

REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCILLORS' REPORT



Report Reference C-23-25
Meeting Date 15th January 2024
Agenda Item 6
Prepared by Borough Councillors Coan, Dean and Gardiner

REPORT OF CLLR PETER COAN

No report received.

REPORT OF CLLR TONY DEAN

FINANCIAL MESS

After just four and a half years of Labour control, Cheshire East is hurtling towards Section 114 declaration (equivalent to bankruptcy in a private company). It is fair to say that it's not all their fault as there are laws about what must be provided for children for example, and the costs of providing these requirements are going through the roof. But they woke up to this looming crisis far too late and even now there are steps that should be being taken that aren't in place.

The Conservative group has put forward a further set of (quite drastic, for that is what is now needed) proposals to save money and increase revenue quickly. Finance Officers have these already and they will be presented to the full Council as our alternative budget in February.

EVERYBODY HEALTH AND LEISURE (EHL)

The proposal to close four Leisure Centres in the north of the Borough was voted down after an opposition led revolt in the November meeting of the Environment and Communities Committee.

Unfortunately, a different consultation document has now been published which does not directly advocate closures but will still have them in the armoury as a 'last resort'. I would ask you to encourage all residents to respond to this latest consultation, demanding no closures. I have asked fellow Councillors, and more importantly the officers serving the committee, to look hard for alternative savings and income, and 'fight like a cornered Gurkha' to keep all our treasured leisure Centres open.

Hopefully they will respond accordingly. The reason leisure centres are a Council financial issue, rather than an EHL one, is the way EHL is set up. They receive a small management fee from the Council and all the usage fees, and pay the staff at the centres. The owners of EHL, Cheshire East Council, pay all the maintenance and utility costs for all the buildings directly - between £125k and £350k per building per annum. The savings in annual costs to the Council by closing centres are therefore obvious, but I am sure better ways can be found to reduce costs and increase income in these areas. A list of proposals have been put forward to officers by EHL and a separate list by the Conservative group within its wider budget proposals.

GREEN BIN CHARGES AND OTHER CURRENT ISSUES

Now the 'green bin' reality has hit, my inbox is filling up once again with Green Bin Charge complaints of various kinds, and it's keeping me busy.

I also note the KTC opposition to the current proposals to move the pedestrian crossing on the A50 near Canute Roundabout further south. I agree that it would be better as a simple zebra crossing, as another set of crossing lights on that section of King Edward Road would be unsightly and would cause further traffic queues.

REPORT OF CLLR STEWART GARDINER

THE COUNCIL'S FINANCES.

Despite speculation in the press that Cheshire East is potentially heading towards the issuing of a Section 114 Notice; and indication that it is unable to fund its committed expenditure, the Interim Chief Executive was confident when briefing members at the end of December that the necessary savings etc would be found to prevent this occurring in the current financial year (April 23-24). However, he was less confident that a balanced budget could be achieved for 2024-25 without a significant shift in how the Council's services are delivered or a major uplift in the Council's income.

In conclusion he stated that moving forward there would have to be some exceedingly difficult decisions taken by the Council and they were unlikely to meet with public approval. One of the options offices are looking at is to shift more service provision (or its funding) towards Town and Parish Councils – this is likely to be an option that will be brought forward as part of the budget planning process in the next few months.

We need to be very mindful that many of the proposals will form part of the consultation on the MTFs moving forward and if we are not to be blind-sided as a Town Council, we will need to undertake a thorough examination of the proposals and their potential impact upon Knutsford and the Town Council's policy objectives.

THE NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE

At Full Council in December the appointment of Rob Polkinghorne as the New Chief Executive – he takes up his position this month. Mr Polkinghorne comes to Cheshire East with a wealth of Local Authority experience from across the country, including as Chief Executive in a small Essex Authority.

PLANNING

At full Council in December the Administration's proposals to abolish the Strategic Planning Board were rejected in favour of a cross-party proposal which I sponsored with Labour's Fiona Wilson for a retention of three Planning Boards, albeit meeting less frequently: with Strategic meeting by-monthly and the Northern & Southern Planning Boards meeting every six weeks. This equates to the same number of meetings per year as that set out within the Administration's proposal and as such should be cost-neutral, but without the risks of potential legal challenges presented by the proposal originally tabled.

As has been widely reported, at December SPB the Board unanimously voted to refuse the proposals for the Land at Longridge on the grounds that using land designated as Green Belt to secure vehicular access to the allocated did not constitute very special circumstances to allow the release of further Green Belt land. Additionally, that the merits of developing the site to provide a development which would be fully integrated with the existing housing in the vicinity were possible without a total

redesign of the sites access and prospective layout. Furthermore, that the benefits of the proposal were not sufficient to outweigh the loss of a critical area or local ecological value.

I was pleased to see how the Town Council, local amenity groups and individual objectors put forward carefully thought out and cogent arguments against the proposal development at the SPB meeting and I believe this helped determine the way several of my colleagues voted.

It is probable that the applicants will appeal the decision and it will be important that those who spoke at committee all tried to attend and make representations to the appeal, which is likely to be at a public Inquiry. There may also be a further application submitted for the site, so we need to watch this space.

THE STANLEY CENTRE

I understand that the Council's decision to close the Centre has been subject to an application for the decision to be referred to the Courts by an impacted person to request a Judicial Review. Whilst this legal process is pending the Council cannot progress matters.

LEISURE CENTRE

The consultation period has now ended and a fresh report on the outcome and a report on the outcome of the consultation and subsequent proposals for the delivery of leisure services across Cheshire East will be presented shortly.