

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Corporate Policy Committee**
held on Thursday, 30th November, 2023 in the Committee Suite 1, 2 & 3,
Westfields, Middlewich Road, Sandbach CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillor S Corcoran (Chair)
Councillor C Browne (Vice-Chair)

Councillors C Bulman, D Clark, J Clowes, M Goldsmith, A Harrison,
N Mannion, C O'Leary, J Pearson, J Rhodes, J Saunders and M Warren

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

David Parr, Interim Chief Executive
David Brown, Director of Governance and Compliance
Alex Thompson, Director of Finance and Customer Services
Paul Mountford, Democratic Services
Janet Witkowski, Head of Legal Services
Brian Reed, Head of Democratic Services and Governance
Sara Barker, Head of HR
Alan Ward, Complaints Manager

46 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

47 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting held on 5th October 2023 be approved as a correct record.

48 PUBLIC SPEAKING/OPEN SESSION

There were no public speakers.

49 SECOND FINANCIAL REVIEW 2023/24

The Committee considered a report on the second review of the Cheshire East Council forecast outturn for the financial year 2023/24.

The report outlined the serious financial challenges facing the Council (and other councils) and the activities aimed at minimising the impact on services.

The Committee had regard to the report to the Finance Sub-Committee on 2nd November which considered Council expenditure as a whole. That

report highlighted the ongoing negative impact of high inflation, rising interest rates and increasing demand for services since the Council set its budget in February 2023. The second financial review of 2023/24 was forecasting a pressure of £18.7m by 31st March 2024, an increase of £5.9m compared to the first financial review. This figure exceeded general reserves but not usable reserves. Officers were pursuing a range of measures to reduce the forecast overspend.

The Committee report focussed on that part of the budget for which the Corporate Policy Committee was responsible as detailed in the appendix to the report.

In response to members' questions and comments, the Director of Finance and Customer Services advised that:

- The Corporate Leadership Team met weekly to review recruitment to essential posts.
- The MARS scheme referred to in the report was essentially the same scheme as last year.

RESOLVED

That the Committee

1. notes the report of the Finance Sub-Committee on 2nd November 2023;
2. notes the factors leading to a forecast Net Revenue financial underspend of (£0.5m) against a revised budget of £41.2m (1.2%);
3. notes the forecast and any further mitigations to be identified;
4. notes the in-year forecast Capital Spending of £11.7m against an approved MTFS budget of £12.8m, due to slippage that has been re-profiled into future years; and
5. notes the contents of Annex 1 and Appendix 3 of the report and notes that any financial mitigation decisions requiring approval will be made in line with relevant delegations.

50 MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY CONSULTATION 2024/25 - 2027/28 (CORPORATE POLICY COMMITTEE)

The Committee considered a report on the indicative financial envelope for the Corporate Policy Committee to support consultation on the development of the Cheshire East Medium-Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 to 2027/28.

The Chief Executive thanked the Council's staff for the efforts they were making to achieve financial savings, efficiencies and new ways of working.

Members suggested a number of measures which could be explored as a means of reducing costs, including converting library spaces into community hubs to provide a range of services, the use of artificial intelligence in relation to activities such as report writing, and reducing the size of committee memberships. Officers noted the suggestions for further consideration.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee

- 1 notes the indicative budget envelope for the Committee, as approved at the Finance Sub-Committee on 2nd November 2023, as a way of setting financial targets in support of achieving a balanced budget for 2024/25;
- 2 notes that officers will develop further proposals in consultation with Members to enable wider stakeholder consultation prior to approval by Council; and
- 3 notes that Committees will be presented with the opportunity to further review financial proposals, designed to achieve a balanced budget, as part of their January cycle of meetings prior to recommendations being made to Council for approval.

51 COUNCIL TAX BASE 2024/25

The Committee considered a report on the Council tax base calculation 2024/25 for recommendation to Council in December 2023.

In response to members' questions and comments, the Director of Finance and Customer Services advised that:

- The remaining unspent Covid support grant received from the Government was not subject to claw-back.
- A property which was uninhabitable until renovation works had been undertaken was exempt from Council tax for a specific period, further details of which were set out on the Council's website.
- A family home would not be treated as a second home for Council tax purposes during the period that the individual concerned was in a care home.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee

1. recommends to Council that
 - (a) in accordance with the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 2012, the amount to be calculated by Cheshire

East Council as its Council tax base for the year 2024/25 is 160,151.52 for the whole area; and

(b) the Council Tax Landlord discount previously applied to empty rental properties be removed.

2. notes that the Council Tax Support scheme is agreed for 2024/25 as unchanged other than the increases in line with CPI as agreed in the last consultation.

52 PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE CONSTITUTION

The Committee considered a report on proposed changes to the Constitution, as recommended by the Constitution Working Group, in relation to various administrative, procedural and staffing matters. The changes were set out in paragraph 8 of the report, together with the reasons for them.

With regard to a delegation to Directors to implement changes to staffing structures involving the loss of 10 or more posts not currently vacant, members commented that they would wish to know if any such changes involved redundancies. Officers suggested that the delegations relating to staffing as set out in paragraph 8(a) of the report could be subject to consultation with the chair and vice-chair of the relevant committee in addition to other relevant parties.

With regard to a proposal that a committee may delegate to the relevant Executive Director a financial limit for the allocation of grants, donations and other contributions to outside bodies, members commented that they would wish to see the details of any internal, Council-led grant. Councillor M Warren, Chair of the Constitution Working Group, advised that all grants this year were funded externally but that if a grant was above a certain threshold, it would be reported to the appropriate committee.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee recommends to Council

1. the changes to the Council's Constitution in relation to Officer Delegations and Staffing as set out in paragraph 8 - a) of the report subject to an amendment to the revised paragraph 36 to require that any decisions taken under these delegations are taken in consultation with the chair and vice-chair of the relevant service committee;
2. the changes to the Council's Constitution in relation to Officer Delegations to Executive Directors only and settlement agreements as set out in paragraph 8 - b) of the report;

3. the changes to the Council's Constitution in relation to decision-making with regard to early retirement and severance packages as set out in paragraphs 8 - c) of the report;
4. the changes to the Council's Constitution to allow the inclusion of provisions to allow for electronic signing and sealing of documents as set out in paragraph 8 – d) of the report; and
5. the changes to the Council's Constitution to the provisions regarding approvals of grants schemes as set out in paragraph 8 – e) of the report.

53 REVIEW OF THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY SAVING

The Committee considered a report on proposed changes to the committee system to achieve financial savings of £135,000 identified in the MTF5.

A previously deferred proposal to reduce the number of planning committees from three to two was due to be considered by Council on 13th December 2023.

The Committee was asked to consider a number of additional proposals:

- Reducing the number of Place service committees from three to two.
- Merging the functions of the Corporate Policy Committee and Finance Sub-Committee to create a Corporate Policy and Resources Committee.
- Incorporating the functions of the Scrutiny Committee into the relevant service committees.

Officers advised that the Council would need to remove two main committees from the committee structure to achieve the required savings. Reducing the number of meetings instead would not achieve the savings, and reducing the frequency of planning committee meetings would be problematic.

In general, there was no support among members for a reduction in the number of Place service committees.

There was also wide agreement that the Finance Sub-Committee should be retained, particularly in the present financial climate, given its pivotal role in overseeing the Council's budget.

With regard to the functions of the Scrutiny Committee, members felt that these might be better placed with the Audit and Governance Committee rather than a service committee. Officers saw no issue with this in principle but advised that future meetings of the Audit and Governance Committee would need to be structured in such a way as to enable scrutiny functions and audit-related functions to be dealt with at separate times during the

meeting. It was also recognised that different skill-sets were required for audit and scrutiny functions.

In addition to the options identified in the report, members asked that consideration be given to incorporating the functions of the Licensing Committee into the Environment and Communities Committee or the Audit and Governance Committee. Officers advised that a distinction was usually drawn between regulatory committees and service committees. However, they undertook to consider the feasibility of the proposal.

Members also suggested that in future, visiting members, non-core officers and members of the public wishing to speak at committee meetings could be encouraged to attend meetings remotely rather than in person. Officers undertook to consider the implications of the suggestion.

Officers undertook to provide members with a briefing paper on the various options identified and suggestions made during the debate, in time for the Council meeting on 13th December.

RESOLVED

That the Committee recommends to Council that

1. Council note its agreed MTFS saving of £135,000 to reduce the costs of democracy;
2. the Finance Sub-Committee be retained as a Sub-Committee of the Corporate Policy Committee;
3. the three Place service committees be retained;
4. the functions of the Scrutiny Committee be transferred to the Audit and Governance Committee;
5. a further annual review of the committee system be undertaken and a report on its findings be presented to the first scheduled meeting held after the Council AGM in 2024; and
6. the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make such consequential changes to the Council's Constitution as he deems necessary to give effect to the decision(s) of Council.

Note: At 12.20 pm, the meeting adjourned for a ten minute break.

54 CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL ELECTORAL REVIEW

The Committee considered the recommendations of the Electoral Review Sub-Committee in relation to the future council size of Cheshire East Council.

This was in response to a review being conducted by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England of the electoral arrangements of Cheshire East Council. As part of that review, the Council was being consulted and invited to make a submission on council size to the Commission. The Sub-Committee had prepared the Council's submission which was appended to the report. The Committee was being asked to recommend the submission to full Council for approval.

This was the first stage of the review, which would go on to consider future warding arrangements. The Electoral Review Sub-Committee would, over the next few weeks, prepare a draft submission on warding arrangements which would be recommended to the Corporate Policy Committee in February for recommendation to full Council.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee recommends to Council

1. that the council size submission attached as an appendix to the report be approved for submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England; and
2. that authority be delegated to the Electoral Review Sub-Committee to make any final changes to the council size submission and related documentation which may be required following Council approval, prior to submission to the Boundary Commission.

55 WORKFORCE STRATEGY 2021-2025

The Committee considered a report on progress with the delivery of the Council's Workforce Strategy 2021-2025 up to October 2023.

Officers were congratulated on the initiative to encourage agency workers to join the Council as permanent members of staff, which had resulted in financial savings to the Council.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee

1. notes the progress in delivering the Workforce Strategy;
2. agrees to receive further updates every six months to monitor progress; and
3. agrees with the implementation of the strategy as set out in the report.

56 **SIX MONTHS COMPLAINTS REPORT**

The Committee considered a report which provided a summary and analysis of complaints and compliments received by the Council during the period 1st April 2023 to 30th September 2023.

In response to members' questions and comments, officers advised that:

- A new themes and trends tracker had been introduced which would improve the accuracy of reporting and provide comparison data for future reports.
- With regard to an apparent shortage of drivers for school transport, officers undertook to take this up with the relevant service.
- With regard to response times in responding to complaints, managers were now required to confirm, within 24 hours, that they would be picking up and responding to the complaint.
- Complaints with regard to SEND were primarily from parents and not schools which followed a different process.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee

1. notes the Committee complaints and compliments data, and the briefing material in the report relating to the first half of the 2023/24 financial year;
2. notes the issues raised and improvements made in respect of the management of complaints across the Council contained within the briefing material in the report; and
3. notes the Council's compliance with the Corporate Complaints Policy, and with the recommendations of the Ombudsman.

57 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee reviewed its work programme for 2023-24.

Members asked for an item to be included on the work programme for a future meeting on the business case and implementation timetable for the introduction of community hubs as discussed earlier in the meeting. It was suggested that the report should include a review of the current community centres and Sure Start centres.

The Director of Governance and Compliance reminded members that the date of the February Committee meeting had recently changed from 8th to 9th February. He advised that it may be necessary to slip the meeting back further to allow sufficient time for members to be briefed on the budget and to allow officers time to assimilate the feedback from members before the budget Council meeting on 27th February. It was anticipated that there

would be additional reports to the Committee's March meeting arising from consideration of the budget at full Council.

RESOLVED

That subject to the inclusion of an additional item on community hubs, the work programme be noted.

58 MINUTES OF SUB-COMMITTEES

RESOLVED

That the following sub-committee minutes be received and noted:

Finance Sub-Committee – 2nd November 2023
General Appeals Sub-Committee – 10th October 2023
General Appeals Sub-Committee – 7th November 2023

59 WORKPLACE (ESTATE RATIONALISATION)

The Committee considered a report which proposed the closure of the Westfields offices in Sandbach as part of the rationalisation of the Council's office space, following consultation with Cheshire East Council recognised trade unions, employees and members.

Members had regard to confidential legal advice which had been circulated to members with the agenda.

Officers advised that the timing of staff vacating Westfields would depend on the timing of the repurposing of the building.

Members commented that they would wish to see the repurposing of Westfields as soon as possible to achieve the financial savings and establish a new income stream.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Committee

1. notes the results from the consultation with Cheshire East Council recognised trade unions, employees and members provided at Appendices 1a and 1b;
2. approves the option to close the Westfields offices in Sandbach;
3. notes that the Head of Human Resources and Head of Democratic Services will progress further consultation with trade unions, employees, third parties and members, on the impact of closing the Westfields offices in Sandbach on those groups as it relates to relocation within other areas of the corporate estate;

4. notes the findings of the market testing at paragraph 21 of the report, and that the Head of Estates/Executive Director of Place will report to the appropriate committee on the future use of the Westfields site in a timely manner to achieve best consideration from the asset; and
5. notes that the Monitoring Officer will carry out all necessary communications to alert relevant individuals and organisations that the Post Room, located at Delamere House, Crewe, will be the registered address for all statutory correspondence.

60 EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC

RESOLVED

That the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the next item on the agenda pursuant to Section 100(A)4 of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 and the public interest would not be served in publishing the information.

61 ERP SUPPORT CONTRACT EXTENSION

The Committee considered a report which proposed an extension to the Council's current Enterprise Resource and Planning (ERP) Support Contract for a period of up to 2 years commencing September 2024.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the recommendations in the report be approved.

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am and concluded at 1.35 pm

Councillor S Corcoran (Chair)