

**MINUTES OF  
CHELMSFORD CITY COUNCIL CABINET**

on 8 October 2024 at 7pm

Present:

**Cabinet Members**

Councillor S Robinson, Leader of the Council (Chair)  
Councillor L Foster, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a Fairer Chelmsford  
Councillor C Davidson, Cabinet Member for Finance  
Councillor N Dudley, Cabinet Member for an Active Chelmsford  
Councillor D Eley, Cabinet Member for a Safer Chelmsford  
Councillor R Moore, Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford

**Cabinet Deputies**

Councillor S Goldman, Cabinet Deputy for Economic Development and Strategic Projects  
Councillor J Lardge, Cabinet Deputy for Cultural Services

**Opposition Spokespersons**

Councillors, J Armstrong, J Jeapes, J. Raven, M Steel, A Thorpe Apps and R Whitehead

Also present: Councillors H. Clark, Hyland and A. Sosin

**1. Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Dobson and Sherlock.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

Members of the Cabinet were reminded to declare at the appropriate time any interests in any of the items of business on the meeting's agenda.

**3. Minutes and Decisions Called-in**

The minutes of the meeting on 10 September 2024 were confirmed as a correct record. No decisions had been called in.

## 4. Public Questions

[One public question had been submitted in advance, relating to Rectory Lane East Car Park and can be viewed via this link.](#)

The Cabinet were asked how the public had been consulted on the loss of the car park and if so, what had the result been. They were also asked why the car park was being removed when it would be the first car park for anyone entering the city via Regiment way or Chelmer Valley Road, where more houses were planned in North Chelmsford.

In response to the question raised, the Deputy Leader stated that the site had been included in the Local Plan and in the current review, where there had been opportunities for public comments. The Cabinet also heard that the planning process was an open one and the comments by the public had led to the recent application being considered by the Planning Committee. The Cabinet were also informed that the car park in question had 60 of the 3100 spaces across the Council's Car parks, and there were two other car parks within a few minutes of it. The Deputy Leader also referred to the two new car parks at Beaulieu Station and noted that many residents in those areas would park there in the future to commute via train, instead of using Chelmsford station and the car parks in the City Centre. The Deputy Leader also emphasised the importance of allocating the site as housing, due to the high number of households in temporary accommodation, and the need for more affordable housing in a City Centre location.

## 5. Members' Questions

At this point of the meeting, Cabinet Members were asked questions by members of the opposition.

Cllr Jeapes asked a question on why the old pool site at Riverside had not yet been sold to reduce the cost of the scheme and to build apartments on it, thereby obtaining affordable housing at the same time. They also asked why it had laid dormant for over five years and what plans were in place to bring it into use as soon as possible. In response the Deputy Leader stated that whilst it may look like nothing had happened with the site, it had been allocated in the Local Plan and a vast amount of work had been undertaken to explore the possible sale and use of the site. The Cabinet also heard that the value of the site would be greatly enhanced once planning permission had been granted and officers were exploring and working through issues with the site before applying for planning permission. The Cabinet were also informed that the Environment Agency had changed their requirements on flooding, which therefore had been taken into consideration. The Leader of the Council also stated that previously developed brownfield sites were difficult to develop due to the existing land value of such sites, the world economy had changed greatly since 2019 especially with building costs having risen hugely and that a range of design options were being looked at.

Cllr Steel asked a question regarding the significant number of vacant dwellings in the public sector nationally that were left vacant, if these vacancies were monitored by the City Council and if so what the latest figures were. They also noted that the Local Government Association estimated that there were 1 million unoccupied properties across England and if the Council were monitoring this and had a strategy regarding it. They also asked if the Council knew how many empty private rental properties there were in Chelmsford. In response the Deputy Leader stated that regular meetings were held with registered providers and they did not think

there was a major issue with vacant properties from registered providers in Chelmsford. The Cabinet also heard that privately owned vacant properties were monitored by the Council and this had last been reviewed at a strategic level in 2021 and would be reviewed again in 2025. The Deputy Leader also referenced the changes made to Council Tax reductions to encourage empty properties to be brought back into use and highlighted the various powers available to the Council. The Cabinet also heard that the average time CHP properties were vacant could be looked into and that Councillors could raise any specific cases with them. The Leader of the Council also stated there were less vacant CHP properties than a few years before and that it was very difficult and costly to track down the owners of long term vacant properties.

Other questions were asked by opposition members under the relevant items already on the agenda.

## 6.1 Annual Financial Review 2024/25 (Finance)

### Declarations of interest:

None.

### Summary:

The Cabinet were provided with an update on the Council's overall financial outlook for current and future years and were requested to agree or vary the proposals contained within the report. The Cabinet were informed of the budget forecast and the proposals within the report which were to be used as a basis to prepare the 2025/26 budget. The actions recommended to achieve a balanced 2025/26 were to review capital spending to ensure it remained affordable, to continue to explore options to reduce the costs of providing services, to review fees and charges, to continue pressing Government to provide more financial support or open up additional options for funding local government and if they were not sufficient, to explore a charge for the collection of garden waste. The Cabinet were also asked to approve the amended capital programme.

The Cabinet Member for Finance stated that Local Government finance was an issue across the country as Governments over a long period had not funded local authorities sufficiently. It was hoped the Autumn Budget would assist, but the Council needed to find its own way to fill the budget shortfall and maintain services. The Cabinet Member stated that the Council had managed its finances well during the year, spending was below budget in some areas, but there were still trends leading to large budget gaps each year, due to rising temporary accommodation, fuel and staffing costs. The Cabinet Member stated that a balanced budget for 2025/26 would be presented at Full Council in February 2025 and that before then the financial support from Government should be clearer, but actions were required for if the support was not sufficient. The Cabinet Member referred to the actions detailed in the report, and highlighted two areas, a review of the levels of service provision to determine they remained affordable and the development of a scheme to charge for the collection of garden waste. The Cabinet Member also called for support from the Government to act on the crisis in Local Government finance.

### Options:

To agree or vary the proposals contained within the report whilst paying regard to the financial sustainability of any amendments.

### Preferred option and reasons:

To accept the report's projections and recommendations. The report outlined the likely financial outcomes based on current approved policy and budgets.

### Discussion:

The Leader of the Opposition acknowledged that the report was a statement of the current position and that there were multiple difficult decisions that would need to be taken. They also stated that they did not expect sufficient support for Councils from the Government. The Cabinet heard that the opposition felt a lack of information and underlying financial numbers had been presented on recent land and property decisions and they queried the use of small sites for new housing when larger sites remained vacant. The Cabinet also heard that the opposition were of the view that capital strategy should be reappraised by the Cabinet. and changes to fees and charges would not be sufficient to balance the budget. Instead a further look at the corporate strategy on property matters could achieve additional and rapid capital sales whilst also providing additional affordable housing which would reduce the Council's Homelessness costs.. The Cabinet also noted the request for a Car Parking strategy which was going to be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Cabinet Member for Finance was also asked by another member whether, capital spending could be deferred for future years and if the Government could be canvassed to require CIL contributions to be paid in advance to Council's.

In response to the points raised, the Cabinet Member for Finance stated that, they were and would continue to look at what capital spending could be deferred and if all planned spending could be achieved within the initially planned timescales. They also informed the Cabinet that the proposals detailed in the report, were in effect what the opposition had asked them to do, as they would be reviewing the Capital Programme to reduce costs where appropriate. The Cabinet Member stated that they had noted the opposition's comments and would consider them when preparing the budget proposals for February 2025. The Leader of the Council also highlighted the difficulty in building works in recent years due to rising costs and that in the response to the draft National Planning Policy Framework proposals, they had asked for mandated build out rates to assist with CIL collection.

RESOLVED that;

1. the financial forecast be noted and used as a basis to prepare the 2025/26 budget. In particular, that Cabinet;
  - review capital spending to ensure it remains affordable;
  - continue to explore options to reduce the costs of providing services;
  - review fees and charges;
  - continue pressing the Government to provide more financial support or open up additional options for funding local government;
  - in case these actions are not sufficient for a balanced 2025-26 budget to be set, consider how a new charge for collecting garden waste could be introduced.
2. the amended capital programme be approved (appendix 2)

(7.18pm to 7.42pm)

## 7.1 Declaration of John Shennan Field as a Local Nature Reserve (Greener Chelmsford)

### Declarations of interest:

None.

### Summary:

The Cabinet were asked to consider declaring John Shennan Field as a Local Nature Reserve and to register the LNR with Natural England. The Cabinet were informed that making the declaration would help the Council meet the objectives and targets set in the Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan and the Green Infrastructure Plan.

The Cabinet Member for Greener Chelmsford stated that they were very pleased to be in a position to recommend the declaration and the excellent work of the parks team and other officers involved should be acknowledged. They informed the Cabinet that the area was the only green space in the densely populated Moulsham Lodge Ward and that it was close to schools and was a vital component in connecting habitats to other ones. The Cabinet also heard that the declaration met the Council's strategic objectives and that the site had been removed from the Local Plan back in July 2019, to protect the important green space for residents. The Cabinet Member also stated that there was a significant social value from high quality green spaces and that it would allow nature to prosper. The Cabinet also heard that as the site was within the Council's ownership, they would be able to involve the community who had contributed so greatly to the space and encourage corridors for wildlife. The Cabinet Member stated that the declaration would be an important step in meeting the Council's priorities.

### Options:

1. Declare John Shennan Field as a Local nature Reserve and register the LNR with Natural England on the national register of LNR's.
2. Not make such a declaration.

### Preferred option and reasons:

The preferred option was to make the declaration and complete the registration process in pursuit of the City Council's Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan and the Green Infrastructure Plan adopted as part of the Local Plan. This also accorded with the Our Chelmsford Our Plan priority to implement measures to protect and expand natural green spaces, improve habitat value and increase biodiversity.

### Discussion:

The Opposition spokesperson for Greener Chelmsford thanked officers for the production of the report and for the hard work of volunteers at the site, which had led to a green space that Natural England were happy to support as an LNR. The Cabinet were informed however, that they did not view a declaration as necessary and that it would remove a wide variety of opportunities to use the site in the future. They informed the Cabinet that no changes to the current maintenance of the site were being proposed and therefore, why did the declaration need to be made. They also informed the Cabinet that the land value could be damaged, income could not be diversified on the site, such as from solar panels and areas such as the car parks and play areas had been included in the designation site. The Cabinet also heard

that the site had previously been a landfill site so had considerable underlying issues and the designation would restrict further improvements in the future.

In response the Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford stated that the status would safeguard the area, provide opportunities for other projects such as an urban forest and the administration had set out to protect and enhance areas for the benefit of nature as well as those living in the communities. They also stated that there were concerns about the quality of the land underneath the field but that did not prevent them from ensuring the land above was as enriched as possible. They also informed the Cabinet that the parks team would continue to carry out the management plan for the site. The Cabinet also heard from one of the Ward Members for Moulsham Lodge, who thanked officers and residents for their hard work in planting thousands of trees on the site and highlighted the importance of the only green space in the area, that needed to be protected for future generations.

The Leader of the Opposition also stated that the decision could be called in and highlighted the housing crisis, where the site in question due to being under Council ownership could instead be used for housing rather than a local nature reserve. They also highlighted a lack of other options in the report and stated that the housing crisis was more important for the Council than declaring an LNR. The Cabinet were also asked by another member, if any business case figures or social value reporting had been seen and if the site was a maintenance cost or a revenue earning opportunity instead. They were also asked if a nature reserve was a higher priority than affordable housing.

In response to the further points, the Deputy Leader stated that the site was contaminated and building on the site would not be viable in terms of achieving affordable housing and that despite the importance of providing much needed affordable housing, they could not simply build on every site. The Cabinet Member for a Greener Chelmsford also stated that the site would require significant remediation works, therefore leading to developers providing less affordable housing on the site and highlighted the importance of retaining the only green space in the area.

RESOLVED that;

1. Cabinet supported the declaration of John Shennan Field as a Local Nature Reserve and;
2. Requested that the site is listed on the Natural England register of Local Nature Reserves.

(7.43pm to 8.02pm)

## 8. Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

## 9. Reports to Council

No reports were subject of a recommendation to Council.

The meeting closed at 8.03pm

Chair