

Report to the Council

Subject: Safer, Greener & Transport Portfolio Date: 20 February 2014

Portfolio Holder: Councillor G Waller

Recommending:

That the report of the Safer, Greener & Transport Portfolio Holder be noted.

Domestic Homicide Review

As previously reported, a further Domestic Homicide Review is now under way following the death of a young woman, Junella Valentine, at Waltham Abbey on 7 October 2013. Retired judge His Honour Anthony Bradbury, whom I appointed to chair the Review, has made good progress in leading the investigation into the circumstances, and the Panel has met twice so far. I am very hopeful that a report can be submitted to the Home Office within the normally expected six months period, and that any lessons which can be applied in future to help prevent similar tragedies from occurring will be fully set out.

Community Safety

The latest crime figures for Epping Forest District show an encouraging trend, with all categories of offence declining during the municipal year to date, compared with the equivalent period for 2012/13. During the past three months, according to Home Office statistics, the position has improved in terms of theft of and from vehicles, and also in terms of serious acquisitive crime. During this period, Epping Forest District has experienced the second best crime trend for local authority areas in Essex. While it is impossible to draw a conclusive link, I believe that the excellent work of our Community Safety team is making an important contribution.

Essex Police and Crime Panel

I was present at the meeting of the Police and Crime Panel on 29 January, when the Commissioner, Nick Alston, presented his budget for approval. He was in some difficulty because the Government had not yet announced the level of any precept cap and how any such cap might operate. In proposing an increase to the precept of 3.5 per cent to protect police numbers (which was accepted by the Panel by 12 votes to 2), Mr Alston said he had made an assumption that the cap would be set at 1.5 per cent and that the Government would again follow last year's practice by allowing PCCs to exceed the cap if their precept is in the lowest quartile of counties and provided the increase does not amount to more than £5.00 over the year for Band D households. (Even after a 3.5 per cent rise, the precept would indeed still leave Essex in the lowest quartile and would amount to a little below an extra £5.00.) The PCC added that if it turned out that his proposed precept would need to be approved by referendum before it could be implemented, he would withdraw it because he did not believe he could justify the spending of a substantial sum on a referendum.

Countrycare

Following the record number of volunteers attending Thursday working parties in 2012, even more volunteers came to work with Countrycare in 2013. There were eight new volunteers among the 54 who participated during the year on 51 separate working days. A total contribution of 4470 hours was totted up and, rated at £6.50 an hour, this equates to £29,055 in terms of donated time over the year.

On 10 December, Countrycare hosted a team building day for the Community Development section, with 25 staff taking part in a day of scrub bashing on Swaines Green Local Wildlife Site. This 22 acre site on the western side of Epping provides a habitat for a wealth of trees, plants and animals. There is firm evidence that the field boundaries are the original Saxon / Norman demarcations, and the hedgerows have been dated back to pre-Tudor times.

On 18 January, Countrycare helped Friends of Ongar Orchard plant 19 fruit trees on the piece of EFDC owned land in Shelley. The Ongar Community Orchard will be run by Friends of Ongar Orchard with help from Countrycare and Community Development. Until the 1970s, thousands of acres of apple, plum and pear orchards were located in the A12 corridor, but records show a decline of 81 per cent in Essex orchard land between 1990 and 2007, coinciding with a considerable growth in the proportion of imported fruit. In 2011 a small group of interested local people made a proposal to EFDC to plant a former allotment site as an orchard. A constitution for the Friends of Ongar Community Orchard was approved, and funding obtained from Edible Essex, a three year project (2011-2014) run by the Rural Community Council of Essex, funded by the Big Lottery's Local Food Scheme and supported by Essex County Council. Support is offered to set up or renovate allotment sites across the county and to establish or expand orchards, with public access. The orchard is also strongly supported by Ongar Town Council, which has provided grant funding as well.

Finally, on 28 January Countrycare hosted another team building day, this time for Planning and Economic Development. The participants pollarded, coppiced and layered trees in Roughtallys Wood LNR and created a stag beetle home.

Conservation

The production of guidelines for appropriate design in conservation areas and other historic locations has been identified as an important future project for the Conservation Section. Incremental change and examples of poor design greatly undermine the character and appearance of historic areas, so up to date, relevant guidance on appropriate design, focussing for instance on shopfronts and signage on historic shopping streets, would help to improve the appearance of those areas. It is also considered that more general guidance documents for owners and occupants of listed buildings, locally listed buildings and properties within conservation areas would prove helpful in reducing the number of enquiries received and discouraging inappropriate alterations.

The Conservation Section divides its time between consultations on planning applications affecting heritage assets (curtilage listed buildings, conservation areas, locally listed buildings), pre-application enquiries, both formal (which are chargeable) and informal, queries from the general public relating to heritage assets, the administration of the historic buildings grants, monitoring locally listed buildings and conservation areas, the production of conservation area character appraisals and management plans. There are also other strategic projects such as the Local Plan,

the Heritage at Risk register (an English Heritage initiative), the creation of design guidance and applications for the designation of additional listed buildings.

The number of planning application consultations has been reduced, and planning officers now deal with the more straightforward applications relating to heritage assets without a formal response from the Conservation Officer, but perhaps involving informal discussions with the Conservation section. This has released Conservation Officer time for the more strategic aspects of the role, including most importantly the character appraisals, of which it is intended to produce about four per year. As previously noted, the Staples Road Conservation Area Character Appraisal is due for early publication, together with those for York Hill and Baldwins Hill shortly afterwards.

Energy Efficiency and Fuel Poverty

At its meeting on 3 February, Cabinet noted the Council's increased requirement to gather data under the provisions of the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995, known as HECA. Under the Green Deal, which applies to businesses and social housing as well as private sector homes, local authorities have a choice, either alone or in partnership with others, of acting as promoters, producers or providers. The Housing Directorate set up a working group to formulate a view on the approach the Council should take with regard to delivering the Green Deal to residents of the district and agreed that, as uptake has been slow both nationally and locally, the Council should adopt the role of promoter for the time being.

Meanwhile, a new method for calculating fuel poverty is being introduced following recommendations set out by Professor John Hills of the London School of Economics. This will include a new definition, allowing for its more accurate measurement as it will include dual indicators to separate the extent of the issue (the number of people affected) from its depth (how badly people are affected).

There can be no doubt that the Council's additional duties will impose new demands, as the coordination of energy efficiency matters across the Council is currently the responsibility of a part-time Environmental Co-ordinator whose role also includes wider sustainability issues. Proposals for suitable permanent staffing arrangements will need to be brought forward in due course.

Parking

Tariffs

A plan is included in the budget for 2014/15 to raise an additional £150,000 per annum from off-street car parking charges. The necessary increases in tariffs which this figure entails should be considered in the context that parking charges have not increased for five years. It was my intention to bring a report to Cabinet on 3 March with a fundamental review of car parking tariffs, but in the time available that will not be possible. Instead, I shall be presenting a report on some interim changes pending a more radical appraisal later in the year. A decision has already been made to replace ticket machines during 2014, and this should enable us not only to have regularly updated and reliable information about the usage of our car parks, which will inform the decisions we wish to make, but will also enable me to consider more sophisticated and flexible tariff structures as part of the review.

NEPP ParkSafe enforcement vehicle

I took part in an interview on BBC Radio Essex about the problems caused by inconsiderate and dangerous stopping in the vicinity of schools at the beginning and end of the school day. Complaints are regularly received about this practice which threatens the safety of both children and their parents and carers. As a result of this problem, which is prevalent everywhere, the North Essex Parking Partnership has introduced a CCTV camera equipped vehicle which will be deployed across the Partnership area to focus on the places outside schools, as well as urban clearways. This vehicle will be able to deter such dangerous practices much more effectively than civil enforcement officers who are capable of patrolling a very much more limited number of locations.

I attended the launch event in Epping Forest for the ParkSafe CCTV car on 27 January at Hillhouse Church of England Primary School in Waltham Abbey. The event was attended by the head teacher, governors and pupils and was widely welcomed locally because, despite the availability of safe places to park, including a free Council car park opposite the school entrance, there are frequent incidents caused by drivers persisting in parking directly on the zig-zag lines. It is hoped that few penalty charge notices will need to be issued before drivers become aware of the possible consequences of future infringements.

Submission of schemes to NEPP

At the meeting of the North Essex Parking Partnership at Clacton-on-Sea on 8 January, I submitted a number of new schemes for investigation and implementation, following the consultation which I had undertaken with local members and parish / town councils. The status of schemes which I have submitted to date is given in the NEPP FAQs published in the Members' Bulletin which will, I hope, have answered some of the questions frequently raised about the Partnership.

Buckhurst Hill Parking Review

The outcome of the informal consultation with Buckhurst Hill residents was presented to ward members at a meeting held on 29 January. Essex Highway engineers are now updating the proposals in the light of comments received and, once this work is completed, a formal, statutory public consultation will be carried out, including advertising in the local press and notices in the vicinity of proposed changes. I have asked officers to make this information available on the Council website. Implementation – the provision of signs and yellow lining – will depend on the extent and nature of objections raised during the formal consultation and is due to be carried out during the summer months, when we hope we can rely on better weather. Completion of the Review will then allow us to commence work on the Loughton Broadway Parking Review.