

Minutes

Cabinet



14 February 2011

Present:

Cabinet Members	Portfolio	Present
Councillor G Butland	Leader of the Council	Yes
Councillor Mrs J C Beavis	Customers and Community Support	Yes
Councillor N R H O Harley	Enterprise and Culture	Yes
Councillor M C M Lager	Efficiency & Resources	Yes
Councillor Lady P Newton	Housing and Well-Being	Yes
Councillor Mrs W Schmitt	Clean, Green and Safe	Yes
Councillor R G Walters	Environment & Sustainability	Yes

Deputy Cabinet Members	Portfolio	Present
Councillor D L Bebb	Customers and Community Support	Yes
Councillor N G McCrea	Enterprise and Culture	Apologies
Councillor J McKee	Efficiency & Resources	Yes
Councillor R G S Mitchell	Environment & Sustainability	Yes
Councillor Mrs C Sandbrook	Efficiency & Resources	No
Councillor C Siddall	Leader's Portfolio/Clean, Green and Safe	Yes
Councillor Mrs G A Spray	Housing and Well-Being	Yes
Councillor T S Wilkinson	Enterprise and Culture	Yes

The following Councillors were also present as invitees of the Leader

Councillor J E Abbott, Leader of the Green Party, and Councillor Dr R L Evans, Leader of the Labour Group.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R J Bolton, Chairman of Halstead Local Committee, Councillor T J W Foster, Chairman of Witham Local Committee, Councillor M G Gage, Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and Councillor S M Walsh, Chairman of the Braintree Local Committee.

Councillors M J Banthorpe, J Baugh, G Cohen, E R Lynch, D Mann, Mrs J Money, Mrs J A Pell and R Ramage were also in attendance.

At the commencement of the meeting the Leader advised that speakers in Question Time would be invited to speak prior to the Council Budget report, and there would be opportunity for any non-Cabinet Councillors to express their views.

Councillor Butland continued to advise that Agenda Item 5b – Annual Audit Letter 2009/10 would be brought forward on the agenda and received at the start of reports.

61 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

INFORMATION: The following interests were declared:-

- Councillors G Butland and M C M Lager both declared a personal interest as members of Essex County Council in Agenda Item 5d – A Joint Parking Partnership for North Essex.
- Councillor Mrs J C Beavis declared a personal interest in
 - (i) Agenda Item 5a – Council Budget as (i) her niece attends brownies at the Senior Citizens' Centre in Halstead; and (ii) she is known by some of the walkers from Sible Hedingham speaking in Question Time
 - (ii) Agenda Item 7a – Open Spaces Action Plan as it contains reference to Sible Hedingham Parish Council of which she is a member.
- Councillor R G Walters declared a personal interest as a member of Essex County Council, and Deputy to the Cabinet Portfolio for Highways in
 - (i) Agenda Item 5a – Council Budget and the Concessionary Fares element, and
 - (ii) Agenda Item 5d – A Joint Parking Partnership for North Essex.
- Councillor Mrs G A Spray declared a personal interest as she works for Age UK (formerly Age Concern) who are users of the Senior Citizens' Centre, Halstead referred to in Agenda Item 5a – Council Budget.
- Councillor J E Abbott declared a personal interest as Chairman of Rivenhall Parish Council, whilst discussing Agenda Item 5a – Council Budget and the consultation process.
- Councillor Lady Newton declared a personal interest as a non-Executive Director of the Primary Care Trust (PCT) in Agenda Item 5a – Council Budget, as the PCT had made representation to the proposals.

In accordance with the Code of Conduct all Members remained in the meeting for all the items, unless stated otherwise, and took part in the debate and decision thereon.

62 **MINUTES**

DECISION: That the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 7th December 2010 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Leader.

63 **ANNUAL AUDIT LETTER 2009/10**

David Eagles of PKF, the Council's external auditors, presented the Annual Audit Letter that summarises the work undertaken by PKF during the financial year 2009/10. There were two key outputs to the process, comprising of Financial Statements and the Value for Money conclusion that included a use of resources assessment. It had been recognised that the Council's financial planning was adequate and well managed. Cabinet also received the reference from the Audit Committee of 13th January 2011 (Agenda Item 11a) regarding the Use of Resources 2009/10 report from PKF and the Annual Audit Letter 2009/10.

The Leader of the Council thanked PKF for the good report.

DECISION: That the Annual Audit Letter for 2009/10 be accepted.

64 **QUESTION TIME**

INFORMATION: There were nine questions asked or statements made, and these are recorded in the Appendix to these minutes.

65 **COUNCIL BUDGET AND COUNCIL TAX 2011/12 AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY**

The Leader of the Council invited any non-Cabinet Councillors to join the table and speak on the Budget Proposals.

Councillor Mrs Pell stated she had attended many meetings as a District Councillor and a Halstead Town Councillor on the future of the Senior Citizens' Centre in Halstead and for an appropriate Community Centre. Discussions had been on-going for numerous years for a suitable site and a joint venture proposal but had not reached fruition. Councillor Mrs Pell advised that reassurance had been given for the Senior Citizens' Centre to remain open, until new facilities are available – this had now been reneged. The proposed closure realises savings of £15,000, and groups and organisations that use the Centre do not have alternative accommodation. It was reported that no consultation had been undertaken with Halstead Town Council on this issue, and it was noted that they are willing to work with the District Council to resolve the situation.

Cabinet were requested not to close the Centre until another site is available.

In response to whether Halstead Town Council had a proposed budget for this – as Braintree District Council had funded £800,000 for a Feasibility Study – it was noted that three sites had been put in towards the cost.

Councillor Butland, the Leader of the Council, introduced the Council Budget and Council Tax 2011/12 and the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2011/12 to 2014/15. Cabinet was reminded of the shortfall in Government Grant and how this was addressed, and advised of two adjustments of an additional £126,000 for the 2012/13 Tax Year and a £36,000 gain in the second year. A short presentation was received on the results of the 'Your Council – Your Say' survey – the consultation method with residents, users of Council services, the People's Panel, and with Partners and Stakeholders. As a result the following revisions to the original budget are proposed regarding:-

- Cemetery chapels and toilets to remain open
- The budget of £10,000 from the cessation of the travel token scheme to be transferred to an expansion of Community Transport
- Some funding to the Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE) will continue for 2011/12 to allow the completion of current community-led plans
- Community Well-being initiatives – the walking programme to continue and funded to March 2012, and move towards self-management; and the continuance of the activity days for children.

Cabinet was advised of investment by the Council, including economic growth, support for the Green Heart campaign, and a proposal to create a seed fund of £250,000 for community groups, local organisations and Parish/Town Councils to work jointly with the Council to improve running of assets and to provide services.

Councillor Lager, Cabinet Member for Efficiency and Resources, referred to the customer element of the budget and the provision of Witham Pool, the Affordable Housing Programme, and the target for 'Cleanest District'. The report explains some

changes in service provision, the implementation plan for budget proposals and relevant transition periods. The allowance for Councillors will remain 'frozen', the

Council Tax level will remain 'frozen' for 2011/12 and 2012/13 and opportunities will be explored, e.g. to generate electricity from a wind turbine. There is further work to be undertaken to create the Halstead Community Centre, and the Council will assist people affected by the budget proposals. It was clarified that the Concessionary Fares scheme will be operated by Essex County Council – who do not use the 'travel token' process.

Further references included:-

- the abolition of Local Committees and moves to improve local representation through the three tiers of County, District and Parish Councils
- staff redundancies, staff pay being 'frozen' and proposals to change the Discretionary Redundancy Scheme. However, investment in staff training through use of technology instead, will go ahead
- to repay long term debt
- the scope of joint working and joint management
- to explore any potential income, i.e. to rent out the Mayland House accommodation in Witham
- to continue the regeneration of the town centres, and sell the Bramston Pool site in Witham
- Capital Programme schemes (Appendix T of report)

Councillor Lager referred to the revised Appendix N circulated at the meeting; and continued to move the Recommendations to Council, as indicated on Pages 3, 4, and 5 of the agenda. This was seconded by Councillor Butland.

During the discussion the following issues were raised:-

- concern was expressed to the threat of funding being withdrawn to the Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE), as they do not just support the Council on Parish Plans, but also provide grant support, additional help and finance
- Councillor Abbott advised that he had seen seven representations from Silver End Parish Council, that had not been included in the consultation results. The Leader of the Council had also seen these items, and would make enquiries.
- Councillor Abbott did not support the abolition of the Local Committees without an alternative local process being in place.
- Councillor Dr Evans considered that a 2% response rate to a survey of 64,000 residents was a low return
- Reference was made to the update of Appendix N and the shortfall of £1.385m from Government, and the total cuts of £2.189m. Over four years the Government has made cuts of 33.3%, and the level of savings identified by the Council exceeds this.

The Portfolio Holders were invited to respond to the issues raised during Question Time.

Councillor Lady Newton, Cabinet Member for Housing and Well-Being, formally acknowledged receipt of the petition comprising of 333 signatures on funding for Heart & Sole Walks/Walking for Well-Being. The petition organiser, Mr Lawrence Duncan had spoken during Question Time.

With regard to the differences in costs between the Heart & Sole Walks and that of the Walking for Well-Being programme it was noted that the Heart & Sole Walks has higher investment funded from different sources and are monitored carefully to achieve health outcomes. Whereas the Walking for Well-Being programme is a

'flagship' scheme across Essex, reliant on volunteer support, that attracts initial set-up costs and realises cost savings in the following years. Therefore, increase in volunteer

help means less cost to the Council to deliver health needs.

The success of the walks programmes and the benefit it brings to users on health and social issues is recognised; together with the opportunity for Walk Leaders to work with the Council.

In response to representation on the Walking Programmes, and the Petition received, Councillor Lady Newton moved the recommendation for the Walking Programme to continue until March 2012.

Councillor Mrs Beavis, Cabinet Member for Customers and Community Support, responded to the concerns on Concessionary Travel tokens and agreed that bus passes are not beneficial to the public if they do not live on a bus route. The Council are proposing to use the saving of £10,000 on Concessionary Travel, by investing in Community Transport and expanding the service for the District, offering flexibility and choice for residents. The Portfolio Holder formally thanked all the volunteers on Community Transport and its' administrators, and continued to move the transfer of £10,000 to the Community Transport budget.

Councillor Mrs Schmitt, Cabinet Member for Clean, Green & Safe, referred to the Community facilities for Halstead and was disappointed that recent site proposals had not reached a conclusion. The Feasibility Study funded by Braintree District Council to provide a Community Centre is on the basis that the facility can be managed by the community. It was noted that consultation with interested parties will happen once the community involvement has been identified. With regard to the Senior Citizens' Centre, the Council is seeking alternative venues for its users.

Cabinet was advised that a progress and options report on Halstead Community Centre will be received at the March meeting.

In conclusion, the Leader of the Council, commended Council staff for the quality of the budget reports and reiterated the two-year freeze on Council Tax, the continued investment in services, the content of the Capital Programme, for no increase to car parking charges, and only the VAT increase applied to the majority of the Council's other discretionary fees and charges.

DECISION:

That it be RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL that the following be approved:

General Fund

1. The budget variations to the current base budget for: inflation (section 5.2 in the report), pension fund (Section 5.4), investment income (section 8.1) and reduction in specific grants (section 9);
2. The changes to service provision and associated implementation plans, as detailed in Appendices D and E;
3. The Service Demands detailed in Appendix C;
4. The savings from the renewal of the ICT and Leisure Management contracts and from the proposed shared Regulatory services, as detailed in Appendix H;
5. The possible efficiency savings from shared services, market testing, etc. as detailed in Appendix H, be excluded from the financial profile but are retained as efficiency targets over the MTFS period;
6. The corporate savings involving proposed changes to employee's terms and conditions, as detailed in Appendix I, are agreed to be taken forward to formal consultation with the Council's recognised trade unions;
7. The introduction of charges for the provision of advice on "householder" proposals and for Listed Building advice with effect from 1st April 2011: details of

- the charges are contained in Appendix E;
8. The proposed reduction in discretionary redundancy pay from the current scheme maximum of 66 weeks actual pay to a maximum of 45 weeks actual pay, to take effect from May 2011 following all staff being given 90 days notice of the change;
 9. The Council Tax Freeze grant receivable from the Government over the next four years, subject to the council tax for 2011/12 not being increased, be used to support the General Fund revenue account;
 10. The anticipated New Homes Bonus receivable from 2011/12 be partly used to fund the costs of concluding the Local Development Framework in 2011/12 and 2012/13 with the remainder added to the Council's capital resources;
 11. The shortfalls in funding in 2012/13 and 2013/14 are funded from balances, i.e. £302,712 and £91,518 respectively;

Housing Revenue Account

12. The Council's housing rents are increased by 5.1% for 2011/12;
13. The current 'Cooker and Fridge' service charge at Craig House, Braintree is replaced with a service charge for 'Furnishings' and is set at £7.97 per week;
14. The other housing service charges are increased by 5.1% for 2011/12, as detailed in Appendix R;
15. The proposed Housing Revenue Account budget for 2011/12, as detailed in Appendix Q;

Capital

16. The General Fund Capital bids for 2010/11 and 2011/12 listed in Appendix S;

Treasury Management

17. The Prudential Indicators and limits set out in Appendix U;
18. The Policy on Minimum Revenue Provision as recommended in Appendix U;
19. The Treasury Management Strategy, including annual investment strategy, for 2011/12;

Council Tax

20. The proposed estimates (producing a budget requirement for council tax purposes of £16,519,579) as detailed in Appendix N and the Council Tax for 2011/12 of £162.81 for a Band D property, having taking into consideration:
 - The consultation feedback received;
 - The Equalities Impact Assessments and
 - The Section 151 Officer's report on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of balances (Appendix V to the report).

That the following be noted:

21. The management efficiency proposals and associated implementation plans and the decisions on savings already agreed at previous meetings, as detailed in appendices F and G;
22. The corporate savings proposed by management, detailed in Appendix I;

23. The Council's existing Fees and Charges will not be increased for 2011/12,

- unless there is a statutory or contractual requirement;
24. The current position regarding recovery of the investments at risk in Icelandic Banks, as outlined in section 8.2 of the report, and receipt of the approval from the Secretary of State of permission to capitalise in 2010/11 up to £1,997,590 of the potential losses on the investments at risk.

Post Meeting note: Appendix N circulated at the meeting will alter the decision at No. 11 on the shortfall and funding, and this should now read 'i.e. £240,704 and £92,002 respectively'.

66 **BRAINTREE DC AND COLCHESTER BC - SHARED MANAGEMENT**

The Leader of the Council presented a scoping paper of a joint management arrangement between Braintree District Council and Colchester Borough Council. A Member Group from each Council will be established, comprising for Braintree District, of the Leader of the Council, the Deputy Leader of the Council and the opposition Group Leader to meet and address issues/questions set in the paper, and report back to their relevant authority by the end of April 2011. Any decisions or preparation of a Business Case will be an issue for after the Election in May.

DECISION: That a joint Member working group comprising of Councillors Butland, Harley and Dr Evans, be established with Colchester BC to research and consider the issues set out in the report, prior to considering the development of a full business case.

67 **A JOINT PARKING PARTNERSHIP FOR NORTH ESSEX**

Councillor Walters, Cabinet Member for Environment & Sustainability, advised that the Agency Agreements for the management and operation of on-street Civil Parking Enforcement are to cease from 1st April 2011. Braintree is currently in a Joint Parking Partnership with Colchester and Uttlesford, with Colchester being the administrator. Parking Partnerships for North and South Essex are agreed, and the current provision for Braintree will be extended to include three further authorities for North Essex.

The Cabinet Member responded to issues raised on a potential increase in charges as fees could be set centrally, and advised that the Council will control the parking fees on Council-owned car parks, and the Parking Partnership has the ability to discuss charges for residents parking on roads and streets. An issue was raised regarding content of Appendix 1 not being similar to the main report for decision making on policy issues, such as car parking charges; and also on a separate audit fee for joint working of £10,000 per year. However, it was noted that audit rules are to change and that in a wider Partnership any costs will be shared across the authorities; and that the Parking Partnership currently administers our own car parks and any levy penalties.

DECISION:

1. That the Council joins the new Parking Partnership for North Essex, comprising Braintree, Colchester (as the Lead Authority), Epping, Harlow, Tendring and Uttlesford Councils, and is overseen by a new Joint Committee with effect from 1 April 2011.
2. That delegated authority is given to the Corporate Director with responsibility for parking in conjunction with the Cabinet Member for Environment and Sustainability to approve the final Parking Partnership Joint Committee Agreement.
3. That the existing Parking Partnership Joint Committee Agreement between Braintree District Council, Uttlesford District Council and Colchester Borough Council be dissolved with effect from 31st March 2011, subject to agreement of the documents

referred to above.

4. That the Council's off-street car parking operation is included within the new Partnership arrangement.

68 **PUBLIC SERVICE PROVISION FOR OLDER PEOPLE – TASK AND FINISH GROUP FINAL REPORT**

Councillor R Ramage, Chairman of the Public Service Provision for Older People Task and Finish Group, presented the report on the Group's findings. The Group had started in February 2010 to focus on services to the elderly/senior citizens of the District. It was soon recognised that it was a vast topic and decided to focus on certain elements that can make a difference to the requirements of the elderly. However, it is recognised that the District Council support the provision of social care and health service provision that are County Council and NHS Mid Essex functions. Consultation with various organisations was undertaken, and a Community Needs Assessment completed. To support the elderly to have independent lives and stay active was promoted, as the over-65 category in the district is expected to rise from 24,100 in 2010 to 29,200 by 2015. Reference was made to access to information routes, and supplying information in leaflet form - as 62% of elderly people do not access the internet. The Decent Homes Standards, the provision of a handyman service, the Essex Fire Service to assess fire safety in their home were all noted. The Community Transport Scheme and the walking programme are vital to the elderly. Councillor Ramage thanked organisations, colleagues and officers for their support.

The Leader of the Council requested that a response to the recommendations be made to the Cabinet meeting on 28th March 2011, and continued to advise that a provision of £10,000 is made in the budget to aid communication to the elderly. Councillor Lady Newton, Cabinet Member for Housing and Well-Being, confirmed the budget provision to take forward the recommendations from the Group, and that officers had already commenced work on this, therefore enabling a response report in March. The Task Group Chairman and Members were thanked for their work and the significant findings of the report.

DECISION: That the report and recommendations of the Task & Finish Group be noted, and the Cabinet Member for Housing & Well-Being provide a detailed response and recommendations to the Cabinet meeting on 28th March 2011.

69 **OPEN SPACES ACTION PLAN**

Councillor Harley, Cabinet Member for Enterprise & Culture, presented the Open Spaces Action Plan that had received consultation at the Local Committees, with minor amendments made for Bocking and Halstead. It was noted that a Landscape Architect had been appointed to secure the delivery of Section 106 funded open space enhancements across the District.

Members recognised that the Action Plan is a 'live' document, and recorded that it contained inaccurate information, i.e. for Silver End. The Leader requested that each Ward Member has opportunity to update their local information, and to add any new areas to the Action Plan, i.e. allotment sites.

DECISION: That the Open Spaces Action Plan be endorsed.

70 ****AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT**

Minutes Published: 21 st February 2011 Call-in Expires: 1 st March 2011 Applies to Decision 1 only
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Councillor Lady Newton, Cabinet Member for Housing & Well-Being, presented

proposals to dispose of two areas of Council-owned land to facilitate affordable housing. The report also provided a progress update on negotiations elsewhere and requested Delegated Authority to a Programme of Development. A proposed investment programme was provided under a confidential annexe to the main report.

DECISION:

1. That land at Oxford Meadow, Sible Hedingham is transferred to Greenfields Community Housing at no cost for provision of a scheme of affordable housing.

That it be **RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL** that:

2. That land at the rear of 19-21 Bocking End, Braintree is transferred to a housing association at no cost for provision of a scheme of supported / affordable housing.
3. That the Council removes the requirement for Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) funding to be secured before the transfer of land at the Tabor garage site in Braintree and that the Council underwrites the scheme for the provision of affordable housing.
4. That authority is delegated to the Cabinet Members for Housing & Wellbeing and Efficiency & Resources to agree acquisitions and funding commitments within the overall affordable housing budget in order to allow timely decisions to be taken and prevent opportunities being lost.

71 **LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIPS (LEPS) AND SUB REGIONAL ALLIANCES**

Councillor Harley, Cabinet Member for Enterprise & Culture, presented a progress report for Braintree to join a Sub-Region Partnership as part of establishing a new Local Economic Partnership (LEP). An alliance is proposed with the Haven Gateway sub-region to deliver the local economic priorities for the District. The Haven Gateway is an effective region, with an emphasis on growth, assisting small business, promoting road infrastructure and to broadband provision to rural areas. A bid will be submitted for funding from the new Regional Growth Fund Programme, to enable the development of Business Incubator units.

Councillor Harley was pleased to report that at a Board meeting of Business Enterprise Acorn Units (BEAU) earlier on 14th February 2011 agreement was given to the proposed merger between BEAU and Business Development Services (BDS).

The Leader of the Council advised that he had attended the first meeting with the Haven Gateway, and that their next meeting is to be held in Braintree.

DECISION:

1. That the progress made on the establishment of sub-regional partnerships be noted.
2. That Braintree's position in the Haven Gateway Sub-region be endorsed.
3. That the joint Regional Growth Fund Bid for provision of incubator hubs and small business support across the Haven Gateway area be supported.

72 **CABINET MEMBERS' UPDATES**

INFORMATION: There were no verbal reports from Cabinet Members.

73 **CHIEF EXECUTIVE REPORT**

INFORMATION: There was no verbal report from the Chief Executive.

74 **MINUTES FROM CABINET SUB-GROUPS**

Consideration was given to the minutes of the Local Government Reform Cabinet Sub Group held on 7th February 2011. The Leader of the Council drew attention to a Working Group being established to look at a Governance Committee; a Member Induction Programme for 2011/12; and for the Independent Remuneration Panel to consider whether any allowance should be linked to the commitment by Councillors to training.

DECISION: That the minutes of the meeting of the Local Government Reform Cabinet Sub Group held on 7th February 2011, be noted.

75 **DELEGATED DECISIONS**

Consideration was given to five Delegated Decisions made by Cabinet Members, since the last meeting of Cabinet.

DECISION: That the Delegated Decisions be noted.

EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

DECISION: That under Section 100 (A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12 (A) of the Act.

Whilst the following items of business were discussed in private session, the minutes do not contain any confidential information and are therefore admissible in the public domain.

76 **CABINET MEMBERS' UPDATE**

INFORMATION: Councillor Harley, Cabinet Member for Enterprise & Culture, provided a progress report regarding property in Witham and a piece of Council-owned land.

77 **DELEGATED DECISION**

Consideration was given to a Delegated Decision made by a Cabinet Member, since the last meeting of Cabinet.

DECISION: That the Delegated Decision be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 9.57pm

G BUTLAND
(Leader)

APPENDIX

CABINET MEETING

14 FEBRUARY 2011

QUESTION TIME

Summary of Questions Asked / Statements Made During Question Time

1. Agenda Item 5a – Budget Proposals – Funding for Heart & Sole Walks / Walking for Well-Being

(i) Maurice Lipton, Longleaf Drive, Braintree - former Volunteer Leader of Heart & Sole Walks, Great Notley

Mr Lipton had received a detailed breakdown of the costs of running the Heart & Sole Walks and Walking for Well-Being (WWB). The total expenditure is £21,517 before grants. Comparison was made between £18,574 total for Heart & Sole, and £750 for WWB, and queries were raised regarding the variance in wages of £14,000 for Heart & Sole and £200 for WWB; and the role of the Community Well-Being Development Officer who could encompass both programmes.

Mr Lipton stated the ongoing amount of the walks to the Council are 'pennies' and that the Walks Programme are grouped with other savings proposals totalling £0.5m; and did not appear to make coherent sense.

(ii) Mrs Jenny Mitchell, Hilton Way, Sible Hedingham - Heart & Sole Walk Leader, Sible Hedingham

Mrs Mitchell stated that walking is recognised as the most cost efficient way of exercise, especially for rural areas, and provides easy access for the whole community. They are cost free to users, and with the limited funds of some users travelling to other venues, i.e. the gym, is unlikely. The walks encourage people to go out in all weathers, to exercise and socialise and the users include retired people, unemployed, single people and those with physical and mental health problems. The health benefits to walkers provide increased stamina/energy levels, relieves stress, increase self confidence and the long term benefits to health are well documented. The importance to the communities where the walks have been implemented cannot be under estimated.

In conclusion, Mrs Mitchell considered that the Walks Programme is a small investment to the Council, a health impact to the whole District, and is in line with the Council's objectives, i.e. on obesity. The volunteer leaders are committed to the walks and ways can be sought to work with the Council to reduce the cost.

(iii) Mr Michael Bardell, Cressing Road, Braintree - Walking for Well-Being Walk Leader

Mr Bardell questioned how the Council would be viewed if they did not relieve the walks and the Government initiative to exercise more – both physically and mentally. The Council's own survey at Halstead in January revealed a 97% positive response to the walks, with 95% of users more aware of their own fitness. It was considered that walk leaders embrace the concept of the Big Society, can and will do more than they do now to continue to organise and run the walks.

Some proposals put forward by the Council – moving the Council offices to Witham, closing public toilets, plans for Braintree Bus Park – have caused public concern, whereas the Walks Programme is a success story, exceeding even the County-town programmes. Mr Bardell stated the Council should have a key role to facilitate groups, such as walkers, whilst keeping the scheme under the Council ‘umbrella’.

(iv) Mr Lawrence Duncan, Cressing Road, Braintree - Petition Organiser

Mr Duncan abbreviated his provided statement and advised he had been a WWB leader for eight years, and wished to address the purpose of the petition presented to the Council, the cost situation and how walks can be taken forward.

The principle of the petition comprising 342 signatures – and additional local Councillors, committees and Parish Councils - was for the Council to take forward and continue Council-provided walk programmes. Mr Duncan noted that the end date is amended to March 2012 to seek alternative management arrangements.

The Council provides an essential enabler role for the walks to take place, and has a cost to the tax payer – a large element on staff costs on walk promotion and development that will fall as the programme matures. The 50 walk leaders work for free and do not claim expenses. The cost of the walks was compared to other current programmes including Local Committees, and projects – footpaths at John Ray Park for £204,000. These illustrate the finance available in other Council ‘pots’ and the minimal impact of the walks costs in relation to the overall budget.

The need to reduce costs is recognised and a way forward is through partnership, optimising the role and expertise of walk leaders and Community Services officers, without a separate organisation. It was noted that the service delivery of WWB is already outsourced to walk leaders, and costs could be reduced through non-colour programmes being hand delivered. With regard to Heart & Sole the Health Co-ordinator role is externally funded to November, and should be utilised to expand the walks programme to Earls Colne and Kelvedon. Service delivery and registration paperwork can also be revisited.

Mr Duncan’s proposals for the Council is for activities of staff to be reduced to a minimum, to provide the support services of First Aid training, meeting venues I.D. cards and relevant insurance, whilst maintaining a management overview function, and aim for a projected cost of £5,000 per year – a 50% reduction in the cost. These measures were commended to Cabinet as cost effective and to utilise and maximise the strengths of the volunteers.

(v) Mrs Frances Falconer, The Green, Wethersfield

Mrs Falconer stated she was representative of most of the walkers and had been a walk programme user for 22 months, making a social network of friends over this period. Improvements had been recognised in her general health, with less medication, and fewer visits to the doctor and a three stone loss in weight.

Mrs Falconer had now become the Walk Leader for Sible Hedingham that has 62 walkers of various abilities, and the walks provide companionship. Therefore, it was questioned how the Council could contemplate stopping the walking initiative when it brings many people full and productive lives?

(vi) Mr Richard Sillett, Witham Road, Cressing

Mr Sillett read from a prepared statement advising that tens of thousands of pounds of public money had been invested by the Council in its Health Walks programmes that has produced a successful and beneficial local community activity running every

weekday throughout the year.

The Council itself has gained an enviable reputation for fostering a healthy lifestyle for its residents across the District. To totally withdraw from the walks programme is a waste of valuable public investment, and could damage the Council's credibility for its claim to place healthy living as a priority – as quoted at a recent Braintree Local Committee meeting. The Walks volunteers are able to show the Council, Mr Sillett believed, that the two programmes can be administered for a fraction of their current cost. However, to maintain the local focus it is imperative that the scheme remains in the Council's hands.

Mr Sillett requested the Council's assurance that in accepting a greater management contribution from the walks volunteers, the objective is to retain overall ownership of the Walks programmes.

2. Mr Dave Bowen, Gurton Road, Coggeshall
Agenda Item 5a – Budget Proposals – Concessionary Travel Tokens

Mr Bowen referred to the Council proposal to scrap concessionary travel tokens for selected over-60's and disabled people who cannot use or access buses. There are currently 700 people using the facility giving a lifeline to spontaneous and independent living, which is important to all of us let alone those with disabilities. They are a 'silent minority' including his mother. It was considered our responsibility, and especially the elected Member, to stand for those who through age and infirmity cannot or will not speak out for themselves. This group currently pays £16.47 for £40 of tokens for use as taxi fare, and as an alternative can use the Dial-a-ride or the Social Car Scheme at a cost of £15 per year and £2.50 for the initial five miles and 50p a mile afterwards. Each journey requires three days notice to the Council, and is dependent on volunteer drivers, with journeys useful for doctor or hospital appointments and limited use for basic shopping. How will these users know if they feel well or there is suitable weather in three days time? Why should they not be spontaneous and independent like the rest of society?

Mr Bowen advised that his mother is 91 years old, is registered partially sighted and lives in sheltered accommodation built in 2010, situated 500m from the shops, but not on a bus route. Her need for transport is increasing and a taxi fare to the shops costs £3 each way full fare. Therefore, it was questioned why Mr Bowen's mother and the other 699 people in a similar situation cannot continue with the token scheme, especially when other over 60's are entitled to free bus passes? How can the Council justify the removal of the concessionary token scheme from its policies bearing in mind the Council's goals for independent living, a healthy lifestyle, transport to meet local needs and the delivery of excellent cost effective and valued services?

3. Agenda Item 5a – Budget Proposals – Senior Citizens' Centre and Community Facilities in Halstead

(i) Mr Mike Bowles, Dyers End, Stambourne

Mr Bowles represented the people who use the Community Centre in New Street, Halstead as part of Age Concern for the Halstead area. The Centre is to close in July 2012 and currently there is no replacement building that will be ready for that period. It was queried if a replacement building or a temporary building will be made available – to ensure users are not left 'high and dry'. Reference was made to Council policy regarding Council tenants not being evicted until a replacement establishment is found.

Mr Bowles reported that 100 users per week use the New Street Centre, and involve 14 volunteers looking after those users. The situation was considered to fit in the

Government's Big Society requirements – and to provide a good replacement building managed in the same way as the current premises.

(ii) Mr Malcolm Fincken, Knowles Close, Halstead

Mr Fincken reported that the citizens' of Halstead had the Big Society in practice before politicians launched the idea, and Halstead has a multiplicity of voluntary and charitable organisations giving a close and vibrant community. The majority meet at the Senior Citizens' Centre in New Street and concerns was raised on three aspects – the decision to close the Centre before any alternative provision made, the withdrawal of the District Council's financial support to community organisations in Halstead, and to the lack of meaningful consultation on these proposals.

It is recognised that the New Street buildings are unsuitable, and there is no proposed replacement. The Town Council has supported the case for a new Community Centre for over 30 years. Several feasibility studies have been undertaken and there are no prospects of a new building being provided by July 2012. The current proposal saves only £15,000 – a small price to pay to support many worthwhile organisations. Any organisation willing to house these groups would need a subsidy to do so.

The people of Halstead were concerned to the lack of consultation on the proposals, including the elderly people who use the drop-in centre, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the History Society and the Art Group.

Mr Fincken stated that the Town Council expected to be consulted on the proposals, and all relevant groups. It was considered there was lack of communication, a lack of imagination, and a lack of meaningful consultation. It is believed that the present Centre should not be closed until a new community centre is in operation, and that all organisations in the town should be engaged in concrete plans for a new centre.