

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
CORPORATE BUSINESS SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
TUESDAY 22 MARCH 2016, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor P Phillips (Chairman).
Councillors M Allen, S Bull, M Casey,
R Henson, J Jones and M Pope.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors D Andrews, L Haysey, G Jones,
P Ruffles and G Williamson.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Democratic Services Officer
Philip Gregory	- Head of Strategic Finance and Property
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Paul Pullin	- Economic Development Manager
Su Tarran	- Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service
Adele Taylor	- Director
Ben Wood	- Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy

666 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors R Brunton, M Stevenson and J Wyllie.

667 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In respect of Minute 670 – Council Tax Reduction Scheme, Disclosable Pecuniary Interests were declared by Councillors S Bull, M Casey and M Pope in relation to the potential impact on landlords of any changes to Council Tax Discount Schemes. The three Councillors left the Council Chamber during the discussion regarding proposed changes to Council Tax Discount schemes and were invited back into the Council Chamber to take part in the Council Tax Reduction Scheme discussion.

668 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed new Committee Member, Councillor J Jones to the meeting.

669 MINUTES – 24 NOVEMBER 2015

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 24 November 2015 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

670 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2017/18

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report inviting Members to consider the latest available information around the current local Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme at East Herts and whether any changes to the scheme should be considered for 2017/18. The Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service provided a summary of the report, as detailed.

Members debated the report at length, seeking information and clarification from Officers on a number of aspects, including the impact of any proposed change.

Members received the report and supported a recommendation that the Executive be advised that, the Council should look towards removing the empty and uninhabited properties discounts and lowering the number

of empty and unfurnished properties discounts on a reducing basis. Additionally, the Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service was asked to carry out a modelling exercise on a number of financial options for further consideration by the Executive based on discouraging and reducing empty homes. Finally, Members also supported a recommendation that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme should remain unchanged, for the time being.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be advised that Corporate Business Scrutiny supports :

(A) a move towards removing discounts for empty and uninhabited properties and discounts for those properties which are empty and unfurnished, on a reducing basis;

(B) the Head of the Revenues and Benefits Shared Service being asked to model a number of financial options based on discouraging and reducing empty homes, for consideration by the Executive; and

(C) the Council Tax Reduction Scheme remain unchanged for the time being.

671 PROGRESS ON THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT VISION
2016/17 – 2019/20

The Executive Member for Economic Development submitted a report updating Members on actions within the newly approved Economic Development Vision for East Herts Council. The Executive Member for Economic Development and the Head of Communications, Policy and Strategy provided a summary of the report as detailed and referred to the successes and outcomes of some of the priority themes.

In response to a query from Councillor M Pope regarding Wenta and the two-year Service Level Agreement to

deliver business start-up advice and support, the Executive Member explained how the impact of Wenta would be evaluated and reviewed. Members supported a suggestion that this be reported back to them for further consideration.

Councillor M Pope referred to the need to ensure the vibrancy of the Council's town centres and that towns and parishes were fully engaged in this approach. The Executive Member for Economic Development advised that a report would be presented to Members at a future date. The Head of Communications, Policy and Strategy explained the Council's role as facilitators in giving support including providing advice and information where it could. The Leader advised that she and the Chief Executive would be meeting with the five Town Councils shortly to discuss a number of issues, including ongoing vibrancy and supporting the rural economy. She cited by example, the need to secure broadband in rural areas as a necessary piece of infrastructure.

Councillor M Allen referred to the need to support the rural economy in relation to the Eastern Plateau Rural Development Programme and referred to the funding availability of (Euros) 1.8m. Officers explained that 26 applications / projects had been received and referred to the difficulty for small businesses, in terms of the complicated administrative process in trying to secure EU funding which acted as a deterrent to many.

In response to a query from Councillor J Jones regarding a light rail connecting rural towns, Councillor G Jones confirmed the reasons for this not being discussed as a priority theme.

Members received the report and supported a recommendation that the Executive be advised that Members be kept informed when there was a review of the Wenta contract and when there was movement on any of the EU bids.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Executive be advised that Corporate Business Scrutiny be kept informed when there was a review of the Wenta contract; and

(B) any movement on EU bids be reported to Corporate Business Scrutiny.

672 ANNUAL REVIEW OF PARTNERSHIP REGISTER

The Director of Finance and Support Services submitted a report inviting Members to consider the implementation of the recommendations from Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee's meeting on 24 November 2015 regarding the Partnership Protocol. The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy provided a summary of the report as now detailed. The Head referred to the need to amend the report in paragraph 2.2 (point 15) by the inclusion of wording to reflect when the end date review would take place. This was supported.

Members received the report and supported the amended recommendation, now detailed.

RESOLVED – that the partnership protocol as submitted and as amended, be replaced by the '*Informal partnership working – a quick guide*' document.

673 ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN 2016/17

The Executive Member for Finance and Support Services submitted a report setting out the aims and objectives for the management of the Council's assets contained within the Asset Management Plan. The Head of Strategic Finance provided a summary of the report as detailed.

In response to a query from Councillor M Casey regarding investment properties, the Head of Strategic Finance explained that the Old River Lane purchase would be included in the Asset Management Plan for 2017/18.

Members were advised that a specification for the refurbishment of the building had been drawn up and agents had been appointed.

In response to a query from Councillor M Allen, the Director of Finance and Support Services explained that in terms of the Council's accounts, "unqualified" was a positive term.

In response to a query from Councillor M Pope, the Head of Strategic Finance explained the progress made in carrying out a gap analysis.

Councillor M Allen referred to the Community Lettings Policy and was keen to ensure that the community was kept informed of what this policy would entail. The Head of Strategic Finance explained that the Asset Management Working Group was currently considering the policy and that this would be presented to Scrutiny and then to the Executive for approval. The Director assured Members that this would also be the subject of an equality impact assessment.

The Chairman suggested that Members have the opportunity of reviewing the Asset Management Plan on an annual basis. This was supported.

Members received the report and supported the recommendations now detailed.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report be received; and
(B) the Executive be advised that Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee supported the Asset Management Plan as now detailed, and that it be reviewed annually.

674 QUARTERLY CORPORATE HEALTHCHECK – QUARTER 3
DECEMBER 2015

The Director of Finance of Support Services submitted a report updating Members on finance, performance and strategic risk monitoring for East Herts Council for 2015/16 as at December 2015. The Head of Strategic Finance provided a summary of the report in relation to revenue budget forecasts and capital schemes.

Councillor M Pope sought clarification regarding the Decent Homes Grant budget which was £130k underspent. The Director of Finance and Support Services explained that the Council was not receiving sufficient throughput of referrals for grant awards to be made.

In response to a query from Councillor M Allen regarding the Council's debtors, the Director explained that 90% of the debt related to one particular debtor and that matters were in hand to recover this outstanding amount.

Councillor M Pope referred to the fact that £200k of the ICT programme remained uncommitted. The Director provided an update on what was being done to deliver the programme.

Councillor S Bull asked for further information regarding funding four Policy Community Support Officers. The Head of Strategic Finance agreed to write to Members.

Councillor M Pope referred to the overspend on the salary budget. The Director explained that this was a one off situation and related to the turnover factor of staff, as well as some posts that were being funded through specific earmarked reserves.

The Head of Communications Strategy and Policy provided a summary in relation to performance monitoring. The Chairman explained that a number of changes were being planned to present performance

monitoring information in a different format. He stressed the need to ensure that the performance figures be presented to Members in a timely manner.

Members received the report and supported the recommendations now detailed.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report be received; and

(B) the Executive be advised that Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee has no comments to make in respect of the following:

1. the revenue budget forecast underspend of £677k as set out at paragraph 2.1 of the report submitted;
2. the proposed slippage on the following capital schemes:
 - Hertford Theatre, £13k
 - The Bourne Ware, £41k
 - Wallfields solar panel, £45k
 - Environmental enhancements to town centres, £28k
 - Market improvements, £22k
 - Community Capital Grants, £41k
 - Operational Building Rolling Programme, £74k
 - North Drive Ware, £12k
 - Print investment, £20k
 - HR and payroll system, £55k
 - Electoral management software, £75k
 - Historic Building Grants, £13k
 - Energy grants, £38k

- Land Management Programme, £26k ;

(3) the reported performance for the period October 2015 to December 2015.

675 EVALUATION OF SCRUTINY 2015/16 AND WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2016/17

The Chairman submitted a report evaluating the progress made in relation to the work programme over 2015/16 and detailing what actions needed to be carried forward to the 2016/17 Corporate Business Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Scrutiny Officer referred Members to the evaluation sheet as now detailed and asked Members to forward their individual comments on work achieved during the past civic year by the deadline of 31 March 2016. She also agreed to circulate the sheet electronically. The Scrutiny Officer asked Members to focus on topics for inclusion in the work programme for next year which would help in the 'forward planning' section of the draft 2015/16 Overview and Scrutiny Annual report.

The Director of Finance and Support Services referred to the Annual Governance Statement Action Plan and the role of Audit in monitoring this and the role of Corporate Business Scrutiny in terms of the business role of governance and reporting matters.

The Chairman referred to the problems of looking at data which was a number of months old and asked Officers to find a solution to the problem specifically in relation to the Quarter 3 Performance Report. The Scrutiny Officer explained that it was anticipated that the healthcheck performance information could be presented to Members at the joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees on 14 February 2017.

The Committee received the report and supported the recommendations now detailed.

RESOLVED – that (A) Members’ comments be collated as part of the evaluation exercise and used to frame the draft 2015/16 Overview and Scrutiny Annual report;

(B) Healthcheck performance information be presented in a timely manner, particularly in relation to quarter three data; and

(C) the work programme be approved.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm

Chairman
Date