

CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COUNCIL
held on 19 February 2025 at 7pm

PRESENT:

The Mayor, J Potter
The Deputy Mayor, S Sullivan

Councillors C Adutwim, J Armstrong, G Bonnett, N Bugbee, N Chambers, D Clark, H Clark, P Clark, P Davey, S Davis, A E Davidson, C K Davidson, J Deakin, S Dobson, N Dudley, D Eley, L Foster, K Franks, J Frasca, I D Fuller, M C Goldman, S M Goldman, S Hall, J Hawkins, R J Hyland, J Jeapes, B Knight, J Lardge, R J Lee, L Mascot, R J Moore, M O'Brien, V Pappa, G H J Pooley, S Rajesh, J Raven, S Robinson, S Scott, T Sherlock, M Sismey, A B Sosin, J E Sosin, M S Steel, M Taylor, A G Thorpe-Apps, C Tron, N M Walsh, R T Whitehead, and S Young.

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors, Massey, Sampson, Thompson and Wilson.

2. Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor informed the Council that by the end of February 2025, the Mayoralty would have attended 294 engagements/meetings and that just over £11,000 had been raised to date for the Mayor's Charity, Farleigh Hospice. The Council also heard that forthcoming fundraising events, included a Quiz Night and Afternoon Tea.

3. Declarations of Interest

Members were reminded to declare at the appropriate time, any interests in the business on the meeting's agenda. None were made.

4. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 December 2024 were confirmed as a correct record.

5. Public Questions

Two public questions had been submitted in advance of the meeting, the first of which was asked in person [and both can be seen via this link.](#)

The first question asked about the Climate Emergency declared by the Council, how it could be defined, when it would be over and what quantitative and qualitative indicators were the Council reviewing to determine when it had passed. The Council were also provided with observations about the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and were asked how the decision to swap all vehicles to electric vehicles reconciled with the Council's modern slavery commitments, due to concerns about how minerals were extracted for EV batteries.

In response the Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford, thanked the member of the public for their question. The Cabinet Member stated that the UN had an interest in identifying global problems and the role of the IPCC was to provide evidence-based assessments to inform policy decisions, and did consider natural factors, but the emphasis was on human induced changes due to their significant impact. The Cabinet Member also stated that a climate emergency referred to a situation where urgent action was required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage and that it was a call to address the profound changes seen in our weather systems, including record temperatures as a result of human activity. The Council were also informed that the Council balanced its climate goals with ethical considerations and through its Procurement Policy, ensured that supply chains were transparent and responsible.

The Cabinet Member also stated that the Climate and Ecological Emergency had been declared with cross party support in July 2019 and since then the Council had been working to reduce carbon emissions, lower energy consumption, reduce waste and pollution, improve air quality and increase biodiversity. It was noted that the Climate Emergency would not be considered over until those goals were achieved and sustained. The Council also heard that the vast majority of scientists accepted that climate change was real and contributed to by human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels. The Cabinet Member also stated that, there were two very practical benefits for residents, cutting the cost of living and improving air quality, by requiring homes to use less energy and water, leading to lower bills. It was also noted that less polluting vehicles, led to benefits in air quality, as demonstrated by areas such as the Army and Navy Roundabout, no longer being an Air Quality Management Area. The Council also heard that the Love Your Chelmsford platform provided more background and detail and that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were considering an item on the Climate and Ecological Emergency and the corresponding Action Plan in March.

The second question asked about planning consents and whether conditions were being implemented to ensure developers protected the ever-decreasing hedgehog population, which was at risk of extinction, due to the ever increasing takeover of fields and hedgerows. The Council were also asked as to whether swift bricks could be installed to give the red listed bird some breeding capability.

In response the Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford, thanked the member of the public for their question. The Cabinet Member stated that the Council were aware of the risk to hedgehogs and were looking at planning consents and conditions that could be put forward when developers were creating new buildings and communities. They referred to the National Planning Policy Framework, which detailed that conditions should be kept to a minimum, be necessary, relevant to the planning

permission, be enforceable, precise and reasonable. The Council heard that in the right circumstances, biodiversity conditions could be attached to permissions, including the use of soft landscaping, swift bricks and cut throughs in fences, to encourage developers to engage with policies to manage land sympathetically. The Cabinet Member also stated that the current review of the Local Plan was ongoing and encouraged all members and residents to take part in it and referred to DM16 which protected and promoted ecology, nature and biodiversity.

(7.04pm to 7.14pm)

6. Cabinet Question Time

The following questions from Councillors were put to members of the Cabinet:

Question from Councillor P Clark to the Cabinet Member for a Safer Chelmsford

How many urgency decisions were put to Cabinet/Leader of the Council and not supported? Can you outline examples of urgency decisions not supported.

In response the Cabinet Member for a Safer Chelmsford stated that there had not been any urgency decisions put to Cabinet or the Leader of the Council that had not been supported. They also stated that Paragraph 4.3.2.9 of the Constitution, permitted the Chief Executive to take urgent decisions, which could arise in relation to executive or non-executive decisions. It was noted that in relation to executive decisions, the Leader would be consulted and for non-executive decisions, the relevant Chair or Vice-Chair would be consulted.

As follow up points Cllr P Clark, queried the high number of urgency decisions, especially for projects that had been ongoing for some time and were of a high value and why they had not been brought to a closed session of Full Council instead. In response the Cabinet Member provided information on the process for making urgency decisions and the further safeguards involving notice of key decisions via the Executive Decision Notice and the role of the Overview and Scrutiny Chair in approving extremely urgent executive decisions. The Council were also informed that, whilst it was not the custom and practice at Chelmsford City Council, the Leader and other executive members if authorised by the Leader, could legally take executive decisions at any time. However, as this did not normally happen at Chelmsford, it would sometimes result in urgency powers being utilised to take decisions outside of the usual Cabinet timetable.

Question from Councillor Hyland to the Cabinet Member for a Safer Chelmsford

The Recent LGA Peer Challenge in December 2024 provided recommendations, its first of which was specific to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, what steps have been taken to strengthen overview and scrutiny since that report?

“Commission the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to review and strengthen overview and scrutiny and wider governance”

The Peer Challenge report stated that O&S currently fails to provide pre-scrutiny or policy suggestions as it looks at issues retrospectively. Will LGA Peer Challenge recommendation be taken forward to ensure, it is within current, and any future design of the Local Governance?

In response the Cabinet Member for a Safer Chelmsford stated that contact had been made with the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, to provide training sessions for the Chair and Vice-Chair of O&S, with the possibility of all O&S members being trained. The Cabinet Member also informed the Council that discussions would take place with other local authorities, that have shown good scrutiny practices and that the Democracy Team had been looking at the current call-in procedure and how it could be improved. It was noted that this could, perhaps be with an easy to use form for members and the setting up of informal call-in discussions prior to a call-in being made.

In response to the answer, the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, also added that they felt that scrutiny at the Council, needed to focus more on decisions before they were taken and they welcomed the move for training and looking at best practices elsewhere.

Question from Councillor Steel to the Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford

The City Council recently purchased land at Little Waltham, in my ward, for a significant sum of residents' money. This is land that is in the Green Wedge and it appears to have been purchased solely with the purpose of filling it with trees as part of the Liberal Democrat's grand strategy to reach net carbon neutral.

The land is currently pastureland, so not without biodiversity. This is not the place to question this policy, as my biggest concern is with the secrecy of the amount of money the administration has paid for this land.

It is in the public domain that the land was up for sale for £420K, but the actual price paid is confidential. When I questioned this at Cabinet, I was told that that the price could not be revealed because it was still being negotiated.

However, I have now been told that the sale was completed in May 2024, but the price can't be revealed because "disclosure would prejudice the commercial interests of any legal person (an individual, a company, the public authority itself or any other legal entity."

I have registered my objection to this view, with the Monitoring Officer. It seems to me that the amount paid – which is apparently more than the asking price, - still remains secret.

Whilst I personally question the wisdom of reducing to net zero by spending significant amounts to absorb carbon emissions, rather than stop them at source, it is not

necessary in the Cabinet member's response to explain the Council's reasons for their green policies, as these are already included in their Our Chelmsford document.

There are clearly many other places to plant trees in the City without the cost of acquiring additional land. For example many Parish Councils would welcome any additions to the scheme to plant trees on their land and we recently discussed the use of the John Shennan field which has plenty of space.

It is surely embarrassing for an Administration that has paid to get land on which to plant trees rather than using the money to acquire land to provide much-needed social housing or, for example, to use this money to update our fleet of vehicles from diesel?

Of course, I welcome protection of the green wedge, as do the residents of Little Waltham. but I note that the land has been purchased with an overage provision of 30% for a period of 50 years, triggered by non-agricultural or non-equestrian development. The inclusion of this clause means that the Council has the ability to use the land for development in the future, and pay the seller a part of the gain. Surely, if there was an intention to keep the land as a nature reserve, no such clause would be necessary?

Therefore, could the Cabinet Member please:

- State the amount spent to acquire this land?*
- If not, explain why this has to remain confidential given that the sale has been completed, and the land register will record the price when completed*
- Justify why, given the homeless crisis, there is a need for this purchase rather than use it to provide permanent accommodation for homeless families.*
- Confirm that the land will remain a nature reserve and not be used for development in the future.*

In response the Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford stated that at the previous Cabinet meeting, officers had indicated the price was confidential, but after properly considering the information law position, it was now acceptable for the figure of £480,000 to be in the public domain. The Cabinet Member also stated that there was a housing crisis and a climate crisis and the administration were addressing both. The Council heard that a comprehensive Housing Strategy was addressing the need for homes, alongside work with developers and partners, to push for genuinely affordable and Net-Zero homes, through robust Planning Policies embedded within the Local Plan. The Cabinet Member also informed Council that, homes were being provided that mitigated the effects of Climate Change and restoring habitats by forging strong partnerships with social and private landlords, landowners and neighbouring councils. It was noted that the land at the site referred to was relatively cheap, as it could not be built on and provided space to plant approximately half of the total trees being aimed for and that the site would remain open and accessible to the public, for activities such as walks and nature trails, so an educational asset as well as environmental. The Cabinet Member also stated that the Council remained keen to identify suitable sites

for affordable homes, but suitable land was often more expensive than land for planting and that the Council continued to lead by example, guiding Chelmsford's growth to be a greener, fairer, more connected community.

In response to a follow up question, about the amount of time it took for a decision to be made to release the figure, the Council's Monitoring Officer confirmed that a full consideration of the information law position had been required and there was a four stage test within the process that needed to be worked through logically. The Council also heard that a lesson for the future for similar requests, was that officers could treat the request as a formal information request and begin the process with the Information Governance Team, rather than the relevant service responding directly.

(7.15pm to 7.34pm)

7. Reports from the Cabinet on 28 January 2025

7.1 Local Council Tax Support Scheme

The Council was required to approve a Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2025/26. The Cabinet on 28 January 2025 had recommended that the 2024-25 scheme be retained in its current form.

RESOLVED that the Local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2024-25 be retained and adopted as the Scheme for 2025-26.

(7.35pm to 7.36pm)

7.2 Capital, Treasury and Investment Strategies for 2025/26

The Council received a report setting out a proposed approach to the management of its cash, capital investments (the capital expenditure programme) and other types of investment, including property, which the Cabinet on 28 January 2025 had recommended be adopted.

RESOLVED that the Capital, Treasury and Investment Strategies 2025/26 as submitted to the meeting be approved.

(7.37pm to 7.38pm)

7.3 Budget Report 2025/26

The Council had before it a report and recommendations from the Cabinet on the revenue budget for 2025/26 and its capital investments for that year. The proposed Council Tax resolution for the 2025/26 budget was included as part of the report.

The Cabinet Member for Finance introduced the 2025/26 budget and stated that it was a balanced budget that would allow services to be maintained and improved in areas such as the Council's leisure centres. The Cabinet Member also stated Council Tax would be increased by 3% in line with other years, but that financial support from the Government continued to fall. The Council heard that the budget had been very difficult to set and that the Council's finances had been under significant pressure for nearly five years, due to covid, huge inflation and the housing crisis. The Council were informed that Local Government finance was simply unsustainable, that some Council's had run out of money and promised help from the Government on employers National Insurance contributions, had turned out to be a third of what was required to cover the increased contributions. The Council were also informed that Local Government Reorganisation, introduced new risks, new one-off costs that the Government expected Council's to meet from existing budgets, so a plan would be made to ensure services could continue to be delivered. The Cabinet Member stated that the previous and current Government had not helped Local Government, but reminded the Council, that the recent peer review had found the Council to be delivering commendable outcomes to its residents and the proposed budget would allow that to continue.

Concerns were raised against the budget by opposition members including, the introduction of garden waste collection charges, choices made on certain elements of Capital expenditure, the redevelopment of Chelmer Waterside stretching the Council's finances, how LGR should mean a rethink of capital spending, previous property sales that raised revenue for the Council and that this should be carefully considered for the future. The Council also heard concerns about specific sites that could have been used for housing and examples where green sites were being purchased instead of housing sites, despite the housing crisis which should be met in a dynamic manner. The Council also heard about the healthy reserves left by the previous administration, which were now being spent at an alarming rate, leading to higher costs for residents.

The Council also heard further criticism of the garden waste collection charges, that anything past 2027-28 was irrelevant due to LGR and that the Council would be a victim of it's own success as other nearby Council's were in worse financial positions. Concerns were also raised about the cost of borrowing, which would only be offset by the garden waste charge and concerns about the impact of MRP. The Council also heard concerns about the resources used for a recent planning application for affordable homes that was rejected and a lack of joined up thinking around the application, which could have saved time and resources. The Council were also told to only spend on projects that could be afforded.

In response to the concerns raised, the Council also heard views about there not being an alternative to introducing garden waste collection charges if a balanced budget was to be set and why no alternative budget had been submitted by any opposition groups, so there could have been alternatives to debate.

The Leader of the Council also responded to the points raised. They highlighted the significant challenges faced in recent years, the fact that they and their predecessors could not control a large part of income that was set by Government at amounts too low, unexpected expenditure set on Council's, a lack of Government support and restrictions on how property could be invested in. The Council also heard that not a single proposal to amend the budget had been put forward by opposition groups and

that there did not need to be a choice between housing or the environment, as the proposed budget achieved both. The Council were also informed that the Theatre had now broken even for the first time ever, the leisure team had doubled turnover in five years and the garden waste charge had raised £1m of revenue within a month. The Council also heard that the recent peer challenge had recognised the Council as one of the best in the Country, with clear leadership from it's officers and political administration and that investments in facilities such as Dovedales and new co working facilities, would continue with the proposed budget.

The Cabinet Member for Finance also summed up and responded to the points that had been raised. They stated that the Capital programme was affordable, the proposed budget was balanced. They also stated that the claim about squandering reserves was incorrect and that reserves were now higher than in 2019. The Council also heard that without the income from the garden waste charges, the proposed budget would simply not have been balanced so the charge was necessary and that strong financial management would continue to be delivered by the administration, in line with the feedback from the peer review.

Councillors Chambers and Scott left the meeting before the vote on this item.

On being put to the vote, the budget proposed in the report to the meeting was approved, with the voting being as follows:

For the motion: Cllrs Aduwim, Bugbee, D Clark, H Clark, Davey, A Davidson, C Davidson, Deakin, Dudley, Eley, Franks, Foster, Frasca, Fuller, M Goldman, S Goldman, Hall, Hawkins, Knight, Lardge, Lee, Mascot, Moore, Pooley, Rajesh, Robinson, Sherlock, A Sosin, J Sosin, Taylor, Tron, Walsh and Young

Against the motion: Cllrs Armstrong, Bonnett, Canning, P Clark, Davis, Dobson, Hyland, Jeapes, O'Brien, Pappa, Raven, Sismey, Steel, Thorpe-Apps and Whitehead

Abstained: Cllrs Potter and Sullivan

RESOLVED that;

1. That the Council notes the report of the Section 151 Officer on the risks and robustness of the budget in **Section 8 (Appendix 1)**.
2. That the Council approves:
 - A. The budget report in **Appendix 1**, including:
 - i. The new Revenue and Capital investments and delegations in Council Services in Section 5.
 - ii. The Revenue Budgets in Section 10 and Capital Budgets in Section 11
 - iii. An increase to the average level of Council Tax for the City Council increasing the average annual Band D Council Tax to £228.07 in Section 9
 - iv. The reserves and notes the budget forecast shown in Section 7

v. Special expenses, Parish tier Councils precepts as identified in Section 9, Table 22.

vi. Delegation to the Chief Executive to agree after consultation with the Leader of the Council the pay award for 2025/26 within the normal financial delegations.

B. The Council Tax Resolution in Appendix 2 which fulfils the legal requirements to set a Council Tax for 2025/26.

(7.39pm to 8.27pm)

8. Pay Policy Statement for 2025/26

The Council was requested formally to approve the annual Pay Policy Statement in accordance with Section 38 of the Localism Act 2011.

RESOLVED that the Pay Policy Statement for 2025-26 be approved.

(8.27pm to 8.28pm)

9. Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The annual report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the activity of the scrutiny function of the Council for 2023/24 was submitted for information.

The report outlined the Committee's main areas of work over the past year, which had included updates from Cabinet Members, and performance reviews of individual services. The Committee had also received the annual presentation on the work of Essex Police and the Safer Chelmsford Partnership. Officers were thanked for their support throughout the year.

The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee also reflected on the comments from the recent peer review and highlighted that matters needed to be looked at before decisions were taken, that a sharpening up of the scrutiny process at the Council was required and acknowledged the training that would be taking place.

RESOLVED that the Annual Report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for 2023-24 be approved for publication.

(8.28pm to 8.31pm)

The meeting closed at 8.31pm

Mayor