

MINUTES OF CABINET

Tuesday, 22 September 2020
(5:00 - 6:54 pm)

Present: Cllr Darren Rodwell (Chair), Cllr Saima Ashraf (Deputy Chair), Cllr Dominic Twomey (Deputy Chair), Cllr Evelyn Carpenter, Cllr Cameron Geddes, Cllr Syed Ghani, Cllr Margaret Mullane, Cllr Lynda Rice and Cllr Maureen Worby

Apologies: Cllr Sade Bright

20. Declaration of Members' Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

21. Minutes (14 July 2020)

The minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2020 were confirmed as correct.

22. Update on COVID-19 Issues

The Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health Integration gave an update on COVID-19 issues relating to the Borough.

It was noted that the Prime Minister was due to give an official statement later in the evening which would confirm that the UK's coronavirus alert level was being upgraded from 3 to 4 and more stringent restrictions would be introduced. The Cabinet Member commented that the increase to the alert level should come as no surprise and encouraged everyone in the community to abide by the new restrictions and requirements, as individual behaviours were crucial to getting the virus under control.

The Cabinet Member also expressed her dismay at the Government's failure to implement effective national Test and Trace arrangements, which had initially led to some local residents being signposted as far away as Leicester to receive a test. The Council had subsequently secured two testing venues in the Borough but these had been limited to undertaking 200 tests a day, despite having capacity to undertake 500 a day, due to insufficient capacity within laboratories to analyse the results.

Other Cabinet Members spoke on the subject and the work being undertaken across the Council to support local schools, businesses and residents to follow COVID-secure arrangements. The Cabinet Member for Enforcement and Community Safety highlighted the fact that the Council's Out of Hours service was responding to 100 – 150 complaints every weekend and it was placed on record that the Council would take appropriate enforcement action to deal with irresponsible behaviour.

Cabinet **resolved** to note the update on the latest COVID-19 pandemic issues relating to the Borough.

23. Revenue Budget Monitoring (Period 4, July 2020) and Capital Programme Update

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Core Services presented a report on the Council's revenue and capital budget monitoring position for the 2020/21 financial year as at 31 July 2020 (period 4).

The Cabinet Member advised that the Council was facing significant financial pressures due, in the main, to additional costs, loss of income and delays to the delivery of some planned savings proposals as a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council's General Fund revenue budget for 2020-21 had been set earlier in the year at £155.796m and the position at the end of July 2020 showed an underlying budget variance of £8.533m. However, current year-end projections gave a range of overspend of between £5.42m at the most optimistic end to £18.9m at the more pessimistic (although still entirely possible) end, even after taking into account committed Government grant funding of £21.43m. Any level of overspend would need to be funded from reserves and the Cabinet Member referred to section 7 of the report which set out how those varying levels of overspend could be funded in the short-term.

The delivery of the Council's Capital Programme had also been impacted by COVID-19 and a recent review of projects had identified that the original budget of £381.239m for 2020/21 should be reduced to £288.571m, with the difference being reprofiled to future years. The Cabinet Member stressed however that growth, innovation and transformation continued to be key to the successful delivery of the Council's ambitions and he was pleased to report that projects led by Be First, the Council's regeneration company, were progressing very well in the circumstances.

The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) was showing a forecast overspend of £1.2m against the budget of £92.166m at the end of July 2020, with a further income risk of £4.6m as a result of COVID-19. It was noted in particular that rent collection levels were approximately £2m below expectations at the end of June.

Members discussed the financial pressures and noted that difficult decisions would need to be made to reduce the level of overspend, particularly if the country returned to COVID-19 lockdown arrangements. The Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health Integration stressed, however, that the Council was committed to protecting the most vulnerable in the community and referred to recent communication with Government Ministers regarding transport provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) during the current pandemic. The Council had sought additional funding to enable transport to continue to be provided under social distancing requirements but the Cabinet Member was appalled to receive a response that suggested that the Council should continue to fill the buses to capacity. As such a move would put already vulnerable people at further risk, the decision was taken that the Council would directly fund new arrangements. The Leader reiterated the point that there was a clear disparity between how the Council valued people's lives in comparison to the Government.

Cabinet **resolved** to:

- (i) Note the overall financial risks and issues outlined in the report, including

both the underlying issues and those arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown;

- (ii) Note the projected revenue outturn forecast for the 2020/21 financial year as set out in sections 2 to 4 and Appendix A of the report and the potential impact on the reserves position as set out in section 7 of the report;
- (iii) Note the update on key savings programmes, as set out in section 5 of the report;
- (iv) Note the update on the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown, as set out in section 6 of the report; and
- (v) Agree the revised Capital Programme for 2020/21 and note the Quarter 1 expenditure position, as set out in section 9 and Appendix B to the report.

24. Review of School Places and Capital Investment - Update

Further to Minute 94 (21 January 2020), the Cabinet Member for Educational Attainment and School Improvement presented an update report on school expansion and improvement projects aimed at addressing the current and future demand for places in the Borough, as well as the latest funding issues.

The Cabinet Member referred to the fluctuations in pupil numbers over recent years and the actions taken in response. Pupil numbers in the primary school age range were projected to increase for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years and discussions were ongoing to ensure sufficient provision, particularly in and around the Barking Town Centre area which had seen, and would continue to see, considerable regeneration and the building of new family homes. It was noted that the Cabinet Member would be meeting with the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Social Housing and relevant officers in the next fortnight to discuss potential sites for a new primary school(s) in the area to supplement the new provision already agreed with the creation of Greatfields Primary School and Greatfields Secondary School. The Cabinet Member referred, however, to delays in funding decisions by the Department for Education (DfE) in relation to the Greatfields sites and also much needed additional Special School provision in the Borough which had been exacerbated by the DfE's recent decision to outsource the responsibility for approving funds for new school building projects to an external body.

On the issue of funding, the Cabinet Member referred to new allocations from the DfE to support improvements at Local Authority maintained schools and to help create additional school places, as well as new provisions for schools to reclaim certain costs associated with COVID-19 measures.

With regard to pupils' return to school after the period of extended absence caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cabinet Member praised the efforts of school staff and Council officers, and particularly the Council's Director of Public Health and his team, for helping to create a safe environment that had seen over 90% of pupils return in those first few weeks. The Cabinet Member reiterated the message to parents that children were safer in school and took the opportunity to remind parents and carers to wear face masks and socially distance when gathering at the school gates.

Cabinet **resolved** to:

- (i) Note the actions being taken by officers to identify additional school places across the Borough to meet future demand pressures, including the need for a suitable site location to be urgently identified for additional primary school provision in the Abbey, Eastbury and Gascoigne areas of the Borough, as set out in section 2 of the report;
- (ii) Approve the inclusion in the Capital Programme of the DfE grant allocations for 2020/21 and 2021/22, as detailed in sections 3 and 4 of the report;
- (iii) Delegate authority to the Director of People and Resilience, acting on advice from the Procurement Board, to approve the final procurement strategies for projects noted in the report; and
- (iv) Delegate authority to the Director of People and Resilience, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Education Attainment and School Improvement, the Chief Operating Officer and the Director of Law and Governance, to conduct the procurements and award the respective project contracts.

25. Barking and Dagenham Local Plan 2037 - Regulation 19 Consultation

Further to Minute 70 (12 November 2019), the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Social Housing presented a report on the second stage of consultation, referred to as Regulation 19 consultation, on the Council's draft Local Plan.

The draft Local Plan represented the Council's proposed planning framework for the period up to 2037 which would cement Barking and Dagenham's status as the "growth opportunity for London" and "green capital of the Capital" through the delivery of 50,000 new properties, 20,000 new jobs and 463 hectares of open space. The Cabinet Member confirmed that the draft Local Plan was aligned to the Council's new Corporate Strategy and Borough Manifesto and the London Mayor's new draft London Plan, although it was noted that the latter had been challenge by the Government and may, therefore, require substantial change which could have a slight impact on the Council's Local Plan.

Since the report in November 2019, the draft Local Plan had been strengthened in a number of areas including the creation of 'place policies' for the seven sub areas of the Borough to provide clearer development principles for each area. The draft Local Plan also gave considerable focus to infrastructure requirements that would need to be factored into new development proposals and the aspirations for energy efficient developments using sustainable construction methods.

The Cabinet Member referred to the consultation timetable which anticipated that the final Local Plan would be presented for approval by the Assembly in Autumn 2021 and changes to some of the planned consultation arrangements to take account of the COVID-19 situation.

Arising from the discussions, the Cabinet Member for Equalities and Diversity particularly welcomed the inclusion in the draft local Plan of two potential locations

for traveller sites in the Borough to meet extra demand, while the Cabinet Member for Public Realm stressed the importance of fully assessing additional refuse collection and street cleaning requirements as part of major new developments. On the latter point, the Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Core Services commented on the importance of securing appropriate Section 106 contributions from developers to support local infrastructure needs.

Cabinet **resolved** to:

- (i) Approve the request for publication of the submission version of the Barking and Dagenham Local Plan 2037, along with supporting information include a Sustainability Appraisal, Habitats Regulation Assessment, evidence base studies and other supplementary information for eight-week statutory public consultation as per the proposed timetable;
- (ii) Agree that, following the Regulation 19 consultation, the plan should be submitted to the Secretary of State for an independent examination;
- (iii) Authorise the Director of Inclusive Growth, after consultation with the Council's Leader and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Social Housing, to make any appropriate and proposed modifications to the submission version of the Local Plan and amendments to supporting documents prior to the commencement of the consultation period (Regulation 19);
- (iv) Authorise the Director of Inclusive Growth, after consultation with the Council's Leader and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Social Housing, to make any appropriate and necessary minor amendments to the proposed submission version of the Local Plan and supporting documents following consultation and prior to submission to the Secretary of State;
- (v) Note amendments to the Local Development Scheme (2020) to reflect an updated Local Plan timetable; and
- (vi) Note publication of the updated Statement of Community Involvement Refresh (2020).

26. Introduction of the Single Performance Framework and Key Performance Indicator 2019/20 Summary of Performance

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Core Services introduced a report on the new Single Performance Framework (SPF), as part of the Corporate Plan 2020 - 2022, that would be used for performance monitoring going forward and the final key performance indicator information for 2019/20 under the former monitoring arrangements.

The report showed that while 43% of performance indicators were showing a positive direction of travel at the end of the 2019/20 financial year, 49% were showing a downward trend and a total of 21% had a 'red' RAG rating against the 2019/20 target. The Cabinet Member explained that those 'red' areas would continue to be closely monitored through the strengthened collaborative approach under the new SPF arrangements.

Cabinet **resolved** to note the final performance position of the 2019/20 Key Performance Indicators, as detailed in the report.

27. Debt Management Performance and Write-Offs 2020/21 (Quarter 1)

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Performance and Core Services introduced the performance report for the first quarter of the 2020/21 financial year in respect of the debt management functions carried out by the Council Revenues and Benefits service.

The Cabinet Member referred to the comments earlier in the meeting regarding the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic was having on many people's ability to pay all of their bills and, as a result, collection levels were down and debt levels were up across the board. One of the most significant areas of concern related to the Government's Universal Credit (UC) benefit scheme and the Cabinet Member explained that while 26% of residents in receipt of Housing Benefit were in arrears, that figure climbed to over 60% for those in receipt of UC. He felt that was a clear indication of the fundamental flaws of the UC scheme which would only get worse, as it was noted that approximately 14,000 more local residents had applied for UC since the end of February 2020 as many people found themselves furloughed or out of work and unable to make ends meet.

Reference was made to some of the initiatives that the Council had implemented prior to and during the current pandemic to support local residents and businesses who were struggling to pay all of their bills. The Cabinet Member concurred with his colleagues that it was only right and proper for the Council to provide as much support as possible but he also stressed that those who had the means but merely chose not to pay would be pursued with vigour.

Cabinet **resolved** to:

- (i) Note the performance of the debt management function carried out by the Revenues and Benefits service, including the performance of enforcement agents;
- (ii) Note the emerging impact of Universal Credit on collection levels and particularly Council Tax and rents; and
- (iii) Note the effect of Covid-19 on collection levels across various revenue streams.

28. Death of Roger Luxton OBE

The Leader advised on the recent sad passing of Roger Luxton OBE, former Director of Children's Services and Freeman of the Borough, and asked Cabinet colleagues and officers to join him in a minute's applause in recognition of Roger's significant contribution to the education of children in the Borough throughout his 23 years of service.