

123 **COUNCIL BUDGET & COUNCIL TAX 2009/10**

The Leader of the Council introduced the budget item and advised of the process being undertaken.

Councillors Mrs Spray and C Siddall joined the table as Ward Members for the Three Colnes Ward, and spoke against proposals for the closure of public toilets at Queens Road, Earls Colne. Councillor Mrs Spray advised that the topic has raised more comments from constituents than any other issue since she had been a Councillor, as another 'hit' on the villages; and a petition comprising 83 signatures to 'Save our Loos' had been made to the District Council for the toilets to remain open for local people and visitors to Earls Colne whilst on shopping or leisure purposes. In the One District: One Vision report Earls Colne is included as a key-service village of the District and has a Post Office, a Co-op and a few pubs, and if the funding support was withdrawn for the toilets the Parish Council could not fund them on their own. The District Council has supported villages and rural areas in many ways over the past year, but would it campaign against a closure of a main village store or focus more attention to town stores. This is how local residents currently perceive this issue – that is important to their village.

Councillor Siddall referred to the strong opposition against the toilets closure, and advised they were well used by Earls Colne and surrounding villages. The proposed closure is contrary to initiatives in the Medium Term Financial Strategy – where it is to improve public access to toilets and disabled facilities. The consultation period with the Parish Council was considered too brief, and the precept measures too restrictive if the proposal went ahead.

Cabinet Members provided feedback on aspects of the consultation undertaken in their portfolio areas, including suspension of garden waste collection during the winter months, and to see no increase of Members Allowances over the next two years. Councillor Mrs Schmitt did clarify that part funding of the PCSO's only referred to two people in the whole Braintree District and Essex Police will now cover these costs. The Concessionary Fares Tokens are to continue in their present form, and active checks will be undertaken to ensure they are used within the rules originally intended. With reference to closure of public toilets there has been little feedback in Braintree and Witham areas compared to the Earls Colne reaction. Therefore, this will not be followed through and proposals on public conveniences deferred to allow further discussion and investigation on how they can be provided at a reduced cost.

Group Leaders and Chairmen of Local Committees were invited to express their comments. Councillor Dr Evans welcomed that the public toilets proposals would be looked at again. However, it was considered that views of the community should be further explored before any change to green waste collection during December to February.

Councillor Abbott stated that he supports many of the budget saving measures, and was also pleased with the public toilets measures. However, concern was raised to the stopping of the green bin collection for three months as this will not only affect garden waste, but dislocate the service, show wrong signals on the Council's green policy, affect performance levels, and he queried if a cost benefit analysis had been completed on landfill tax.

Councillor Foster advised the above issue was discussed and supported by the Witham Local Committee.

Other Councillors present were invited to participate in the consultation process -

- Councillor Eric Lynch supported the rethink on closure of public toilets, and queried the consultation on those at Braintree Bus Park. With regard to changes in green bin collections it was considered that February remains unchanged, and only December/January be considered.
- Councillor Mrs Pell referred to a Halls Review completed in Halstead and the limited life of the Senior Citizens' Centre. A Working Group comprising of Braintree District Council, Essex County Council and Halstead Town Council had concluded that a new Community Centre in Halstead is required. The users of the Senior Citizens' Centre are unsure on their future and would like to see provision and answers, and reassurance that the facility providing day care and hot dinners will continue. Councillor Mrs Pell requested that a plan is developed for this year, next year and future years in provision for the elderly.
- Councillor Mrs Scattergood spoke on the Review of Car Park arrangements, and requested that when it takes place consideration is given to a proposal by Sible Hedingham Parish Council that either (i) the Parish Council could take responsibility for the management of the car park at Summerfields, or (ii) the Parish Council be given the option to purchase the freehold prior to April 2010. The Leader advised that the Cabinet Member had been requested to take a strategic approach to car parking that could include car parks being managed by other organisations.

Councillor Walters responded to the waste issues raised; Councillor Butland advised he did receive feedback to the Braintree bus park consultation; Councillor Mrs Schmitt stated that the Senior Citizens' Centre is included in the Halls Review which is still ongoing, and will also be affected by the Three Towns: One Vision project. Any rumours or areas requiring clarity -especially those affecting elderly people - should be addressed to the Cabinet Member/Lead Officer to get the facts. Publicly owned facilities are currently being discussed with the Town Councils.

The Leader made reference to the two petitions being received at Cabinet, and the process for petitions. Firstly, the petition comprising 83 signatures from Earls Colne residents on closure of the public toilets – this proposal is not now going to be recommended.

Secondly, on the petition comprising 247 signatures objecting to the proposal for Tabor Field, Braintree being considered as a new allotment site, whereas it should be retained as public open space for all members of the community. This will be referred for discussion to Braintree Local Committee for local members to decide.

Councillor Lager, Cabinet Member for Efficiency and Resources, introduced the budget papers and proposals to put forward to Council.

DECISION: That it be **RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL** that: -

1. The changes to service provision, as detailed in Appendix C to the Cabinet report, with the exception of the proposal to close the public conveniences, be approved.
2. The proposal to close the public conveniences be deferred to allow further discussions and investigation on how they could be provided at reduced costs.
3. The revised budget shortfall, of £163,180, for 2009/10 be met from the General Fund balance.

4. The budget variations to the current base budget as summarised in the revised Appendix P to the Cabinet report, copy attached, be approved.
5. The budget bids detailed in Appendix B of the Cabinet report be approved.
6. No increases to existing Fees and Charges for 2009/10.
7. The introduction of new charges for the eradication of pests of public health significance, from 1st April 2009, as detailed in section A.5. of the Cabinet report, be approved.
8. The Discretionary Rate Relief scheme effective from 1st April 2009, as detailed in Appendix D of the Cabinet report, be approved.
9. The housing rent increases for 2009/10 be 5.5% per week.
10. No increases be applied to housing service charges for 2009/10.
11. The proposed Housing Revenue Account budget for 2009/10, as detailed in Appendix I to the Cabinet report, be approved.
12. It be agreed that following the receipt of a petition against the creation of 70 new allotment plots at Tabor Field, Braintree, the £35,000 identified in the capital bids should be treated as a provision and referred to the Local Committee for further consideration.
13. The General Fund Capital bids for 2009/10 at Section D.3. of the report and listed in Appendix L to the Cabinet report, be approved.
14. The Prudential Indicators and limits set out in Appendix N to the Cabinet report be approved.
15. The Policy on Minimum Revenue Provision as recommended in Appendix N to the Cabinet report be approved.
16. The Treasury Management Strategy, including annual investment strategy, for 2009/10 be approved.
17. The proposed detailed estimates, as amended during the discussion above, in Appendix P to the Cabinet report and the Council Tax increase of 2.5% be approved, having taking into consideration:
 - The consultation feedback received; and
 - The Section 151 Officer's report on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of balances (Appendix O of the Cabinet report).
18. Given the anticipated budget gap over the next two years, the Performance and Efficiency Programme Board be tasked with identifying a further £500,000 savings to feed into next year's budgetary process.
19. The Medium Term Financial Strategy is updated to take account of the information detailed in the report and the decisions made.

