

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF STRONGER COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY, 13 OCTOBER 2020
IN VIRTUAL MEETING ON ZOOM
AT 7.00 - 8.38 PM**

Members Present: P Bolton (Chairman), D Stocker (Vice-Chairman), R Bassett (Member), H Brady, R Brookes, D Dorrell, H Kane (Chairman of the Council), S Neville (Leader of the Green Party Group), S Rackham and J M Whitehouse

Other members present: N Bedford, S Kane, S Murray, A Patel, J Philip, M Sartin and J H Whitehouse

Apologies for Absence:

Officers Present A Small (Strategic Director), C Hartgrove (Interim Chief Finance Officer), L Wade (Service Director (Strategy, Delivery & Performance)), P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services)), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), J Leither (Democratic Services Officer) and N Cole (Corporate Communications Officer)

15. 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 virtual meetings.

16. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Committee noted that there were no substitute members.

17. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved:

That the notes of the meeting held 14 July 2020 were agreed as a correct record subject to officers chasing up an answer to Councillor Neville's question on what type of gas would be used in the air conditioning system Minute item 9). He also noted a typographical error in the preceding paragraph.

Post meeting update: *In answer to Councillor Neville's question on the air conditioning system, the following was obtained after the meeting:*

Two of the Air Handling Units contain 'coolants'. AHU 01 serving the main Civic Hall is provided with DX cooling utilising R410a refrigerant. AHU 02 serving the old Civic Suite (now office and break-out) is provided with cooling utilising chilled water, supplied from two replacement packaged chillers. The chillers themselves utilise R410a refrigerant.

Throughout the building new VRF comfort cooling installations are being provided, utilising R410a refrigerant. R410a refrigerant has a GWP (Global Warming

Potential) of 2088 which is the better of the current refrigerants, and common to all current VRF systems.

Many AC manufacturers are developing towards utilising R32 refrigerant, which has a GWP of 675. Currently though, there is limited range availability and will likely not be fully adopted by the industry until the back end of 2021.

18. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(a) Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor S Murray declared a personal interest in item 8, Accommodation Project, by virtue of being a trustee of Citizen's Advice. The Councillor had determined that his interest was non-pecuniary and he would remain in the meeting for the consideration of this item.

(b) Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor R Bassett declared a personal interest in item 8, Accommodation Project (section 3), by virtue of being the Chairman of Community Transport. The Councillor had determined that his interest was non-pecuniary and he would remain in the meeting for the consideration of this item.

19. TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME

The Select Committee noted their terms of reference and work programme.

20. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT 2020-21 - QUARTERS 1 & 2

The Director for Strategy, Delivery and Performance, L Wade, introduced the report on corporate performance management. This was representative of the programmes of change and the amount of work being delivered across the Council. The initial overview report would have been delivered at the beginning of the financial year, however with officer's focus on the Covid recovery response this had to be delayed.

The first part of the report related to the internal governance review and structure, aligning to the Stronger Select Committees. An internal officer governance structure had been established to focus on the delivery of the Corporate programmes aligned to the Stronger ambition objectives. Programmes would be led by a director enabling Corporate Performance management to be aligned with individual performance management.

The next part of the report was on corporate performance management, setting out the scope of the work and the scope of each of the programmes across the council. Officers had been working with the programme delivery leads to establish clear project briefs for each programme of work along with a roadmap and clear set of milestones to allow the measurement of delivery and progress. L Wade asked the committee if they would like to see the progress of all the programmes or just the exceptions.

Councillor Rackham said that she would like to see all progress not just the ones highlighted; it was important that the Committee scrutinised properly. Councillor Neville agreed with her.

Councillor Bassett noted that there was a lot going on and with the changes with Covid and the impact that it would have. Was this timetable going to be drastically

affected or were these dates reasonably firm. Members needed to look at everything, as they just did not know what was happening and that things were changing rapidly.

The Chairman agreed that it was important to have these reports for members to scrutinise.

L Wade drew the meeting's attention to the three exceptions. The first was the Telecare project, which was now delayed due to Essex County Council withdrawing their initial tender process.

The next was the ICT restructure, this was delayed following the impact of Covid and the recruitment of an interim service manager. However, three team managers have now been appointed.

Thirdly, the impact on the Local Plan, due to the review of the Main Modification delayed document submission and as a result of the inspector's capacity to review the report.

Councillor Neville asked about the Cyber Security review, would we be able to withstand an attack on our systems as Hackney Council had just undergone. The Director for Corporate Services replied that cyber security was kept under constant review; our systems were robust while letting our staff freedom to attend various virtual meetings and training sessions etc. She could not remember an incident where our systems had been breached.

Councillor Neville then asked about the Climate Change programme and how could members give their views on the climate change programme before it went to the Cabinet. He was told that officers would advise members on how this would happen. *(Post meeting update: N Dawe would reach out directly regarding this).*

Councillor Neville asked if there were any plans to bring any sustainable transport to the south of the district although it was quite well served by public transport already. He was told that his query would be put to the officers concerned.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked about the people programme items and asked how the recruitment of staff was going, what were the outcomes on reducing the vacancy rate and about reducing the use of agency staff. The Corporate Services Director replied that they could look at some KPI measures to include that sort of information.

Councillor Bassett noted that Essex CC had withdrawn from Telecare, did we know why; and what would be the cost implications of this as we were in the process of winding it down. He was told that the withdrawal was partly due to Covid and the results of that; officers would be asked for specific details to be put into the minutes. As for the cost implications the resources were still in place and being currently assessed. Part of the outcome was that a report would be going to Cabinet in January.

Councillor Bassett noted that the progress boxes in the sections for Members, Partnership working and Digital payments were blank, why was this? He was told that these related to later milestones and so any progress would not have happened as yet.

Councillor Bassett noted that under the customer excellence programme it said that Customer Survey completed and presented; where were they presented? He was told that an update was presented as a summary at the July Overview and Scrutiny

Committee. The actions to be taken to address survey were already included in the Customer Strategy. If further detailed information was required, this could be obtained from Susan Lewis.

Councillor Bassett remarked that under the digital solutions to improve processes in the planning department – the timescales seemed a bit short to carry this through. He was told that officers were trying to be ambitious with this looking at the minimum viable product in terms of how we actually implement this as part of a minimum first phase and were also looking for ‘out-of-the-box’ solutions.

Councillor Bassett then asked what the first project of the newly appointed Climate change officer would be. He was told that this would come out of the action plan that was presently being discussed.

Councillor Dorrell remarked on the digital solutions and shared councillor’s Bassett’s concerns over the time scales which was part of a long process. He noted that we were down to 2 suppliers and one was over budget; were they a long way over budget, as the Council was trying to avoid a situation where we only had one tender. L Wade said that we currently had two vendors who looked to meet our requirements. We were looking at professional service costs and also looking at how much we could do in-house. Councillor Dorrell asked if one of the two came in at way over budget, were we then down to just one again? He was told that it depends what they were offering, and it come down to either a cost solution or a strategic solution, as part of the evaluation process.

Councillor Rackham expressed concerns about Covid and how it would impact on us if we had another lockdown and how it would affect our corporate plans. A Small replied that our plans were as stated, but could be affected by events, and we would have to adapt accordingly. If we moved into tier two, then most plans would be unaffected. Most work was currently being delivered by staff working from home. The problem was face to face interactions. We will report back to this committee on any problems encountered.

Councillor Murray said that he agreed with Mr Small. He asked about the telecare offering and were we happy that we would able to carry on offering the telecare services until we got a new operator. He was told that was the case, we shall carry on for now and a report on costs and an assessment would be part of a report going to Cabinet. A fuller answer will be put in the minutes. *(Post meeting update: confirmation that the TELECARE offering would in no way be impacted during the interim and a full report will be seen at Cabinet regarding costs).*

Councillor Bedford commented that it was important that we kept our standards up for the telecare service and got assurances that this system was secure for us. He went on to comment about the Local Plan and the Main Modifications, they have now been submitted to the inspector but there was a problem with the inspector having sufficient time to deal with them. But we trying to push it through. Finally, he asked for caution when discussing the digital planning solutions as this maybe currently ‘commercial in confidence’. But just to say that whatever system we will go for would be state of the art as our current system was about 25 years old.

L Wade then asked if there were any questions on the KPIs presented in the report. She indicated most had been directly impacted by Covid, she had also suggested some KPIs for 20/21 for future reference.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked about the proposed Diversity and Inclusion KPI, what would that consist of. He was told that currently officers were in discussions to recognise that we did need a KPI around diversity and Inclusion.

Councillor Bedford asked what the increase in household waste during Covid was. He was told that the figures indicated our targets from last year, and it did show an increase. Asked about the cost implications for the increase officers were unsure but said that they would find out and report back.

Councillor Bedford then asked about Leisure Management KPIs, we should get some feedback from the leisure management about how Covid has affected their business and how we could support them going forward. Officers had seen a pick-up in figures recently but now it has been going down as winter was coming and a second lock down was on the cards.

RESOLVED:

1. The Committee noted the contents of the report and the scope of the corporate programme of work and associated benefits.
2. The Committee agreed that all programmes and projects be report back to them and not just exceptional outcomes.
3. The Committee noted the Q1 and Q2 performance of the KPI and agreed the recommended KPIs for 20/21 performance.

21. ACCOMMODATION PROJECT

The Director for Strategy, Delivery and Performance, L Wade, introduced the report on the ongoing Accommodation Project. The committee noted that the Accommodation Programme Board continued to meet monthly to oversee the delivery of the programme and covered the following workstreams:

1. Refurbishment works
2. Infrastructure and Technology
3. Travel Plan
4. Furniture, fixtures and fittings
5. Change & Ways of Working
6. Partners and Commercial opportunities
7. Customer Service Workstream

The refurbishment works were going well and the AV design specification had been progressed; the appendix to the report included photos of the types of new technology that they hoped to incorporate into the new offices. Discussions had progressed on the Travel Plans with the newly appointed Sustainable Transport Officer where they were exploring sustainable options for travel to the office as part of the wider sustainable transport project and the use of DRT (Demand Responsive Transport).

Officers were currently reviewing the space requirements in light of the flexible working and use of the building. The requirements for furniture and fittings were at the final stage of design. The result would be an open and modern environment retaining and showcasing the listed features of the Civic. The final review would happen in the coming few weeks.

The programme was not just about the offices but delivering a new way of working, the employees continued to embrace remote working. As for the space in the building the Council have had some positive interest in the use of the building and initial discussions were looking positive.

And finally, as from the Programme Board meeting in September, the contract sum was within the agreed 2020/21 budget approved at Full Council.

Councillor Neville asked if the proposed travel plan report going to the December Cabinet would be shared with councillors in advance of this. He was told that it would hopefully be shared by mid-November.

Councillor Rackham asked if the travel plan would be subject to change at short notice if employees decided they wanted to work from home. She was told that for the most part employees were looking to work more flexibly from home and officers were beginning to understand how they could best utilise the spaces they had.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse said it was a shame that the travel plan had slipped. Could officers say which problem this plan was the solution to. Was it so that officers could park elsewhere and then summon demand responsive transport to the offices or was it a service from home to the civic offices? L Wade said that at this stage it was as an alternative mode of transport, they were still trying to understand the coverage of this and part of the understanding of the scope of the replacement of the 87 bus. Based on this they would see what the needs of the employees were.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse then went on to query the commercialisation of the building space, would we market the conference suite as well. He was told this did not feature at present, but it was something that we would look at in the future.

Councillor Bassett as Chairman of Community Transport confirmed that they have had several discussions with the Council this was for transport for local people or pick people from the transport hubs such as tube stations and bring them on from there. This had proved successful in the Harlow area and they were looking to bring it to Epping Forest. It's a reasonably cost effective solution.

Councillor Murray understood that there was a need to work from home at present, but he hoped they had not lost sight of collaborative working. Nationally, younger members of staff felt that they are losing out by working like this. He went on to ask where could he find the original budget for this accommodation project and the agreed variances*; and what was the current expenditure? Also, could he have a list of our partners who would be joining us. He added that as a trustee of the CAB he knew that it was not financially viable for them to occupy an office in our new building. L Wade replied that collaborative office space was a big part of the design for the civic offices. They also recognised that they needed to consider every employee needs especially junior staff and new entrants and to this end we had established virtual networks for new staff. As for the first part of the question, she could include the costs as part of the minutes, and she would check if it was possible to include the names of our potential partners in the Civic Offices. Councillor Murray said that he was particularly interested the community groups and not the commercial organisations.

****Post meeting update: against the refurbishment budget approved at the 1st June Cabinet, the current numbers were as follows:
Budget - £6,875,000;***

*Current Spend to date - £2,008,957;
Forecast spend - £6,783,184; and
Positive Variance - £91,816.*

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the progress on the Accommodation Programme.

22. PEOPLE STRATEGY

The Director for Corporate Services, P Maginnis, introduced the report update on Peoples Services. To begin with she picked up some questions that were asked at the last meeting of this Committee about vacancies and consultants. As of 21 September 2020, an exercise had been carried out looking at vacancies, at roles that had been vacant for at least six months. They found that there were 26 vacancies, some of which were being covered by agency staff. As for Consultants/Agency Staff we had 23 of them at present, scattered throughout the organisation, mostly in qualified, professional rolls.

As for the people strategy update. The People Strategy and Plan set out clear actions and timescales over a two-year period to support the Council deliver its strategic objectives and was divided into 6 workstreams:

- Attracting, on boarding and retaining the best talent
- Developing our leadership
- Embracing change to support EFDC evolution
- Creating a culture of engagement and wellbeing
- Developing our skills and behaviours to make EFDC a great place to work
- Achieving organisational goals through a high performing and flexible workforce

At the core was transforming the People Team to become an enabler for the organisation.

The Strategy sets out the ambition for our workforce – the right people with the right skills, highly motivated high performing and business efficient.

The Covid Pandemic meant that they had brought projects forward in order to support staff and they were providing more resources for staff during the winter months. Some of this was researched by looking at how the Norwegians got themselves ready for their long winter and what their mindset was.

They have also launched an employee assisted programme to enable employees to access discounts online along with medical access. There was also a lot of training available for staff, including first aid and mental health training and e learning packages.

As for developing skills and behaviours there was a programme for management apprenticeships. We have appointed four housing apprentices and they will start their Chartered Institute of Housing qualifications. We were exceeding our public sector duty in terms of apprenticeships – we were expected to have 15 apprentices in our organisation but have actually got 23.

We have recently undertaken a realignment of services to ensure that the projects to assist our residents and businesses in terms of Covid recovery had been aligned

correctly. They were also looking to automate and improve the current recruitment processes using the current IT systems and working with our partner organisations.

Councillor Rackham asked why, when we had 23 Consultants/agency staff in place, were we not filling the vacancies with permanent staff. She was told that they were currently looking at the vacancies, looking to see if they were actually required, they would then know if there were any chance of making savings. Looking at the list they were not additional rolls, but they were filling vacant rolls across the organisation.

Councillor Brookes commented that Covid had taken a lot of officers' time up during this pandemic. What about the time they would have spent doing their regular work? P Maginnis said that they had refocussed and reprioritised their work during this time. Extra Environmental Health officers had been taken on, for which we had received further funding, to work on Covid. A Small agreed that officers had been very busy and some projects had slipped because of this but we had contained this as best as we could. Councillor Brookes noted that Directors had been working under a lot of pressure and had taken on a lot of extra work. A Small agreed that it had been a big challenge for staff. The organisations response had been exceptional and had kept their work to a high standard. However, the extra workload has had to be prioritised and fitted in with the day to day stuff.

Councillor Sam Kane added that the extra workload that all staff had, especially senior management, emphasised the importance of the wellbeing work that the People Team did.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee noted the People's Strategy report.

23. REVENUE AND CAPITAL OUTTURN 2019-20

The interim Chief Finance Officer, Christopher Hartgrove, introduced the Revenue and Capital Outturn for 2019-20 report. He noted that the figures were still subject to external audit and it was technically possible it might change.

It was a good news story for 2019-20. The Council had ended the year with an overall positive revenue variance on General Fund service budgets of £908,000, whereas the ring-fenced Housing Revenue Account recorded a negative revenue variance of £285,000, for which Covid had played a part.

The minimum contingency balance requirements adopted by the Council had been met at year-end on both the General Fund and the HRA.

Councillor Brookes commented that at another Committee meeting it had been said that kitchen and bathroom improvements had stopped; had they stopped because we needed to save money at present or was it because of Covid. A Small said that it was largely Covid related, but this had stopped in 20/21 but this report was for 19/20.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked if this was a phasing issue because of Covid, to be picked up later, or is it a permanent saving. Also, on the HRA right to buy receipts – have they been reinvested or given back to the government. Councillor J Philip said that this was a finance report was on the outturn for 2019/20, this should be taken up with the panel that looks into housing repairs. Councillor Whitehouse said that it was appropriate to ask if it was a phasing issue or a saving. Councillor Philip said that this report looked at what happened, not an outlook one. C Hartgrove said that he

believed that it was just a phasing issue. Also, he could confirm that return of RTB receipts was averted at the end of 2019/20 at year end; as for 20/21 the current issues were that there were some slight delays on this and was some risks if the council did not spend the receipts.

Councillor Bassett noted that at appendix A, general fund revenue outturn, business support, accommodation, we had allowed £19k with a variance of £1.026million with an actual of £1.045million what caused the variance? He was told that it was an accounting adjustment. The actual variance was only £4k.

Councillor Bassett then asked about the large structural schemes, was that all down to the damaging tree roots. He was told that it was chiefly that, but there were other issues as well.

RESOLVED:

- (1) The Committee noted the Revenue outturn for 2019/20 for the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as presented within the report, including *Appendix A*;
- (2) The Committee noted the General Fund Reserve position presented in Section 4;
- (3) The Committee noted the HRA Balance set out in Section 4, including the retention of £0.5 million originally approved for transfer to the Self-Financing Financing Reserve (prior to consideration for approval by Cabinet); and
- (4) The Committee noted the Capital Programme outturn for 2019/20 as presented within the report, including *Appendix B*.

24. QUARTER 1 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT (GENERAL FUND)

The interim Chief Finance Officer, Christopher Hartgrove, introduced the quarter 1, budget monitoring report. The report presented the first four month's (till the end July 2020) General Fund Budget Monitoring report for Epping Forest District Council and reported on the first four months of the pandemic and the financial impact of that. The full position was summarised in appendix A of the report. This report will also be going to Cabinet at their 19 October meeting and was here for pre scrutiny. Because of underspends elsewhere, due to our restricted ability to deliver in some service areas, our projected overspend was currently at £1.9million. Actual variance were picked out in section 3 of the report. The area coming under the most pressure was the Contracts and Technical Services functions. As for the support we were getting from the Government; at present we were projecting something in the region of £3.5m, we had actually received £1.6m in grants. It has also undertaken an income loss scheme and under the statutory fees and charges compensation scheme we have just put in a claim for £725k. this is the first of 3. By year end it should be £1.87million.

Councillor Philip noted that this report was just a snapshot of where we were after the first four (Covid) months; paragraph 1.7 was the key one, looking forward, as this was at an early stage of the year. How it would look at the end of the year, quite frankly we did not know yet.

C Hartgrove added that we had a reasonable balance level of just under £8m available to meet overspends.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse referenced sharing the pain with the Leisure contract losses, how was this calculated? A Small said that he would have to speak to the contract officer and put something in the minutes.

Councillor Bassett said that this was a most useful report, to see what Covid was doing to the council. We did not know what the long term effects would be, but he thanked the officers for putting us in this relatively strong position. A Small stressed just what an exceptional year this had been, and we did not know when it would end. We did not know how the government would continue to support us, so it was difficult to develop a budget for next year.

Councillor Philip added that we had good reserves but did not want to fall into the trap of spending our reserves as we did not know what would happen next year.

RESOLVED:

The Committee noted the content of this report.

25. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted their future meeting dates.