

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
EXECUTIVE HELD IN THE COUNCIL
CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS, HERTFORD ON
TUESDAY 1 OCTOBER 2024, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor B Crystall (Leader)
Councillors B Crystall, C Brittain, A Daar,
J Dumont, V Glover-Ward, S Hopewell,
T Hoskin and C Wilson.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors D Andrews, B Deering, Y Estop,
D Jacobs and G McAndrew.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

James Ellis	- Head of Legal and Democratic Services and Monitoring Officer
Jonathan Geall	- Head of Housing and Health
Steven Linnett	- Head of Strategic Finance and Property
Peter Mannings	- Committee Support Officer
Helen Standen	- Interim Chief Executive
Alison Street	- Financial Planning Manager

163 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Goldspink.

164 LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Leader reminded Members and Officers to use the microphones as the meeting was being webcasted.

165 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

166 MINUTES - 3 SEPTEMBER 2024

Councillor Glover-Ward proposed, and Councillor Wilson seconded a motion that the Minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Leader. On being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 3 September 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Leader.

Councillor McAndrew referred to page 12 of the minutes and a request he made for the meeting to go into part 2. He said that appendix e regarding variances year on year in respect of bad debts, had not been attached to the papers. He asked if the document was now in the public domain.

The Leader asked if appendix e could be circulated.

167 BUDGET 2025-26 AND MEDIUM-TERM FINANCIAL PLAN (MTFP) 2025-2035 PREPARATION

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability presented the report. He said that the report set out the savings requirements for the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) for 2025 to 2035, the assumptions included in the 2025 to 2026 budget and the risks and uncertainties facing the council in setting the budget and the timetable for the budget setting process.

The Executive Member said that the 2024 to 2034 MTFP approved at council on 28 February 2024, had included a

savings target of £5.6m for 2025/26 and £4.2m of savings had been agreed, with a further £1.4m to be identified.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said that subsequently, the quarter 1 forecast had identified further ongoing budget pressures of £0.55m, taking the additional savings requirement for 2025 to 2026 to almost £2m. He said that a number of assumptions had been made regarding council tax increases, government support and inflation.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said that 3 models had been created, the base case, the optimistic case, and the pessimistic case. He said that the proposal was that the base case was the model to be used for the budget setting process, as this reflected the outcomes that were most likely at the moment.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said that the details of these assumptions were set out in the report, and the Executive was referred to Appendix A for the base case MTFP, and to Appendix B for the outcome for the optimistic case.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability referred to many uncertainties ahead and these were outlined in the report. He expected clarity on a number of these to emerge in the course of the next 3 months, and he said that there was much work to do to bring the council finances back to a sustainable level. He said that realistic assumptions had been made about finding internal solutions due to no firm indications of support from the new government.

Councillor Brittain proposed that the recommendations in the report be supported. Councillor Dumont seconded the proposal.

Councillor McAndrew referred to a number of high-profile projects that had greatly benefited residents. He said that with much of the groundwork already established, the

time had come to consider a shared chief executive officer (CEO) rather than filling the position with a full-time appointment. He said that there were opportunities for significant savings, especially given the current financial constraints.

Councillor McAndrew mentioned aged debtors and referred to the £2m that needed to be found in respect of the 2025/26 budget. He said that 40 to 50% of £1.8m was a substantial amount of money and would this be realised and ensure that the budget deficit was reduced accordingly.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said that there were plans to reduce aged debtors. He said that this would be a one-off saving which would be incorporated into the savings proposals for 2025/26.

Councillor Estop asked about the £50k regarding the reduced grounds maintenance specification. She said that she had also been advised by parks officers that the £50k budget for the renewal of playground equipment would not be continuing for the 60 playgrounds. She asked if these two amounts were separate or just the one amount.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability confirmed that these 2 figures were separate and the £50k for grounds maintenance was for the contract to maintain the grounds and was not for new equipment.

Councillor Deering said that the figure for debt write off was a big figure. He asked what were the debts that might comprise the approximate 50% write off and who would make that decision. He asked about the criteria for determining whether any debt should be written off.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said that the Head of Strategic Finance and Property would make the decisions in respect of the debt which was to be written off. The Head of Legal and Democratic Services confirmed the constitution rules in part 9 allowed the

Head of Strategic Finance and Property to write off irrecoverable debts up to a limit £50k in any one case. Any irrecoverable debts in excess of this amount would have to be referred to the Executive.

There was a general discussion about debt timelines as well as the last change to the constitution around the level of debt that could be written off by Officers.

The Executive Member for Communities said that it would be interesting to know the debt level as an amount at the point when the Executive came into administration in May 2023. The Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability agreed that publishing a time profile of the debt and how this debt was being handled subsequently would be helpful in terms of clarity.

The motion to support the recommendations having been proposed and seconded was put to the meeting and upon a vote being taken, was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Executive agreed, as guidance to officers, that the budget proposals should be based on the base case presented in paragraph 1.4; with a Council Tax increase of 2.98%, contract inflation of 2.5%, no inflation in any other goods and services budgets and that the provision for the national pay award will be 3%; and

(B) the revised savings requirements of £2m in 2025/26, rising to £2.5m in 2027/28, be noted.

168 CAPITAL RECEIPTS PROGRAMME – AUTHORITY TO DISPOSE OF ASSETS BY SALE

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability submitted a report that would give Officers the authority to sell a number of assets to reduce council borrowing. He said that the budget of 2024/25 had identified a number of assets that could be sold to reduce council borrowing.

The Executive Member said that he would like to amend recommendation A to read as follows:

‘That the sale by auction of the properties listed in paragraphs 1.3.1, 1.3.2, 1.3.3 and 1.3.5, be approved’. He said that the reason for the amendment was to allow a little more time for discussion around the items listed in paragraphs 1.3.4 and 1.3.6 as these assets both had existing tenants and a delay was not a significant issue in terms of costs.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said the delay would enable further discussion in respect of these sites. He said that the remaining sites were all parcels with no existing use and could therefore continue to be sold at auction.

Councillor Brittain proposed that the amended recommendation be supported. Councillor Daar seconded the proposal.

Councillor Deering said that Charringtons House was not on the list and asked about the current situation in relation to Charringtons House.

The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said that Charringtons House was not on the list as this building was part of the Old River Lane (ORL) scheme and this scheme was already designated for sale. The assets in this report were additional items for sale and Charringtons House was part of the ORL scheme and was not an individual asset.

Councillor Deering asked whether Charringtons House was going to be disposed of. The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability confirmed that Charringtons House would be disposed of when the development agreement was signed.

Councillor Jacobs said he had attended a meeting of the

Bishop’s Stortford Town Council Finance and Policy Committee and the Committee had discussed an aspiration to acquire the Thorley Community Centre from East Hertfordshire District Council. He asked if this issue could be taken away and looked at. The Executive Member for Financial Sustainability said that this matter could be looked into.

Councillor Estop said that she welcomed the amendment to take Elizabeth Road (Havers Parade) out of the proposed sale of assets for capital receipts. She said that further discussions were very welcome, and she and Councillor Jacobs were not against the sale in principle. She said the way the sale was handled was very important in terms in respect to the tenants and the boundary of the land. She referred in particular to the green space and the footpath.

The Executive Member for Planning and Growth said that Thorley Community Centre was discussed at a Bishop’s Stortford partnership meeting and the Interim Chief Executive had this matter on her to do list. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion for the amendment was declared CARRIED.

Councillor Brittain proposed and Councillor Daar seconded, the substantive recommendation and, upon a vote being taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the sale by auction of the properties listed in paragraphs 1.3.1, 1.3.2, 1.3.3 and 1.3.5, be approved.

169 URGENT BUSINESS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 7.32 pm

Chairman

Date
