

Committee(s): Ordinary Council	Date: 13 th March 2024
Subject: Chairs Report for Finance, Assets, Investments and Recovery Committee	
Committee Chair: Cllr Kendall	

At the FAIR Committee meeting on 7th February 2024, members discussed:

Workforce Overview 2021-22, 2022-23 & 2023-24

The purpose of the report was to provide an organisational overview of workforce information and data in respect of Brentwood Borough Council (BBC).

The report provided information with regards to resource levels (by Directorate) and provided an overview of the health of the organisation, using data available to include regional and national benchmarking.

The report included data up to 31 December 2023.

Q3 2023/24 Budget update report

The purpose of the report was to set out the forecast revenue and capital budget positions as at period 9 for 2023/24 and to give an overall financial update.

The commentary of the report does not attempt to cover all budgetary changes but draws attention to the key factors affecting net expenditure differences.

The General Fund is forecasting a balanced budget, this means the income generated covers the council's expenditure. The result of a balanced budget is the general fund working balance will remain unchanged.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is currently forecasting a surplus position of £756k. The main cause of this underspend is due to utility bills falling. We are predicting an underspend of £632k for premises related costs, £423k specifically for utility bills. If this £756k underspend materialises it will increase the HRA's working balance or stored in to reserves to pay for future developments. The director of Housing and CLT are exploring ways to prioritise some urgent works in 2023/24 to reduce this underspend by 31st March 2024.

The overall capital programme is forecast to underspend by £40.7mil. £20mil of this is due to the delays around the regeneration fund. The total underspend will be considered as slippage into next year's programme.

The current financial backdrop poses further financial risks to the Council's budget. It should be noted that the Local Government Association has issued a statement "The lack of funding for local services in the Autumn Statement has left councils facing a growing financial crisis and 1 in 5 council leaders & CEO are very or fairly likely to issue a section 114 in this or next financial year". This statement can be found on LGA website: www.local.gov.uk.

For Brentwood, there are further financial risks to pay inflation forecasts as well as cost pressures from the current high rates of inflation. The high inflation rates, increasing bank rates and national living wage pressure will have further impact onto the ongoing budgets.

Whilst the Council is not anticipating the need to reduce any services, the financial position will have to be monitored over the year and will make the MTFs for 2024/25 and beyond even more of a challenge

Members agreed unanimously to note the report.

Budget 2024/25 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024-29

The report and appendices set out all the relevant information in support of the Council's Budget for General Fund services and Council Tax for 2024/25, together with financial forecast information through to 2028/29. Also included is information on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2024/25 and the Capital Programme 2024/25 to 2028/29.

Members agreed:

To approve the General Fund Budget 2024/25 and Medium-Term Financial Strategy
To approve a proposed Council Tax increase of 2.99% for 2024/25, the charge of Band D property increases to £210.70 per annum for Brentwood Council services only.

To approve the HRA budget 2024/25 including the 30-year HRA Business Plan within Appendix B.

To approve a proposed increase to rents of 7.7% for 2024/25.

To approve the Capital Programme 2024-29 in Appendix C.

To note the Fees & Charges Schedule in Appendix D.

To approve the Pay Policy Statement in Appendix E.

(appendices can be found in the agenda of FAIR Committee – 7th February 2024)

Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25

The report and appendices set out all the relevant information in support of the Council's Treasury management strategy for 2024/25.

Members agreed unanimously to approve the council's Treasury management strategy for 2024/25.

At the FAIR Committee meeting 28th February 2024, members discussed:

The Chair gave further updates:

Following feedback from residents and Councillors, timings of the overnight residential parking will change from 7pm-7am to 7pm-8am.

The Chair, Cllr Kendall took part as a panellist on The Big Pitch. The Big Pitch was the finale event for the UK Shared Prosperity Funded GET SET GROW business support scheme. Ten businesses from across Brentwood borough and Rochford district were given the opportunity to pitch for a theoretical £10,000 investment in a "Dragon's Den" style session. All of the presentations were strong but the judges

agreed that the winning pitch came from Leanne Madden, a Brentwood-based entrepreneur who has started a retrofit company. Kudos also goes to Matt Carr from Eco Edge, another Brentwood entrepreneur, who came in second place.

The Big Pitch was delivered by the new Economic Development OneTeam, which is comprised of Laurie Edmonds as Corporate Manager, Paula Chapman as Senior Economic Development Officer and Nishat Amin as Economic Development Officer. The Chair thanked the Economic Development team for their work on The Big Pitch.

Coptfold Road Multi Storey Car Park – Ms Barnes confirmed that works are commencing on wiring and foyer doors. Testing has been successful although there is a slight delay in aligning the finance system and should be live early April.

William Hunter Way Car Park – the contract has been awarded for resurfacing with work to start after the May Bank Holiday. This will be 10 weeks of work but will be phased in order to keep the car park open and operational.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund update

The report provided a summary of the projects for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) since the last report to the Finance, Assets Investment and Recovery committee on 13 September 2023.

The report included an update on our UK Shared Prosperity Fund spend for 2023/24 and a look ahead to projects for 2024/25.

Mrs Edmonds gave the committee a further in depth update that the E6 (culture) and E10 (sports) grant scheme has now closed. 36 applications from organisations across the borough have been received, requesting just over £1 million pounds for local project delivery. As there is only £388k to distribute, clearly not all applications will be successful.

The E1 High Streets Shop Improvement Grant scheme is live. Ten businesses from across Brentwood, Shenfield and Ingatestone have received grants so far, totalling just under £15k. We have more applications being processed and expect to distribute the remaining £15k of the grant scheme in the coming weeks.

85% of the E6 funding and 75% of the E10 funding will be distributed via the grant scheme. The remaining funding will give the council the opportunity to directly commission projects, such as the Strawberry Sports Festival and refurbishing the heritage boards outside Town Hall.

In reference to E1, a team of officers, including Economic Development, Street Scene, Grounds Maintenance and Community Safety are working at pace to create a long list of Brentwood, Shenfield and Ingatestone capital and revenue improvements, some of which will need to be costed by Essex Highways. The focus will be on projects such as refreshing street furniture, more greening of the high streets and improving wayfinding signage. We will work closely with the Brentwood Connected Business Improvement District to seek opportunities for match funding.

Members and other key stakeholders will have the opportunity to comment on works before they are undertaken. There is also the option of topping up the Shop Improvement Grant Scheme to empower more high street businesses to refurbish their shop fronts and make accessibility adaptations.

The feedback from participants of the GET SET GROW scheme has been extremely positive so we would like to extend the scheme to support even more businesses. Some of the new peer support cohorts might include sole traders looking to expand by taking on one or more new members of staff, young entrepreneurs, silverpreneurs and neurodivergent entrepreneurs.

In terms of reporting, we have created capacity within the team to collate the key performance indicators and financial information that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities requires on a regular basis.

Amendment to the existing Policy for the granting of Discretionary Non-Domestic Rate Relief

To approve the amendment to the existing policy for the granting of Discretionary Non-Domestic Rate Relief required as a result of a change in legislation effective from 1 April 2023. The change is in relation to backdating of discretionary rate reliefs. Members agreed to approve the amendment to the existing policy for the granting of Discretionary Non-Domestic Rate Relief.

Decisions were agreed in private session concerning: Pay by Phone contract, Hutton Poplars Bowls Club and Hutton Football Club Pavilion. In relation to Hutton Football Club – Cllrs Aspinell and Kendall are due to meet with the club on 18th or 19th March 2024.