

Resources and Services Overview and Services Committee – 10 January 2024

Questions to Portfolio Holders on the Budget

<u>Question to which Portfolio Holder</u>	<u>Question from Member of the Committee</u>	<u>Question to be asked</u> <i>(followed by supplementary question(s) based on response – initially from questioner – and others only if time permits)</i>	<u>Answer from Portfolio Holder</u> <i>(If time is tight the question and the response may be read into the record rather than spoken)</i>
HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT			
Cllr Baker	Cllr P Honeywood	Can you set out for me how the HRA budget aligns with the Council’s approved existing Housing Strategy 2020-2025 ‘Delivering Homes to meet the needs of local people’?	I do not believe it does, the Strategy was published just before we were hit with the Covid pandemic, and since then we have seen high inflation, meaning higher prices, along with the current Cost of Living crisis. The aspiration to build/deliver 200 new council homes was highly ambitious, however currently the demands of impending regulation from the Regulator of Social Housing, building safety, a new decent homes standard and an increasing claims culture, are factors that take use of resources away from these aspirations, and towards ensuring the existing stock meets the appropriate standards, and is upgraded where necessary. The demands on the services supporting the HRA and Housing Stock are putting a strain on resources and I, together with officers, will be considering our approach to the scope of the Housing Investment Programme, recharges, procurement, and the use of any headroom within the 30-year business plan, which are considered

			<p>necessary in order to meet the challenges ahead.</p> <p>Within the next few weeks, I will be speaking with officers to review the Housing Strategy 2020 – 2025, and am hoping to bring forward a revised strategy by the end of 2024.</p>
Cllr Baker	Cllr Steady	<p>Is the HRA sustainable with the current size of the Council’s social housing stock? From a budgetary point of view, if there was an optimal size of housing stock what would that be?</p> <p>Thinking of the public purse, is the Council actively taking steps to identify and dispose of those Council homes that take disproportionately greater amounts of maintenance/cost more to maintain (including any are listed); replacing those with homes acquired using the receipt for the disposed of properties? If not, should that not be actively pursued?</p>	<p>The Council has a 30 year business plan for the housing service that demonstrates the future sustainability of the service based on all of the current circumstances and information.</p> <p>I do not think I can give an answer to that question, as I have just stated the Council has a 30-year business plan, which is currently sustainable, in regard to our current stock. Social Housing provision is a challenging environment, and providers, big and small, are facing significant challenges in meeting their own aspirations. Therefore, officer resource is directed at dealing with the stock we have.</p> <p>The disposal of any dwelling requires careful evaluation and the consent of the Secretary of State. There are a number of properties within the current housing stock that take a disproportionate amount of resource to maintain/repair, and therefore it is considered that it would be better for</p>

		<p>The Council has a stated policy of aspiring to deliver 200 additional Council homes in the District by 2025 (100 being in Jaywick Sands and 100 in other parts of the District). Is this a continuing commitment of this administration?</p> <p>Has any consideration been given to the transfer of the M&S store building in Clacton on Sea, to the HRA for conversion to Housing? If not the whole store, would it not be helpful to consider the upper floor for a Living Over the Shop (LOtS) scheme?</p> <p>Can you set out for us the main loans used to fund the purchase of the Council's housing stock and when those loans have or will be settled? In this regard, on page 59 of the agenda pack it shows at line 10 the interest payments and line 11 the principal payments on those loans. In 2027/28, the interest</p>	<p>those to be disposed of, in order that resources can be focussed on the remaining stock. A number of proposals are currently being prepared for formal consideration. It is highly likely that further properties will be identified and a framework to deal with this, in the form of a Housing Asset Management Plan, is currently being prepared for formal consideration.</p> <p>There is a commitment of this administration to add properties into our housing stock, by the various means available, and where it is affordable to do so. As I have stated already, the aspiration to build/deliver 200 homes within the current Housing strategy was highly ambitious, but I personally do not believe that figure is achievable within the current strategy's time period. I have already outlined what I propose to do in regard to the Housing Strategy.</p> <p>The building is currently under lease, until 2027, and is occupied by a retailer. There are a number of use and conversion options that may be considered in the future.</p>
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GENERAL FUND BUDGET			
Cllr Stephenson	Cllr P Honeywood	<p>In relation to the overall budget.</p> <p>What measures have you taken already and will take to ensure the expenditure in your Portfolio contributes to the savings requirement set out in the proposed budget for 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27?</p>	<p>We have been and we will be continuing to work with Officers in the weeks and months ahead to identify options to support the Council’s long-term financial future. The forecast risk fund has provided us with the time and flexibility to make well informed decisions and it is essential that we use this time wisely to maximise opportunities such as securing efficiencies, getting the most out of assets and generating additional income where possible. However, we recognise that given the scale of the savings required, avoiding reductions to the services we currently provide will not be possible. No member wants to see reductions in services but we need to recognise the tough decisions that have to be made, as the alternative is far worse. We do not want to end up like various Council’s across the country that cannot set a balanced budget and have run out of money, which will have such a detrimental knock on impact on their local people and communities and will likely take them</p>

			<p>years to recover. In reflecting on our pledge to be open, honest and transparent we need to make sure we both inform and involve members and our residents in the associated activities and be clear about why such decisions will be necessary.</p> <p>Additional comments across the various portfolios are set out elsewhere in response to questions to the Portfolio Holders.</p>
Cllr Stephenson	Cllr Cossens	Can we not put more effort into raising income rather than saving costs? This could be in conjunction with other Councils – has the Leader lobbied Government? (either on behalf of this Council or in conjunction with other Essex Authorities, or both)	As highlighted earlier, opportunities to generate additional income will continue to be an important element of supporting the Council’s financial position now and in the future. The Council has always taken the opportunity to lobby the government wherever possible, which is something that I will be keen to continue doing, which may involve joining forces with our partners where necessary.
Cllr Stephenson	Cllr P Honeywood	Applying for grant funding in a more proactive manner may be a way of taking forward Council priorities without incurring additional cost pressures on the Council. Does the Leader believe this would be a positive way forward and see this approach adopted wholeheartedly?	Maximising external funding opportunities will be essential going forwards. This is also something that fits neatly with the list of potential future cost pressures that was mentioned earlier where we can explore opportunities to lever in external funding against the various items identified and it will also undoubtedly be a key activity to

			support the delivery of our corporate priorities.
Cllr Stephenson	Cllr Griffiths	<p>Where are we with the sign off by the External Auditors of the previous year's accounts, which I believe still includes the accounts for 2020/21, and what are the risks of nasty surprises once they are signed off?</p> <p>Between 10 November and 15 December, the forecasts show £1.024M of additional cost increases. Over £1M in about 5 weeks. What does that say about the budget management going forward for the Council?</p>	<p>Frustratingly we are still awaiting the sign off of the 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 accounts by our outgoing Auditors. I understand that they will be providing an update to the next meeting of our Audit Committee towards the end of January. The risk of any surprises emerging from the audit of these outstanding accounts is negligible as the statement of accounts process relates more closely to the accuracy of the preparation and presentation of the Council's financial position rather than issues that will have a direct financial impact on the Council's budget.</p> <p>As set out in earlier Financial Performance report, it was highlighted that work remained ongoing with Departments and Portfolio Holders with the aim of remaining 'sighted' on potential future cost pressures for consideration as part of finalising the draft budget that will be presented to Cabinet in December 2023. Earlier reports also listed a number of potential items. The work undertaken to date has therefore been based on updating this cost pressure position. The list of potential future cost pressures is maintained on a 'live' basis which demonstrates good</p>

			budget management and therefore avoids surprises and ensures financial decisions are made in the context of the most complete financial picture as possible.
Cllr Stephenson	Cllr Steady	Is there any opportunity through schemes to be funded from the Levelling Up Fund and Future of Towns projects in Clacton-on-Sea and the Government's Capital Regeneration Project in Dovercourt for the Council's own revenue or capital schemes to be reduced (by displacing that expenditure with Government funding)?	No, the schemes which we are bringing forwarded through additional levelling up funding aim to be cost neutral, given the capacity funding that comes with them, but they are required to be for additional work, not to replace current investment in services that the Council already provides.

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Cllr Baker	Cllr Doyle	<p>On page 55 of the Agenda Pack I see reference to a £0.5M cost pressure per year from next year due to homelessness – including temporary (or emergency) housing. This cost pressure is after taking account of the Spendells Scheme to provide a set of temporary/emergency housing units rather than booking bed and breakfast rooms. What plans are in place to avoid that cost pressure and otherwise reduce the cost of temporary/emergency housing? For instance, providing further units like Spendells?</p> <p>What is being done to limit the time and therefore expenditure, of people in temporary accommodation?</p>	<p>The project to bring Spendells House back into use is due to be completed by the end of the financial year 2023/24. The aim of that project is to reduce the cost pressures on the General Fund, That pressure will not be realised straight away but I am hopeful that it will be quite quickly. I am very committed in exploring the potential for similar schemes, both within the current housing stock and also by potential acquisition of suitable properties. I am unable to give exact details but I can confirm that officers, in consultation with me, have considered two potential sites for acquisition within the last six months. Unfortunately, neither was suitable but I, and officers, will continue to look for potential and suitable locations.</p> <p>I am determined that the Spendells Project will be delivered on time, and this will assist with reducing the expenditure on temporary accommodation. Homelessness is a national problem, being a consequence of the broader housing and affordability crisis and beyond the Council's immediate control, and budgetary pressures are created by</p>

			<p>the ever-increasing homelessness presentation being seen by local authorities across the country. Investing in increased staffing, I am determined that the service will be more proactive in preventing homelessness. I would also point out that a new Temporary Allocations Policy and Homelessness Prevention Policy will be coming forward to Cabinet in the very near future. Reducing the time spent in temporary accommodation is dependent on the availability of suitable, and affordable, rented accommodation, both in the private and social/affordable sections. The Council works proactively to source private sector landlords and to ensure that new developments contribute new affordable homes under planning obligations. I have also asked officers to look at using, on a short-term basis, those properties that are potentially going to be listed to be disposed of and currently void, to assist where possible as temporary accommodation.</p>
Cllr Baker	Cllr P Honeywood	<p>In relation to the overall budget.</p> <p>What measures have you taken already and will take to ensure the expenditure in your Portfolio contributes to the savings requirement</p>	<p><u>Housing:</u> A potential cost pressure of £500k to deal with homelessness has been identified, however as already stated Spendells House is due to be completed by the end</p>

		<p>set out in the proposed budget for 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27?</p>	<p>of the financial year 2023/2024. I am hopeful that will relieve some, not all, of the pressure, as no one can predict the number of people that will come to the council claiming to be homeless. Work on prevention is also key, and the more that we as a council can do to help in this is vital, and this is why a new Homelessness Prevention Policy is being brought forward soon. Helping to keep people in their homes is surely a much better option than having to be placed in temporary accommodation.</p> <p>Potentially acquiring more properties of our own, to be used as temporary accommodation, similar possibly to Spendells House, would also help, and I refer to my previous answer to Councillor Doyle's question.</p> <p><u>Planning</u>: The review of the Local Plan is to be progressed in line with overarching principles agreed by the Planning Policy and Local Plan Committee in December 2023 that include updating rather than re-writing the Plan, using best use of existing information and evidence and carrying out only proportionate, necessary and affordable updates to relevant technical evidence – with the aim of ensuring the updated Plan has a sound basis whilst achieving best value for money for</p>
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Cllr Baker	Cllr Steady	The budget identifies £500,000 per annum for homelessness services – how can that be more effectively delivered?	I would refer you to my answer to Councillor Doyle's question, and point out that the sum of £500k is a forecasted 'cost pressure' for 2024/2025. As I have previously said, I believe more work to prevent people from becoming homeless is vital, and officers will be undertaking this going forward in line with the

			upcoming Homelessness Prevention Policy.
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Cllr Barry	Cllr P Honeywood	In relation to the overall budget. What measures have you taken already and will take to ensure the expenditure in your Portfolio contributes to the savings requirement set out in the proposed budget for 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27?	There are two broad areas I have focused on so far to bring contribute to savings. Firstly, energy reduction, as Leisure facilities use energy intensively. Further details are included in my answer to Cllr Steady, but if we are successful in current funding bids to the Swimming Pool Support Fund, in addition to the projects already funded such as the swimming pool covers, are projects to save well over £100,000 a year. The Council also applied for and received £388,717 from the Government's Swimming Pool Support Fund to cover additional energy costs for the three leisure centres. The second is to increase income, and here I have had the opportunity to build on the work started under the previous administration. The Leisure Centres have 4,800 members, which is expected to bring £1.2 Million a year. This is nearly double the number of members the gym had a year ago. This increase in income is

			<p>a mix of the right pricing strategy and inclusive range of courses and activities on offer in our facilities. It also includes the 3G pitch which is now operational and bringing in £32K since opening in July. I look forward to bringing forward a Sports and Activity strategy in Spring to Cabinet, and financial sustainability will of course be part of that work.</p>
Cllr Barry	Cllr Steady	<p>What is being done in respect of Leisure Centres (including swimming pools) to reduce energy charges incurred in running those centres/pools?</p>	<p>To reduce energy charges incurred in running these facilities, the following is being undertaken:</p> <p>Variable speed drives have been installed across the leisure centre pools. Estimated energy savings per year are £12,500.</p> <p>Procurement for new LED lights across all leisure centres within the facilities and car parks is underway, and we hope to have a contractor appointed in February. The exact costs and savings will be established at that time, and orders will be raised following a decision by the corporate director, in consultation with the portfolio holder for corporate finance and governance.</p> <p>Contracts are being finalised at present for the pool covers across the centres, and it is hoped that these will be installed by the</p>

			<p>end of March. Estimated energy savings per year are £79,400.</p> <p>Two bids have been submitted to the Swimming Pool Support Fund Phase 2 for the following projects; TDC should hear back on whether they have been successful by the end of January:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oil boiler replacement at Clacton Leisure Centre. Estimated Energy Savings per Annum is £9,000 2. New Building Management System at Walton on the Naze Lifestyles Estimated energy savings per year are £4,050. 3. New Air Handling Unit at Walton on the Naze Lifestyles: Estimated Energy Savings Per Annum: £21,800 <p>Additionally, the appointment of contractors to prepare plans for lower-carbon heating systems in the council's estate is underway.</p>
Cllr Barry	Cllr Doyle	What is being done to make Leisure Centres more cost neutral to the Council, including local tourism facility marketing, through hotels etc? By way of an example, there could be hotels without swimming pools offering access	I have set out in detail in answers to other councillors the work we have underway to increase income, to reduce energy costs, and to bring forward a Sports and Activity Strategy in the Spring.

		<p>to the Council's pools for guests and thereby extending the offer from the hotel as well as bringing new trade to the Council's Leisure facilities with payment coming from the hotels.</p>	<p>At present, Leisure Services uses social media, internal marketing, and also links into local schools to advertise activities, encouraging more people to take up sessions.</p> <p>This approach is working well, as demonstrated by the substantial increase in members, almost doubled to 4,800 overall and 3000 for Clacton Leisure Centre. The financial impact of these are referenced in my earlier reply to Cllr Paul Honeywood's question.</p> <p>In the past, there has been a direct arrangement with hotels and holiday parks whereby the leisure centres have provided passes for the pools to allow those staying in the local area to use the centres with their families and friends. We will review the potential to reinstate this offer in in our future marketing plans.</p>
Cllr Barry	Cllr Smith	<p>Who owns the solar panels on the Clacton Cricket Club pavilion next to the Clacton Leisure Centre in Vista Road, Clacton-on-Sea?</p>	<p>The solar panels are owned by a private company called Freetricity Commercial Limited. The company occupies the roof of the building under a 25 year and 6 month underlease granted by Clacton Sports Club in March 2012.</p>

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE TO PORTFOLIO HOLDERS WHO HAVE PROVIDED WRITTEN REPLIES AS FOLLOWS. AS THEY WERE NOT REQUIRED TO ATTEND THE COMMITTEE MEETING THE QUESTIONS AND REPLIES WILL NEED TO BE READ INTO THE RECORD OF THE MEETING.

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Cllr I Henderson	Cllr P Honeywood	<p>In relation to the overall budget.</p> <p>What measures have you taken already and will take to ensure the expenditure in your Portfolio contributes to the savings requirement set out in the proposed budget for 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27?</p>	<p>The Economic and Tourism portfolio has focused on bringing funding into the Council to deliver priorities, and drawing on the capacity funding that comes alongside the awards to enable delivery of the schemes.</p> <p>For example, there is or will be the following capacity funding available for levelling up schemes:</p> <p>Levelling Up Fund: £70,000 has been received in the 23/24 financial year, and DLUHC have advised that a further £40-£60,000 will also be made available. This can also be used to support CRP if needed</p> <p>Long term plan for Towns: £50,000 has been received</p> <p>Levelling Up Partnership: £45,000 has been received</p>

			<p>Accelerator: we will receive £50,000 for this which can be used for support if need be, but after discussions with the MP this will be used directly on projects</p> <p>In relation to the Airshow, the Council is considering how best to draw in sponsorship to reduce the costs of the event to the Council.</p> <p>In addition, we continue to work with funding partners such as the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery to consider options for future investment in the District.</p>
Cllr Placey	Cllr P Honeywood	<p>On page 57 of the Agenda Pack, it states that there will be a one-off unavoidable net cost for Careline in this year of £120k and £296k in 2024/25. Can you set out what those cost pressures are and why a break-even position is not possible? How certain are we that that cost pressures will end in 2024/25 or will we see costs pressures then in 2025/26?</p>	<p>A staffing restructuring is taking place to reduce costs and an Options paper will be submitted to Cabinet over the next few months. The cost pressures relate to staffing and the digital switchover.</p> <p>The Options paper is the key document which will determine the future of the service. At this stage, you have the worst-case scenario cost pressure for 2024/25 and until the Options paper is completed, I would not like to comment on 2025/26, as we need to see the outcome of the review, which is being undertaken by a specialist Officer from the Finance team.</p>

Cllr Placey	Cllr P Honeywood	<p>In relation to the overall budget.</p> <p>What measures have you taken already and will take to ensure the expenditure in your Portfolio contributes to the savings requirement set out in the proposed budget for 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27?</p>	<p>I keep all service areas under review to ensure that they are contributing the Corporate priorities, including savings requirements. It should be noted in Partnerships that I have a number of posts that are externally funded by the Alliance and DWP that are contributing to the delivery of the Council's priorities.</p> <p>I have two service areas where I have implemented additional reviews :</p> <p>Careline - An Options review and a restructuring are currently being undertaken. The restructuring consultation is taking place this month and the Options paper will be submitted to Cabinet over the next few months.</p> <p>Career Track - The Council's apprenticeship service, Career Track, is supported by the Council in its work to provide employment opportunities for those within the District who may otherwise struggle to progress. The service does not break even due to the fixed fees that can be charged which are set by national government. These fees have not been increased since they were established in 2017. The service is however, going to commence charging for re-sits to support the budget position</p>
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			going forward. The authority provides an additional investment into the service on an annual basis.
Cllr Bush	Cllr P Honeywood	<p>In relation to the overall budget.</p> <p>What measures have you taken already and will take to ensure the expenditure in your Portfolio contributes to the savings requirement set out in the proposed budget for 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27?</p>	<p>We are preparing for new waste and recycling collection and street sweeping arrangements from 2026. I cannot guarantee that the new arrangements will offer a financial saving as inflationary pressures are not in our favour in this respect. I can assure you though, that we will be seeking best value for money in what is delivered.</p> <p>Engineering: My team off officers is working towards a programme of replacement of drop in flood boards as part of a longer term invest to save scheme.</p> <p>The team is preparing proposals for a Cliff and Coast Policy that is aimed at limiting liabilities by providing for judicious interventions and the seeking out of external funding opportunities.</p> <p>Currently we are reviewing the Climate Change Action Plan that was originally adopted in 2020. The focus of the action plan is carbon reduction, which is primarily reducing the amount of energy the council uses, and so what it spends on energy. So</p>

			<p>whilst this action plan includes potential expenditure, it provides opportunities for spend to save by reducing energy usage. A briefing paper on the progress with the Climate Change Action Plan is being prepared for the Committee to be circulated later this month.</p> <p>Streets/lighting - The team has put in place a trial group of solar powered streetlights at Jaywick. Evaluation is ongoing but the idea has potential to create revenue savings and contribute to carbon reduction.</p> <p>I have also asked for an unadopted roads policy to be drafted. There is significant demand for such discretionary works but that demand has to be carefully evaluated against available budgets.</p> <p>Transport - The team is evaluating options for a fleet decarbonisation strategy with the aim of finding efficient ways to procure and use vehicles that are both suitable for the various works uses and as low carbon as they can be.</p>
Cllr Kotz	Cllr P Honeywood	<p>In relation to the overall budget.</p> <p>What measures have you taken already and will take to ensure the expenditure in your</p>	<p>As mentioned elsewhere, maximising efficiencies will play a key role in balancing the budget / forecast. IT will undoubtedly be a key element in helping</p>

		<p>Portfolio contributes to the savings requirement set out in the proposed budget for 2024/25, 2025/26 and 2026/27?</p>	<p>to unlock such efficiencies and we will continue to work with Services alongside our external partners such as other local authorities and software providers to generate savings opportunities for the Council.</p> <p>I have asked the property team to review the 72 sites that had been identified as potentially surplus in order to narrow down the areas of work and prioritise activity into a sharper focus in order to drive forward receipts and efficiency where it is appropriate to do so.</p> <p>The Property team is managing the redevelopment of the Honeycroft site. Work is about to start on site and will generate saving through homelessness reduction.</p> <p>I have requested resolution of a number of leasehold matters where lease renewals or other matters have been outstanding for some time. The council is supportive of community groups through the CAROS scheme and it is important that all of the beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries are taking part on a level playing field. Having up to date agreements is also important with regard to legal and other risks and liabilities.</p>
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Cllr Kotz	Cllr Steady	<p>Have we still got a preferred contractor list? If we have, can others be added? When work is completed is it checked to ensure we are getting value for money? Is it easy for a contractor to be taken off the list if the above is not obtained?</p>	<p>Services may have their own preferred contractor contacts, however, procurement rules still apply when seeking services and the relevant values for particular tender processes apply.</p> <p>Services should be managing the contract and any performance/standard issues throughout.</p> <p>Specifically in relation to Operational Services, there is no preferred list. All of the work that is carried out at a larger scale is subject to competitive quotes or tenders. Where projects are tendered, they are open to all. Anyone wishing to bid for works or supplies can begin at the Doing Business With the Council page on our web site.</p>

