

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCILLORS' REPORT



Report Reference C-22-30
Meeting Date 6th March 2023
Agenda Item 7
Prepared by Cllrs Tony Dean and Stewart Gardiner

No report was received from Cllr Abel at the point papers were dispatched.

REPORT OF CLLR TONY DEAN

OVERVIEW

All the activity in Council committees has been about the draft budget produced recently by the administration. The draft budget is all about how the administration is proposing to make the necessary operational savings in 2023/24, caused mainly by overspending their operational budget this financial year, most notably on Adults and Health and on Children. All committees were a little taken back by the draft, as the savings outlined in it had not been discussed (never mind chosen by/voted on) in Committee, which meant they all came 'out of the blue'. Most Committees then had their meetings where they were 'consulted', and not surprisingly there were many objections to many of the savings ideas - just one example being the closure of the Stanley Centre in Knutsford, which was certainly a shock to everybody.

The full council meeting to discuss and vote on the draft budget (or MTFs as CEC call it) is Wednesday 22nd February, no doubt your CEC members can report back on it and the result of the vote.

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

My committee had several areas where savings are proposed, totalling over £5m. The first one of note is the proposal to charge residents for green waste collection next financial year (from April 1, 2023). There were many objections, as people see this as one area where CEC does well. Having said that, many other Councils are taking advantage of this 'loophole' to charge for this service, the shock to us was that it has never before been mooted by CEC, Library hours are proposed to be reduced, again many objections in Committee. Pre-application meetings for Planning applications are chargeable and these charges will be increased, although there were less objections to this proposal. Spending on the 'Net Zero' programme is being reduced from last year, again some surprise as we appear to be 'behind the curve' on this programme. There were other, less controversial, areas where savings are proposed but you get the gist.

One poor councillor (a committee member) seemed to see all the objections as a personal attack on her (not sure why as she is not Chair), and she had a minor tantrum in the meeting about her being 'absolutely fed up of all these people moaning about the proposed savings without coming up with alternatives'. I had already requested a proper consultation in autumn 2023 where the committee is involved in choosing from a menu of options as to where the savings should be made, and I stated to Cllr X afterwards that this would solve her issue - the savings in the draft would then be 'ours' and not 'theirs' or 'hers' - this year's savings were chosen by a meeting of committee chairs in a smoke filled

room at Westfields (only ruling coalition councillors involved). I have been told that this is the official system, but it leaves the new committee system a long way from the much 'greater involvement of individual Councillors' promised at inception, and Cllr X with her victimisation complex still in place for next year. The issue of 'alternatives' is also difficult. Unless a councillor or a group of councillors has access to significant time from a senior financial officer, and access to the latest spending patterns across the board, it is impossible to form an 'alternative' budget that stacks up. These things are not available currently to the 'opposition'. It's therefore unrealistic to turn to a councillor who queries, say, the closure of the Stanley Centre, and ask them to suggest an alternative 'saving' that is backed by sound figures.

Now we move on to the May election as purdah approaches!

REPORT OF CLLR STEWART GARDINER

There have been two meetings of Full Council at Cheshire East since the last KTC Full Council meeting. The first deal solely with the report by Grant Thornton report into issues relating to the former Leader Michael Jones and the awarding of a contract to 'Core Fit'.

Although I voted to accept the report, I did raise concern with Grant Thornton at the enquiry's failure to interview the former Director of Adult Social Care and the Director Public Health, both of whom I knew raised this issue with Senior Managers at the Council well in advance of the matter being formally investigated.

Additionally, I was concerned at the limited reference being made to the work of Cllr Rachel Bailey and the former Acting Chief Executive to address the points raised and to put in place protocols and procedures to prevent a recurrence of such events and to protect staff.

In my mind this did not give a full explanation to the wider public as to how this matter was handled by the new leader, other cabinet members and senior officers to address the problems brought about by Mr Jones.

More recently the Council met to agree the budget for the financial a year April 23-March 24, the Council proposed to increase Council Tax for the second year running to the maximum 4.99% allowed by the Government.

This Council Tax increase was coupled with a reduction in several service areas, including identifying a potential saving of about £300,000 by closing the Stanley Centre. I have received direct contact from several service users and their family members asking me to fight this proposal.

I have long recognised the benefit of the Stanley Centre for our vulnerable older residents and have fought against its proposed closure in the past and I intend to continue to do so until a better facility to sever the needs of its clientele and others is available. To this end I spoke against its 'suggested' closure at full Council and voted against the budget which identified its closure as a 'saving'.

I have also asked the Chair of the Adults & Health Committee for the future of the Stanley Centre to be tabled at the next Adults Committee next month. I was disappointed to hear that as it was not on the Committee's work programme this cannot happen. However please be assured that I will not allow a committee protocol from raising the issue at that meeting a month from today. At that meeting I will also hopefully have an opportunity to ask our NHS colleagues about how matters are progressing on our long promised new medical centre.

The Strategic Planning Board is meeting twice in March, but neither of the major planning applications

waiting determination within Knutsford is on the March 1st Agenda and there is no guarantee they will be on the agendas later in the month, or on that in late April.