

Public Document Pack

Cabinet

31 January 2025

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CABINET,
HELD ON FRIDAY, 31ST JANUARY, 2025 AT 10.30 AM
IN THE COMMITTEE ROOM, AT THE TOWN HALL, STATION ROAD, CLACTON-ON-
SEA, CO15 1SE**

Present: Councillors I J Henderson (Deputy Leader of the Council & Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth, Regeneration & Tourism) (in the Chair), Baker (Portfolio Holder for Housing & Planning), Barry (Portfolio Holder for Leisure & Public Realm), Kotz (Portfolio Holder for Assets & Community Safety), Placey (Portfolio Holder for Partnerships), Scott (Portfolio Holder for Arts, Culture & Heritage) and Smith Portfolio Holder for the Environment & ICT)

Group Leaders Present by Standing Invitation: Councillors Bray (Leader of the Reform UK Group) (except item 119), Chapman BEM (Leader of the Independent Group) and P B Honeywood (Leader of the Conservative Group)

In Attendance: Lee Heley (Corporate Director (Place and Economy) & Deputy Chief Executive), Lisa Hastings (Director (Governance) & Monitoring Officer), Richard Barrett (Director (Finance and IT) & Section 151 Officer), Gary Guiver (Director (Planning & Communities)), Keith Simmons (Head of Democratic Services and Elections & Deputy Monitoring Officer), Katie Wilkins (Head of People), Ian Ford (Committee Services Manager), William Lodge (Communications Manager), Bethany Jones (Committee Services Officer) and Katie Koppenaar (Committee Services Officer)

106. CHAIR

In the absence of the Leader of the Council (Councillor M E Stephenson), the Chair was occupied by the Deputy Leader (Councillor I J Henderson).

107. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of the Leader of the Council & Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance (Councillor M E Stephenson) and the Chief Executive (Ian Davidson) who were both absent attending a meeting of the Essex Leaders and Chief Executives.

108. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

It was moved by Councillor I J Henderson, seconded by Councillor Smith and:-

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet, held on Friday 20 December 2024, be approved as a correct record and be signed by the Chairman.

109. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In relation to Agenda 11, Report of the Housing & Planning Portfolio Holder - A.4 - Adoption of Six Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plans, and specifically with regards to the Brightlingsea Hall and All Saints Church Conservation Area,

Councillor Chapman BEM declared for the public record that she was a member of Brightlingsea Town Council and a District Ward Member for Brightlingsea.

In relation to Agenda 11, Report of the Housing & Planning Portfolio Holder - A.4 - Adoption of Six Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plans, and specifically with regards to the Clacton Sea Front Conservation Area, Councillor P B Honeywood declared for the public record that he was the District Ward Member for the Pier Ward.

Councillor Bray declared an Interest in Agenda Item 13, Joint Report of the Housing & Planning Portfolio Holder and the Corporate Finance & Governance Portfolio Holder - A.6 - Updated Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and Budget Proposals 2025/26, insofar as he was a Housing Tenant of the Council. Councillor Bray further stated that he would withdraw from the meeting at the appropriate time.

Councillor I J Henderson read out the following personal statement:-

"I have sought the Monitoring Officer's advice in relation to the reference in the General Fund Budget Report at A3, in particular, Appendix C page 57 of the Agenda, to the set aside of funding of to a PSCO in Harwich.

This matter has been subject to previous decisions and has been in place for a number of years but historically has been funded as a cost pressure in year. Page 57 is clear that to allocate the money, a separate report will be required and it is as this point, my interest as a Town Councillor would be relevant and when any decision is being considered I will withdraw, as I have done so previously.

Consequently, there is no need to make a declaration of interest, but I would like this recorded as a point of information in the minutes."

110. ANNOUNCEMENTS BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

There were no such announcements on this occasion.

111. ANNOUNCEMENTS BY CABINET MEMBERS

The Portfolio Holder for Partnerships (Councillor Placey) referred to the recent announcement by Essex Police about proposed cuts to Police staff and PCSOs and informed Cabinet that she would write to the Police, Crime & Fire Commissioner for Essex to support efforts to ensure adequate funding and resourcing for community safety in Tendring.

The Portfolio Holder for Partnerships and the Deputy Leader of the Council then both responded to a question from the Leader of the Reform UK Group in relation to the future of those PCSOs that were funded by town and parish councils.

112. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE CABINET BY THE COUNCIL

There were no matters referred to the Cabinet by the Council on this occasion.

113. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE CABINET BY A COMMITTEE - REFERENCE FROM THE RESOURCES AND SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - A.1 - SCRUTINY OF THE INITIAL BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2025/26

Cabinet was aware that, in accordance with the requirements of the Budget & Policy Framework Procedure Rules, the Resources and Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee (“the Committee”) had undertaken its scrutiny of the budget for the Council. Prior to its meeting on 13 January 2025, the Members of the Committee, had met informally on 6 January 2025 with the Section 151 Officer and the Head of Democratic Services & Elections in attendance. That informal meeting had aided the Members of the Committee in developing key lines of inquiry for its formal scrutiny meeting that had been held on 13 January 2025.

At the Committee’s formal meeting on 13 January, it had been aware that the initial General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget proposals for 2025/26 had been considered by Cabinet on 20 December 2024.

The Committee had been provided, as part of the material for them to consider, the following:

- 1) Updated General Fund Financial Forecast / Budget 2025/26 – the report considered by Cabinet on 20 December 2024.
- 2) Updated Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and Budget Proposals 2025/26 – the report considered by Cabinet on 20 December 2024.

Following the informal meeting of the Committee held on 6 January 2025 a series of written questions had been circulated to Portfolio Holders and their responses had been circulated to the Committee prior to its formal meeting on 13 January 2025. The Minutes of that formal meeting recorded those questions and responses in an Appendix.

At the 13 January meeting further, supplementary questions had been asked of Cabinet Members and responses provided. Those further responses had been also recorded in the Appendix to the Minutes.

The Committee had resolved to RECOMMEND to Cabinet that –

“(a) That the Committee has recorded that it felt that it was not in a position to comment on the robustness of the budget plans for 2025/26 and beyond and, in this regard, it noted that:

- (i) in respect of the General Fund, the Forecast Risk Fund (used to smooth deficits in particular years) would be exhausted within 2028/29 and (as at the day of the meeting) there were no specific plans to address the full savings/income generation necessary up to that point to support a balanced budget from that point;*
- (ii) in respect of the Housing Revenue Account, there were not the written plans to move it to a sustainable position;*
- (iii) through the papers submitted and statements made to the Committee, it was understood that plans to address (i) and (ii) were being worked upon; and*

(b) That Cabinet be informed of the above and requested to address the issues raised.”

Cabinet had before it the following written response of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance & Governance:-

"In respect of the GF / HRA budget proposals, I do not recognise the point made by the Committee relating to them not feeling that they were in the position to comment on the robustness of the budget plans for 2025/26 and beyond.

The various Financial Performance Reports considered by Cabinet during the year that the Committee were invited to comment on, along with the detailed report considered by Cabinet in December that the Committee had in front of them at their meeting on 13 January 2025, set out a significant level of detail covering the long term forecast, risk assessments including the adequacy of reserves, savings plans and cost pressures.

As recognised by the Committee via the point they raise within (a)(iii) and as discussed directly at their meeting, Cabinet have already acknowledged the associated challenges ahead in terms of the further development of the savings plan. This was further addressed within the Cabinet's Initial Highlight Priorities that were also presented to the Committee at their meeting on 13 January 2025.

For completeness, Cabinet's Initial Highlight Priorities included:

Deliver Savings Plan for 2025/26

- To take the necessary steps to implement outstanding items included within the adopted Savings Plan for 2025/26.*
- To review the Saving Plan set against the long-term financial forecast and the impact of the Local Government Finance settlement (as it relates to the District), including the Government's longer term funding review, to develop a 'pipeline' of options for consideration.*

Develop Savings Plan for 2026/27

- Complete the implementation of the items in the 2025/26 Savings Plan and develop the requirement for Savings in 2026/27 and beyond.*

To develop proposals to secure the long-term sustainability of Housing Revenue Account (HRA)

In respect to the Council's own housing stock, drive improvement with expanded estate management. To develop the long term HRA 30 Year Business Plan proposals to secure sustainability of the HRA to include:

- Management of long term empty properties*
- Responding to the new Government's drive to increase the stock of social housing e.g. additional flexibilities relating to retained "Right-to-Buy" (RTB) receipts*

Develop a High Level Transformation Strategy and a Targeted Plan for 2025

Develop a Transformation Strategy/Plan to include the active management of the Council's costs and liabilities and addressing both supply side and demand side challenges faced by the Council. Possible areas to address in the Strategy/Plan would be:

Supply Side –

-
- *Investment in AI and channel shift / move to new technologies / in-house development of new applications / processes to improve efficiency and business operations*
 - *Service reviews including service standards reviews – including gap analysis etc.*
 - *Data lake infrastructure and science / informed decision making / data dashboards / realtime performance reporting*
 - *Developing the Project Delivery Unit approach to respond to evolving projects and priorities*

Demand Side –

- *Developing self-service / customer portals initiatives*
- *Development of chat bot / AI technology on the Council's website*
- *Continue to develop the Council's website*
- *Develop communication activities / use of media channels and interaction with customers and partner*

Further updates will therefore be provided to the Committee during 2025/26 alongside the development of the associated plans, and Cabinet will continue to invite comments from the Committee as part of the associated and regular reports that will be presented throughout 2025/26.

In addition to the above, it is also worth highlighting that Cabinet's approach set out above is not dissimilar to arrangements put in place by previous administrations where full detailed plans to deliver financial sustainability over multi-year periods were not produced."

Having duly considered the recommendations made by the Resources and Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee together with the written response of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance & Governance thereto:-

It was moved by Councillor I J Henderson, seconded by Councillor Baker and:-

RESOLVED that the recommendations made by the Resources and Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee be noted and that the response of the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance & Governance thereto be endorsed.

114. MATTERS REFERRED TO THE CABINET BY A COMMITTEE - REFERENCE FROM THE COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - A.2 - GRANT FUNDING BY THE COUNCIL AND OTHERS AND ITS APPROPRIATENESS GIVEN THE NEEDS OF THE DISTRICT

Cabinet was aware that, as a part of the Community Leadership Overview & Scrutiny Committee's Work Programme, that Committee had considered the topic of grant funding by the Council and others and its appropriateness given the needs of the District. Prior to its meeting on 14 January 2025, the Members of the Committee had met informally on 9 January 2025. That informal scrutiny meeting had aided the Members of the Committee in developing key lines of inquiry for its formal scrutiny meeting that had been held on 14 January 2025.

At the Committee's formal meeting on 14 January, it had considered the report presented by the Portfolio Holder for Partnerships and had asked the Portfolio Holder a

number of a questions in relation to this report that had been formulated as a part of the informal scrutiny meeting referenced earlier. At the formal meeting several supplementary questions had also been put to the Portfolio Holder for Partnerships. The Committee had heard from several external persons that had provided their comments/experience on the Grant Funding process. The representatives of the organisations that spoke at the Committee were from Clacton Arts Centre, Jaywick Sands Community Forum and Ketchup Clothes.

The Committee had been provided, as part of the material for them to consider, the following:

- Report of the Portfolio Holder for Partnerships – A.7 External Funding Review – Submitted to Cabinet on 20 September 2024
- Commentary submitted by Headway Essex on their experience/thoughts on the Grant funding process
- Commentary submitted by Inclusion Ventures on their experience/thoughts on the Grant funding process

The submission from the range of external organisations into this enquiry had greatly assisted the Committee to assess the extent to which there was corporate oversight of the diverse range of grant schemes provided by through the Council, the issues for many small organisations locally to access information on grant schemes and then accessing those schemes and the extent to which very important gaps existed in supporting organisations to pursue the Council's Corporate Plan themes and improve health and wellbeing across the District

The Committee had resolved to RECOMMEND to Cabinet that –

- 1) *Welcomes the report on Grant Funding from/through the Council and the statements and responses from the Portfolio Holder and Officers to the Committee and further welcomes the flowchart and checklist adopted internally to identify when matters can follow an 'open call' grant arrangement and when a 'procurement';*
- 2) *Records its thanks to all those who contributed to the enquiry into Grant Funding by/through the Council including written submissions from Headway Essex and Inclusion Ventures and the attendance by representatives from Jaywick Sands Community Forum, Ketchup Clothes and from Clacton Art Centre and their insight into the processes and value of grant opportunities for community activities;*
- 3) *urges Cabinet to seriously consider the following actions:*
 - a) *the establishment of an Oversight Group of Members for grant schemes across the Council;*
 - b) *some form of gap analysis – even is full analysis is too large a project to be achieved and the opportunities to 'flex' grant giving to maximise the range of organisations receiving financial support in the District across the years.*
 - c) *Further standardised processes for different grant giving arrangements to help deliver best practice across those separate grant giving arrangements (e.g. around the length of time between opening invitations for applications and the closing date, common and plain language to explain the processes (and be available on the website), details of other grants received, the time between*

closure of application and determination/notification of outcomes, and the post grant-giving monitoring arrangements)

- d) *Adopt a consistent 'you said, we did' opportunity for organisations applying for grant funding to feed back on their experiences;*
- e) *Look at organisation an open day for community/voluntary groups in conjunction with other grant funding organisations (and CVST) to disseminate information on those grant scheme and help to break down barriers to access grant funding for these community/volunteers groups;*
- 4) *Request that the Chairman of the Committee and the Portfolio Holder to consider the recommendations above and to encourage a positive response to them from Cabinet; and*
- 5) *Note that there are proposals for LGR in Great Essex and that we are awaiting confirmation from Government to whether these will proceed and over what timetable. On the basis that Government does approve the principle of LGR in Greater Essex the Committee record that it would wish to undertake an enquiry into the implications of LGR on areas within its responsibility (including grant funding) in the work programme for 2025/26 and that this enquiry would look at possible areas where the transition to a new unitary structure could be supported.*

Cabinet had before it the following written response of the Portfolio Holder for Partnerships:-

"I thank the Committee for their recommendations, and these will be considered as the forthcoming Grant Policy is developed. I note the comments in respect of a voluntary sector funding day and consideration will be given to supporting or running such an event to assist the voluntary sector."

Having duly considered the recommendations made by the Community Leadership Overview & Scrutiny Committee together with the written response of the Portfolio Holder for Partnerships thereto:-

It was moved by Councillor Placey, seconded by Councillor Kotz and:-

RESOLVED that the recommendations made by the Community Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted and be given consideration for inclusion in the forthcoming Grant Policy which is currently being developed.

115. LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S ITEMS

There were no items referred to the Cabinet by the Leader of the Council on this occasion.

116. CABINET MEMBERS' ITEMS - REPORT OF THE CORPORATE FINANCE & GOVERNANCE PORTFOLIO HOLDER - A.3 - UPDATED GENERAL FUND FINANCIAL FORECAST / BUDGET 2025/26

Cabinet considered a detailed report of the Corporate Finance & Governance Portfolio Holder (A.3) which sought its approval of:

- 1) the latest financial forecast / budget proposals and council tax amount for 2025/26 for recommending to Full Council;
- 2) a delegation to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance to agree the detailed budget proposals and formal draft resolutions / 'technical' appendices required for Full Council on 11 February 2025; and
- 3) a delegation to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance, to agree / adopt a Retail, Hospitality and Leisure mandatory business rate relief scheme for 2025/26 along with any other changes to reliefs that may be announced by the Government.

Cabinet recalled that, at its meeting held on 20 December 2024, it had considered the updated financial forecast / budget 2025/26. That updated financial forecast had been subsequently subject to consultation with the Resources and Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which had met on 13 January 2025, and their comments had been considered earlier on in the meeting under Minute 113 above.

It was reported that, since the Cabinet's meeting on 20 December 2024, additional changes had been required, primarily because of new or revised information becoming available, which included the impact of the Government's Provisional Local Government Financial Settlement announcements.

Cabinet was informed that the changes required had resulted in a reduced deficit for 2025/26 of £0.056m (0.3% of the Council's current net budget), a change of £1.452m compared to the £1.508m deficit presented to Cabinet in December. Appendix A, along with comments set out in the Portfolio Holder's report, provided further details across the various lines of the forecast, with the most significant change being the favourable and potentially one-off income from Business Rates via the estimated Collection Fund position at the end of this financial year. The most up to date savings schedule and cost pressure summary were set out in Appendices B and C respectively.

Members were advised that, to enable the detailed estimates along with the various resolutions / 'technical' appendices required for Full Council in February to be finalised, a delegation to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance was included within the report's recommendations. A further delegation was also included therein to enable a business rate relief policy, associated with the continuation of a mandatory Government relief scheme in 2025/26, to be finalised in advance of bills being printed and sent out before the start of the financial year, along with reflecting any further changes that could be announced by the Government.

It was pointed out that the budget position set out in this report would change as further adjustments were required as part of finalising the budget for presenting to Full Council on 11 February 2025, with a further delegation included in the report's recommendations to reflect this.

Cabinet was made aware that based on the final proposed budget for 2025/26, the Council's own council tax requirement was £10.674m, which was based on a 2.99% (£5.79) increase for this Council's services, with an annual Band D council tax of £199.52. Those figures were expected to remain unchanged and therefore would be reflected in the various budget resolutions / 'technical' appendices proposed to be delegated to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance.

Members were aware that the Council's annual budget and the District and Parish elements of the council tax would be considered by Full Council on 11 February 2025 with approval of the 'full' council tax levy for the year being considered by the Human Resources and Council Tax Committee later on during February 2025.

As set out in earlier reports, despite the challenging financial and economic environment, confidence in the long-term approach to the forecast remained, which was supported by the Forecast Risk Fund. The Council continued to maintain a prudent and sustainable approach to its long-term plan, which provided the 'platform' against which it could consider its on-going financial position in response to the challenging economic outlook it faced.

The Deputy Leader of the Council read out the following statement:-

"Just before Christmas we received the Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement, which we briefly discussed at our Cabinet meeting on 20 December. The forecast has been updated to reflect these settlement figures along with a limited number of other changes, which are set out in the report we have in front of us today.

The biggest change we have seen since we considered the earlier forecast back in December relates to Business Rate income receivable via the Collection Fund estimates with details set out within the report. Although we await the announcement of the Final Settlement figures shortly, additional income is expected with details set out within Appendix B. Appendix B also includes additional income we expect to receive under the terms of the existing council tax sharing agreement with the major preceptors.

These changes are positive in terms of the budget for 2025/26 and 'protect' the Forecast Risk Fund position that in turn supports the Council from 2026/27 onwards. However, it is likely that they may be one-off in nature, which we will need to consider as part of developing the forecast during the year.

As set out within the report, there is quite a bit going on in future years, such as the Government's review of Local Authorities needs and resources, a business rate reset and reforms to the new homes bonus to name just a few. Add this to the potential impact of Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation, forecasting over the medium to long term is becoming increasingly difficult. However, we continue to have the right frameworks and processes in place to support our financial planning activities and we will continue to provide updates throughout 2025/26.

I thank the Resources and Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the important role that they play in our financial planning activities, and I note the item earlier on the agenda relating to their review of both the General Fund and HRA Budget proposals and their associated comments.

In terms of the Full Council meeting in February, we will be recommending a Band D Council Tax amount of £199.52 in 2025/26, an increase of 2.99%. It is always worth highlighting that our element of the overall Council Tax bill is only around 10% and is just over 50p a day. I think this continues to represent excellent value for money especially when you think about all the things the Council does and the services it provides to residents.

As set out in the report, there are a few budget adjustments that remain outstanding, which will be finalised in readiness for reporting to Full Council on 11 February. The report to Full Council in February will therefore reflect Cabinet's final budget recommendations for 2025/26 along with the various technical appendices to support the associated discussions and required resolutions on the night."

Having set out and considered the latest financial forecast as part of the process of developing the budget proposals for 2025/26 for recommending to Full Council on 11 February 2025:-

It was therefore moved by Councillor I J Henderson, seconded by Councillor Barry and:-

RESOLVED that Cabinet:

- a) approves the updated financial forecast, as set out in Appendix A to the Report of the Corporate Finance & Governance Portfolio Holder (A.3), along with the savings and cost pressures set out in Appendices B and C respectively that form the firm proposals for the 2025/26 budget and recommends to Full Council:-
 - a Band D Council Tax for district services of £199.52 for 2025/26 (a 2.99% increase), along with the associated council tax requirement of £10.674m.
- b) authorises the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance, to agree the 'technical' appendices and resolutions for the budget proposals for recommending to Full Council on 11 February 2025;
- c) authorises the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Corporate Finance and Governance Portfolio Holder, to report directly to Council in respect of the formal resolutions necessary to implement the Executive's budget proposals including any further amendments emerging from additional information becoming available and/or notifications received from the Government; and
- d) authorises the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance, to agree / adopt a Retail, Hospitality and Leisure mandatory business rate relief scheme for 2025/26 along with any other changes to reliefs that may be announced by the Government.

117. CABINET MEMBERS' ITEMS - REPORT OF THE HOUSING & PLANNING PORTFOLIO HOLDER - A.4 - ADOPTION OF SIX CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL AND MANAGEMENT PLANS

Earlier on in the meeting, as detailed under Minute 109 above, and in relation to this item:-

- (i) with regards to the Brightlingsea Hall and All Saints Church Conservation Area, Councillor Chapman BEM had declared for the public record that she was a member of Brightlingsea Town Council and a District Ward Member for Brightlingsea; and
- (ii) with regards to the Clacton Sea Front Conservation Area, Councillor P B Honeywood had declared for the public record that he was the District Ward Member for the Pier Ward.

Cabinet considered a detailed report of the Housing and Planning Portfolio Holder (A.4), which informed it about progress updating the District's Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plans and which sought its agreement from Cabinet to adopt the final versions of six Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans.

Members recalled that one of the aims of the Council's adopted Heritage Strategy was for the Council to reassess each of the District's twenty Conservation Area Appraisals.

It was reported that fifteen of those had now been the subject of public consultations, with the last five being consulted upon in early 2025. Seven Appraisals had been adopted by Cabinet in the summer of 2024. A further six Appraisals were now ready for adoption, which would enable them to be referred to as a material consideration in planning matters.

Cabinet was informed that the six Conservation Area Appraisals now recommended for adoption were:-

- Clacton Seafront;
- Brightlingsea Hall and All Saints Church;
- Great Clacton;
- Lawford;
- Kirby-le-Soken; and
- Great Oakley.

The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning read out the following statement:-

"Chairman, I am delighted to introduce this report requesting that Cabinet adopt a further six Conservation Area Appraisals, for the six areas of Clacton Seafront, Brightlingsea Hall and All Saints Church, Great Clacton, Lawford, Kirby le Soken and, Great Oakley. The appraisals themselves are shown from Page 73 to 442 of the Agenda, quite a long read but very interesting nevertheless.

One of the aims of the Council's Heritage Strategy, adopted in April 2020, was to update the Council's Area Appraisals, and much work has been done since then to bring these updated appraisals forward.

As you will recall Cabinet adopted the first seven appraisals in summer last year, therefore these further six will take the total adopted to 13.

The final areas, have either been consulted upon, or are currently out for consultation and I hope to bring further reports to Cabinet hopefully, by the summer.

As you can see yet again, Chairman, a lot of work has gone into producing these appraisals, and I would like to thank all those who have undertaken that work, as well as those who responded to the consultations. Having these Appraisals in place will help in the preparation of our new revised Local Plan and also assist in attracting external funding for heritage related activity in the District.

I do not intend to say anything further as it is all outlined in the report."

In order to progress projects specifically identified in the Council's Heritage Strategy:-

It was moved by Councillor Baker, seconded by Councillor Scott and:-

RESOLVED that Cabinet –

- (a) notes the outcome of the consultation, as summarised within the report of the Housing and Planning Portfolio Holder (A.4); and
- (b) approves the formal adoption, of the final Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan for the following areas (as found at Appendices A – F to report A.4):-
 - Clacton Seafront;
 - Brightlingsea Hall and All Saints Church;
 - Great Clacton;
 - Lawford;
 - Kirby-le-Soken; and
 - Great Oakley.

118. CABINET MEMBERS' ITEMS - REPORT OF THE PARTNERSHIPS PORTFOLIO HOLDER - A.5 - PROCUREMENT OF INFORMATION AND SUPPORT SERVICE

Cabinet considered a report of the Partnerships Portfolio Holder (A.5), which sought its approval to provide an information and advice service to local residents with revised requirements via an associated specification and procurement process, with the new arrangements commencing on 1 October 2025. The report further sought Cabinet's approval for the allocation of £0.072m to Citizen's Advice Tendring to continue to contribute to the existing information and advice guidance service through direct funding for the interim period up to 30 September 2025 in accordance with a subsidy scheme.

Members were aware that, to date, the Council had contributed to the funding of an information and advice service available to local residents across the District. This was currently provided through Citizens Advice Tendring (CAT) via a Service Level Agreement. The current payment made to CAT for the above service was £0.144m per annum. This arrangement had been in place for 13 years, which had recently been facilitated via the adoption of a local Subsidy Control Scheme.

It was reported that in line with the high-level external funding framework agreed by Cabinet at its meeting held on 20 September 2024 and in demonstrating value for money that reflected the Council's wider best value responsibilities, a procurement process was proposed to be undertaken for the future provision of information and advice services to local residents.

Cabinet was advised that in terms of the procurement process, it was important that the Council set out a clear specification of what it wished to procure, which included understanding the 'market' and what similar services were already available to local residents. This approach ensured a joined-up approach across the various sectors within the area with the underlying aim of maximising the use of the Council's resources.

In terms of the principles underlying the provision of an information and advice service to local residents, it was important to highlight the following:

- *the challenges some parts of the community faced in relation to housing, welfare and debt;*
- *almost 30% of our local neighbourhoods were in the 20% most deprived nationally;*
- *there had been a 20% increase in those claiming out of work benefits between 2020 and 2022;*
- *in addressing deprivation, residents needed to improve their income which could be achieved by employment, accessing higher levels of benefits and adequately managing and reducing debt;*
- *the provision of information and advice was a cost-effective way of helping to support people in relation to employment, benefits and debt;*
- *providers were highlighting the increasing demand, for example, CVST reported a 103% increase in demand around social prescribing and the DWP had highlighted the need around 4000 new cases formerly on Employment Support Allowance migrating to Universal Credit; and*
- *Partners had also identified the greater complexity of those in need both in terms of the multiple issues they now presented with, but also that they now more frequently appeared 'in crisis'.*

Members noted that the demand for information and advice services to local residents was therefore demonstrable based on the above and as set out further in the Portfolio Holder's report a 'gap' analysis had been undertaken in terms of the services offered to local people by other local organisations and providers.

Cabinet was made aware that some funding was provided by Government to support services to assist individuals for example funding for DWP who led on Universal Credit. Other providers who delivered advice and guidance might receive funding from Essex County Council, Tendring District Council, the North East Essex Health and Wellbeing Alliance or other partners.

Members were cognisant that there was a wide range of provision of online and telephone services provided for example by Shelter, money and debt helplines and Christians Against Poverty. Some of the main providers highlighted above such as DWP and Citizens Advice also provided some online or telephone services.

It was pointed out that several providers including DWP, CAT the Council and also CVST, highlighted the importance of face-to-face advice and, in particular, DWP highlighted that a significant number of those needing support would not use digital channels but would also not use the telephone to make contact.

Providers had also highlighted the importance of outreach for those residents who might find it difficult to travel to access services.

Cabinet was aware that face to face provision was a more expensive way of delivering services than online advice and consequently would have a lower rate of access. However, those people who accessed via a face-to-face method were those most likely to be furthest away from support and the least likely to engage in existing on-line provision. Any service would need to provide a wider service than just face to face services as some clients would need different forms of access.

It was considered that when considering the type and scale of provision of an information and advice service, key considerations included ensuring any provision was easily accessible and in particular had a strong face to face component, had the potential for outreach rather than in one location, had some form of quality assurance

and could deal with multiple issues residents faced and was complimentary to the existing provision of such services across the District.

With the above in mind, and in maximising the use of the Council's resources, a recommendation was set out within the report that would provide a delegation to the Partnerships Portfolio Holder to approve the specification for the provision of an information and advice service and to then undertake the necessary procurement activities.

In further supporting the maximisation of the Council's resources highlighted above, it was further recommended to take a modular approach to procurement, with providers being asked to indicate the complimentary services they could deliver at different price points to enable the Council to determine the best value proposition from the market.

As highlighted above the Council had historically contributed funding to an information and advice service for local residents via a Service Level Agreement with CAT, with the most recent cost being £0.144m, that had been paid to them annually.

Members were informed that CAT had been made aware of the proposed approach set out above and they could consider submitting their own 'bid' for the work the Council was seeking to procure and respond to the outcome of that process.

To ensure a service to residents continued for advice and information whilst the procurement took place and the service mobilised on 1 October 2025, it was the Portfolio Holder's recommendation to extend the grant to Citizens Advice Tending for six months. Based on the estimated procurement timeline set out in this report, it was proposed that a new contract with the provider would have been procured and could commence on 1st October 2025.

Based on the existing arrangements in place with CAT, it was therefore recommended to allocate £0.072m to enable them to maintain the existing provision of information and advice services until 30 September 2025. This would require the withdrawal of the current termination notice issued on 9 December 2024 and the reissuing of a further termination notice reflecting the proposed approach as set out in this report and the approval of the Service Level Agreement as set out as an Appendix to this report.

Cabinet was advised that to deliver this a subsidy scheme would be required to provide the direct allocation of funding which would need to be published on the Government's website.

Given that –

- (i) following an assessment of need it had been identified that there was a continuing demand for an information and advice service which was repurposed and commissioned, to support improving income and opportunity as residents faced increased challenges associated with deprivation;
- (ii) partners reported the importance of a holistic approach and dealing with the multiple issues residents faced which could be achieved via an information and advice service; and
- (iii) the allocation of £0.072m to the existing provider Citizen's Advice Tending would ensure there was continuous provision of a service and allow sufficient time for any new provider to gear up for maintaining provision of an appropriate service.

It was moved by Councillor Placey, seconded by Councillor Kotz and:-

RESOLVED that Cabinet –

- a) approves the provision of an information and advice service to local residents;
- b) agrees to the procurement of such services for a contract period of three years commencing 1 October 2025, and agrees to a modular procurement approach to determine what a provider could offer for various levels of potential funding e.g. £50,000, £100,000, or £150,000 per year;
- c) authorises the Portfolio Holder for Partnerships, in consultation with the Deputy Chief Executive, to approve the specification for the provision of an information and advice service based on the broad principles set out within the report of the Partnerships Portfolio Holder (A.5);
- d) approves for an interim period of six months from 1 April 2025, the continuation of the existing agreement with CAT at a cost of £0.072m, supported by the existing budget for information and advice services to local residents;
- e) in respect of the contribution of £0.072m to CAT, agrees to extend the current Addressing Health Inequality – Advice, Support and Mental Health Support Subsidy Scheme for 2025/26;
- f) authorises the Deputy Chief Executive, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Partnerships and the Monitoring Officer, to finalise the administrative requirements for the production of the Subsidy Scheme in accordance with the Subsidy Control Act 2023 and Statutory Guidance and to publish it on the Government website prior to any awards; and
- g) agrees to extend the current Service Level Agreement with Citizens Advice Tendring (CAT) from 1st April 2025 until 30th September 2025 on the terms and conditions as set out in the updated agreement shown in Appendix B to the report (A.5).

119. CABINET MEMBERS' ITEMS - JOINT REPORT OF THE HOUSING & PLANNING PORTFOLIO HOLDER AND THE CORPORATE FINANCE & GOVERNANCE PORTFOLIO HOLDER - A.6 - UPDATED HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT BUSINESS PLAN AND BUDGET PROPOSALS 2025/26

Earlier on in the meeting, as detailed under Minute 109 above, Councillor Bray had declared an Interest in this item insofar as he was a Housing Tenant of the Council. Councillor Bray therefore withdrew from the meeting at this juncture.

Cabinet considered a detailed joint report of the Housing and Planning Portfolio Holder and the Corporate Finance and Governance Portfolio Holder (A.6), which sought its approval of an updated Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan for 2024/25 and 2025/26, 26 along with the final HRA budget proposals for 2025/26 (including fees and charges, capital programme and movement in HRA Balances) for recommending to Full Council on 11 February 2025.

Cabinet recalled that at its meeting held on 20 December 2024, it had considered the HRA Business Plan and Budget Proposals for 2025/26. The updated HRA Business plan / budget proposals at that time had provided for a surplus of £0.418m in 2024/25 and a deficit of £1.170m in 2025/26. Those initial budget proposals had been subject to consultation with the Resources and Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which had met on 13 January 2025 to consider them, and their comments had been considered earlier on in the meeting under Minute 113 above.

It was reported that since Cabinet's meeting on 20 December 2024, only one amendment to the proposed budget for 2025/26 had been required with 2024/25 remaining unchanged. The change required in 2025/26 had resulted in the overall deficit decreasing to £1.131m a change of £0.039m compared to the position reported to Cabinet in December as highlighted above. Appendix A to the Portfolio Holders' joint report (A.6) set out the updated Business Plan, in terms of 2024/25 and 2025/26, with Appendix B setting out the proposed detailed budgets that reflected this latest position.

Members were made aware that it was proposed to fund the estimated deficit for 2025/26 by calling down money from HRA balances as an alternative to reducing expenditure. As had been the case in previous years, the use of reserves struck a necessary balance of 'protecting' the investment in tenants' homes whilst recognising the need to use reserves to respond to the on-going financial challenges that the Council continued to face. It was however recognised that this was not a sustainable long-term solution, but it enabled the Council to meet its key priorities in the immediate term, which could be revisited as part of the HRA Business Plan in future years. This challenge had been recognised within Cabinet's current initial highlight priorities for 2025/26.

Cabinet was informed that the proposed average weekly rent remained unchanged to the figure reported in December at £103.49, an increase of 2.7% over the comparable figure of £100.89 for 2024/25. Appendix C set out the proposed fees and charges for 2025/26, which broadly reflected inflationary uplifts of 2.7% where relevant or other inflationary changes to better reflect the cost of providing the associated service.

Members noted that the proposed HRA Capital Programme for 2025/26 was set out in Appendix D, which reflected the commitment to maintain the necessary investment in the existing homes of tenants.

It was drawn to Cabinet's attention that the HRA general balance was forecast to total £2.595m at the end of 2025/26, which retained a relatively strong financial position against which the associated HRA 30-year Business Plan could continue to be delivered / developed. The HRA balances, together with the proposed rent increase for 2025/26 were important elements of delivering a sustainable HRA in the longer term.

Cabinet was cognisant that HRA debt continued to reduce year on year as principal was repaid with a total debt position at the end of 2025/26 forecast to be £31.120m (a reduction of £1.415m compared with the figure at the end of this financial year).

Members were reminded that the overall HRA position described above remained subject to further adjustments that were likely to be required as part of finalising the budget for presenting to Full Council on 11 February 2025, with a delegation included in the report's recommendations to respond to that possibility.

It was recognised that the Tenants' Panel played an important role in developing the HRA Business Plan and budget proposals and it was proposed to consult with them shortly, with any comments planned to be reported to Members either ahead of, or directly at, the Full Council meeting on 11 February 2025.

The Deputy Leader of the Council read out the following statement:-

"There has only been one relatively minor change to the budget since our meeting in December, which is set out in the report. The proposed rent increase remains the same at 2.7%, which results in an average weekly rent of £103.49 in 2025/26.

Similarly to the General Fund Position, there are a few budget adjustments that remain outstanding that will be finalised in readiness for reporting to Full Council on 11 February. Along with updated Business Plan figures, the report also sets out the proposed detailed HRA budget for 2025/26, fees and charges, capital programme and reserves.

The commitment to invest in the housing stock remains, with £9.453m included within the proposed budget for 2025/26 to meet the cost of major refurbishment and repairs to our tenants' homes. As set out in the report, there is always a balance to strike between investing in our tenants' homes whilst recognising the need to use reserves in the short term. Work will therefore remain on-going during 2025/26 to develop proposals to continue to secure the long-term sustainability of the Housing Revenue Account.

I understand that the Tenant's Panel is meeting soon and I look forward to their comments which we will make available to Members ahead of the Full Council meeting on 11 February as necessary.

Having considered the most up to date HRA Business Plan which set out the position for 2024/25 and 2025/26 along with the proposed HRA budget for 2025/26, and in order to enable associated recommendations to be presented to Full Council on 11 February 2025:-

It was moved by Councillor I J Henderson, seconded by Councillor Baker and:-

1. RESOLVED that Cabinet -

- (a) approves the updated HRA Business Plan, which includes the proposed position for 2024/25 and 2025/26 as set out in Appendix A to the Portfolio Holders' joint report (A.6); and
- (b) authorises the Director (Finance & IT) to adjust the forecast / budget, including the use of reserves, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Planning and the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Finance and Governance if the financial position changes prior to Full Council considering the HRA budget on 11 February 2025.

2. RECOMMENDS TO COUNCIL that a 2.7% increase in dwelling rents in 2025/26 along with the detailed HRA Budget proposals for 2025/26, as set out in Appendices B to E of the Portfolio Holders' joint report (A.6), be approved.

120. MANAGEMENT TEAM ITEMS

There were no matters referred to the Cabinet by the Council's Management Team on this occasion.

The Meeting was declared closed at 11.05 am

Chairman