



POLICY AND INFORMATION UPDATE

**Friday, 24 February 2012
Issue 15 2011/12**

Performance Improvement Unit

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www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/local_democracy/Performance

1. POLICY AND INFORMATION UPDATE - ISSUE 15 2011/12

The Policy and Information Update is published on a regular basis, to highlight news announcements, and reports, publications and consultation documents issued by the Government and other agencies and organisations, which affect the work of the Council. The Policy and Information Update is designed to ensure that relevant matters, which may have corporate as well as service specific implications, are drawn to the attention of the appropriate members, service directors and officers.

The Policy and Information Update provides a summary of new and emerging issues, and provides links to the full versions of relevant reports, publications and consultation documents. The document also gives details of forthcoming conferences and events of relevance to the Council's activities, that are facilitated by government departments or local authority organisations. Although members and/or officers may already be aware of issues specific to particular services, functions, responsibilities or interests, the Policy and Information Update is intended to raise corporate awareness of relevant matters and to ensure that nothing of importance to the Council is overlooked.

If members or officers wish to discuss any of the items published in the Policy and Information Update, or require further information or reports on specific issues, they should contact the relevant service director in the first instance. Feedback in respect of the format and content of the Policy and Information Update can be made to the Performance Improvement Unit at performance@eppingforestdc.gov.uk.

PART A - NEWS ITEMS

2. £20MILLION FOR SAFETY NET AGAINST REPOSSESSION (9 FEBRUARY 2012)

Housing Minister Grant Shapps has announced a new £20million safety net to help ensure that mortgage repossession remains the last resort for struggling homeowners.

This Preventing Repossessions Fund gives councils the opportunity to offer small interest free loans to struggling homeowners and ensure that court desks can offer on the day advice for those facing the prospect of repossession. Mr. Shapps urged anyone facing financial difficulty to use the range of free and independent advice available to get help and avoid losing their home. The new funding includes £1million to ensure that free, on-the-day, legal advice is on hand in every county court for homeowners at risk of repossession. This much needed legal assistance is available at court to any individual facing homelessness and will plug the gaps in the Housing Possession Court Duty Scheme, ensuring that all courts are able to offer a viable service, where it is not already provided by the Legal Services Commission or independently. In many cases, applications for possession orders are rejected or suspended when a householder has accessed on the day legal advice, last year over 30,000 households benefited from the court duty desks.

Mr. Shapps has also given a £19million cash injection to councils, so they can ensure that local people have access to real financial support to help allay the threat of losing their homes. The Preventing Repossession Fund, which is being allocated to every local housing authority in England, enables them to offer struggling homeowners small interest-free loans of less than £5,000 or grants to help ease debt pressures and give them the breathing space to get back top of their finances. Having the right advice and support on managing debts is crucial in helping homeowners to regain control of their debt. Alongside financial support, those at risk of repossession should be given the knowledge and help to manage their finances in the future. Local authorities are encouraged to work innovatively and flexibly with other local authorities, lenders and homeowners to ensure that the Preventing Repossession Fund is sustainable and tackles repossession in the best way for their area. The announcement comes as the latest figures from the Council of Mortgage Lenders show the number of homes taken into possession in 2011 to be 36,200, lower than the 40,000 originally forecast and the lowest since 2007. Tackling the deficit to help ensure that homeowners don't face rapid increases in interest rates is a top priority for Government and interest payments for mortgages are currently the lowest as a proportion of total income since records began. The Government is also investing more than £200 million into the Mortgage Rescue Scheme. The scheme, available through local authorities, is designed to offer a last resort to the most vulnerable families to avoid repossession.

Of interest to:
Housing Portfolio Holder
Director of Housing

3. REGISTER OF VOTERS TO BE MORE ACCURATE AND COMPLETE (9 FEBRUARY 2012)

The Government has strengthened proposals for a new individual register of voters, to make the scheme simpler for the majority of voters.

Following a period of consultation, Mark Harper, the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform, has published updated proposals for Individual Electoral Registration (IER) that will improve the accuracy of the electoral register, make it harder to opt out, and make the transition to IER easier for most people. In order to make it easier for people to stay registered and in a bid to make the electoral register more complete and up to date, the Government is proposing to use 'data matching' to retain up to two-thirds of those already on the electoral register. Under the data matching process, an elector's name and address would be compared against other public databases. If an individual's details 'matched' then they would not have to take any action to remain on the register. This would create a floor in registration rates and allow the Government to focus efforts and resources on those electors whose details could not be confirmed and those people who are currently not on the register. In order to ensure that the electoral register is as complete and up to date as possible for the transition, the canvass scheduled for autumn 2013 will now take place in spring 2014.

The Government believes registering to vote is a civic duty and do not intend to create new offences to criminalise people who do not apply to register to vote. The Government will retain the existing offence of refusing to provide information to an electoral registration officer when required to do so, but acknowledges that there is a debate to be had about suggestions that a civil penalty for not returning an IER form should be introduced.

Of interest to:
Support Services Portfolio Holder Assistant to the Chief Executive

4. SETTING THE BENCHMARK FOR TRANSPARENCY IN SOCIAL HOUSING (14 FEBRUARY 2012)

Housing Minister Grant Shapps has praised the latest social landlord to open its books and become more transparent to tenants.

The Minister said Viridian's plans to publish all expenditure over £500 from April this year would help them increase efficiency and become more accountable. He called on other housing associations to follow the example of Viridian and Home Group, who are setting the benchmark for a new era of transparency in social housing. Since becoming Housing Minister, Mr. Shapps has consistently challenged all social landlords to match his Department's commitment on transparency about expenditure, so tenants can see how their rent is being spent. Ministers believe that by subjecting themselves to greater scrutiny, housing associations can achieve better business discipline and ensure every transaction represents good value for money. Mr. Shapps said social landlords would be left behind if they failed to acknowledge the growing demands of tenants to see how their rent is being spent and, like the Government, be willing to change in order to meet those expectations. Over the next few months officials from the Department for Communities and Local Government will hold a series of discussions with individual housing associations to discuss how they can become more transparent in the way they run their business. Ministers believe bringing housing associations under the Freedom of Information Act could make it easier for tenants and the public to find out more about how their landlords work, and what their taxes pay for. The Government has committed to consult with social landlords on whether to extend the scope of the Act to include housing associations.

Of interest to:
Housing Portfolio Holder Director of Housing

5. COUNCILS RECEIVE FIRST £100 MILLION IN ICELANDIC BANK PAYOUTS (20 FEBRUARY 2012)

The first £100 million of money recovered from collapsed Icelandic bank Landsbanki will be paid into council accounts this week, according to the Local Government Association.

The payment follows successful legal action, coordinated by the Local Government Association, to secure priority creditor status for UK local authorities following the winding up of Icelandic banks Landsbanki and Glitnir. The payment, which is likely to exceed £110 million, represents the first instalment of the £413 million in local authority funds held by Landsbanki when the bank collapsed in 2008. The Local Government Association expects as much as 98% of the total to be recovered. Following the recent announcement about the sale of Iceland Foods, in which Landsbanki has a large stake, further cash is likely to be recovered over the coming months.

Of interest to:
Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder Director of Finance and ICT

6. ERIC PICKLES GIVES COUNCILS BACK THE FREEDOM TO PRAY (17 FEBRUARY 2012)

Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles has given local councils a major new power that will allow town halls to continue to hold prayers.

Local councils now have a power that should enable them to continue to include prayers as part of the formal business at council meetings, if they wish, and thereby maintain the common practice in council meetings across the country. This responds to the recent High Court ruling against Bideford Town Council based on an interpretation of Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972, rather than on equality or human rights grounds, which judged that councils did not have the powers to hold prayers as part of formal business. This major new legal power is contained in the Coalition Government's Localism Act 2011, which creates a 'general power of competence' that will allow councils to legally do anything an individual could do unless specifically prohibited by law. This should give councils that want to continue holding formal prayers the confidence and legal standing to do so. Mr. Pickles has fast-tracked and personally signed a Parliamentary Commencement Order so the new power can be exercised by all major local authorities in England from 20 February 2012 and, following due Parliamentary process, for parishes by April.

Of interest to:
All Members All Officers

PART B - REPORTS & PUBLICATIONS

7. ENGLISH HOUSING SURVEY 2010-11 (9 FEBRUARY 2012)

This Department for Communities and Local Government research report brings together findings on household trends and the housing stock. It details trends in

tenure, household type, economic status, buying expectations of renters, overcrowding, underoccupation, recent movers and satisfaction with the home and local area.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/2084179.pdf>

Of interest to:
Housing Portfolio Holder Director of Housing

8. NATIONAL PLANNING CASEWORK UNIT (10 FEBRUARY 2012)

This Department for Communities and Local Government circular is a letter to local authorities updating them on changes to the arrangements for handling planning casework following the closure of the Regional Government Offices. These changes are part of the drive to devolve more powers to localities and remove burdens and constraints on local and neighbourhood organisations.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/2085974.pdf>

Of interest to:
Planning and Technology Portfolio Holder Director of Planning and Economic Development

9. COUNCIL TAX 2012-13 (13 FEBRUARY 2012)

This Department for Communities and Local Government circular is from the Local Government Minister Bob Neill, to council leaders of English local authorities regarding the Council Tax for 2012/13.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/2087893.pdf>

Of interest to:
All Members Director of Finance and ICT

10. 'BUILDING SAFE, ACTIVE COMMUNITIES - STRONG FOUNDATIONS BY LOCAL PEOPLE' (14 FEBRUARY 2012)

This Department for Communities and Local Government publication is a manual for communities, bringing together new ideas that have been proven to work and case studies from different areas. It highlights resources which can provide support to communities that want to do more.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/2088494.pdf>

Of interest to:
All Members

11. POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS - TIMELINE (14 FEBRUARY 2012)

This Home Office publication presents a timeline to show key stages in the police and crime commissioner process, including the schedule for them to be elected, to take office, and to develop a police and crime plan.

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/police/pcc/pcc-timeline?view=Binary>

Of interest to:

Safer, Greener and Highways Portfolio Holder Director of Environment and Street Scene
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12. ESSEX COUNCILS COMPARATIVE DATA ANALYSIS - JANUARY 2012 (22 FEBRUARY 2012) (Pages 3 - 26)

The Performance Improvement Unit has produced a second issue of the Essex Councils Comparative Data Analysis, which is intended to act as a convenient one-stop shop for a variety of data, statistics and information relating to the Essex districts, sourced from a variety of publicly accessible websites and references.

The Data Analysis is not a comparison of council performance, but rather a digest of useful information and a prompt to further research or further investigation. The document is published on a quarterly basis, covering different themes as well as updating previously published data when available. The second issue of the Data Analysis covers planning, housing and building, deprivation, mortality, older people and recorded crime.

The benchmarking analysis is attached as an appendix to this Policy and Information Update. If members or officers have any questions about the document or any suggestions for topics that could be covered in future, please contact Mike Warr of the Performance Improvement Unit on mwarr@eppingforestdc.gov.uk.

Of interest to:

All Members All Officers

13. NEW LOCAL PAY GUIDANCE TO HELP TACKLE TAX AVOIDANCE (16 FEBRUARY 2012)

Government rules to open up Town Hall pay practices and senior salaries to public scrutiny, now include measures to root out any inappropriate tax avoidance arrangements, Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles has announced.

Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander has set out the Government's commitment to tackling all forms of tax avoidance and, as local government is also paid from the public purse. Mr. Pickles has issued new statutory guidance that addresses the matter. The Localism Act requires councils to publish and be

accountable for their pay policies, helping to ensure that local remuneration arrangements, particularly for chief officers, provide value for money for the whole of the public sector. The Government's associated guidance on Openness and Accountability in Local Pay, states that authorities should review the terms of senior appointments, particularly where arrangements could be perceived as seeking to minimise tax payments. It specifically states that councils should vote on salary packages for employees greater than £100,000 a year. Councils should also publicly justify any big bonuses, above inflation pay rises, or the recruitment of staff already in receipt of public sector retirement or severance money. Elected councillors have until the end of next month to approve pay policy statements that should include explicit local policies on all the above practices and whether or not they intend to permit any of these sorts of arrangements. At a time when the public are worried about the cost of living and all parts of the public sector should be making savings, this action will give taxpayers the clearest evidence possible that value for money has been considered in pay policies.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/2091042.pdf>

Of interest to:
Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder Director of Finance and ICT

14. GUIDANCE ON PLANNING PROPRIETY ISSUES (20 FEBRUARY 2012)

Following the commencement of the predetermination provision in the Localism Act 2011, an updated version of the planning propriety guidance has been published by the Department for Communities and Local Government. This replaces previous guidance published in October 2008.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/2091742.pdf>

Of interest to:
Planning and Technology Portfolio Holder Director of Planning and Economic Development

15. 'CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR INTEGRATION' (21 FEBRUARY 2012)

The Government has called on people to come together and play their full part in local communities.

A new 'localist' approach to achieving a more integrated society focusing on creating the conditions for everyone to live and work successfully alongside each other has been unveiled by Secretary of State Eric Pickles and Communities Minister Andrew Stunell. The paper demonstrates how the Coalition Government is moving away from a Whitehall-dictated approach and, because communities know their own local areas best, instead encourages collective action which:

- emphasises and celebrates what we have in common rather than our differences, by supporting projects such as the Big Lunch and the planned Diamond Jubilee celebrations;
- promotes the responsibilities we have to each other and to society, through programmes such as National Citizen Service, Youth United and A Year of Service;
- enables people to realise their potential to get on in life - by increasing opportunities and tackling persistent inequalities in access to training, jobs, education and business finance;
- gives people of all backgrounds the opportunities to play an active part, be heard and take decisions - including new provisions in the Localism Act 2011 to put neighbourhoods in control; and
- ensures that intolerance is robustly challenged and extremist views and behaviour marginalised by improving the recording of hate crime including against the Muslim and Jewish communities.

While Government has an important role to play, this new approach is based on a conviction that the challenges facing local communities today are too complex to be tackled simply by blanket solutions, or by singling out specific groups for special treatment. An integrated society is vital to building strong, prosperous sustainable communities. The paper argues that Britain, with its proud history of migration and tolerance, is well placed to meet the challenges of integration. And with the unprecedented pace of change in our communities over the past decade we must now more than ever robustly protect and promote our core values such as democracy, the rule of law, equality of opportunity and freedom of speech.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/2092103.pdf>

Of interest to:
All Members
All Officers

PART C - CONSULTATION DOCUMENTS

PART D - CONFERENCES & EVENTS

16. NEW CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

The following conferences and events may be of interest to relevant members and officers:

(a) Alcohol Strategy Conference

With responsibility for alcohol services moving from the NHS to local government, this conference will explore the role of councils in ensuring successful reform to

encourage and enable innovation in healthcare and lead to more positive outcomes for local people.

Local authorities have an important role to play in the prevention of harmful drinking. This includes the enforcement of alcohol licensing legislation, educating the public and working with other agencies, such as health and police services to minimise the harm caused by alcohol misuse. Local government is set to take on responsibilities for public health as part of the biggest shake-up of health delivery for 60 years. Health improvement is a key component in the Government's agenda for change, to reduce the heavy financial and social burden of avoidable ill-health and premature death and to change the relationship between citizens and state. For the first time in a generation, local government is to be handed back lead responsibility for health improvement and public health. This opens up huge opportunities for local government to adopt health improvement as a core objective in all their plans and services. With responsibility for alcohol services moving from the NHS to local government, councils will be charged with commissioning not just public health prevention programmes for alcohol misuse but the full range of alcohol services out of the ring-fenced public health budget. Successful reform will encourage and enable innovation in healthcare and lead to more positive outcomes for local people.

This Local Government Association conference in London on 17 April 2012 will feature contributions from key figures from local and national government and from the drinks industry. Workshop sessions will explore how councils can work together to tackle alcohol misuse and highlight interventions that are working best.

http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/events/-/journal_content/56/10161/3491039/EVENT-TEMPLATE

Of interest to:
Environment Portfolio Holder Director of Environment and Street Scene

17. FORTHCOMING CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

Full details of the following forthcoming conferences and events, have previously been reported in the Policy and Information Update:

Title	Date	Venue
LGA Public Health Conference 2012 - 'Political & Managerial Leadership In Public Health'	28 February 2012	London
LGA Workforce Seminar - 'The Future Face Of Local Government'	8 March 2012	London
LGA Reducing Health Inequalities For Children & Young People Conference	22 March 2012	London