



East Cambridgeshire District Council

Minutes of a Meeting of the Finance & Assets Committee Held at The Grange, Nutholt Lane, Ely, CB7 4EE at 4:30pm on Thursday 28th September 2023

Present:

Cllr Ian Bovingdon
Cllr Christine Colbert (substitute for Cllr Lorna Dupré)
Cllr Mark Goldsack
Cllr Bill Hunt
Cllr Mark Inskip (substitute for Cllr Robert Pitt)
Cllr James Lay
Cllr David Miller
Cllr Alan Sharp (Chairman)
Cllr John Trapp
Cllr Alison Whelan

Officers:

Sally Bonnett – Director Community
Maggie Camp – Director Legal Services
Spencer Clark – Open Spaces & Facilities Manager
Tracy Couper – Democratic Services Manager
Emma Grima – Director Commercial
Nicole Pema – HR Manager
Ian Smith – Director Finance
Hannah Walker – Trainee Democratic Services Officer

In attendance:

Paul Remmington - ECTC Chairman
John Hill – ECTC Managing Director
Nigel Ankers – ECTC Finance Manager

Karen Wright – ICT Manager
Melanie Wright – Communications Officer

26. Apologies and substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Dupré, Pitt and Shepherd.

Cllrs Colbert and Inskip were attending as substitutes.

27. Declarations of interest

No declarations of interest were made.

28. Minutes

The Committee received the Minutes of the meeting held on 3rd July 2023.

It was resolved unanimously:

That the Minutes of the Finance & Assets Committee meeting held on 3rd July 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairman.

29. Chairman's announcements

The Chairman advised Members that Nigel Ankers, John Hill, and Paul Remmington were in attendance at the meeting to answer any questions regarding ECTC Accounts.

30. East Cambs Trading Company 2022-23 Accounts

The Committee considered a report, Y48 previously circulated, that detailed the ECTC Directors' Report and Financial Statements for 2022-23. The ECTC Finance Manager highlighted that within Appendix 1 of the ECTC Finance Manager's report, pages 1 to 2 of the statutory accounts contained the Directors report which listed their responsibilities and that the accounts should only be approved if they are satisfied that they give a true and fair view of the affairs of the company, having selected appropriate accounting policies and applied them consistently. Pages 3-5 contained the report by the external auditors Price Bailey. Page 6 of the report detailed the profit and loss account for the year ended 31 March 2023, with a net profit of £166,191 which was £52,000 higher than reported at the last committee meeting.

The ECTC Finance Manager referred to paragraph 1.2 on page 11 which referred to concerns of the cost of living, increased interest rates and the Eden Square project. Page 19 referred to the tax changes and page 22 reflected the borrowing of £153,322 to the combined authority as final interest payment on the Haddenham loan, and the £6m loan had a 2–5-year repayment period to ECDC for March 2026 as the formal repayment date.

The Chairman invited Members to ask questions of the ECTC representatives. In response to a Member's question, the ECTC Finance Manager explained current lease liabilities.

Members congratulated the Trading Company on the production of such accounts in the current economic climate.

It was resolved unanimously:

That the ECTC Directors' Report & Financial Statements 2022/23 be noted.

31. Growth and Infrastructure Fund

The Committee considered a report, Y49 previously circulated, detailing the proposal to open the Growth and Infrastructure Fund for a further round of applications. The Director Community explained that the funding allocation awarded to Stretham Community Hub and GP Rooms project was not proceeding at the current time and therefore this could be released for other applications.

Members attention was drawn to a correction to the wording in the recommendation to appoint seven rather than five Members to the Growth and Infrastructure Fund Scoring Panel, which was correctly stated in the Terms of Reference attached at Appendix 2 to the report.

The recommendations in the report were proposed by Cllr Alan Sharp and seconded by Cllr Ian Bovingdon.

A Member stated that it was disappointing that Stretham Parish Council had written to advise that they no longer required the funding.

The Democratic Services Manager advised Members that nominations had been received from the Liberal Democrat Group to appoint Cllrs Dupré, Trapp and Whelan to the Scoring Panel.

A Member asked whether the funding would be available for any eligible applications received, or was any to be offered to any previous applications submitted in the last round that were turned down. The Director Community advised that all applications in the previous round were accepted, with only two turned down as they were ineligible, and therefore the funding would be available for new applications.

It was resolved unanimously:

- i) That the fund be reopened on Monday 9 October 2023 and closed at 5pm on Friday 8 December 2023 and the Council reserves the right to reopen the Fund for further round(s) of applications in the event that it is not fully utilised.
- ii) That the scheme eligibility criteria as set out in Appendix 1 of the Officer's report be approved.
- iii) That the Growth and Infrastructure Fund Scoring Panel Terms of Reference as set out in Appendix 2 of the Officer's report be approved.
- iv) That seven Members be appointed to the Panel, comprising 4 Conservative and 3 Liberal Democrat Councillors, with Councillors Dupré, Trapp and C Whelan being nominated by the Liberal Democrat Group.

32. Community Infrastructure Levy Funding Allocation – Changing Places Facility, Soham

The Committee considered a report, Y50 previously circulated, detailing a request to approve expenditure towards the provision of a changing places toilet in Soham. The Director Community explained that the CIL funding would be matched by a Government grant, and that they were currently assisting with changing places toilets at Littleport and at the Lighthouse Centre in Ely.

A Member praised the recent Council-owned assets tour they were involved with and saw where the changing places toilet would be situated in Soham.

The recommendation in the report was proposed by Cllr Mark Goldsack and seconded by Cllr James Lay.

In response to a question from a Member regarding the matched funding, the Director Community explained the funding arrangements

16:48 Cllr Inskip joined the meeting.

A Member emphasised that the changing places toilet in Soham was greatly needed and commended the plans for it to be delivered.

It was resolved unanimously:

That the expenditure of up to £35,000 on the provision of a Changing Places toilet in Soham be approved.

33. Outside Bodies Update

The Committee considered a report, Y51 previously circulated, that contained outside body nominations for the remaining Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) vacancies and requesting appointments to the Rural Services Network to be added onto the Council's Outside Bodies list.

The Democratic Services Manager explained the table in paragraph 4.8 of the report summarising the uncontested and contested IDB appointments and conducted the voting process for the contested places on the Haddenham and Littleport and Downham IDBs with Committee Members.

Members then commented on the merits of candidates with a local connection or from the farming community as part of the discussions.

At the conclusion of the voting process, a Member requested that the unsuccessful candidates be formally thanked for taking the effort to submit their application and personal statements and asked that the IDBs be approached to see if there was any alternative mechanism for them to be appointed to the bodies.

It was resolved:

1. That the uncontested nominations as set out in Section 4.8 of the Officer's report to fill the vacancies on the Internal Drainage Boards be appointed.
2. That Cllr Steve Cheetham be appointed to the Haddenham Level IDB and Cllrs Mark Taylor and Andrew Butcher to the Littleport and Downham IDB.
3. That the Rural Services Network be added to the Council's Outside Bodies List, and Cllr Keith Horgan be appointed as the Nominated Member, and Cllr James Lay be appointed as the Nominated Member Backup to the Rural Services Network.

34. Establishment of Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP)

The Committee considered a report, Y52 previously circulated, detailing the proposal to undertake an Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) review of Members Allowances. The Democratic Services Manager explained that IRP would need to be undertaken in the autumn/winter of 2023 or 2024, and advised Members it would be beneficial to run it concurrently with the Constitutional Review Working Party which was about to commence its review this year.

Members agreed that it would be sensible to run the IRP alongside the Constitutional Review Working Party.

The Democratic Services Manager explained to Members that the panel consisted of four lay members, and a questionnaire would be circulated to Members to feedback into the process of deliberation.

It was resolved unanimously:

That an IRP review of Members Allowances be conducted and reported to Full Council in February 2024.

35. Gender Pay Reporting 2022/23

The Committee received a report, Y53 previously circulated, containing data on gender pay at the Council. The HR Manager explained that as at 31 March 2023, the women's mean hourly rate was £17.22 per hour, 10.1% lower than the males mean hourly rate of £19.16 per hour. In addition, the women's median hourly rate was £15.26 per hour, 10.6% lower than the male's median hourly rate of £17.06 per hour. Table 1 within the Officer's report depicted the percentage of males and females in each quartile as at 31/03/23.

The HR Manager went onto describe the Council's gender pay gap for the previous three years showing the mean and median percentages. For 2022/23 the mean was 10.1% and the median was 10.6%. They added that the Council comprised of 133 females and 59 males.

The HR Manager then explained the actions that the Council took to reduce the gender pay gap, some of these involved ensuring shortlists for recruitment and promotion opportunities included women, using skills-based assessment tasks in recruitment to assess a candidate's suitability for the role and ensure fairness, and using structured interviews for recruitment and promotions to prevent unfair bias from influencing decisions.

A Member question relating to this item had been submitted prior to the meeting and this, along with answer provided by officers, was set out in Appendix 1 to these minutes.

A Member further queried their original questions submitted before the meeting regarding the Cambridgeshire County Council percentage of 29% of women in the upper quartile in table 3 for 2021/22, was not complement to 100, and that table 4 Cambridgeshire County Council had decreased their size in 2022/23 from an organisation size of 5000-19,999 to 1000-4999. The HR manager advised she would contact Cambridgeshire County Council to confirm their gender pay gap figures.

A Member asked for confirmation that both men and women were paid for the same job, the HR manager confirmed that they were.

In response to a question by a Member as to how the Council ensured the elimination of unconscious gender bias in job adverts, etc, the HR Manager reassured Members that the Council had good policies for employee recruitment and selection.

In response to a Member comment on the impact that a small change in the gender of employees at higher salary grades could make, the Director Commercial acknowledged that as the Council was a small organisation with a flat structure, a small change in officers could have a disproportionate statistical effect.

It was resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted.

36. East Cambridgeshire Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) For 2024/25

The Committee considered a report, Y54 previously circulated, detailing the annual review of the LCTRS scheme for 2024/25 and options for scheme amendments. The report was proposing no changes to the current scheme of an

8.5% minimum contribution and asked the Committee to recommend this to Full Council.

The recommendation was proposed by Cllr Sharp and seconded by Cllr Hunt.

A number of questions relating to this item had been provided prior to the meeting from Members and these, along with answers provided by officers, were set out in Appendix 1 to these minutes.

The Chairman invited questions to be asked to the Director Finance. A Member had queried whether the Director Finance knew how many households received Council Tax Benefit (CTB) in East Cambridgeshire. The Director Finance advised that 31,964 households equivalent to Band D properties but had requested more detailed information from Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP) and would circulate the information to Committee Members once received.

The Chairman then opened the debate. A Member stated that the current discount was substantial and it was important to encourage people back into work, wherever possible. Another Member asked the Director Finance to also find out the number of households that were in Bands A, B, C and D in East Cambridgeshire.

Another Member emphasised that the £24,345.76 cost to the Council, if the minimum contribution was decreased to 0%, could be less than the cost of those households building up arrears on their Council Tax. They also highlighted the increasing problems of residents affording to pay their Council Tax due to the current cost of living crisis.

Councillor Trapp proposed and Councillor Inskip seconded the following amendment:

To adopt option 2 in the report to decrease the minimum contribution to 0%.

As the proposer of the amendment, Councillor Trapp emphasised that without the detail on Council Tax bands, LCTRS breakdown and levels of arrears, they could not make an informed decision to keep the current scheme at 8.5% minimum contribution.

A Member acknowledged the amendment, however, believed in the principle that people should contribute something towards their Council Tax and thought the 8.5% contribution was reasonable, bearing in mind the other support options available for those on low incomes impacted by the cost of living crisis. Other Members concurred with this view.

17:29 Cllr Whelan joined the meeting.

In response to a Member question, the Director Finance explained that the 8.5% contribution stemmed from it previously being a national government scheme, whereby the maximum LCTRS awarded was 91.5%, and this was now the same at local level.

A Member stated that the cost to the Council of £24,345.76 to adopt a minimum contribution of 0% could be less than the cost of irrecoverable debts for Council Tax.

As the seconder of the amendment, Councillor Inskip highlighted the cost-of-living crisis impacting on our lowest earning residents. By lowering the minimum contribution to 0%, this would help the lowest income families.

The Director Commercial advised Members that the information requested from Anglia Revenues Partnership (ARP) would be supplied before the next Full Council meeting.

In response to a Member question, the Director Finance explained that if Members did propose a change to the current scheme, it would have to go out to consultation.

At the request of Cllr Inskip, a recorded vote was taken on the amendment, which was lost with Members voting as follows:

FOR: (4) – Cllrs Colbert, Inskip, Trapp, Whelan.

AGAINST: (6) – Cllrs Bovingdon, Goldsack, Hunt, Lay, Miller, Sharp.

ABSTENTIONS: (0)

A member raised a point of order, to ask whether Cllr Whelan should have taken part in the recorded vote as they turned up part way through the debate on the amendment. The Monitoring Officer confirmed with Cllr Whelan that they had heard enough debate and views from Committee Members to make an informed decision and was allowed to participate in the vote, agreed also by the Chairman.

Upon being put to the vote the motion was carried by 6 votes in favour to 3 against and 1 abstention.

It was resolved to RECOMMEND TO FULL COUNCIL:

That the LCTRS scheme for 2024/25 remain unchanged.

37. Medium Term Financial Strategy Update

The Committee considered a report, Y55 previously circulated, giving an update on the MTFS since approval of the Budget in February 2023. The Director Finance advised Members that the 2024/25 and 2025/26 budget were in balance, and there was uncertainty around the timing of the Fair Funding Review, which he was now forecasting would be delayed for a further year. The MTFS would be kept under review, and a draft budget come to committee in January 2024.

Member questions relating to this item had been submitted prior to the meeting and these, along with answers provided by officers, were set out in Appendix 1 to these minutes.

In response to a further Member question on the Fair Funding Review, the Director Finance advised that the estimated loss was shown in Appendix 1 to the Officer's report. This showed that on the locally retained Non-domestic rates line the estimate for 2025/26 and the estimate for 2026/27 would be an estimated loss of £1.5m.

A Member queried the assumption in the report regarding the potential timeframe for a new Government to undertake a fair funding review, which was responded to by the Director Finance.

It was resolved:

That the contents of the report be noted, including the revised final outturn position for 2022/23.

38. Finance Report

The Committee considered a report, Y56 previously circulated, detailing budget monitoring information for services under the Finance & Assets Committee and then, as part of its corporate remit, for the Council as a whole. The Director Finance highlighted that there was now a requirement to bring a treasury management update to this Committee on a quarterly basis, although only the mid-year and year-end reports needed to be subsequently reported to full Council. Therefore, the quarter one and three updates would be incorporated into this report in future.

It was resolved:

That the following be noted:

- That the Finance & Assets Committee has a projected yearend underspend of £265,000 when compared to its approved revenue budget of £5,967,312.
- That overall the Council has a projected yearend underspend of £324,000 when compared to its approved revenue budget of £16,856,960.
- That the overall position for the Council on Capital is a projected outturn of £6,938,121, this is an underspend of £862,666 when compared to the revised budget.
- The treasury management activity of the Council in the first three months of the year detailed at Appendix 5 to the officer's report.

39. Assets Update

The Committee considered a report, Y57 previously circulated, containing an update on Council-owned assets and requesting the appointment of an Assets Member Champion.

The Open Spaces & Facilities Manager reported on remedial works for flooding at the men's toilets at The Cloisters, Ely, which had been dealt with quickly. Works also had almost completed at Cemetery Lodge, Ely and Littleport Barn. IT colleagues were working to improve IT equipment at the depot, with a forecast completion for the end of November.

The recommendation was proposed by Cllr Alan Sharp and seconded by Cllr Ian Bovingdon.

Members praised the assets tour they recently participated in and encouraged others to attend the next tour.

In response to a Member's question, it was reported that the pot holes and condition of the Newnham Street car park road was being monitored, and would be addressed after the building works had been completed near the site.

A Member queried the nature of the Member Champion Cllr Hunt's attendance at meetings with the Open Spaces & Facilities Manager. Cllr Hunt described his role as the Member Champion, and stated that he had a close but informal working relationship with the Open Spaces & Facilities Manager.

The Director Commercial clarified to Committee Members that the Member Champion had no decision-making powers.

It was resolved:

1. That the update on Council-owned assets and the Expenditure Tracking Sheet at Appendix 1 to the submitted report, be noted.
2. That Councillor Bill Hunt be appointed as Member Champion for Assets.

40. Bus, Cycle, Walk Working Party Notes

The Committee received the Bus, Cycle, Walk Working Party notes of the meetings held on 25th January 2023 and 27th July 2023.

It was resolved unanimously:

That the Notes of the Bus, Cycle, Walk Working Party meeting held on 25 January and 27 July 2023 be noted.

41. Forward agenda plan

The Committee received the updated Forward Agenda Plan to September 2024.

It was resolved:

That the Forward Agenda Plan be noted.

42. EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC INCLUDING REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PRESS

It was resolved unanimously:

That the press and public be excluded during the consideration of the remaining items because it is likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if members of the public were present during the item there would be disclosure to them of exempt information of Categories 1, 2 & 3 of Part I Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended).

43. ECTC Board Meeting Minutes

It was resolved unanimously:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 15th June 2023 be noted.

44. ECTC Management Accounts April – June 2023

The Committee considered a report, X104 previously circulated, containing the ECTC Management Accounts for the 3 months to June 2023. The ECTC Finance Manager introduced the report and gave an overview of its contents.

It was resolved unanimously:

That the contents of the report be noted.

45. Exempt Minutes

It was resolved unanimously:

That the Exempt Minutes of the meeting held on 3rd July be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The meeting concluded at 6:07pm.

Chairman.....

Date.....

**FINANCE & ASSETS COMMITTEE
28 SEPTEMBER 2023
QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE**

Item 11 – Gender Pay Reporting 2022/23

Questioner	Question	Response
Cllr Trapp	Last line in Table 3 shows the proportion of men in each quartile, not women. It should be the complement to 100 of the figure given	The response will be provided verbally

Item 12 – East Cambridgeshire Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (LCTRS) for 2024/25

Questioner	Question	Response
Cllr Trapp	Section 3.8 end of line 3: is £7.4 per week/month/year?	It is weekly
Cllr Trapp	How many ECDC residents benefit from LCTRS, and how many of those are in arrears?	ARP is compiling this figure. Unfortunately, the information has not been provided in time for the meeting. This will be reported to Members as soon as the information is available.

Item 13 – Medium Term Financial Strategy Update

Questioner	Question	Response
Cllr Trapp	Mention is made of the downside to the Council if the Fair Funding Review goes ahead; which items in the budget would be affected, and is there an estimate of the loss that the Council will encounter?	The budget assumes that the Fair Funding Review will take place in 2026/27, and from appendix 1, it can be seen that the forecast amount of Business Rates retained is significantly reduced. The assumption is that a new Government will want to undertake the review following the General Election, but no confirmation can be given as to the exact timescale.

<p>Cllr Shepherd</p>	<p>I see from the Medium-Term Financial Strategy update paragraph 5.5 (Agenda item 13, on-line page 3) that the council proposes to begin the preparation of a new Local Plan in 2024 and that the costs for this have been included. This is all good as the plan is, of course, now very overdue. How much has been budgeted please and where is this included as I cannot see it in the budget plans presented in this paper.</p>	<p>A provision of £150,000 has been made for 2023/24.</p> <p>The appendix has now been circulated to Members.</p>
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