

**Confirmed**



Minutes of a Meeting of the **Cabinet** held via Remote Meeting via Zoom , on **Tuesday, 02 February 2021 at 6:30 pm**

**Members of the Cabinet present:**

Councillor Norman Brooks, Councillor Stephen Burroughes, Councillor Maurice Cook, Councillor Steve Gallant, Councillor Richard Kerry, Councillor James Mallinder, Councillor David Ritchie, Councillor Craig Rivett, Councillor Mary Rudd, Councillor Letitia Smith

**Other Members present:**

Councillor Paul Ashdown, Councillor Stuart Bird, Councillor Peter Byatt, Councillor Alison Cackett, Councillor Judy Cloke, Councillor Tony Cooper, Councillor Linda Coulam, Councillor Mike Deacon, Councillor Louise Gooch, Councillor Tracey Green, Councillor Mark Jepson, Councillor Rachel Smith-Lyte, Councillor Caroline Topping, Councillor Steve Wiles

**Officers present:** Stephen Baker (Chief Executive), Kerry Blair (Head of Operations), John Brown (Building Maintenance Manager), Karen Cook (Democratic Services Manager), Vicky Cotterill (Environmental Health Officer), Laura Hack (Delivery Manager), Andrew Jarvis (Strategic Director), Bridget Law (Programme Manager), Fern Lincoln (Housing Needs Service Manager), Matt Makin (Democratic Services Officer), Sue Meeken (Political Group Support Officer (Labour)), Brian Mew (Chief Finance Officer & Section 151 Officer), Agnes Ogundiran (Conservative Political Group Support Officer), Chris Phillips (Senior Estates Surveyor), Lorraine Rogers (Deputy Chief Finance Officer), Amber Welham (Senior Accountant), Paul Wood (Head of Economic Development and Regeneration)

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**1 Apologies for Absence**

There were no apologies for absence.

**2 Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Rivett declared a local non pecuniary interest in respect of agenda item 6, Civil Penalty Policy (Amendment), as a landlord.

**3 Announcements**

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Communities, Leisure and Tourism announced that the EAST Bags (Everyone Active, Supported Together) were now being distributed across the whole of East Suffolk; these were for older people who were

living alone or caring for someone who had been identified as being at risk of loneliness and / or social isolation by ESC Communities' Team and local organisations and groups working with the team. The EAST Bags were a very simple yet effective way for ESC to reach out to those who were struggling, particularly during the cold and dark winter months. It was hoped that this initiative would encourage people to stay active, mentally and physically, during this challenging time.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing announced that the Housing Revenue Account had launched its My Home Digital Portal for all ESC residents in social housing, which would allow them to use their digital devices to set up their own accounts, where they could manage their direct debits, rents, and report any problems etc. Councillor Kerry added that, for those who did not have access to digital devices, the telephone service remained in place.

#### **4 Minutes RESOLVED**

That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 5 January 2021 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

#### **5 Building Materials Supply Contract**

Cabinet received report **ES/0657** by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, who reported that ESC had retained social housing stock of around 4,500 properties for rent, generating around £20m per annum income to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The HRA was ringfenced and could only be used for the provision of housing, new developments, maintenance and other services on behalf of tenants. ESC had various workstreams in place to undertake a wide range of maintenance, refurbishment and improvement programmes to its social housing stock. Many of these workstreams were undertaken by the Council's retained in-house workforce, keeping homes in good condition for tenants. In order to undertake necessary and ongoing repair and maintenance activities, Councillor Kerry reported, there was clearly a need to purchase a wide range of building materials and the current building material supplies contract would expire in 2021. The report before Cabinet sought permission to re-procure a new contract for the supply of general building materials, in accordance with contract procedure rules and procurement legislation.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing reported that the Council would of course look at the credentials of all companies that wanted to tender for the work, to ensure that they had their own green policies in place. However, he added that, in some cases, work had to be of a reactive nature and in those circumstances it would not always be possible to take full account of green policies / credentials. Councillor Kerry gave a recent example of where this had happened.

In conclusion, Councillor Kerry gave thanks to the Housing Maintenance Manager, John Brown, for all of his work over many years. Councillor Kerry reported that John would soon be retiring from ESC and he, joined by the Leader, gave thanks and paid tribute to John. The Leader referred to the quality of the maintenance of the Council house stock being of a high standard and he referred to the excellent work of the Housing Maintenance Manager and his team.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment referred to the strong environmental vision of ESC and the fact that it had declared a Climate Emergency in 2019; this, he said, reinforced the commitment of the Council. Councillor Mallinder stated that, in looking at the environmental concerns, it was not a binary relationship, and businesses and nature could work together. Councillor Mallinder stated that ESC could lead by example and ensure that the Council's partnerships enhanced its vision. Referring to procurement, Councillor Mallinder stated that ESC could ensure that it only worked with companies that understood its vision.

Councillor Topping referred to the example given by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, where the Council had had to act in a reactive way. Councillor Topping stated that she was aware of that case and she applauded the work of the Housing and Building Teams, referring to the compassionate and swift way in which they had acted; their work had been hugely appreciated by the family involved.

Councillor Topping hoped that the procurement could be undertaken as locally as possible, thereby helping local businesses, but she fully endorsed the need for green credentials to be taken account of.

In response to a question by Councillor Byatt, it was confirmed that the contract would expire in March 2021. Councillor Byatt referred to the work of the Procurement Task and Finish Group and asked if this contract would be looked at taking account of that work. The Leader, in response, stated that the remit of that Group was to look at the overall procurement processes that ESC had ambitions to move to going forward. The Leader added that there should not be a break in supply for the Building Maintenance Team; however, the aspirations that would be contained within the procurement could be expanded, along with ESC's aspirations going forward.

Councillor Byatt referred to the contract being to supply a range of building materials for maintenance; he also referred to the ambition of the Council to build 50 houses per year, or more, and asked if the contract could be expanded in respect of greater scale and purchasing power if the Council was to purchase other materials to build houses as well as maintaining them. The Leader, in response, stated that generally, ESC would not be purchasing the bricks; very often ESC would have a development, but it would not be the provider of the bricks and mortar; ESC would be the contractor.

On the proposition of Councillor Kerry, seconded by Councillor Mallinder, it was by unanimous vote

## **RESOLVED**

That the procurement of a new contract for the supply of general building supplies be approved and delegated authority be given to the Strategic Director, in consultation with the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services and the Section 151 Officer, to award a three year contract with an option to extend (1 year, plus 1 year) with an estimated contract value of £1,260m, in line with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules (inclusive of EU procurement

legislation) and subject to terms that both protect the Council's interests and support the delivery of its Strategic Plan.

## **6 Civil Penalty Policy (Amendment)**

Cabinet received report **ES/0658** by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, who reported that ESC's Private Sector Housing Team had a duty to ensure that the housing stock within the district was of a decent standard, and to do so, had a range of tools at its disposal including the ability to issue civil penalties under the Housing and Planning Act 2016. The report before Cabinet sought to amend the existing policy applied to administer these penalties, and to introduce specific matrices for houses in multiple occupancy and new electrical safety regulations. The new policy would enable the Council to continue to effectively deal with breaches of housing legislation, as an alternative to prosecution, and it would enable the Council to consistently, and fairly, issue civil penalties for the Electrical Safety Standards (Private Rented Sector) Regulations 2020.

The Leader and the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Community Health welcomed the proposed amendment to the policy, referring to the need to ensure that residents' health and wellbeing was looked after.

Councillor Byatt welcomed the amendment to the policy; he referred to the financial penalties and alternatives to prosecution, particularly with regard to HMOs and asked if the Council would publish the names of people who breached the regulations, in order to deter others. The Leader, in response, stated that if people were taken to Court then it would be a matter for the Court to decide what information would be released; it would not be a matter for the Council. Officers added that any larger penalties that might be issued would assist in deterring other offences by landlords.

Councillor Byatt referred to agents, and asked if they were notified if any landlords were not fulfilling their obligations to tenants. Officers, in response, stated that if a landlord was subject to receiving a civil penalty on more than one occasion there was a banning list; this was a nationwide database, that was publicly available, and so this could be accessed by all agents.

On the proposition of Councillor Kerry, seconded by Councillor Rudd, it was by unanimous vote

### **RESOLVED**

That the revised Civil Penalty Policy and associated matrices be adopted.

## **7 Housing Development Strategy 2020/24**

Cabinet received report **ES/0659** by the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee which included, as an appendix, the response from the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing.

The Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee stated that the Committee was anxious to work with the Administration to explore every possible avenue in bringing forward as many council houses as possible for East Suffolk residents. Councillor Bird summarised the report, and particularly referred to the options for modular

housing, and stated that he welcomed the response by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, which fully embraced that concept and wished to proactively explore that option wherever possible. Councillor Bird provided an example of what results could be achieved by modern modular construction, referring to two new colleges that were being constructed that would provide 1480 student rooms in 18 residential blocks; a modular construction method was being employed; the first block consisting of four floors, containing 63 rooms, was built and fitted out in 26 days. Councillor Bird felt that this example would greatly assist ESC, wherever possible, in bringing forward as many council homes as possible where they were desperately needed.

The Leader, after thanking the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee, asked the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing if he wished to make any comments. Councillor Kerry stated that he thoroughly endorsed the recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee.

The Leader, in conclusion, stated that he welcomed the work of the Scrutiny Committee and the way that the Committee could assist Cabinet in its ambitions to deliver greater results for East Suffolk. The Leader asked Councillor Bird to thank the Committee for its work.

Councillor Byatt referred to the engagement event to be held at the end of October, with the aim of investigating possible models for greener housing developments, and asked if all members could be invited to attend this. Councillor Byatt also referred to the ambition of ESC to build 50 homes per annum; he commented that building more than 50 homes would be preferable. The Leader, in response, stated that ESC would continue to build as many houses as possible, in a sustainable way.

Again, the Leader thanked the Scrutiny Committee for its work, and he thanked the Chairman of the Scrutiny Committee for presenting the report.

## **8 Freeport East Submission**

Cabinet received report **ES/0660** by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development, who reported that in February 2020 Government launched the Freeports initiative aimed at boosting economic growth by creating special economic zones around ports which would provide an array of business incentives. This policy was designed to take advantage of the UK's new economic freedoms following Brexit, contribute to the 'levelling up' agenda and support the country's economic recovery from the Covid downturn. The recently launched Freeports Prospectus set out the bidding criteria and set 5 February 2021 as the deadline for submissions.

Freeport East, a partnership of Hutchison Ports (operators of Felixstowe and Harwich ports), the upper and lower tier councils covering Felixstowe and Harwich and the LEPs covering the same geography was established to develop a bid to secure Freeport status for a zone encompassing the ports of Felixstowe and Harwich. This bid focussed on this cluster's global trade connections, intermodal connections with the Midland and North, strong links to the net zero energy generation/ use, innovation via links to BT's Adastral Park and academia, regeneration to address coastal and urban deprivation and complementary programmes to promote inclusive growth.

The key areas of economic activity within freeports, Councillor Rivett reported, would be based at the Tax and Customs sites where tax, planning and business incentives applied. Each Freeport could propose up to three of these sites and for Freeport East the chosen sites included Felixstowe Port's Logistics Park, Bathside Bay within Harwich International Port's demise and Gateway 14 owned by Mid Suffolk District Council. These sites would be the main focus for economic growth; however Freeport status would induce further growth within the surrounding area inside and outside of the Freeport.

The report before Cabinet sought approval for the Freeport on the basis that it would directly contribute to the Council's Strategic Plan objectives of enabling economic growth and in light of the Covid downturn such growth was an even greater priority. Freeport status would also strengthen the current competitive advantage within the ports and logistics sector as well as strengthening existing and emerging sectors in low/zero carbon energy and not least ESC's ambitions around establishing a hydrogen economy within the district.

The Leader firstly acknowledged the amount of work that had taken place, which he commented had been heavily supported by ESC. He further commented that it would have a huge financial / economical benefit to the East Suffolk district, and to the district of Tendring of course.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing very much welcomed the report; he referenced the confidence in the industry but added that Freeport status would enhance that confidence.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment very much welcomed the report; he referred to the Port having a strong environmental record. He also referred to what he strongly believed in; when looking at the environment, it was not a binary relationship; businesses did not have to be chosen over trees, they could and should work together. This, Councillor Mallinder concluded, was another example of how the two could work together, with the strong polices of Felixstowe Port.

Councillor Smith-Lyte commented that she had read a report from the Wildlife and Countryside Link; she commented that in its summary it said that the Government consultation document did not seem to cover or consider evidence from freeports in other countries, which demonstrated that lax application processes and regulation, and poor enforcement, for opaque customs processes had led to serious environmental degradation, because of course environmental issues were not just about decarbonising, although that was important Councillor Smith-Lyte added, it was also about wildlife, ecology, and flora and fauna etc. The Deputy Leader, in response, drew members' attention to paragraph 3.19 and Appendix B of the report, that addressed some of the concerns raised.

Councillor Deacon commented that he was very excited by the proposals contained within the report; he did ask for an explanation in respect of the tax free area around the the port and officers, in response, confirmed that the tax and customs were combined; there were three across the whole of the Freeport zone: one at Felixstowe

Logistics Park; one at Bathside Bay; and one at Gateway 14. That was where the focus of the activity would be and where the tax, customs, business and planning benefits would apply. That accounted for approximately 120 hectares in terms of development land; however that would energise the wider sector too.

Commenting on the points made by Councillor Smith-Lyte, and to help put her mind at rest, Councillor Deacon said that when the Port extended some time ago there was a huge loss of very valuable mudflats; to compensate for that, the Port provided a new wetland that was and continued to be very successful. Councillor Deacon was very confident that mitigation would take place.

Councillor Wiles stated that a post-Brexit Britain needed innovative thinking and he added that the regional benefit of Freeport status in this area was one that should be strongly supported. The Freeport draft submission not only showed the Council's support and confidence, it also sent out a strong message of what a successful Freeport could and would deliver.

Councillor Byatt welcomed the report; he referred to the reference that the Freeport would have portside manufacturing hubs for offshore energy; he asked if some of the work from Lowestoft would be displaced towards the Freeport. Officers, referring to the offshore energy industry, commented that Harwich Port's focus had been on the most southerly developments in the north sea, and they already had an operations and maintenance base at Harwich. There was growth in the industry and there was enough growth for all ports, and more.

Councillor Byatt asked, if the bid was to be rejected at this time, would there be another opportunity to submit a further bid. The Leader, in response, commented that if the bid was not successful, then the work that had been undertaken would still have significant benefits to the Port and its allied logistics. Officers added that the Government had initially limited this to 10 freeports; however, it had said that if there was a compelling case, there may be more than 10. No mention had been made of further rounds of bidding.

On the proposition of Councillor Rivett, seconded by Councillor Gallant, it was by unanimous vote

## **RESOLVED**

That the Freeport East submission be approved to achieve Freeport status recognising the significant economic growth opportunities this will provide to the District and the wider economic sub-region within which East Suffolk operates.

## **9 Felixstowe Forward Transition**

Cabinet received report **ES/0661** by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development, who reported that Felixstowe Forward (FF) was established by the former Suffolk Coastal District Council (SCDC) and Felixstowe Town Council in April 2015 as an enabling and time limited initiative to deliver joined-up local economic and community development. It was now coming to the end of its second three year funding agreement and both sponsoring partners, one now being ESC and not SCDC, agreed that the closure of FF by the end of March 2021 would be

detrimental in achieving the enabling objectives in economic and community development that the initiative was established to complete.

As a result, the Deputy Leader stated, his report proposed that the current funding agreement be extended until December 2021 resulting in budget growth of £83.5k (plus potential additional costs to cover redundancy and pension costs) for ESC. By this point FF would have fully transitioned its current responsibilities in relation to business engagement/ development, tourism promotion/ brand management, community enabling, the Landguard Partnership and events management to existing and new bodies. The extension would also bring FF's tenure in line with the Leiston Together place-based initiative and allow time for ESC to undertake a comprehensive review of its approach to place-based initiatives that would be implemented from the beginning of 2022.

The Leader, speaking as a ward councillor in Felixstowe, stated that he had nothing but admiration for the work of FF, as an enabling project, that had taken forward a number of initiatives across the peninsula as well as in Felixstowe itself. The Leader added that Helen Greengrass, the Change Director, had been invaluable in delivering to date.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customers, Communities and Leisure, after agreeing with the comments of the Leader, added that she fully supported the proposal before Cabinet. Councillor Smith referred to the fantastic work that had taken place, that ESC had contributed to.

The Assistant Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development stated that extending the funding for FF support until December would enable the team to fully develop its enabling target, sending out not only a clear signal of objectives closure, but leaving future stakeholders with a much stronger base for future success.

Councillor Green stated that the Change Director and her team had been a credit to the town, the residents, businesses and visitors. Councillor Green referred to paragraph 3.9 of the report, and the reference to the Council considering an online events management application system; Councillor Green hoped that the FF Change Co-ordinator would be at the forefront of the consultation to ensure there was a robust system for event organisers and planners. The Leader commented that the FF Change Co-ordinator had been instrumental in the work and her experience would be important. Officers confirmed that she would be involved in the work. It was also confirmed that officers would be available to speak to people in person too.

Councillor Jepson commented that he had worked with FF, as Mayor of Felixstowe; he added that the support that they had given to him, and to the town, was exceptional and that, he said, was the sort of work that would need to continue during the difficult months to come. Councillor Jepson wished to put on record his thanks for everything that FF had undertaken.

Councillor Deacon welcomed the proposals within the report and added his thanks, commenting that the work of FF, under the leadership of the Change Director, had



been immense during the last few years and had made such a difference to the town.

Councillor Byatt welcomed the proposals within the report and commented that he had been privileged to have received a briefing from the Change Director, some months ago, about the work in Felixstowe.

In conclusion, the Leader stated the importance of the extension and the need for a seamless transition to new and existing bodies.

On the proposition of Councillor Rivett, seconded by Councillor Smith, it was by unanimous vote

### **RESOLVED**

That the extension of the current funding agreement for Felixstowe Forward until the end of December 2021 at a cost of £134.8k be approved.

## **10 Housing Revenue Account Budget Report 2021/22**

Cabinet received report **ES/0662** by the Cabinet Members with responsibility for Finance and Housing. The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance introduced the report, stating that it brought together the Housing Revenue Account Budget for the period 2021/22 to 2024/25, with a forecasted position for 2020/21 and a summary of its reserves and balances. The HRA budgets were fully funded from existing funds to meet the Council's HRA spending plans, including the Capital Investment Programme and reserve balances as per the HRA Financial Business Plan.

Under the new 2020 Rent Standard, local authorities could increase rents by up to Consumer Prices Index plus 1% for five years. The September CPI value must be used, which was 0.5%, giving the Council the option to increase rents by up to 1.5%. Rents would be based on a formula rent set by the Government. The Council continued to collect rent and service charges on a 50-week basis and the proposed rent gave an average weekly rent of £89.30 for 2021/22, an increase of £0.65 compared to 2020/21. Service charges could only recuperate the cost of providing a service. The proposed average weekly General Service Charge for Grouped Homes for 2021/22 was £13.26, an increase of £0.41 compared to 2020/21.

The HRA Repairs and Maintenance (R&M) programme was split between capital and revenue Councillor Cook stated; the capital element would be funded by the Major Repairs Reserve (MRR) and the revenue element would be funded from the income derived from rents. The 2021/22 housing R&M revenue budget had been set at £4.292m and this was considered sufficient to allow the Council to carry out all necessary works to maintain the decent homes standard in all its properties.

The budget proposals gave a forecast HRA working balance for 2021/22 of £5.428m, maintaining it well above the minimum acceptable limit of 10% of total income.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing referred to the Scrutiny Committee meeting that had recently taken place, where the Committee had

considered the HRA Budget report; he gave thanks to the Committee for its constructive comments.

Councillor Byatt referred to paragraph 1.5 of the report, and the reference to the Government allowing social landlords to charge a full market rent where a social tenant had an annual household income of at least £60,000; Councillor Byatt asked how it was known that incomes were above £60,000 and he asked if there was a link to HMRC for clarification purposes. Officers, in response, confirmed that the Government allowed the Council to charge full market rent to households with more income than £60k; however, it had been found that there were so few tenants in this position that the implementation of a system would cost more than the amount that would be recovered by increasing the rents.

Councillor Byatt commented on the current level of rent arrears together with the fact that there had been no evictions; he asked what was being done in respect of collecting the arrears, over a period time. Officers, in response, stated that rent arrears had crept up since the introduction of Universal Credit; however, last year was the first year that the arrears had decreased; the levels were static at the moment and it was hoped that with the implementation of the new system (predictive analytics software), together with support in place for tenants, that rent arrears would continue to decrease over time. The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance added that the enforcement was administered by Anglia Revenue Partnerships and, of course the pandemic had had a significant impact on that work; that, he said, explained the rise, which he hoped would be on a temporary basis. The Leader was pleased that ESC was now able to identify those who had difficulties, at an early stage, and offer support; ESC, he said, wanted to be a supportive and caring landlord. The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Housing, commenting on the new system in place, outlined how the new software worked and explained the many advantages, for the Council, and for the tenants. He concluded that ESC did not wish to evict tenants, unless it had to; its aim was to provide support.

Councillor Topping gave thanks to the Cabinet Members with responsibility for Finance and Housing, for their report to the Scrutiny Committee, and for answering the Committee's questions. Councillor Topping applauded the introduction of the new software system and how ESC was able to sympathetically reach out to tenants and assist them.

On the proposition of Councillor Cook, seconded by Councillor Kerry, it was by unanimous vote

## **RESOLVED**

That it be recommended to Full Council that it:

1. Approves the Housing Revenue Account Budget for 2021/22, and the indicative figures for 2022/23 to 2024/25;
2. Notes the revised outturn position for 2020/21;
3. Approves the movements in Reserves and Balances as presented in Appendix D;
4. Approves the average weekly rent for 2021/22 of £89.30 over a 50-week collection year, an average weekly increase of £0.65 or 0.74%;
5. Notes the effects of COVID-19 on the service in 2020/21;

6. Approves the Service Charges and associated fees for 2021/22, Appendix B; and
7. Notes the changes affecting public and private sector housing and welfare.

## **11 Draft General Fund Budget and Council Tax Report 2021/22**

Cabinet received report **ES/0663** by the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance relating to the draft General Fund Budget for 2021/22 and the updated Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as at January 2021.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance reminded Cabinet that it considered the draft MTFS on 1 December 2020. Since then, it had been continually revised with updates.

The report presented a balanced position for the current year and for 2021/22; this was achieved by the use of reserves. For the current year £2.001m was being used from the In-Year Savings reserve; for 2021/22 the budget gap of £3.167m was being met from the In-Year Savings reserve (£2.269m) and from the Business Rates Equalisation reserve (£0.898m). This meant that all of the In-Year Saving reserve has been committed.

Councillor Cook drew members' attention to section 6 and Appendix A6 of Appendix A of the report and commented that it provided details on the Council's reserves position. From April 2022 to April 2025, the average total on the Council's Earmarked Reserves is £27m, plus a General Fund Balance being maintained at £6m.

At the end of the 2021/22 budget process, the Council was required to approve a balanced budget for the following financial year and set the Band D rate of Council Tax. Covid-19 had presented significant additional financial challenges to the Council and the outlook was very uncertain at this stage for both next year and the medium term. However, the Council's robust reserves position enabled it to meet these challenges; develop its response to the pandemic and the objective of maintaining financial sustainability; and freeze its element of the council tax for 2021/22.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance highlighted the appendix that had been added to the report, since the Scrutiny Committee meeting, relating to the consultation that had taken place with the public, town and parish councils and businesses. Councillor Cook commented that the responses supported the strategic thinking of ESC in producing the budget.

The Leader, after welcoming the report, commented on the challenges in respect of the pandemic, local authorities and council budgets. The Leader highlighted the uncertainty in respect of public finances going forward, but he stated that there were many members of the public who were feeling a similar level of uncertainty in respect of their own finances. The Leader stated that ESC needed to be realistic in that some people, who had been furloughed, may end up without a job at the end of the scheme. The Leader stated that the role of ESC was to continue to deliver against its strategic aims and to consider the financial position of residents. The Leader was pleased, therefore, to be able to recommend a zero percent rise in ESC's element of the Council Tax, but he emphasised that this would not stop ESC delivering. The Leader

emphasised that the proper use of reserves was being applied to enable this to happen.

In response to a question from the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Customer Services and Operational Partnerships in respect of how ESC was able to deliver a zero percent increase in respect of its Council Tax, compared to many other authorities, the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance stated that, in the first instance, there had to be the will to do it; and ESC had that will and aspiration. Councillor Cook emphasised that, back in the autumn of 2020, the conversations began, but at that time the decision was subject to so many different facets. However, the aim remained in place. Councillor Cook referred to the support from Government, stating that it had been good and had been used to its best. Also, due to the pandemic, some savings had been made from within and the use of reserves had been a contributing factor; with voluntary reserves playing a large part. Councillor Cook concluded by stating that the response from town and parish councils had been particularly pleasing, with many following the lead of ESC and putting a zero percent increase on their precepts. Overall Councillor Cook concluded, it was a massive team effort, and it also stemmed from prior to ESC as well, with good prudent conservative management of the finances by the predecessor authorities.

The Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment stated that he very much supported the proposals before Cabinet; he welcomed the use of reserves and the wish to put the residents first. Going forward, Councillor Mallinder supported the wish to invest in the people of East Suffolk and to invest in environmental positive infrastructure.

Councillor Topping referred to the budget consultation that had taken place via the website between 4 and 22 January and commented that the responses, 190 respondents to two questions, were very disappointing; she wondered if that was due to the timing, with many businesses still being in lockdown and some parish councils only meetings bi-monthly. Councillor Topping suggested that ESC needed to be mindful of those factors and provide consultees with as much time as possible. The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance acknowledged and understood all of those points but added that this was the first time, in recent years, that the Council had gone out to the public with a survey on its aspirations and strategies to seek their opinions. Councillor Cook commented that feedback had been received, which would be taken on board, and going forward surveying would take place more frequently, with longer being given for people to engage and the questions would be given careful consideration. The Leader added that all members of the Council would know the budget setting calendar going forward and he added that, as ward members, they could discuss budget issues with residents and with town and parish councils, and he knew that the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Finance would welcome all feedback.

Councillor Gooch commented on the pie chart that represented the demography of the respondents, and the fact that there had been low participation from younger people; Councillor Gooch suggested that, in future, ESC should look to increase the representation, perhaps reaching out through the colleges etc. Councillor Gooch was heartened by how honest and how pragmatic the responses were; people seemed to recognise the pressures faced by local government. The Leader, in response,

commented that some ward councillors, through their work, may spend time and engage with young people on a regular basis, and he suggested that those opportunities may be used to engage young people.

Councillor Byatt endorsed the comments of both Councillor Topping and Councillor Gooch; he noted that people disagreed with reducing the quality of services; they agreed with sharing with councils and they did not want any of ESC's services to be transferred to commercial companies. Councillor Byatt, in conclusion, commenting on the zero percent Council Tax rise by ESC, suggested that it would need to be explained that the the bulk of Council Tax would not increase, but their were elements for others, ie the Police, SCC, and town and parish councils. Councillor Byatt very much supported the zero increase by ESC, commenting that it was wise and fair in the circumstances, to support residents in this time of crisis.

The Leader commented that it would be wrong of him to pass judgement on the finances of any other authority; the reality was that they needed to balance their budgets and take account of their pressures; all ESC could do was to support its residents while still maintaining the quality of services that was important to the residents.

On the proposition of Councillor Cook, seconded by Councillor Gallant, it was by unanimous vote

## **RESOLVED**

That it be recommended to Full Council that it:

1. Approves the General Fund Revenue Budget as set out in this report and summarised in Appendix A5 and notes the budget forecast for 2022/23 and beyond;
2. Approves the Reserves and Balances movements as presented in Appendix A6;
3. Approves that no further changes are made to Council Tax Discounts and Premiums for 2021/22;
4. Approves the Efficiency Strategy attached as Appendix B; and
5. Approves a Band D Council Tax for 2021/22 of £171.27, which is no increase on 2020/21.

## **12 Exempt/Confidential Items**

The Leader of the Council reported that in exceptional circumstances, the Council may, by law, exclude members of the public from all, or part of, an executive decision-making meeting. The Council should, unless there were urgent circumstances, give notice of its intention to do so via the Forward Plan, which was updated and published on its website 28 clear days prior to the meeting. There were various reasons that the Council, on occasions, had to do this and examples were because a report contained information relating to an individual, information relating to the financial or business affairs of a particular person, or information relating to any consultations or negotiations. Tonight, the Leader reported, the Cabinet of ESC would be considering three substantive exempt matters which were outlined in agenda items 14 - 16 on the published agenda.

Firstly, item 14, Minor Disposal – Land off Simons Cross, Wickham Market, asked Cabinet to approve ESC entering into an option to sell a small area of land. The

disposal of the land, subject to a planning application, would support local housing growth. It would also improve a play area and would create a small capital receipt.

Item 15, Next Steps Accommodation Programme, asked Cabinet to give delegated authority to the Housing Service to receive any grant funding awarded from the capital element of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Next Steps Accommodation Programme and also to give delegated authority to one of the Council's Strategic Directors to negotiate, agree and enter into contracts for refurbishment works to be carried out in accordance with planning approval. The receipt of additional funding from Government would assist some of the most vulnerable to access and sustain accommodation which was suited to their needs. Assisting people with complex needs to access affordable and appropriate housing remained a challenge and this project would assist the Council to find housing solutions which were in line with the person's support and care needs and aspirations to live a relatively independent and normal life.

Finally, Item 16, East Suffolk Council's Cemeteries and Managed Closed Churchyard Services, asked Cabinet to approve a number of recommendations. ESC's Strategic Plan identified the health and wellbeing of East Suffolk's communities as a priority and this included in death and bereavement. Burial space should not only be local and accessible, but also appropriately maintained and managed. Burial grounds had a role in enabling people to come to terms with their loss. The landscape and management of cemeteries should be appropriate to the purpose first and foremost of serving the bereaved. However, the significance of cemeteries for local communities was far wider than this, embracing cultural, historical and environmental opportunities as well as education and recreational uses. In reviewing the service, the Council was seeking to remain financially sustainable. Through organisational design and streamlining services, it would ensure the organisation was able to deliver the right services to the right places. In making best use of and investing in assets, and those that it managed for others, the efficient use of our assets was essential.

On the proposition of Councillor Gallant, seconded by Councillor Rivett, it was by unanimous vote

## **RESOLVED**

That, under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

### **13 Exempt Minutes**

- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).
- Information in respect of which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.
- Information relating to any individual.
- Information that is likely to reveal the identity of an individual.

**14 Minor Disposal - Land off Simons Cross, Wickham Market**

- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

**15 Next Steps Accommodation Programme**

- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

**16 East Suffolk Council's Cemeteries and Managed Closed Churchyard Service**

- Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

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Chairman