

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

PRESENT: Councillor D Jacobs (Chair)
Councillors E Buckmaster, R Carter,
N Clements, A Holt, C Horner, S Marlow,
S Nicholls, Smith, M Swainston,
D Woollcombe and J Wyllie

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors B Crystall, B Deering and
J Dumont

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Michele Aves	- Committee Support Officer
Carol Bulloch	- Systems and Support Manager
James Ellis	- Director for Legal, Policy and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Peter Mannings	- Committee Support Officer
Brian Moldon	- Director for Finance, Risk and Performance
Ben Wood	- Director for Regeneration, Customer and Commercial Services
Neil Wright	- Shared Service Manager – Benefits

72 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

It was proposed by Councillor Swainston and seconded by Councillor Nicholls, that Councillor Horner be appointed Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2025/26 civic year. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that Councillor Horner be appointed Vice-Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2025/26 civic year.

73 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors Andrews and Cox. It was noted that Councillor Holt was substituting for Councillor Andrews.

74 MINUTES - 4 MARCH 2025

Councillor Nicholls proposed and Councillor Swainston seconded, a motion that the Minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2025 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 4 March 2025, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

75 CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair welcomed Members to the first meeting of the new civic year, and he welcomed anyone watching on the webcast. The Chair welcomed Councillor Smith to his first meeting of the committee. He also welcomed back Councillor Wyllie.

Members were reminded to use their microphones as the meeting was being webcast.

76 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

77 REFRESHED LEAF PRIORITIES AND ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2024-25

Councillor Crystall, Leader of the Council, submitted a report that provided Members with an update in respect of performance against LEAF priorities over the 2024/25 year, and the proposed amended LEAF priorities for the 2025/26 year onwards.

Councillor Crystall said that the first corporate plan was presented to council in February 2024. He said that this document had been refreshed with some amendments. He welcomed comments, suggestions and questions from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor E Buckmaster asked for clarification to the changes in the Annual Report, and he asked for some of the important examples. Councillor Crystall said that there was an addition in the first section of the corporate plan which was to strive to achieve excellent customer service.

Members were advised about a further addition which was to engage the community in local government reorganisation. The Leader said that under the environmentally focussed section, there was an addition which was maximising the positive environmental impacts of the delivery of the new waste contract.

The Leader explained that there was a modified section marked as new, which was encouraging residents to play their part in supporting local wildlife and improving our natural environmental and supporting the delivery of the Hertfordshire Nature Recovery Strategy. Lastly, he said that there was a new item under the heading acting with the community, entitled creating a new long asset management plan based on community values.

Councillor Crystall advised that there were modifications to wording where policies were originally being developed and now being implemented. Councillor Wyllie asked what the council would be doing differently to achieve excellent customer service.

Councillor Crystall said that a council would always strive to achieve excellent customer service. He said that the corporate plan provided a focus for how Officers behaved, and the kind of things that they treated as the most important.

Councillor Dumont said that the council was seeking to achieve a nationally recognised accreditation or award known as customer service excellence. He said that Officers had recently engaged with an assessment body, and an internal audit and assessment which involved collating information about systems and processes, and this was due to be completed by the end of June.

Members were advised that this information would be reviewed by the accreditation body for review and audit. The Council would be informed after this whether the accreditation standard had been met.

Councillor Nicholls expressed a concern regarding inclusivity in customer services. She cited an example of a resident who did not have access a computer and had struggled to get answers to a council tax support query by telephone. She asked if there was a drive to making the digital service more comprehensive to free up telephone capacity for people who struggled online.

The Director for Regeneration, Customer and Commercial Services said that the general direction of travel was to address more queries digitally to free up more time for the complex queries to be handled face to face in the reception with customer services. He said that the number of digital contacts had increased significantly and face to face contacts had decreased. Members were

advised that the customers coming into receptions had more complex needs, and the time spent dealing with customers face to face had remained unchanged albeit with fewer customers. He said that the time spent with customers face to face was still important to the council.

Councillor Swainston asked if there was a confidence that everything was being done to advertise how to contact the council, be it online or through any other means. Councillor Crystall said that even though every attempt was made to get information across, the council could never reach everyone, and the council could never be confident that enough had been done.

Councillor Woollcombe asked if there could be more detail in respect of ideas regarding engaging with the community on the topic of local government reorganisation. He talked about community forums and asked about a schedule for town hall meetings in communities across Hertfordshire.

Councillor Crystall said that there was a draft timetable, and recommendations had to be submitted to the government by 28 November 2025. He said the county councils and the 10 districts and boroughs had submitted interim initial proposals in March.

Councillor Crystall said that business models were being developed for the different potential proposals for 2, 3 or 4 unitary councils. He said that councils were still waiting for clarity on an outline from central government in terms of details for consultation. He said a public consultation could be due in September, and this was reliant on discussions due to take place before then in respect of financial modelling in terms of financial performance or the different models.

Councillor Clements said that as resources were quite limited, which matters would be given a lesser priority or removed to make way for new priorities in the corporate plan. He referred to the current reception opening hours

and asked about digital inclusion and what this would mean for people who struggled to access services online and needed face to face support.

Councillor Crystall said that some items were removed from the plan as projects were completed. He said that budget setting was a process, and this was always going to be challenging. He said that as regards the opening of the offices to the public, everything had to be considered as part of the budget setting process, and some matters would be removed as things Members would not support.

Councillor Crystall said that it was important to say that he did not feel that the council would end up in a situation where offices would be closed to residents. The Director for Regeneration, Customer and Commercial Services reiterated his point about the data and fewer people coming to reception but with more complex needs.

The Director for Regeneration, Customer and Commercial Services said that cutting hours back further would be a false economy. He advised that conversations were ongoing with community-based partners about co locating and referred to the offices in Bishop's Stortford only being used two days a week.

Councillor Dumont reiterated that he was keen to avoid the impression being drawn that the council was looking to reduce access for vulnerable residents who could not communicate with the council without coming to the offices.

Councillor Buckmaster referred to the metrics in terms of trends in homeless households. He referred to the leasing of 5 self-contained flats in Hertford, and the upward trend in the number of homeless households. He asked if the 5 self-contained flats were sufficient to address that situation. Councillor Crystall referred to wider national political issues that were driving that trend, which was outside of the council's control. He said that all the council could do was match the demand as best it could.

The Director of Regeneration, Customer and Commercial Services responded to a question from Councillor Nicholls regarding the website rating (govmetric) and the viewing figures for the new website since this was launched 5 years ago. He said that there was now little in the way of meaningful data and a different approach was being explored in the different platform called engage HQ.

Councillor Horner said that he was pleased to see that the forward plan was much more populated than it had been previously. He talked about the Local Cycling, Walking and Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) and EV Chargers. He said that stimulating EV charging to increase the number of EV vehicles on the roads. He also mentioned homelessness and the importance of increasing the availability of affordable living accommodation.

Councillor Crystall said that the tender for EV chargers was launched in November 2024. The Director for Regeneration, Customer and Commercial Services said that once the tender process had completed, an update would follow outside of the meeting. He said that the number of homes delivered by the council in 2024/25 was really good.

Councillor Jacobs referred to an apparent disconnect between the actions under section (f) in respect of delivering the cultural strategy, and whether these actions would help the council be fairer and more inclusive. He referred to the delivery the cultural strategy and whether this made East Herts fairer and more inclusive.

Councillor Crystall referred to the Arts in East Herts programme and said that being fair and inclusive could mean a lot of things. He said that this programme was a way of bringing people together who would not normally be involved in those activities. Councillor Dumont said that the services that the council provided tied in with the aspiration of providing the best possible customer service for residents and to be as efficient as possible.

Councillor Buckmaster emphasised the importance of enabling people to have access to arts and culture. He said that some aspects of arts and culture could be exclusive only to those who could afford it.

Councillor Nicholls proposed, and Councillor Clements seconded, a motion that performance over the 2024/25 year be reviewed, and Members review the proposed amended LEAF priorities for 2025/26 and make any recommendations for Executive or Council to consider.

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

RESOLVED – that (A) performance over the 2024/25 year be reviewed; and

(B) Members review the proposed amended LEAF priorities for 2025/26 and make any recommendations for Executive or Council to consider.

78 COUNCIL TAX SUPPORT SCHEME

The Director for Finance, Risk and Performance submitted a report that updated members on the work undertaken so far in respect of the Council Tax Support Scheme, and in respect of consultation with both the public and the Major Precepting Authorities in respect of proposed changes to the Council's Council Tax Support Scheme with effect from 1 April 2026.

The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said that the current scheme commenced in 2013, when it moved from a government scheme to a local scheme. He said that at that time, central government passported 90% of the cost in the form of funding to the council to administer the new council tax support scheme.

Members were reminded that the scheme had to be approved by the Council each year as part of the budget process. The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said the scheme had not changed much since it was introduced in 2013, and pensioners could get up to 100% support, and working aged people could get up to 91.5% support.

The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said that new scheme for 2026/27 would involve a move to a banded scheme. He said that the main benefit of the banded scheme for an individual was that their income could fluctuate up and down within the band without a reassessment.

Members were advised that this process would mean that the council would not have to carry out regular reassessment activity and gave assurance to individuals in avoiding weekly or monthly reassessments. The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said that the scheme that would be brought forward later in the year for approval would aim to be a cost neutral scheme and there would be public consultation later this year once this process was completed.

The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said that the scheme was still being finalised and might fluctuate slightly, and one of the recommendations that went to Executive on 3 June 2025 had changed to reflect that. Members were advised that the final proposed scheme would be signed off by the Director of Finance, Risk and Performance and the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability for consultation.

The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said that the matter would come back to Full Council for final approval around November 2025, with a proposal for a new council tax support scheme for 2026/27 following consultation.

Councillor Nicholls said that there was only one option for changing the system and she asked if this was based upon examples from councils that had already adopted a similar scheme and had this been a success and had there been any issues encountered.

The Shared Service Manager (Benefits) said that he had been extensively in contact with the other Hertfordshire Benefits Teams in respect of council tax support and the scheme had been very successful. He said the current scheme needed to be simplified and a lot of the working age recipients of council tax received universal credit and there was a monthly reassessment of their award.

Members were advised that Officers changed their council tax support award, which as well as being a piece of work for benefits staff also required the charge payer to be rebilled and new instalment plans set up.

The Shared Service Manager (Benefits) said that the means tested scheme was incompatible with some of the changes in the general benefits arena. The changes would simplify the scheme and make it fairer and would also cut down on administration and assist with collection rates.

Councillor Marlow asked what kind of savings might be made and where would these savings go, i.e. back to the council or to the government. The Shared Service Manager (Benefits) said that there would not be saving in the context of the scheme itself. He advised that the saving that might be generated was from less resources required within the benefits team to administer the actual reassessment of cases. Members were advised that the saving hopefully would be around improved collection rates for the council.

Councillor Horner welcomed a number of aspects of the proposed changes. He expressed a concern that where there was banding, there would be a regressive tendency on the margins of the council tax bands.

Councillor Horner asked about the amount in the scheme for the housing element of universal credit being disregarded. He urged Officers to specifically consult the agencies who supported residents who were on benefits and asked if there was a calculator for the public to be able to compare how the changes would affect particular groups.

The Shared Service Manager (Benefits) said that universal credit housing costs were not taken into account in respect of the assessment of council tax support. He said that there was a mechanism where officers evaluated the award of universal credit, and the same would apply to the banded scheme.

The Shared Service Manager (Systems, Support and Control) added that as modelling was still underway, Officers could add or remove certain disregards if required, and Officers also had some flexibility in respect of extending the council tax bands. She referred to moving the 20% cut off slight to something in the region of 15%. Members were advised that a consultant had been engaged to assist with the consultation, and some of this consultation would be digital.

Councillor Carter said that it made sense to have a simpler system, which would be easier to understand. She expressed a concern about residents who were going to lose their entitlement and asked about transitional protection for those who experience exceptional hardship. She asked if there was a possibility of tapering the transition to avoid a sudden shift in the system for council tax support.

Councillor Holt asked for some clarity in respect of new modelling of different case scenarios if more households qualified than expected. He asked about the exceptional hardship fund, and whether this was the same as the exceptional hardship scheme which was already implemented by the council.

The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said that the hardship scheme was the same as the exceptional hardship scheme, and he could come back to Members re that funding in due course.

The Shared Service Manger (Systems, Support and Control) said that as regards modelling, there would be a range of modelling starting with the 100% entitlement down to also reducing the liability of that officers used for assessment.

The Director of Finance, Risk and Performance said that he could not comment on whether a transitional protection was possible for those who experience exceptional hardship. He said that Officers had noted that and look to incorporate this consideration into the modelling of scenarios.

Councillor Buckmaster said that scheme should be straightforward so that residents could understand the reasoning for why their benefits had changed. Councillor Jacobs said that the paper should explore some worked examples for when the consultation was due to commence.

Councillor Jacobs referred to the newly agreed protocol and the undertaking that the Executive to come back to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the points that had been raised.

Councillor Nicholls proposed, and Councillor Swainston seconded, a motion that the Council Tax Support Scheme be considered and Members comments be provided to the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability for his consideration.

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

RESOLVED – that (A) the Council Tax Support Scheme be considered; and

(B) Members provide comments to the Executive Member for Financial Sustainability for his consideration.

79 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee Support Officer submitted the work programme report and Members were invited to consider and determine the work programme going forward. The Committee Support Officer mentioned the workshops that had been held in June 2024 and March 2025, and various topics had been added to the work programme.

The Committee Support Officer reiterated that there should be discussions or emails between Members and the chair to define those topics via scrutiny proposal forms to avoid these matters slipping further during the civic year.

The Director for Legal, Policy and Governance said that some of these topics had been on the work programme from the previous civic year. He reiterated that Officers needed to know which aspects of affordable housing and sustainable transport Members wanted to explore.

The Director for Legal, Policy and Governance said that Officers needed to pull information together and take this through Leadership Team before final amendments were made for reports to Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He said that scrutiny proposals forms should be submitted by the end of June for the meeting of the Committee in September.

Councillor Carter said that she had suggested the topic of sustainable transport following a report submitted back in 2017. She referred to recommendations made then and whether there had been progress since then.

Councillor Carter asked if there was a way for members to see a list of which topics the committee had consider over the last 5 years or so. Councillor Jacobs said that he would talk to the Committee Support Officer about this outside of the meeting.

Councillor Wyllie asked about the position of the Scrutiny Officer that had supported Members when he was previously on the committee. The Committee Support Officer explained that there was no Scrutiny Officer and he and a colleague shared the workload of supporting the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Nicholls said that she would do a scrutiny proposal form in respect of affordable housing or housing associations and accountability. Councillor Swainston said that some helpful documents had been circulated about the function of the scrutiny committee and some training information. She asked if this could be sent out again for the benefit of the new members of the committee.

Councillor Swainston proposed, and Councillor Carter seconded a motion that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme be agreed. After being put to the meeting and a vote taken, the motion was declared CARRIED.

RESOLVED – that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme in Appendix 1 be agreed.

80 URGENT ITEMS

There was no urgent business.

The meeting closed at 8.30 pm

Chairman

Date

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