members of the library service:

Councillor M Brooks, T Dean, D Jefferay and H Seddon.

During consideration of item 6, Councillor L Buchanan declared an interest
that she worked for, and was a member of, Everybody Health and Leisure.
Cllr Brooks also declared that she was a member of Everybody Health and
Leisure.

124 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2023 be agreed as a
correct record.

125 **PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION**

There were no public speakers.

126 **THIRD FINANCIAL REVIEW 2023/24 (ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE)**

The Committee received a report which provided the third review of the Cheshire East Council forecast outturn for the financial year 2023/24.

Members were asked to consider the serious financial challenges being experienced by the Council (and other councils) and to recognise the important activities outlined which aimed at minimising the impact on services.

Overall the Council was forecasting an over spend of £13m and this was an improvement of £5.7m since the second finance review. The Environment and Health Committee had pressures of £3.1m and this was a reduction of £0.4m since the second financial review.

There were some income pressures in planning and building control of £1.3m, increased waste disposal, contract inflation and recycling shortfall pressures of £1.8m and pay inflation pressures of £0.8m. There were some one off charges linked to the delay in some of the savings that had been previously discussed at Committee and they had been offset by in year improvements linked to capitalisation and also the use of earmarked reserves, as well as holding vacancies and some of the mitigation factors taken by the directorate.

An amendment to recommendations 1 – 4 was moved and seconded which sought to add the words ‘and note’ after the first word ‘Consider’. This was carried unanimously.

In relation to recommendation 6 officers agreed to review a request made that in future it would be appropriate if members were being advised that officer delegations were to be used, that they would like to know what the specific delegations are related to, in the context of the Council’s constitution.

RESOLVED: (By Majority)

That the Environment and Communities Committee:

1. Consider and note the report of the Finance Sub Committee: Finance Sub Committee, 11th January, 2024
2. Consider and note the factors leading to a forecast adverse Net Revenue financial pressure of £3.1m against a revised budget of £48.7m (6.4%), for Environment and Communities Committee services.

3. Consider and note the forecast and further mitigations needing to be identified, aimed at bringing spending back in line with budget.

4. Consider and note the in-year forecast Capital Spending of £6.9m against an approved MTFS budget of £12.0m, due to slippage that has been re-profiled into future years, in respect of Environment and Communities Committee projects.

5. Approve fully funded supplementary revenue estimates over £500,000 up to £1,000,000 in accordance with Financial Procedure Rules as detailed in Appendix 5 Environment and Communities Committee, Section 2 Corporate Grants Register, Table 2.

6. Scrutinise the contents of Annex 1 and Appendix 5 and note that any financial mitigation decisions requiring approval will be made in line with relevant delegations.

127 **MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY CONSULTATION
2024/25 - 2027/28 PROVISIONAL SETTLEMENT UPDATE
(ENVIRONMENT & COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE)**

The Committee considered a report which sought feedback on the responsibilities of the Committee as consultees, on the development of the Cheshire East Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 to 2027/28.

Officers reported that the High Level Business Cases would be presented at the Corporate Policy Committee on the 13th of February.

Councillor J Clowes proposed two amendments, seconded by Councillor T Dean which were as follows;

EC4 “Fund Libraries in a different way”

It was felt that whilst the approach was supported it must go further than as described in the consultation extract.

If the potential savings for 2024/25 were to be achieved, the Library Strategy must be expedited. It was proposed that;

- 1) That the Library Strategy (together with the schedule for its’ delivery), was included in the MTFS proposals for 2024/25 (Savings could not be effectively met without it).
- 2) That progress of the Library Strategy was included in MTFS quarterly reviews scheduled into the Committee’s work programme in order that Members had sight of emerging policy objectives at the earliest opportunity. This offered optimum opportunity for oversight and scrutiny of that work.

- 3) That all Library governance models remained “on the table”. Engagement with Town and Parish Councils was only one approach, but other models such as Staff Mutuals, Constituted Community Groups, Industrial & Provident Societies, may better suit different libraries and communities.
- 4) That the proposed outcomes of the Library Strategy were brought forward to Committee in a timely way to deliver savings within year.

Parish Compacts

- 1) As part of the 2024/25 MTFS quarterly reporting process, all asset transfers and devolved services to Town and Parish Councils are reported to Committee in order that Members are able to provide optimal oversight and scrutiny.
- 2) the 2024/25 MTFS includes opportunities for proportionate, devolved services, through an expansion of the parish compact system (or appropriate alternative models), for smaller (often more rural) parishes, where CEC service provision is commensurately more costly than that which local parishes and communities may wish to source for themselves.
- 3) These opportunities to be investigated in terms of local consultation and cost-benefit analysis, prior to bringing forward any realistic savings to Committee later in 2024/25 or for inclusion against the 2025/26 MTFS.
- 4) As the Green Spaces Review (MTFS 2023/24) is implemented, it is timely to further review Green Space maintenance over 2024/25 in the context of Town and Parish Council devolved services (this is already underway), but also in the context of parish precepts (where such parishes express an interest).

The amendments were voted on and carried unanimously therefore the amendments became part of the substantive recommendations. Officers undertook to include them into the revised MTFS documentation.

Following an introduction on each proposal members asked questions and provided comments in relation to each proposal. These included:

Proposal EC1: Refresh wholly owned company overheads and contributions

Had a view already been formed on this a proposal of £1m savings had been cited is there already a review on this?

Officers reported that an update on the review would initially be presented to the Finance Sub Committee in March.

Proposal EC2: Strategic Leisure Review (Stage 2)

Were officers confident that the proposals that would be presented in March be supported by the Environment & Communities Committee and if it was agreed to take those forward were they confident that the £1.3m would be achieved, and secondly if the proposals were not approved was there a fallback position in order to meet the saving?

In response officers stated that it was a member decision so they could not comment whether they would be acceptable to the Committee. There were ongoing negotiations with Everybody Health and Leisure around achieving the target. In respect of whether there was a fall back position, there were alternatives that could be explored but these were dependent on what the decision that committee made.

In response to concerns raised about whether the target could be met and the mitigations in place officers reported that any savings would be monitored and there would be in year adjustments made if savings were not forecast to be achieved. Further proposals would be presented to committee at the appropriate time if that was the case.

Members felt that it was difficult to appraise what was coming out of the public consultations for example if there were legitimate savings put forward those would need to be considered and at what point would each committee know about those as they could have an impact on proposals? Officers highlighted that the recent consultation had closed, the feedback had been assessed and that the consultation report had been published publicly a few days earlier.

Proposal EC3: Reduce costs of waste disposal and number of Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC)

It was suggested that this would be clearer if it was two budget lines rather than one so that they would be identified separately and not connected to each other directly. Officers took an action to ensure that this item was split in the final version of the MTFS document.

Members asked for clarity around whether the Household recycling centres being 'mothballed' was time limited or was it ongoing.

Officers reported that there was a piece of work ongoing around procurement for the replacement of the existing household waste centre contract and that final recommendations related to the long term provision of HWRCs for Cheshire East proposals would be presented to committee later in 2024, currently targeted for September.

Clarification was sought to whether the Committee was being asked to make a decision on identifying the savings and the mechanism as to how that could be achieved would be delegated to the appropriate officer under their delegated powers. There were concerns that members were not by

association of being a member of the Environment and Communities Committee going to be accused of closing a waste recycling centre.

Officers confirmed that the Committee was being asked to recommend the proposals to Corporate Policy Committee and Full Council would be asked to agree to the emergency closure proposals as part of the budget setting process in February.

A question was raised in respect of whether other recycling centres were equipped to deal with the additional waste and whether there were any mitigations in the budget to deal with potential fly tipping. Officers reported that a previous review of provision undertaken approximately 2-3 years ago suggested that 4 sites were enough centres for the number of residents the local authority had, even including the forecast growth of the borough. As part of the formal review this assessment is being refreshed via external consultants and will be presented in support of any final recommendations around the future of the service. The historical closure of two household waste centres had not resulted in an observed increase in fly tipping.

Proposal EC4: Fund libraries a different way

Members agreed that making good use of resources was sensible but asked what research had been undertaken and who the current experts were, and whether they had the capacity to deliver the development?

Officers reported that there was an experienced in-house library service team with knowledge and expertise but they had a day job and it was a finite resource so it may be necessary to bring in external suitably qualified resource in to the project to compliment them. This was specifically in the context of the need to expedite the delivery of the piece of work. Members raised that there were also external resources from Library Connected and the Department of Culture and England Sport, which officers confirmed they are already engaged with on a regular basis and who would be used to inform strategy development.

Proposal EC5: Reduce costs of street cleansing operations

In response to a question raised in respect of whether the proposal was to stop or reduce street cleaning or whether it was a proposal to carry it out more efficiently officers reported that the aim was to make the service more efficient, potentially through exploring the use of technology. Officers further stated that they had been looking at how to deliver savings for 2024/25 working with the appointed delivery provider, but there was not a guarantee that it would not involve some reduction in service levels. At this point it was target budget saving value.

Proposal EC6: Reduce revenue impact of carbon reduction capital schemes

It was suggested that whilst it was disappointing that the capital project was being slowed down in respect of the Council becoming carbon neutral by 2025, there could be some other budget proposals coming forward, such as sustainable transport interventions, which might have carbon benefits and may help offset the proposal.

Officers confirmed that as part of the MTF5 document a Carbon assessment is undertaken and that any positive impact of these other proposals would be considered within this, at a high level.

Proposal EC7: Increase Garden Waste charges to recover costs

Members raised questions in respect of the slow uptake in the subscription and whether or not officers were confident in being able to achieve the figures set, whether the increased annual charge proposed would potentially have a detrimental impact on subscription levels and how did the value of the charge compare to the Councils neighbours.

Officers reported that the business plan was based on a 60% uptake (so 90,000 properties) and from conversations had with neighbouring authorities their take up had been higher than 60%, particularly in year 2 onwards. Officers reported that as of 23rd January the level of subscriptions sat at circa 63,000 but as this is a live system and was one week ago this number would be higher. As the collections had only started again very recently and with the growing season approaching officers were confident that they would hit the 60% target and that an increased charge would not have any detriment to the business plan.

Members suggested that if the Council over achieved on its target it needed to be careful if it was going to consider increasing the charge as it wanted to encourage as many people to subscribe as possible.

In response to a question raised as to whether there would be any impact on the contractual arrangements with the provider Biowise if the Council did not meet its 60% target it was reported that there would not be an impact as it was worked out on annual tonnage and at this time of year it was low level amounts of garden waste collected. There would be monitoring of other elements of the model, not just the uptake and officers would report back on performance through the usual channels later in 2024.

RESOLVED:

That the Environment and Communities Committee

- (a) Recommend to the Corporate Policy Committee, for their meeting on 13 February 2024, all proposals within the budget consultation, as related to the Committee's responsibilities, for inclusion in the Council's budget for 2024/25.

- (b) Submit the comments and proposals outlined above to the Corporate Policy Committee

128 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee considered the work programme.

Members requested the following be taken in to consideration

- It was important that the various submissions put forward for the MTFS were included in the quarterly reviews of the MTFS so that members would know exactly where the Council was up to in delivering those projects and identify at an early stage if there was slippage. .
- A request for informal briefings in between the scheduled formal meetings to have round table discussions, which officers undertook to provide further detail on.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

The meeting commenced at 2.00 pm and concluded at 4.38 pm

Councillor M Warren (Chair)