

# Minutes

## Performance Management Board (Budget) 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021



### Present

Councillors	Present	Councillors	Present
J Coleridge	Yes	S Rehman	Yes
G Courtauld	Yes	B Rose	Yes
Mrs C Dervish	Yes	P Schwier (Vice-Chairman)	Yes
T Everard	Yes	N Unsworth	Apologies
M Radley (Chairman)	Yes		

The following Councillors were also in attendance at the meeting: J Abbott, J Baugh, D Bebb, Mrs J Beavis, K Bowers, G Butland, Mrs M Cunningham, T Cunningham, P Euesden, Mrs D Garrod, A Hensman, P Horner, D Hume, Mrs A Kilmartin, D Mann, J McKee, A Munday, Mrs I Parker, Mrs J Pell, I Pritchard, F Ricci, Mrs W Scattergood, Mrs W Schmitt, Mrs G Spray, P Tattersley, P Thorogood, R van Dulken, D Wallace, Mrs L Walters, Mrs S Wilson, J Wrench and B Wright.

### 17 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

**INFORMATION:** There were no interests declared.

### 18 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

**INFORMATION:** There were no questions asked, or statements made.

### 19 **MINUTES**

**DECISION:** The Minutes of the meeting of the Performance Management Board held on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2020 were approved as a correct record.

### 20 **SCRUTINY OF THE COUNCIL'S BUDGET FOR 2021-2022 - UPDATE**

**INFORMATION:** The Chairman of the Performance Management Board advised that all Members of the Council had been invited to attend the meeting in order to participate in Agenda Item 5, 'Scrutiny of the Council's Budget for 2021-2022 – Update,' as part of the wider Member Development Programme. However, it was highlighted that only Members of the Performance Management Board would be permitted to vote on the Item. It was added that Members of the Cabinet were also present in order to respond to any questions that were raised in respect of the Budget, the report for which had been prepared for the publication of the next Cabinet Agenda. The presentation slides for the evening were circulated accordingly to all Members in advance of the meeting.

Councillor G Butland, Leader of the Council, was then invited to introduce the report on the Council's updated Budget position. Councillor Bebb, Cabinet Member for Finance, would contribute to the report at different points throughout the presentation.

In his opening statement, Councillor Butland advised Members that there had been some notable changes made to the Budget since it was last scrutinised in November 2020, and also that the uncertainties around the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic were still prevalent. At the start of the presentation, Councillor Butland announced that the Annual Plan, which would ordinarily be presented to the Council in April, would now be postponed until September 2021 for a period of 18 months, through to the District Elections in 2023. Some of the primary changes to the Budget were in relation to the provisional allocations under the 2021/22 Local Government Finance Settlement, which were announced on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2020, and the announcement from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government of the provisional details in respect of the Local Government COVID Support Package for 2021/22.

The full presentation slides can be viewed at:

<https://braintree.cmis.uk.com/braintree/Meetings/tabid/70/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/1036/Committee/18/Default.aspx>

The presentation to Members can also be viewed via the Council's YouTube at the following link: <http://www.braintree.gov.uk/youtube>

Further to the conclusion of the presentation, the Chairman invited Members of the Performance Management Board to ask their questions of the Cabinet Members and officers first, which were then to be followed by questions of the non-Committee Members present. In response to a suggestion by Councillor Butland, Governance Officers also agreed to compile a list of the questions raised by Members in respect of the Budget report, which would subsequently be circulated to all Members for their reference.

In response to the questions that were raised, the following information was provided by the Cabinet Members:-

- In response to a comment made about the Council's pay award provision, it was explained that in the Chancellor's Spending Review Statement, mention was made to a pay freeze to "public authorities" but there was no further elaboration provided as to which "authorities" this was specifically in reference to, aside from NHS workers being exempted from this reference. In addition to this, it was stipulated that the pay freeze would not apply to members of staff who earned £24k or less per year, a category of which a number of Council staff fell within. The Cabinet had therefore taken the decision to allocate 2% towards its pay award provision which would allow it a degree of fall back, should there be a national settlement of 2%.
- It was agreed that many online businesses had an "advantage" on operating costs over shops based in town centres.
- It was confirmed that the Cabinet would likely review its provision of £1m from the Council's unallocated balances in light of the Government grants that had recently been identified.
- Note was made of the support which had been expressed by a number of Members during the course of the questions thus far with regard to the proposal of "freezing"

Council Tax; however, it was reiterated that if agreed, such action would lead to a resultant increase in the shortfall over the four-year period up to 2024/25, which would need to be addressed.

- In response to a query about the purpose of the Emergency Fund Allocation of £686k, it was explained that although the actual costs could not yet be determined, it was expected that these would be in relation to income that could not be met entirely by fees and charges compensation scheme alone and also additional expenditure such as leisure service additional costs. The Government had allocated an amount to every Authority on a formula basis.
- Members were advised that although the Leader would not 'rule out' use of the New Homes Bonus (NHB) in respect of the Council's Cycling Strategy, it was emphasised that any use of NHB would be under the responsibility of the Council, rather than shared responsibility with the Local Highways Panel.
- On the subject of Community Woodlands, Members were reminded of the Scrutiny Review undertaken by the Community Development Group which had recently concluded and produced a set of recommendations. The finalised Scrutiny Report, along with the subsequent recommendations of the Review, were due to be presented at the Cabinet meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021.
- In terms of addressing the Climate Change Emergency, Members were advised that £500,000 from the Council's budget was to be allocated towards this. Further to the completion of the Climate Action Group report, the balance of funds from this allocation would be available to resource emerging future projects.
- With regard to any updates in respect of Silver End Surgery, Members were made aware of an upcoming meeting of Witham Town Council, the meeting of which was to include discussion around improvements to healthcare facilities in Witham, with a subsequent report to be produced from this. It was highlighted that surgeries like that in Silver End were managed by the NHS, who were responsible party for any bidding for funding towards such facilities.
- On the subject of losses in relation to Business Rate Collections, Members were advised that although the Council had been issuing reminders to businesses, responses were not always received. Due to the closure of the Magistrate Court as a result of Covid-19, the Council had been unable to undertake legal action in these situations; however, the Council would continue with its efforts towards recovery of balances outstanding, the amount uncollected would not impact on the revenue account in the year. It was stressed that the provisional figure of £884,000 of estimated losses around Business Rate Collection was a best estimate only and also the Government had offered a degree of financial support towards Business Rate losses for the current year; however, the exact amount to be offered could not be determined at this stage. The Government had also mandated that losses in relation to Business Rates in the year, which were normally required to be accounted for in the following year, would now instead be spread over a three-year period.
- Members were informed that Braintree District Council currently had one of the highest collection rates when compared with other Essex Authorities.
- Monies which had been allocated to various groups as part of the Councillor Community Grant Scheme had been carried over in the previous year due to the

impacts of Covid-19, and it was anticipated that this would be the case for allocations made in the current financial year. It was noted that the Scheme was due to be reviewed for the next financial year, but this was postponed accordingly.

- On the subject of the Council's investments in the incinerator at Ipswich, Members were advised that a written question had already been submitted in respect of this and would as such be responded to in accordance with the written question procedure. The response was due for circulation to all Members on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2021.
- In response to a general comment by a Member, it was highlighted that the report for the Scrutiny Review into 'Leisure Provision in the Braintree District' that was due for presentation at the meeting of Cabinet on 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021, during which the Cabinet would respond to the recommendations of the report.

In response to questions raised by Members, Cabinet Members agreed to provide the following information by means of a written response:-

- Councillor G Butland, Leader of the Council, agreed to forward the details of the Council's total expenditure in respect of the North Essex Garden Communities to Councillor Thorogood, which had been supplied previously.
- Councillor Mrs G Spray, Cabinet Member for Planning, agreed to provide a written response to Councillor Mann on how the new Planning Scheme of Delegation impacted on the potential level of planning pre-application fees.
- Councillor P Tattersley, Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, agreed to circulate a Cabinet Briefing Paper to all Members which explained the Council's financial position should it continue with its support to Fusion Lifestyle.
- Councillor P Tattersley, Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing, agreed to contact the Clerk at Witham Town Council in order to confirm whether an invite to the meeting on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021 could be extended to Councillor Abbott.

A webcast of the full discussion is available via YouTube at the following link:  
<http://www.braintree.gov.uk/youtube>

Further to the conclusion of the discussion, the Chairman expressed his gratitude to the Leader, Cabinet Members and all other Members present for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

## 21 **SECOND QUARTER PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT 2020/21**

**INFORMATION:** Members gave consideration to a report on the performance of the Council in the second quarter (July to September 2020). Tracey Headford, Business Solutions Manager, was invited to introduce the report.

As at the end of the second quarter one project had been completed, 46 projects were on track, five projects had an amber status and one project had been cancelled. The cancelled project occurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and was in relation to creating gardens of remembrance in some of the District's cemeteries, which would ordinarily be take place during the planting season; the work would now be undertaken in the Spring/Summer of 2021. The five projects that had an amber status included the redevelopment of the entrance to the Witham Town Park; the trial of the anti-littering

signage along some of the District's strategic routes; improvements to sports facilities at the Braintree Sport and Leisure Centre; development of the 3G pitch at the Halstead Leisure Centre, and finally; developing health priorities in various localities across the District in partnership with the newly formed NHS Primary Care Works. Although each of the five 'amber' projects had experienced delays due to the various impacts of the pandemic, Members were advised that arrangements had since been put in place for their reinstatement at a more appropriate time, with some now underway already.

Members were advised that targets had not been set for all of the Council's performance indicators due to the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 would have had on setting these. With regard to the remaining targets, it was reported that seven performance indicators had either met or exceeded their target, and seven had missed their targets; of these indicators, three had missed their target by less than 5% and four had missed their target by more than 5%. The areas where underperformance was recorded were relation to: recycling rates; the average waiting time for disabled facility grants; the average call answering time in the Customer Service Centre; the collection rate for Business Rates; the percentage of stage one complaints responded to within seven working days; the collection rate for Council Tax, and; the percentage of invoices paid within 30 days.

In respect of complaints, it was reported that the Council had received a total of 129 complaints in the second quarter which indicated that there had been a slight increase in the number received compared with that of the first quarter. On the subject of health and safety, it was relayed that there been an increase in the number of verbal assaults towards members of staff; it was reiterated that all members of staff were encouraged to report such incidents to their line managers in order to enable the Council to conduct the appropriate proceedings, as well as provide support for those individuals effected.

Members were also provided with a brief update in respect of the Council's financial performance, and it was reported that there was an overall adverse variance projected of £2.651m in the second quarter without taking into account the Covid-19 support packages from the Government.

In relation to the overall performance of the Council in the second quarter, it was acknowledged that staff and the day-to-day services had experienced unprecedented challenges in order to adapt to new ways of working in the months that followed the first lockdown; however, in spite of these pressures, the Council had continued to perform well overall.

Further to the conclusion of the report, the Chairman thanked Tracey for her detailed report and added that he wished to express his gratitude on behalf of the Performance Management Board to all members of staff for their hard work and the overall performance of the Council in such strenuous circumstances.

Councillor Mrs Dervish wished to echo the Chairman's comments, and also commend staff for their hard work and the ways in which they had supported residents, businesses and Councillors alike so thoroughly throughout a very challenging year. Other Members of the Performance Management Board also added their thanks towards staff.

In response to questions raised by Members, officers agreed to the following lines of enquiry:-

- Tracey Headford agreed to provide Councillor Rose with a written response to his query about the financial costs involved with the development of the Witham Town

Park entrance; in particular, around whether there was a fixed price in respect of the tender process for works to re-surface the car park and to remove the previous building's foundations.

- In response to a query raised by Councillor Courtauld on behalf of a group of residents, Cherie Root, Corporate Director, agreed to check whether the woodland burial feasibility report which had been produced in respect of a specific site in the District could be circulated in the public domain; if not, if Councillor Courtauld could kindly provide the residents' contact details, she would arrange for the Head of Operations to contact them and discuss the matter of woodland burial sites further.
- In response to a question raised by Councillor Schwier in relation to the rollout of 'Superfast Broadband' across the whole of the District, including the anticipated speed and delivery time, Tracey Headford advised that by the end of December 2021, approximately 94-95% is expected to be achieved across the district which was on target. Tracey agreed to provide details of the rollout scheme by way of written response to all Committee Members including whether there was a divide between the rollout across urban and rural areas. Cherie Root had also provided details of the website ([superfastessex.org](http://superfastessex.org)) which included an interactive map.

**DECISION:** Members of the Performance Management Board noted the report.

**REASON FOR DECISION:** To inform Members of the performance of the Council.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 9.00pm.

Councillor M Radley  
(Chairman)