

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,
WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON TUESDAY 14
JANUARY 2025, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor D Jacobs (Chair)
Councillors D Andrews, P Boylan,
E Buckmaster, R Carter, N Clements,
C Horner, G McAndrew, S Nicholls,
M Swainston, G Williams and D Woollcombe

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors B Crystall, B Deering, J Dumont,
T Hoskin and S Marlow

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Michele Aves	- Committee Support Officer
Alex Cook	- Customer Services Team Leader
Peter Mannings	- Committee Support Officer
Jess Khanom-Metaman	- Head of Operations
Dominique Kingsbury	- Parking Services Manager
Adam Staples	- Transformation Project Manager
Ben Wood	- Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy

286 APOLOGIES

An apology for absence was submitted from Councillor Thomas.

287 MINUTES - 5 NOVEMBER 2024

Councillor Nicholls proposed, and Councillor Clements seconded, a motion that the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 November 2024 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 November 2024, be confirmed as a correct record, and signed by the Chair.

288 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair reminded Members to use the microphones as the meeting was being webcast. He also reminded Members of the Joint Meeting of Scrutiny Committees scheduled for 29 January 2025, to consider and scrutinise the budget.

289 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

290 DRAFT PARKING STRATEGY 2025

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability submitted a report that presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the draft version of the Parking Strategy for East Hertfordshire following public consultation and engagement.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that this draft version of the strategy document was one that he would like to see challenged and thought through following the public consultation and engagement. He detailed the recommendations and set

out the background to the report in terms of the East Herts corporate plan and the climate emergency.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that in February 2024, Council had approved a £1.75m income target for parking for the financial years 2025/26 through to 2027/28 and this document set the strategic context and principles by which changes might be approved to support the achievement of income and the wider ambitions of the council.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability set out the process that had led to the development of the strategy and said that there had been just over 1,700 responses in autumn 2024. The Executive Member set out the three strategic aims of the parking strategy which were linked back to the corporate plan and the other associated strategies detailed on page 6 of the report.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that in a number of areas pricing had been used as a behavioural change tool and the strategic aims had guided the three key objectives which had determined the actions for delivery. He said that the three objectives for delivery actions were alternative, balanced, and considerate. He summarised these objectives and said that there were 22 actions that underpinned these objectives and they fell into short, medium, and long-term categories.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that to be successful in delivering these actions, the council recognised that it could not be the direct deliverer of change in all instances and could not operate alone. Members were advised that the council must work with partners to maximise its impact, and to this end the Executive Member set out the roles that the council would adopt. He invited Members to debate the 2025 draft parking strategy.

Councillor Buckmaster said that he had read through the sentiments around behaviour change and acknowledged that it was generally difficult to achieve. He said that he could see some of the thinking around some of the movement of people, for example to Northgate End. He acknowledged that this would potentially free up assets for sale.

Councillor Buckmaster referred to Sawbridgeworth and the change from long term to short term would lead to an increase of up to 55% on charges for people parking for 1 to 2 hours, which was a large jump. He talked about a reduction in long term commuter parking, and also touched upon the difficulties of balancing considerations. He referred to a resident having to drive to a GP appointment and paying a lot more than they were used to.

Councillor Boylan referred to the list of charges on page 118 of the report and asked for some clarity on the rationale for the charges. He said that there were no charges in Buntingford or Sawbridgeworth at weekends, yet in Stanstead Abbots village residents and visitors were charged to park there at weekends.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that charges had been reduced in Stanstead Abbots following a loss of sponsorship. Councillor Boylan said that this reduction had followed a new increase in fees in 2024.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that parking had never been free in Stanstead Abbots. He talked about short, medium, and longer-term implementation of the strategy. He said that some of the anomalies could not be ironed at this stage without traffic regulation orders. He said that the longer-term goal was better alignment across the smaller destinations.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that a key aim of the strategy was to close a significant gap in the council's finances. He said that there were very few options open to the authority, and raising car parking charges was one way to protect the financial sustainability of the council.

The Head of Operations explained that the council was seeking to streamline or align some of the car parking charges. She said that the council was seeking to redesignate the car parks and add a rationale as to why some areas had different prices. Members were advised that Buntingford, Sawbridgeworth and Stanstead Abbots were lower priced compared to the destination car parks.

Councillor Nicholls commented on the important part that the consultation process had played in the pricing strategy for the car parks in Buntingford. She was pleased to note the continuation of the current 90 minutes free parking in Buntingford. She said that there was no train station or adequate bus services meaning that there was a greater reliance on car journeys in Buntingford.

Councillor Andrews suggested the car park referred to as the library car park, be renamed Burgage Lane. The Parking Services Manager said that the name could be changed if software was reprogrammed, however there would be associated costs. Councillor Andrews commented on the possibility of confusion for the public or visitors.

Councillor Clements referred to behavioural changes and an overreliance on pricing rather than alternatives to influencing parking habits. He commented on improvements to Northgate End Car Park in respect of doors and lighting. He mentioned feedback from residents that the car park was closed from midnight to 6 am and complaints regarding the road surface outside the front of

the car park.

Councillor Clements said that some residents had mentioned the need for a greater provision of bike spaces. He said that some residents had said that routes and access into towns by bike could be quite difficult. He expressed a concern regarding the review of the provision of 30 minutes of free parking and noted that some feedback had indicated that was a valued option.

The Executive Member said that the opening hours at Northgate End was a good challenge and the council wanted to make that asset work as hard as it can. He referred to planning constraints in the form of conditions regarding the opening hours of the car park.

Councillor Clements stressed the importance of the work of Hertfordshire County Council and Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) regarding the provision of alternative routes.

The Executive Member talked about the challenge posed by behaviour change and referred to the LCWIP in terms of work to remove some of the physical and attitudinal obstacles to behaviour change. He talked about looking at the 20 mph zones and tilting the balance in favour of pedestrians whilst not penalising other road users.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that the matter of 30 free minutes parking had been the subject of research papers proving that it absolutely was essential or that if it was taken away people spent more time and therefore more money in town centres. He said that this matter would be subject to further consultation as part of the parking strategy.

Councillor Carter acknowledged the challenges of balancing factors such as driving behaviour change, fair parking charges and cleaner air. She mentioned the

ageing parking machines which sometimes did not work, and said that she was not sure that everyone was ready to use the parking payment app.

Councillor Carter asked for some clarification regarding the arrangement for parents using Old London Car Park for collecting children from Simon Balle School. She said that 30 minutes free parking for that purpose was not enough.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability acknowledged that the parking machines were far from perfect. He mentioned the costs procuring and maintaining the machines, and he said that there were also costs regarding the electronic handling of money which the council did not pass onto the customer in some instances.

The Executive Member mentioned the low take up of the use of Old London Road Car Park for school pick up. He talked about reengaging with schools in respect of active travel plans and making sure that these plans were substantial and were implemented.

Councillor Horner said that there was a lot of things in the strategy document that he would support at a strategic level. He said that an increase in charges, as proposed at the higher level than the new standard linear tariff, to encourage short stay parking did not work so well in Elm Road Car Park as it did in Apton Road and Basbow Lane, as Elm Road did not have any short stay car parking at present. The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability agreed to review the proposed pricing.

Councillor Horner mentioned resident's parking zones (RPZs), as he had noted that there was a commitment in the strategy document for a review. He asked about the timescale for this review, and whether the idea was to make the RPZ process easier than it was at present.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability acknowledged that there were inconsistencies with RPZs. He said that an overriding ambition was to make sure that the Northgate End Car Park was viable. He said that he recognised the anomaly of the Elm Road Car Park. He talked about the strategic use and impact of the Crown Terrace Car Park in terms of air quality initiatives.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability talked about the criteria for RPZs, and whether this needed challenging. He talked about opening up the ability for RPZs to form part of the parking strategy. The Head of Operations said that she had a piece of work to take forward in respect of a review of RPZs, and this would be reported to the Executive on 11 February 2025.

Councillor Williams talked about the equity and fairness between the car parking charge tariff regime in place at Kibes Lane in Ware when compared to shopping centre car parks such as Jackson Square in Bishop's Stortford.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that the strategic review of car park usage should include consideration and discussion of how the council could best serve residents in terms of how car parks were being used. Councillor Swainston pointed out that the Jackson Square Car Park served as a lot more than just a car park for the attached shopping centre.

Councillor Woollcombe commented on the need to simplify the operation of the car parking payment machines. He said that the car parks were a great asset for the council, and that he would like to know whether any consideration had been given to selling the car parks to raise revenue.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that the parking machines did need to be reviewed,

and that maybe there did need to be a strategic view to be taken on the provision of the parking payment machines.

Members continued to discuss and debate the matter of RPZs and talked about high street prosperity, retaining control of the car parks, active travel and air quality, emissions, EV charging points and possible pedestrianisation initiatives with a particular reference to Bishop's Stortford. The possibility of a charge for blue badges used in car parks was also mentioned with these still being free for use on street.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability commented on future proofing and referred to the expansion of Stansted Airport. Members also briefly discussed the matter of car clubs.

The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability said that formal car clubs often-required capital investment. He talked about a less formal arrangement such as neighbours agreeing to share cars.

Councillor Nicholls proposed, and Councillor Carter seconded, a motion that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee have considered and commented on the parking strategy prior to the strategy document being presenting to the Executive and Council, and that the Committee had commented on the proposed changes effective from April 2025 for consideration by the Executive, as described in paragraph 2 "proposals".

After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) Overview and Scrutiny Committee have considered and commented on the parking strategy prior to the strategy document being presenting to the Executive and

Council; and

(B) Overview and Scrutiny Committee commented on the proposed changes effective from April 2025 for consideration by the Executive as described in paragraph 2 "proposals".

291 DIGITAL EXCLUSION

The Executive Member for Corporate Services submitted a report that provided information on the council's approach to digital services and how it currently accommodated those who were digitally excluded.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services said that as the way in which the council worked changed, it was important that organisations such as East Herts Council reflected and made sure changes were being made in the right way. Members were advised that the council had made significant strides in respect of digital transformation.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services explained that the customers who accessed the council's services in person were often the ones with the most complex needs. He explained that this group of customers currently represented two to three percent of interactions with the public. Members were advised that the council's approach to customer services provision would continue to be driven by data to ensure that residents needs were being met.

The Executive Member said that approximately 80% of face-to-face contact which the council had with customers was related to council tax and benefits, and that this was quite a significant increase of around 50% from the spring of 2023 when service contacts were more evenly spread across various departments and service areas.

The Executive Member said that to address digital exclusion, the council had kept its receptions open for walk ins, and residents could also book appointments if they found this to be convenient. The council had also held face to face consultations in public spaces in line with the corporate plan objective of being a listening council.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services said that the receptions had reopened for face-to-face services on a phased basis following the COVID-19 lockdowns, and he detailed the opening hours in Bishop's Stortford and Hertford.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services said that although face-to-face demand continued to decrease, the council had continued to provide access for those who needed to engage with the council face-to-face. He acknowledged that for a small number of customers, the online systems for Resident Parking Zones (RPZs) permits may not be ideal. Members were advised that the technology that was in place did not offer the flexibility that some residents would prefer.

The Executive Member said that the council continued to provide paper RPZ permits for residents that visited the council offices. He said that the council would continue to learn from best practice and digital exclusion was not something that was unique to local authorities. Members were advised that other forward-thinking councils had partnered with business and agencies to address any concerns.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services said that the council would continue to learn from the experiences of other businesses and agencies where possible. He said that the council's commitment to inclusivity remained at the core of the approach to digital exclusion and that the council would ensure that residents who chose not to use

digital services, or those who were not able to, were fully supported and that this work would be going.

Councillor Carter said that there was some anecdotal evidence to suggest that residents who were not able to use digital services were using other agencies such as the Citizens Advice, the tourist information centre, or Town Council receptions. She asked how much the council was working with other organisations to ensure that residents were signposted or could access the services they need.

Councillor Clements said that he was pleased to see the emphasis in the report on maintaining a face-to-face service for those who could not go fully digital in their interactions with the council. He asked if officers knew why customers were still choosing to phone the council when they had the option of dealing with a query online.

Councillor Clements asked if the council had put in place training for reception staff to take account of the changing needs of customers who were still coming into see the council face-to-face.

Councillor Dumont said that the council offered a similar assisted self-service provision for customers who had booked an appointment with a customer services officer. He said that customers not knowing which authority to contact for various services had been a long term and ongoing problem since he had been an elected member. Officers were very quick to highlight if an issue was not one that East Herts Council deal with and were very quick to provide the right information or signpost the customer to the correct council or agency which they needed to contact.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said the council had regular dialogue with Citizens Advice in respect of sharing information regarding any patterns or trends. He cited an example of when council tax letters

went out, and where there was closer collaboration with some of the council's partners in libraries or, as now, in Jackson Square shopping centre Bishop's Stortford.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that some of the changes alluded to by the Executive Member might force the council into more of that type of collaboration. He said that there was no structured way of sharing information, but the council did work with Citizens Advice and in an ad hoc way with other organisations.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that there were always customers who wanted to ring the council, and that this would continue to be the case. He referred to the wide geographic spread of the district and the two reception centres. Members were advised that some customers would happily stay holding on the phone to speak to the council. He talked about the challenge of improving the digital offer and said that officers had received training in respect of safeguarding and mental health awareness. Customer Services staff had also been trained in personal safety following a spike in aggression towards public sector workers.

Councillor Marlow talked about the issue of broadband affordability and older people who used mobiles instead. He asked if the council was working with phone providers to address this issue and the matter of poor coverage in areas such as the Hadhams and Hunsdon.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services said that East Herts had one of the highest uptakes of digital usage in the country. The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy acknowledged that there were patches of the district that were not covered by broadband due to the expense of the installation of fibre services and due to the poor mobile coverage. He said that the county council had a connecting counties programme that had delivered broadband to a lot of different villages in the district. He

also mentioned the partnership known as the digital innovation zone and the work being done to talk about lobbying for more investment in masts and other similar infrastructure.

The Head of Customers Services confirmed to Councillor Swainston that both Bishop's Stortford and Hertford customers services centres had self-service PCs that could be utilised by the public during the opening hours, and Customer Services staff were available to help customers.

Councillor McAndrew commented on the different groups of people that the council had to cater for, i.e. those who did not want to talk on the phone and those that would only engage by digital means. He talked about the challenges of IT and referred to the waste services contract and the potential for a fully digital service. He mentioned that councils were in the hands of the providers in reference to the installation of full coverage of broadband services.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services said that the contract the council had with Stevenage did not hamper digital innovation and there had to be specific platforms and technologies to deliver specific services. Councillor McAndrew said that he believed there were some challenges.

The Head of Communications, Strategy and Policy said that the waste services contract was digitally automated in terms of requests to the contractor regarding missed collections or replacement bins.

Councillor Horner said that all aspects of the digital services needed to be brought together so that it should be easier to use, and that this was very important. He referred to future budget constraints and said that self-service assisted appointments should continue as well as the open receptions in both of the main towns.

The Executive Member for Corporate Services said that the council had to provide the self-service assisted provision for the people that needed it. He was not aware of complaints or concerns in terms of data where customers had not been able access the council when they needed to.

Councillor Carter talked about improving services and how the council could survey users to find out what customers found difficult when accessing the council's services. The Executive Member for Corporate Services talked about his aspiration to get a customer service excellence certification. He acknowledged that getting customer feedback had been quite difficult.

Councillor Woollcombe proposed, and Councillor Clements seconded, a motion that Overview and Scrutiny Committee have considered information in respect of digital exclusion and have made comments to the Executive Member for Corporate Services.

After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that Overview and Scrutiny Committee have considered information in respect of digital exclusion and have made comments to the Executive Member for Corporate Services.

292 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair referenced an email from the Head of Legal and Democratic Services. The Chair and the Committee Support Officer explained that the affordable housing scrutiny proposal form hadn't been received ahead of the meeting. The topic would therefore now be moved forward in the work programme to the meeting in June. The same rule would apply to other items in the work

programme where a scrutiny proposal form was required.

Councillor Boylan said that scrutiny proposal forms should form part of the agenda of these meetings, and Overview and Scrutiny Members could then discuss and then agree the proposals. The Committee Support Officer explained why the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) had been moved to the meeting in March 2025 with the consent of the Chair.

The Head of Communication, Strategy and Policy briefly set out the themes of the item that would be coming to meeting on 4th March 2025 in respect of the UKSPF. The Chair explained that not every item on the work programme needed a scrutiny proposal form as some of the items were brought to the committee by the Executive.

Councillor Carter mentioned section 106 funding in terms of how this process worked and how section 106 monies were allocated. The Committee Support Officer invited the committee to consider the work programme well beyond March and June 2025. He referred to an action from November 2023 that the Committee review Development Management Forums within two years of when these were set up, subject to the when the Head of Planning and Building Control wished to present this matter back to the Committee.

Members were advised that a workshop was held on 11 June 2024 where the Committee got together to consider work programme topics. The Committee Support Officer said that another workshop could be arranged, or Members could have proactive discussions offline about potential topics for the work programme going forward.

The Committee Support Officer reminded Members that the work programme should be Member led, subject to matters brought forward from the Executive. Councillor

Andrews welcomed the helpful suggestion of short-timed workshop to discuss the work programme.

Councillor Carter said that it was important to refresh ideas and topics which were immediately important at a short workshop. Councillor Swainston said it was very reasonable to get the scrutiny proposal forms submitted in a timely manner to give officers time to respond. She said the committee should be scrutinising Executive decisions.

The Chair said that a consensus was emerging that a work programme workshop would be useful, and he said that would consult with the Vice-Chair and then consider whether this would be held in person or online.

The Committee Support encouraged any Member of the Committee to take the lead on completing the scrutiny proposal form in respect of affordable housing in discussion with other Members of the Committee.

Councillor Clements mentioned the possible discussion of BEAM around the end of 2025 once the theatre had been operation for a year. Councillor Nicholls concurred with the suggestion that the committee consider Section 106 matters.

Councillor Clements proposed and Councillor Swainston seconded a motion that the 2024/25 Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme in Appendix 1, be agreed subject to the following:

- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) be considered at the meeting on 4 March 2025;
- Affordable housing be considered at the meeting on 10 June 2025, subject to the submission of a scrutiny proposal form by the 4 March 2025;
- Section 106 be added to the programme subject to

the completion of a scrutiny proposal form;

- Scrutiny Proposals Forms be included in the agenda for consideration by the Committee.

After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the 2024/25 Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme in Appendix 1, be agreed subject to the following:

- The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) be considered at the meeting on 4 March 2025;
- Affordable housing be considered at the meeting on 10 June 2025, subject to the submission of a scrutiny proposal form by the 4 March 2025;
- Section 106 be added to the programme subject to the completion of a scrutiny proposal form;
- Scrutiny Proposals Forms be included in the agenda for consideration by the Committee.

293 URGENT ITEMS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 9.10 pm

Chairman
Date

