

Minutes

Corporate Scrutiny Committee (Budget Update) 31st January 2024



Present

| Councillors | Present | Councillors | Present |
|--------------------|-----------|----------------------------|---------|
| J Abbott | Yes | I Parker | Yes |
| J Beavis | Yes | R Ramage | Yes |
| J Bond | Yes | W Taylor | Yes |
| G Courtauld | Apologies | E Williams | Yes |
| P Heath (Chairman) | Yes | T Williams (Vice-Chairman) | Yes |
| D Holland | Yes | J Wrench | Yes |
| J Martin | Yes | | |

The following Councillors were also in attendance at the meeting: J Baugh, G Butland, M Cunningham, T Cunningham, C Dervish, D Garrod, A Hooks, L Jefferis, J Pell, G Prime, F Ricci, P Schwier, G Spray, R van Dulken, L Walters and B Wright.

15 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

INFORMATION: There were no interests declared.

16 **MINUTES**

DECISION: The Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee held on 22nd November 2023 were approved as a correct record.

17 **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

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

18 **SCRUTINY OF THE COUNCIL'S INITIAL BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2024/25**

INFORMATION: The Chairman welcomed Members of the Cabinet and P Myers, Head of Finance, to the meeting. Members were to receive a presentation on the progress of the developing budget position of the Council for 2024/25 and an update on the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2024/25 to 2027/28. Before the start of the presentation, it was noted that apologies had been received from Councillor K Bowers, Cabinet Member for Resources and Performance.

The presentation slides were prepared by P Myers and presented by Councillor G Butland, Leader of the Council. A copy of the full presentation slides are available to view on the [Council's website](#).

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

Further to the presentation, Members of the Committee were invited to ask their questions of the Cabinet and officers. Following this, questions were invited from the non-Committee Members in attendance.

The following information was subsequently provided in response to questions from Members:

- It was explained that much of the workspace within Causeway House was currently under-utilised and in need of modernising. As such, a sum of £1.2million had been allocated towards a refresh of the building, although this was subject to a final business case.
- Regarding the use of New Homes Bonus (NHB) monies, there was still an opportunity for the Committee to make further suggestions around its use prior to the final budget approval by Full Council on 19th 5th February 2024.
- The proposal to allocate a sum of NHB towards risk management recognised the high level of volatility and uncertainty from many external factors that could impact on Council's key services and resource requirements. If it was later considered that the reserve was no longer required, the money would be released for an alternative use.
- The financial models developed for the new garden waste subscription service were set using prudent assumptions based on the experience of other authorities as it represented a major change in service delivery, and it was appropriate this was approached with caution. The Leader was pleased to report that the level of take-up by residents to the new subscription service had exceeded expectations and the additional income was welcomed; however, in terms of the overall budget setting strategy, the impacts had been largely neutral. These impacts would continue to be monitored and the assessments reflected within future financial modelling for the next period of the MTFS.
- The Maltings Lane project in the Witham area was a project in the existing capital programme, but it was still subject to a final business case before it could proceed.
- The financial assumptions made as part of the budget setting process were likely to change on a yearly basis and at this time were considered to be prudent, and it was accepted that closing the budget gap would be a challenge for the Authority.
- The Leader underlined the importance of collaborative working with other Local Authorities and the need to identify different methods of approach to this in order to generate further savings and income for the Council. It was added that the proposal to 'refresh' Causeway House was a prime example of this, having been undertaken to ensure that the Council adapted to the changing needs of its workforce and that the building was suitable for purpose going forward.
- It was highlighted that additional funds were to come forward from the Government that recognised the additional cost of providing service in rural areas in order to bolster rural services. The Council was expecting to receive a share of these extra funds of approximately £4,000 which would mean receiving a total of around £30,000.

- The increase in statutory planning fees and charges was much welcomed. Although Local Planning Authorities were not allowed to make profits from these fees and charges, the expectation was that this would contribute significantly to covering costs.
- It was reported that the Government will require local authorities to prepare a 'Productivity Plan' which would need to be agreed by leaders and members.
- A business case for the proposed 'refresh' of Causeway House was to be presented to Cabinet in due course.
- The Council was currently developing an 'Asset Strategy' to examine all the assets owned by the Council and determine which were still required, which might have alternative uses and which could be disposed of.
- In respect of the Wethersfield Asylum Centre, approximately £240,000 was to be paid, although the final figures were yet to be confirmed by the Home Office. The Council would receive an amount of money from the Home Office "per occupied bed" at the Asylum Centre. In addition, should the Special Development Order (SDO) be obtained by the Home Office, the amount received by the Council would be for the duration of the site's tenure as an Asylum Centre (e.g. three to four years). Furthermore, should ownership of the site switch from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to the Home Office, there could be extra statutory duties placed on the Council.
- In respect of the North Essex Councils (NEC), the importance of collaborative working across Authorities was reiterated.
- The Council Tax Discretionary Policy on long-term empty homes applied to properties, regardless of any transfer of ownership. However, exemptions would be applied to, for example, properties required refurbishing (e.g. time limited).
- The Cabinet Member for Planning and Infrastructure was pleased to report that a new manager had recently been recruited within the Building Control team.
- It was expected that the Council would meet its target around Planning applications income by the end of the current financial year, and there were significant applications still to come forward over the next few months. Members were reminded that the Council was unable to compel developers to proceed with builds, which was a continuous frustration of the Planning Committee.
- As a result of extra funding being provided, the position of the Planning Enforcement team had improved significantly over recent years.
- Members were advised that the changing facilities at Maltings Lane Community Centre, Witham, formed part of a planning application which was due to be presented at Committee over the coming weeks.

In response to questions raised by Members, the following actions were agreed:

- It was agreed that further information would be provided to Councillor J Beavis regarding the refurbishment of Oxford and Brook Meadow Play Area in Sible Hedingham (under the Capital Programme).

- Members were reminded that a final business case for the proposal to refurbish Causeway House would be considered by the Cabinet. Further information relating to the timescales around the plans would be circulated to Members once the dates for this had been confirmed.

Before closing the budget session, the Chairman concurred with comments made by the Leader around the need to work more collaboratively across political groups and with other Local Authorities going forward and emphasised the importance of this approach.

DECISION: The report was noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To receive and understand the updated Council Budget for 2024/25.

19 **FIRST QUARTER PERFORMANCE REPORT 2023/24**

INFORMATION: Prior to the report, T Headford, People and Performance Manager, introduced T Williams, Corporate Performance Coordinator, who would be taking the lead on future performance reports presented to the Committee.

Members considered a report on the performance of Braintree District Council (the Council) as at the end of the second quarter (July 2023 to September 2023). The report was presented to the Cabinet on 22nd January 2024. The Council's performance as at the end of the second quarter was in line with expectations; three projects had been completed, 51 were on track and three had an amber status. The projects with an amber status were in respect of the changing facilities at the Halstead Leisure Centre, the community centre at Maltings Lane in Witham and the development of the Council's Asset Management Strategy. Reasons for the delays varied from costs which were over budget to planning recommendations which required additional work.

Eleven performance indicators had met or exceeded target, and three performance indicators had missed target by more than 5%. The areas of underperformance were in relation to the cumulative number of homes granted planning permission, recycling rates and the percentage of enquiries resolved at first point of contact in the customer service centre.

Reference was made to some of the key achievements of the Council during the second quarter, including the delivery of 'crucial crew' workshops in July 2023; a review into the Council's air quality monitoring methodology; a scheme to refurbish the wildlife gardens at Halstead Public Gardens; the moving of Mount Chambers GP Surgery to a new site at the Victoria Square Development; Councillor Community Grants awarded to the value of £3,750; the delivery of 90 affordable homes (taking the total to 167); a continued increase in the number of people participating in leisure centre activities; uptake of the Council's handyman scheme; the prevention of 67 cases of homelessness; 269 new business start-ups and an increase in the number of people contacting the Council online.

It was noted that the number of complaints received in the second quarter had increased compared to the first quarter, which followed a similar trend to the previous year. However, the total number of complaints for the year thus far were lower than 2022/23 (by 22%). The majority of the complaints were in relation to the Operations Service, particularly around missed bin collections and the introduction of the garden waste service charges. It was added that all complaints were resolved at Stage One of the complaints process.

In terms of the financial performance, the net budget agreed for 2023/24 was £17.5million. The review of income and expenditure against budget and forecast for the year indicated a net overall negative variance of £6,000. A central provision had been made for the staff pay award which reflected the latest proposal from National Employers of £1,925 or 3.88%. The estimated increase in pay costs was +6% against the budget provision of 3% and resulted in an estimated additional cost of £606,000.

Other expenditure was forecast to be £550,000 over budget, and the Council also continued to accrue legal costs in relation to the Wethersfield Asylum Centre appeals. Offsetting the projected additional staffing cost and other expenditure was an overachievement of income currently forecast to be £1.3 million, which was mainly attributed to treasury management investment income. Capital spend to the end of the second quarter was £2.05million, which was incurred on the disabled facilities grant programme, planned property maintenance, community facilities and IT. There was currently an estimated positive variance against the capital projects of £119,000. The estimated movement on the General Fund unallocated balances was a net withdrawal of £1.13 million.

DECISION: The Corporate Scrutiny Committee noted the performance of the Council following its presentation and noting of the report at Cabinet on 22nd January 2024.

REASON FOR DECISION: To demonstrate the performance of the Council at the end of the second quarter (July 2023 to September 2023).

20 **DECISION PLANNER 1ST FEBRUARY 2024 TO 30TH APRIL 2024**

DECISION: That the Decision Planner for the period 1st February 2024 to 30th April 2024 was noted.

REASON FOR DECISION: To note the Decision Planner for the period 1st February 2024 to 30th April 2024.

The meeting commenced at 7.15pm and closed at 8.53pm.

Councillor P Heath
(Chairman)