

Minutes

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

28th January 2015



Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
P R Barlow	Yes	F Ricci	Yes
C A Cadman	Apologies	W J Rose	Yes
Dr R L Evans (Chairman)	Yes	A F Shelton	Yes
P Horner	Yes	J S Sutton	Yes
S A Howell	Apologies	J R Swift	Yes
R P Ramage	Yes		

80. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

INFORMATION: There were no interests declared.

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

81. **MINUTES**

DECISION: That the minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 10th December 2014 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

82. **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

INFORMATION: There were no questions asked or statements made.

83. **SCRUTINY OF THE COUNCIL BUDGET FOR 2015-16 UPDATE**

INFORMATION: The Leader updated Members on proposed changes made to the Council Budget.

As a result of this year's Council Tax collection rate being better than expected, the additional income has been divided between all precepting authorities. This will result in an additional £30,356 being allocated to the Town and Parish Councils funding for this year.

The Cabinet recognises that the Mi Community scheme has been very successful and has enabled the Council to help community projects throughout the District, as well as being a positive and productive way for the Members to engage with the local community. A provision of £100,000 is proposed to extend the scheme for a further year. Funding for

the continuation of the administrative support to the scheme, of £10,000, will be met from the Localism earmarked reserve;

The District Council has prioritised business support as part of the Corporate Strategy and Economic Development Prospectus. It is intended to establish a Business Investment Fund to provide financial loan support for District businesses that need assistance in growing their businesses. The fund will support businesses through offering capital loan funding for capital investment, where this will lead to job creation and economic growth. The detail of the investment fund scheme will be finalised and launched in the Spring following a detailed report to Cabinet. Through establishing this fund there will be the opportunity to attract match funding commitments from other bodies to potentially increase this fund. It is proposed that the Council will invest £500,000 from reserves to establish this fund.

Further consideration has been given to the proposed £4,000 reduction to the Council's contribution to the Dedham Valley AONB and Stour Valley Project. Councillor Lady Newton, Cabinet Member for Planning and Property, has proposed that the current contribution of £16,000 per annum be retained and that the saving proposal is withdrawn. This will help to support the intention of bringing the statutory designation of 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' for the first time to parts of the Upper Stour Valley which are within the District.

As a result of Councillors' Capital Programme Bids, one bid was received in regard of the creation of a 70 metre path linking Wood Grove, Silver End to the football pavilion along the edge of the Council owned Silver Street playing field. This has been included in the budget.

It has been confirmed that there will be no increase to Council Tax in the next year.

84. **SCRUTINY REVIEW INTO POVERTY IN THE BRAINTREE DISTRICT - THIRD EVIDENCE GATHERING SESSION – OFFICERS OF BRAINTREE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

INFORMATION: The Chairman welcomed the following invited speakers:

Joanne Albini, Head of Housing and Community
Donna Goodchild, Housing Options Manager
Julie Rigby, Revenues & Benefits Manager
Nicola Ridgewell, Revenues & Recovery Manager
Colin Batchelor, Environmental Health Manager (Housing and Pollution)

The officers in attendance outlined several issues regarding poverty in relation to their job roles;

- The main priority of the Housing Options team is to prevent people from becoming homeless.
- The Revenues and Recovery team deal with collection of council tax and non-domestic rates. As a result of the recent enforcement regulations there are a number of customers who are facing financial difficulties.

- The Government has introduced the 12 month instalment scheme as against the previous 10 month scheme, and members of the Revenues and Recovery team have been encouraging customers to take up this option. There are currently 2046 customers paying over 12 monthly instalments. The team allows customers wherever possible to set up special payment plans to assist them in paying their council tax on time, as long as the special payment plan is abided by this will prevent customers from having to proceed through the recovery process.
- All staff have been trained to help where ever they can and to guide customers to the CAB for additional help with financial circumstances if necessary.
- In the first year of the council tax support scheme, a new scheme was introduced where by any new customers who have previously never had to pay council tax had a reduced summons fee of £5.
- For those customers who do have to contact enforcement agents, the council will undertake its own compliance checking beforehand. All contracts with enforcement agents state that if the customer has any signs of vulnerability or financial difficulty they have to contact the Revenues and Recovery team straight away, where the accounts are immediately put on hold. In every case each individual is assessed on their own merits.
- The Revenues & Benefits team are responsible for the housing benefit service and council tax support as well as billing and collection of council tax and business rates. The main profile has focused on the council tax and housing benefits since the reform in April 2013, in particular the under occupancy changes, benefit caps and council tax support schemes.
- The take up of discretionary housing payments has been invaluable in assisting customers to work with the Council in adapting to the reform changes that have been introduced. This year, over £121,000 has been paid out to support people with the housing benefit shortfalls and to assist in either keeping people in their properties or helping with removal cost to smaller, more affordable accommodation.
- Officers have also been assisting customers with food vouchers where necessary. If customers are unable to come in to the offices, it has been arranged, on some occasions, for food parcels to be delivered to them.
- The Council has been distributing the Essential Living Fund on behalf of Essex County Council since August 2013 and so far have managed to help over 300 people.
- The upcoming changes will involve the Universal Credit which is expected to take effect as of summer 2015. It is important that the Council retains its information streams with customers and supporting organisations to ensure that changes are enforced as smoothly as possible.
- Due to the benefits cap being introduced in July 2013, there were originally around 80 households that were affected as a result of this. This figure has slowly dropped and is now under 40 households, with the majority of them having gone back to work.

- There are over 200 food bank vouchers issued by the Council every year.
- There is a continuous demand for smaller accommodation. There is still a high demand for 3 bedroom houses in the district however this number has levelled off due to fewer households having adequate family sizes to apply for these homes.
- In recent years it was brought to the Council's attention that the Disabled Facilities Grant waiting list was growing and people had to wait over a year for their grant to come through. Additional funding was applied for and the Council was successful in receiving an additional £200,000 per year to try and reduce these waiting lists. This additional funding was provided over 3 years. Central Government determined that there had been an underspend nationally, of which the surplus was redistributed and the Council received an additional £100,000.
- When new developments are being built the Council looks to negotiate housing provision on that site. New homes that are built in the district, if not under shared ownership, are at an affordable rent level which are higher than social rents and would be let to people through the housing register in the district. The homes would also be limited on first lets to people who have a connection to the Braintree district.
- A review of the Council's homelessness strategy took place in summer 2013, which involved a number of discussion groups with various providers and agencies. One of the issues that was raised at all discussion groups was about the number of households experiencing debt and the easy availability of high interest loans.
- It is becoming increasingly difficult to access the private rented sector. Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates are now only updated annually as opposed to monthly so as market rents increase over the course of the year the LHA has not incrementally kept pace, therefore the gaps become wider throughout the course of the year, making it almost impossible to get a property at LHA rate.
- For those venturing in to the private rented sector and are dependent on housing benefit they will need a guarantor to get in to the property. The guarantor must be someone who is in employment on a certain level of income, or someone who owns their own property. Many people do not have someone who is willing or able to stand as a guarantor, they also need at least a month's rent in advance, and the same or more as a deposit.
- The Council does have a loan scheme in place. When people are being assessed for a loan the Council has to be satisfied that the property is affordable for them, which is very often how debt is uncovered that people are carrying. The Council has to look at not only can they pay the top up of the rent (on the assumption it is above the LHA rate) but also can they pay back the loan. For some households private rented sector may be their only option. If the individual has a former tenant arrears and are paying off that debt to a former landlord, when bidding on properties the social landlord will not consider an individual who has an outstanding debt.

- The potential is there for the Council to consider using the DHP funds increasingly, if things become more difficult in terms of temporary accommodation. There is also the potential for the Council to add to the DHP funds, which may need to be considered in the future.
- If the essential living fund ceases to be available to help provide people with good when moving in to a property, there is the potential for them to fall further in to debt by prioritising purchasing essential items rather than paying rent.
- If the Council are unable to continue to get people in to the private rented sector or the numbers of those eligible reduce, we are likely to see an increased number of homelessness, bringing with it the increase with the cost of temporary accommodation.
- There has been a slow increase in benefit sanctions. The majority of these have been due to overpayment in housing benefit. Housing benefit cannot be awarded for the period of sanctions.
- For stray dogs there is a charge for collection and kennelling. A concession is provided for those on benefits for claiming their dog. The pest control service is maintained at a competitive rate however, the Council offers a 25% discount for people on benefits.
- The grants policy was reviewed last year and there was a reduction made to the discretionary housing repair grants in that only consideration will be given to heating and hot water systems, previously grants had been offered for structural repairs, funding has not been available to retain this facility.

85. **TASK AND FINISH GROUP VERBAL UPDATE - PARKING PARTNERSHIP AND MI COMMUNITY**

INFORMATION: The Mi Community Task and Finish Group have now completed its Scrutiny Review, and has been presented to Full Council. The work of the Task and Finish Group is due to be considered by Cabinet on the 2nd February 2015, where Cabinet will receive and respond to the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.

The Parking Partnership Task and Finish Group is currently on track. The leading members of the group have conducted a number of meetings to gather evidence to support their Scrutiny Review, this has included Councillors Cunningham and Horner meeting with officers at ECC to obtain views on the on street parking functions that is provided by the North East Parking Partnership (NEPP) which is to be compared to the South Essex Parking Partnership. There has also been meeting with the accountant for this service to go through budgetary information.

Councillors Johnson and Shute have attended meeting with the Chairman of the Chamber of Trade and Commerce and the manager of George Yard to gain a customer's perspective on parking enforcement undertaken by NEPP and also to look at the enforcements in BDC carparks.

Councillors Rose and Barlow have received a number of case studies on the traffic regulation process.

86. **DECISION PLANNER**

DECISION: That the Decision Planner for the period 1st February 2015 to 31st May 2015 be noted.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 8.55pm.

Dr R L Evans
Chairman