

District Councillors' Report to Parish Councils – April 2024

The Chief Executive and Finance Director are preparing to recruit an Independent Member for the Audit Committee. The role should be advertised soon, with the intention to appoint the person at Annual Council on 23 May.

Internal Audit reported *“some weaknesses and inconsistencies in the application of controls [over Community Infrastructure Levies], particularly in relation to timely issuing of demand notices; charging of late payment surcharges/interest; and prompt and consistent recovery action.”* They recommended that changes were made *“to ensure that monies due are collected in full and in accordance with the respective agreements.”* There is therefore a risk that some developments will go ahead without the correct monies being paid. If the CIL monies are not collected, the District Council will lose out and Parish Councils will also lose their share (15% for most PCs, 25% for those with a Neighbourhood Plan).

Operational Services reviewed the service plans for 2024/25 and the delivery against the plans for 2023/24. Many of the services reported that staffing recruitment/retention/training were one of their top 3 risks. It was agreed to give additional grants for home adaptations, as the mandatory £30k annual grant was often not sufficient. These are grants towards making a home suitable for a resident with disabilities. Sadly, in some cases the applications had been closed when the adaptations could not be done within the mandatory £30k and those applicants will now have to start the process again. Strategies were agreed for vulnerable communities and Health & Wellbeing. Officers working on Health & Wellbeing were asked to bring forward suggestions for how they could use additional funding when the 2025/26 budget is being considered, because their current budget of £5,000 seemed very small compared to their ambitions (although other parts of the Council, and its partners, also deliver aspects of this strategy). The Waste Services Review working party is considering charging Parish Councils for dog bins which ECDC considers additional to requirements or optional. We raised concerns about this, particularly for those parishes with many public rights of way. The Committee agreed the Business Plan for ECSS, despite concerns that budgeted costs were overstated – e.g. fuel rates significantly higher than current charges and staff costs budgeted in full plus full costs for Agency staff to cover for vacancies.

Finance & Assets reviewed the service plans for 2024/25 and the delivery against the plans for 2023/24. As with Operational Services, many of the services reported that staffing recruitment/retention/training were one of their top 3 risks. It was agreed to delay the Local Plan chapter on Climate Change because of the uncertainty caused by Government announcements. Planning law allowed Local Authorities to set higher standards for energy efficiency on buildings than the minimum required by law. ECDC had asked officers to consider higher standards for the new Local Plan. However, in December Government issued a Written Ministerial Statement effectively preventing us from setting or enforcing higher standards. It is therefore unlikely that a Local Plan with higher standards would be approved by the Inspector. We proposed an amendment to ask the Chief Executive to write to the Minister asking him to rescind the December written statement and reaffirm that Local Authorities could set higher energy efficiency standards. The Conservative majority voted against this, so ECDC will make no formal complaint to Government about them removing the right for local people to set higher standards for local buildings in the Local Plan. A draft Hedgehog Design Statement was approved to go out for consultation. The ECTC Business Plan was approved, although we voted against it. We noted that it was still unclear what purpose ECTC

was fulfilling – it had delivered no more than the 30% affordable housing required of all developers and had made losses in many years.