

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MINUTES

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Committee **Date:** Tuesday, 15 October 2013

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 7.30 - 8.45 pm

Members Present: Councillors R Morgan (Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee) (Chairman) K Angold-Stephens (Vice-Chairman) G Chambers, K Chana, T Church, L Girling, Ms H Kane, P Keska, A Lion, A Mitchell MBE, S Murray, J Philip, B Rolfe, J M Whitehouse and D Wixley

Other Councillors: Councillors Mrs A Grigg, Ms G Shiell, D Stallan, Ms S Stavrou, G Waller, Mrs E Webster and J Wyatt

Apologies: Councillors D Jacobs

Officers Present: D Macnab (Deputy Chief Executive), C Overend (Policy & Research Officer), S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer), T Carne (Public Relations and Marketing Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer) and M Jenkins (Democratic Services Assistant)

By Invitation: S Chambers (Citizen Advice Bureau) and J Woods (Citizen Advice Bureau)

38. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman reminded everyone present that the meeting would be broadcast live to the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings.

39. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

It was noted that Councillor Jon Whitehouse was substituting for Councillor D Jacobs.

40. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the last two meetings of the Committee held on 27 August and 3 September 2013 be signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

41. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct.

42. PRESENTATION FROM THE CITIZENS' ADVICE BUREAU

The Chairman welcomed Stephanie Chambers the Epping Forest Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) District Manager and Janet Woods the Chair of the Epping Forest District CAB. The meeting noted that they are a registered charity and had started in 2008 as a joint branch by combining the three existing branches in the district, namely those at Epping, Loughton and Waltham Abbey. This had also saved them money as they reduced three management committees down to one. Each branch has a Service Manager responsible for the delivery of advice from each outlet. They have nine volunteer officers on the governing trustee board along with two non-voting councillors. They currently have a three year Service Level Agreement (SLA) with the District Council from which they receive £113,840 per annum. They have renegotiated the SLA for another three years but that has not as yet been signed off

The CAB is operated on the service level by highly trained volunteers who undergo a nationally supported training programme to become advisors and they continue to have on-going training, especially in benefits and aspects of the law. The Citizens' Advice Bureau sets out the standards that their branches must adhere to and audit the branches every three years; this district's offices had received an 80% rating which put them in the top 15% in the country.

Up to the end of September this year they had three main offices across the district that cost them approximately £15,500 per annum. In September 2011 owners of their Epping office property, the Theydon Trust, informed them that they wished to redevelop the site and build a two storey building which it was envisaged would be used mainly by the CAB. Planning permission was granted in 2012 and the proposed rent would be approximately £28k p.a. excluding rates. They did not have the funds for this and EFDC advised the CAB that it did not envisage any more core funding being made available in respect of the additional annual rental costs. They had looked into the possibility of other buildings being used but these were considered to be too expensive, particularly bearing in mind the additional costs required for them to be fitted out for their use.

There were also longer term problems at their premises in St Mary's Church, Loughton, which was in a somewhat dilapidated state. The Church wanted to redevelop the site, although they had indicated that there would be room for an outreach office for the CAB. Other options had been looked at but they were not considered suitable.

Accordingly the CAB decided the best option would be to rent the new Theydon Trust building in Epping once completed some 12-18 months hence. The only way to meet the increased rent was through staff cuts. Theydon Trust understood the CAB's funding position in that they could not guarantee to pay their rent for more than one year at a time. They had met with the paid and voluntary staff and told them of the Board's decision. The Board had proposed a new staffing structure and that was presently being considered by the staff. Their views are due to be given by the end of November, when the consultation period ends.

New clients were given a diagnostic interview known as a 'gateway assessment'. If they are from outside this area then they would be referred to their local authority area or another suitable organisation that could help them. The exception being the need for emergency interventions.

They have specialist voluntary advisors who have chosen to specialise in a particular area, and pro-bono legal advice from some solicitors who work voluntarily for them. Currently they do not have the facility to offer an email service, but hope to do so in the future. Each branch had a service manager responsible for the standards for that branch.

They currently operate outreach services from Abridge and Limes Farm. Customers would receive exactly the same advice as they would in the main branches.

They noted that they now have a new computer system known as Petra. However, because of technical issues which still had to be resolved they could not extract the relevant statistics that the Council had requested. They were pressing to get better statistics (such as on the 'bedroom tax') and would forward it on, once received.

Last year they saw 3,397 clients and helped with 14,096 issues. They were mostly asking for advice on benefits and tax credits followed closely by debt advice.

They then went on to consider the questions received by them before the meeting:

Q. What will be the impact of the Universal Credit System be on the workload of the CAB? What steps have the CAB taken to ensure they are in a state of readiness for dealing with the additional queries which will inevitably arise?

A. They were awaiting training on this at present.

Q. Many organisations are looking at the potential for 'sharing' backroom and other services as a means of reducing costs and making efficiencies. Has EFD CAB discussed this possibility with neighbouring and other CAB's and, if so, which services have been identified?

A. They noted that Harlow CAB had taken a lot of their files for storage, but other than that they have very little in backroom services.

Q. What advantages is the CAB taking of in terms of developments in IT? Will these developments improve the service offered further and, if so, how?

A. They would like to improve on IT but lack of finances get in the way. They were still using computers that were over 10 years old, although they have a rolling programme of replacement.

Q. If the CAB were to be re-housed in the Hemnall Street offices once the re-development was completed what opportunities would this present? What would be the disadvantages?

A. The CAB offices are to be built to their design; they would have 6 small interview rooms and could be open longer, maybe even on weekends. But the cost of the rent was high and they did not want to cut back on staff. They would like to stay in Loughton or Debden. Loughton Town Council was generous to them and they did not want to reduce the service given. Also, not all of their volunteer staff may want to work in Epping.

Q. Will EFD CAB be utilising the whole of the refurbished Hemnall Street premises? If not, would any space not required be sub-let to bring in additional income for EF CAB? Has the possibility of bringing all three CAB's under one roof been considered with possibility of more 'one off', localised outreach services being undertaken?

A. It was anticipated that the CAB would have use of all the new building, apart from one large room which would be used as an office for Theydon Trust. There would be a slight decrease in the rent to allow for this. They would still have a small CAB Office in Waltham Abbey. It is small but it gives them a presence in the area. They were aware that travelling by bus from Loughton or Debden to Epping was not straightforward. They intended to provide a good outreach service to both Loughton and Debden once the centre at St Mary's closed.

Q. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Wellbeing who agrees the payment of funding for the SLA Grant needs to be kept fully informed of the discussions and decisions made relating to services in the District as do the District Councillors who attend CAB Board meetings. Please outline the existing arrangements for keeping them informed and how these might be improved, bearing in mind the technological advances you envisage in your working methods.

A. All their board papers go to all board members including representatives from EFDC and LTC. A copy also went to Citizens' Advice and to the Liaison Officer at EFDC to distribute as necessary. New EFDC representatives are invited to visit the CAB so they can get a first hand picture of what they do. They had spoken to Councillors Shiell and Webster about their premises problems.

At their last board meeting on 11 September when the board was making an important decision about premises they spoke directly to Councillors Shiell and Jill Angold-Stephens from Loughton TC about this and also to various other Town Council representatives such as Councillors Jon Whitehouse and Webster, hopefully so they could understand the reasoning behind their decision. They would gladly welcome any suggestions on how they could use any technological advances to keep people informed.

Q. How many residents have visited their offices across the district requesting assistance and information regarding the Spare Room Subsidy since its introduction?

A. This could not be answered at present as they did not have any information.

Q. How many residents have visited their office on Limes Farm requesting assistance and information regarding the Spare Room Subsidy since its introduction and how many attended requesting assistance on other matters?

A. They had five residents in August visit Limes Farm (who were regular clients), two of whom had asked for assistance on Council Tax matters.

Q. How many residents have visited their offices across the district requesting assistance and information regarding welfare reform issues in general?

A. This had been covered in their hand-outs. They were also awaiting training on the new welfare reforms. One of the changes would be that the majority of the forms would have to be filled out on-line, but this may pose problems with their old computers.

Q. The North/South divide in the district – a lot of our resident to the north of the district tend to go up to the Harlow CAB or over the border to Hertfordshire, and not bother to travel south to Epping – could you provide information on the services they can access there.

A. Many clients do go across the border to Hertfordshire and Harlow, this is usually because this was where they were working and also, because of the hours we open they find it easier to attend in their lunchtime. We will ask East Herts and Harlow for any statistics they may have on this. However, this cross border assistance is now stopping as they tend to refer clients back to their local authority area.

The meeting was then opened out to questions from committee members.

Councillor Murray thanked them for their presentation. He wondered what would happen once their office in Loughton closed down and how people would access their services. Ms Chambers said that the honest answer was that she did not know as they were unaware when that office would be closed. They were consolidating their services in Loughton and Waltham Abbey as the Epping office had now closed.

They may have a telephone assessment service and were looking to set up outreach services when they have to close the Loughton office.

Councillor Lion felt that the date on the tabled sheets were confusing, and queried whether the figures were for 2012/13 or 2011/12. He also sought clarification regarding the figure of 3,397 clients being assisted. Ms Chambers replied that it was an error and that the figures were for 2012/13 and that they had helped 100% of their clients in some way, i.e. all 3,397 of them.

Councillor Kane asked how much the CAB get from EFDC and was told that it was £113,840 pa in terms of the core service. In addition the District Council was also currently funding two Welfare Mitigation posts.

Councillor Wixley said that they had mentioned 9 volunteers; how many paid staff did they have, how many redundancies were anticipated and much money would be saved? Ms Chambers said that there were 12 paid staff, including part timers and 60 unpaid volunteers in all. They were trying to save £24,000 in all and had put some proposals to the staff in a consultation exercise. It would be unfair to comment on the consultation at present given the potential for redundancies. They still hoped to cover a similar number of hours as before.

Councillor Wixley then asked about the quality of service to be provided. He was told that they were going down from 3 to 2 branches, but with no drop in the quality of the service offered. They had to keep their standards up as they were monitored by Citizen's Advice.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse said it was helpful to go to board meetings as an Epping Town Councillor; but he asked what impact the closure of the Epping Office would have. He was told that it was still too early to assess this as yet. But to date it had not been as bad as they thought it would be. They would like to increase their telephone services to help see this through.

Councillor Girling asked if they had any other funding streams that they could access annually. Ms Chambers said that they received some money from the three town councils and also from a Loughton Charity. They raised money from some projects and donations and also had a 'friends of EFCAB' who help raise money for them. Councillor Girling asked if they ever approached national sources for money. He was told that they approached everyone and anyone. Last year they got £7,000 in small grants. This year, they have not got any partners as yet. Every year they start their fund raising exercise, looking at what's available from Government or elsewhere. They get approximately 10% of all the bids they apply for; so they have to apply for a lot. Also, a lot of organisations only like to fund one piece of work at a time.

Chris Overend, EFDC Policy & Research Officer, noted that for a number of years they received a grant from the County Council, and enquired as to the latest situation? He was told that they got a small grant from ECC; last year it was just over £11,000; they have received the same for this year, but were told that next year they may not get it at all.

Councillor Keska asked where in Abridge was their office located. He was told that it was in Abridge Village Hall. It was there once a month, and was funded by the Local Parish Council. They were also looking at providing an IT alternative for Ongar, by providing a 'kiosk' with a touch screen system. They have been in touch with Ongar PC about this.

Councillor Murray noted that they were looking to save £24,000 on staff costs, and asked how much were they spending presently? He was told that they were spending in the region of £150k on staff. Councillor Murray noted that EFDC were giving them a grant of £113,840 pa but Essex County Council was only giving £11k. The ECC Councillors should note this particularly bearing in mind that a significant number of cases dealt with by the CAB fell within categories which related to services which were a County Council responsibility.

Councillor Lion asked about working in conjunction with the Library services. Ms Chambers noted that the problem would be that they would need a small interior room for interviews etc. but it could be done. They have had talks about going to Epping Library but have been 'knocked back' every time. Part of the issue was that if they were located there this may result in the CAB being associated with the County and not as a separate entity.

Councillor Waller congratulated the CAB on obtaining a high score in their recent quality audit. He noted that they had a rather large number of staff in comparison to an MP who may deal with a comparable number of cases in a year, but without giving the detailed advice. He noted that travelling was difficult in our area; could outreach services be extended to people in the north of the district? Ms Chambers was aware of the problems in travelling north/south in the district. They tend to have an interchange of customers with Harlow but would need to find suitable locations in the north. As for staffing numbers, not one of them were full time, they may have two managers but they are also part time along with the supervisors.

Councillor Girling noted that they needed considerable storage space and wondered whether there was a requirement for paper files to be kept? He was told that there was a legal requirement to keep files for six years and in debt cases for twelve years. They were trying to scan as much as they could and were aware that that they had to reduce their paperwork, but a lot had to be kept for legal purposes. Councillor Girling asked if there would be a time when they would require less office space and could apprentices help with the scanning of the files. Ms Chambers noted that their new computer system was not quite up to speed and will be revamped next year. They cannot say what they could do until they found out what their new system would do. One day they may well be paper free, but they needed it now.

The Chairman thanked Ms Chambers and Ms Woods for their informative and interesting presentation and for answering the follow up questions.

43. CABINET REVIEW

The Committee noted the Cabinet agenda of 21 October. Councillor Murray said, in relation to agenda item 13 (Civic Offices – Committee Room Tables) that he was not convinced that the council should be spending £10k on new tables in the present financial situation and wondered how this could be justified.

44. WORK PROGRAMME MONITORING

The Committee reviewed the Overview and Scrutiny work programme.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

It was noted that the Youth Council was to go to their November meeting when they would update the committee on the work they did during the past year and their plans for the future.

Housing Scrutiny Standing Panel

Councillor Murray reported that the Housing Standing Panel would be reviewing Parking Enforcement on Housing Managed grassed areas and noted that they had recently gone through the conditions of tenancy and reviewed the Housing Service Standards.

Constitution and Member Services Standing Panel

Councillor Philip noted that they had last met on 24 September where they considered the appointment process for the vice chairman of Council. They were now consulting members via the Members Bulletin.

Safer Cleaner Greener Standing Panel

Noted that the next meeting will be held on 28 October.

Planning Services Standing Panel

Councillor Wyatt informed the Committee that at their September meeting the Panel received an update on electronic records for wider public access and endorsed the idea of providing Parish and Town Councils with officer support at their planning meetings to gauge their IT needs. A report will be submitted to the forthcoming Local Council's Liaisons Committee. They also agreed the content of the draft revised planning application checklist and discussed the Brentwood Borough Local Plan Preferred Options Consultation. They were not convinced that Brentwood was unable to make full provision for housing needs. They felt that there was no indication of how they intended to make provision for 2,100 new dwellings outside their boundary and concluded that the Brentwood Local Plan may struggle at examination in public. They also supported the draft Local Enforcement Plan, which set out the priorities for investigation.

Finance and Performance Management Standing Panel

Councillor Lion noted that at their last meeting they had reviewed the KPIs and the Financial Performance Monitoring quarterly figures. He noted that these warned of tough times ahead for the Council. In addition they received an interim report on cross charging that a sub committee was looking at. A full report will go to their next meeting.

Overview and Scrutiny Review Task and Finish Panel

It was noted that their final meeting was scheduled for 31 October 2013, when they would consider their final report.

CHAIRMAN

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