

EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MINUTES

Committee: Overview & Scrutiny Committee **Date:** Thursday, 15 October 2020

Place: Virtual Meeting on Zoom **Time:** 7.30 - 10.45 pm

Members Present: Councillors M Sartin (Chairman) R Jennings (Vice-Chairman) R Baldwin, P Bolton, L Burrows, D Dorrell, I Hadley, S Heather, J Lea, S Murray, D Plummer, S Rackham, P Stalker, D Stocker, D Sunger, J H Whitehouse and D Wixley

Other Councillors: Councillors R Bassett, N Bedford, R Morgan, M Owen, A Patel, J Philip, C Whitbread, H Whitbread and J M Whitehouse

Apologies: -

Officers Present: G Blakemore (Chief Executive), N Dawe (Chief Operating Officer), P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services)), V Messenger (Democratic Services Officer), R Moreton (Corporate Communications Officer), A Small (Strategic Director Corporate and 151 Officer), L Wade (Service Director (Strategy, Delivery & Performance)) and G Woodhall (Team Manager - Democratic & Electoral Services)

By Invitation: Ms S Rea (Associate Director – EPUT)

29. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

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

30. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee noted that no substitute Members had been appointed for this meeting.

31. MINUTES

Resolved:

(1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2020 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record, subject to the following amendment:

(a) adding Cllr J M Whitehouse to the list of attendees.

32. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

33. PUBLIC QUESTIONS & REQUESTS TO ADDRESS THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee noted that no public questions or requests to address the meeting had been received.

34. EXECUTIVE DECISIONS - CALL-IN

The Chairman updated the Committee on progress with the call-in received regarding releasing the restrictive covenants at Epping Forest College in Loughton.

There had been an informal meeting held regarding the call-in and the lead signatory had indicated that sufficient progress had been made and discussions were ongoing so there was not the need to debate the call-in at the current time and that it would be withdrawn in the not too distant future.

35. LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES - SCRUTINY OF EXTERNAL ORGANISATION

The Chairman introduced Ms S Rea, Associate Director of West Essex Mental Health Services, from the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust (EPUT) as the Committee had previously requested an opportunity to undertake external scrutiny of local mental health services.

Ms S Rea gave a presentation to the Committee to answer the specific questions raised by Members before the meeting and provide a wider overview of the services provided by the EPUT within the District:

- Impact of Covid-19 on mental health;
- How we responded;
- Response during Covid:
 - o Older people and those with dementia;
- Projected surge;
- Mental health & wellbeing of students aged 18 +;
- Funding for local mental health services;
- Working in collaboration;
- EPUT Services in Epping Forest;
- Services for older people and all age dementia; and
- Adult community.

The Chairman thanked Ms S Rea for her presentation and requested questions from the Committee. In response to a number of questions from Cllr S Rackham, Ms S Rea stated that it was always considered that a second wave of Covid-19 infections would have mental health ramifications with a gradually developing peak. Consideration was already being given to further supporting those people already using the local services, as well as considering how to further support those people previously released from the local services. Extra funding for the Crisis Team had come from NHS England, but the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) had to make a commitment to using that funding for long term care. The Trust was also examining how to develop the Crisis Team using funding from Essex County Council, for example the Crisis Café in Harlow. It was acknowledged that risk assessments were challenging in the current circumstances, but the Trust was actively checking in with people on their books – although some of these people were not keen on having outsiders come to their homes.

Cllr D Plummer acknowledged that mental health services were not funded as well as they should be, and enquired if there was any specific help that could be given to the

mental health of young people as they become adults. Ms S Rea accepted that there was a gap in mental health provision for youngsters as they transitioned from children to adults, and there was a project whereby adult services became involved with an individual from the age of 17. A pilot scheme for young people aged 18 – 25 appeared to be working well and it was intended to continue with this scheme. The Trust supported any initiative which reinforced the view mental health was an issue that could affect anyone.

Cllr S Murray was heartened to hear that services were not withdrawn during the first Pandemic, and complimented the quality of the staff who supported a weekly mental health group in Loughton. The Councillor commented that schools were far more aware of mental health issues with children now, but felt that it was still difficult for children aged 11- 18 to access services, or they were accessing them too late. Finally, was mental health services now being adequately funded? Ms S Rea informed the Committee that the Trust did not deal with mental health issues for children, but contact details for the relevant bodies had been provided to Officers. Ms S Rea felt that investment in mental health services was improving as they had a higher profile now, but CCGs were being held to account for the services they were providing.

Cllr J H Whitehouse enquired as to what support was provided by the Home Support Team and how long it lasted for. Ms S Rea explained that Psychiatrists and Mental Health Nurses within the Team could initiate medication if required, provide counselling and provide support around social issues such as employment and housing. The individual would stay under the care of the Team for as long as their episode required, before being transferred to a Community Team. The Community Team would continue to monitor the individual and provide support in accordance with their care plan and mental health needs. They were not visited as often as when they were under the Home Support Team, but they were given support in re-engaging with their local community.

Cllr D Sunger highlighted the bold message of World Mental Health Day, i.e. that it is ok to not be ok, and that mental health issues affected 1 in 4 people in any given year. Had the Trust considered a similar initiative for the District? Ms S Rea stated that the Trust always campaigned on World Mental Health Day to raise local awareness of mental health issues. For example, middle-aged men were most likely to commit suicide for various different reasons, and the Trust was working on a number of initiatives to deal with this issue. Any work with the Council to promote positive mental health wellbeing would be excellent, and the Trust would support any joint initiatives with the Council.

In response to a number of questions from Cllr A Patel, Ms S Rea informed the Committee that there were a whole range of initiatives that the Trust could work alongside the Council to progress. In respect of cross border transitions of patients, there was a clear transfer process which was followed. The Trust worked across the traditional borders of administrative units, and the Home Support Team would provide assistance in the early stages outside of the Trust's area. The Trust had a place of safety at the Derwent Centre in Harlow, where people could go if they wished, and a number of Crisis Cafes were also being developed. There was also a Street Triage Service which could be contacted by the Police if mental health issues were identified during an incident. For community referrals, the Trust had accepted direct referrals from the general public for some time now if it was noticeable that a neighbour was suffering from mental health issues for example, and the 1112 telephone number was open for everyone to use if required. It was acknowledged that with awareness of mental health issues having increased, it was difficult to find suitably qualified staff. There was a national shortage of such staff, but the Trust had

attended a stakeholders event to identify particular gaps in staffing and Mental Health Coaches were also used to raise awareness with suitably qualified people.

The Committee had no further questions and Ms S Rea emphasised that she would be happy to answer any further questions from Councillors in the days after the meeting. Cllr M Sartin opined that this item had raised as many questions as it had answered, and thanked Ms S Rea for her attendance at the meeting.

Resolved:

- (1) That the external scrutiny by the Committee of the Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust regarding the current provision, planning, management and performance of local mental health services across the Epping Forest District be noted.

36. ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY

The Service Manager for Strategy, Delivery & Performance, L Wade, presented a verbal update on the Accommodation Strategy.

L Wade reported that the refurbishment works of the Civic Offices were progressing well, and discussions had progressed on the Travel Plan with the appointment of a Sustainable Transport Officer. It was highlighted that the Strategy for the space had been focused on introducing new ways of working and learnings from how individuals had been working from home, leading to a focus on collaboration. In terms of both partner and commercial space, there had been some positive interest. The Customer Journey for residents was also being developed, and a budget update was provided for the Committee which indicated that the Strategy was on target.

Cllr S Murray requested further information on the community groups that would be based in the refurbished Civic Offices, as the current impression was that there was more emphasis on securing commercial enterprises to share the building rather than community groups. Cllr S Murray also informed the Committee that Citizens Advice could not consider using any of the space inside the Civic Offices as the cost of the proposed lease was more for less space than what they were paying for and using at the moment.

L Wade responded that no agreements had been finalised with any local groups, and that discussions were on-going with Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) and the Library service at the current time. Cllr S Murray opined that VAEF and the Library would not form the sort of Community Hub that had originally been proposed. The Leader of the Council, Cllr C Whitbread, reassured the Committee that the Council was in discussions with various bodies about sharing the space in the Civic Offices. The Leader would be happy to discuss the current situation with Citizens Advice further with Cllr S Murray, and added that the refurbishment would create a brilliant space within the Civic Offices for the Council and others to use.

Resolved:

- (1) That the update on progress with the implementation of the Council's Accommodation Strategy be noted.

37. PEOPLE STRATEGY

The Service Director for Business Support, P Maginnis, presented a verbal update on progress with the implementation of the Council's People Strategy.

P Maginnis referenced to the 'Candidate Journey' video from the last meeting, and informed the Committee that a full update on the Strategy had been provided at the recent meeting of the Stronger Council Select Committee. A lot of time and resource had been spent on developing measures to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff recently, as well as the development of Key Performance Indicators to measure the work from the People Strategy. The Council's Apprentice Programme had been further developed and the Council now had more apprentices employed than was required under its public sector duty. The Council was also using the Apprentice Levy for training purposes.

Cllr S Murray commented that a number of the current Apprentices were ex-pupils of Roding Valley High School where the Councillor worked, and they were very complimentary of the scheme. Councillor H Whitbread welcomed Cllr S Murray's comments, and highlighted that young people were affected more by the Covid-19 pandemic than other sectors of society. Councillor C Whitbread added that the Council produced excellent Apprentices, and that the majority of the people currently in furlough were aged 19 – 24. Essex County Council had also recently launched an entry into work scheme for young people.

Cllr R Jennings enquired, from a mental health and wellbeing perspective, whether considerable numbers of staff had issues dealing with the isolation of working from home? P Maginnis responded that a number of questions had been added to the staff survey on display screens relating to coping with working from home, which had identified a number of issues. To address these issues, further support and guidance had been provided for Team Managers, as well as online resources that staff could access. In addition, it was planned to have 10% of staff trained as mental health first aiders by the end of February 2021.

At the conclusion of this item, the Committee adjourned for a five-minute comfort break.

Resolved:

- (1) That the verbal update on progress with the Council's People Strategy be noted.

38. QUALIS QUARTERLY MONITORING REPORT - Q1/Q2 2019/20

At the request of the Chairman, the Committee agreed to take this item and the next item on the agenda together.

The Strategic Director, A Small, presented the two Quarterly Monitoring reports for Qualis covering the first three quarters of 2020/21, and stated that he would focus on the report for the third quarter. The emphasis during this period for Qualis had been in completing the loan funding transaction, progressing planning work for the Epping development sites and preparing for the transfer of the Housing Repairs service from the Council to Qualis. Qualis was meeting its obligations under the shareholders agreement, and all but one of the key performance indicators had been met. The Covid-19 pandemic had delayed many of the key actions for both the Council and Qualis, some of the originally planned targets had slipped, and the pandemic had affected values and capital markets, but good progress was now being made. The next quarter would be different as key asset acquisitions and further service transfers would take place, and future monitoring reports would reflect this.

Councillor M Sartin enquired whether local companies had been secured to fulfil the various roles outlined in the report? The Chief Operating Officer, N Dawe, stated that Qualis had required an audit company with the necessary skills and experience but the auditors engaged were a local regional company. Legal support was temporarily being provided by a non-local company, but it was the intention for Qualis to use local companies in preference wherever possible.

Cllr J H Whitehouse referred to the options for the re-provision of a Leisure Centre in Epping, and queried when would the decision be made regarding the provision of a Sports Hall in the new Leisure Centre? The Chief Executive, G Blakemore, stated that the next stage of public consultation for the Epping development sites, including the Leisure Centre, would begin in early November. The Leader of the Council, Cllr C Whitbread, added that the responses for this next stage of the public consultation would inform the resulting planning applications for the different sites. Cllr S Murray was concerned that the residents of Epping could be disappointed if the replacement Leisure Centre did not contain a Sports Hall, and the Board of Qualis needed to take note of this. Cllr D Wixley also commented that he hoped a Sports Hall would be included; N Dawe reiterated that a decision had yet to be taken.

Cllr J M Whitehouse enquired whether Qualis would continue to own the proposed new Leisure Centre in Epping or whether it would be leased to the Council? N Dawe reminded the Committee that the current Leisure Management contract with Places for Leisure gave them the right to design and build the new Leisure Centre, and this was the subject of ongoing discussions. No commercial decision had yet been taken over whether to purchase or lease the new Leisure Centre.

Cllr S Murray went on to enquire if Qualis would also consult with the recognised trades unions as part of the staff consultation plan for the transfer of the Housing Repairs service? A Small responded that the law required meaningful consultation and so it would involve the recognised trades unions. Cllr D Wixley commented that he hoped the Housing Repairs staff would not be disadvantaged as a result of their transfer, but A Small reassured the Councillor that they would retain their existing benefits under the TUPE regulations.

Cllr D Wixley wanted confirmation that the Pyrles Lane Nursery had been purchased by Qualis. N Dawe reminded the Committee that the Nursery site at Pyrles Lane had originally been the subject of a conditional offer to purchase by a third party, but this had been withdrawn. A Small added that the Council would lend funds to Qualis to purchase this and other sites, and would earn interest on those loans. It had not been part of the first batch of property assets to be transferred to Qualis. Cllr D Wixley also asked for the neighbours to be taken into consideration when the site was developed as their back gardens all backed onto the Nursery site. N Dawe acknowledged that it was a difficult site to develop but Qualis would be mindful of the neighbours, as indeed it would be of any site within the District that it developed. Cllr D Wixley also enquired whether the management of private rented properties in Loughton referred to in the report related to the Council-owned properties in the High Road? N Dawe confirmed that this related to the residential properties owned by the Council in Centric Parade.

In response to some questions from Cllr I Hadley, N Dawe stated that Qualis would provide any information required by the Council as a shareholder, and that A Small had been appointed as the intermediary between the Council and Qualis. A Small added that the Council had considerable control over Qualis through the Shareholder Agreement, including unfettered access to their accounts, and was content that there was sufficient access to Qualis information for the Council.

Cllr D Plummer wanted confirmation that any Council housing built through Qualis would not be subject to Right-to-Buy? N Dawe replied that none of the proposed property transactions had an envisaged future sale in terms of social housing. The sites were more likely to consist of privately rented properties, but would provide some affordable housing. Cllr Plummer was disappointed to hear this as he felt that the District needed more social housing throughout the District.

Cllr J M Whitehouse requested further clarification regarding the purchases yet to be actioned referred to in the report for quarter 3, and whether the forecast shortfall in income for the Council of £1.6million represented interest payments for loans already agreed for Qualis. N Dawe explained that the search for potential investment properties began in March 2020, and several have been examined. The first purchases should be actioned by the end of October, although it generally took 6 to 8 weeks to complete a purchase, which would hopefully give a yield of 7%. N Dawe confirmed that the shortfall in income to the Council represented lost interest payments.

Cllr H Whitbread, the Portfolio Holder for Housing & Community Services, reminded the Committee that the Council had a successful Housebuilding Programme in the District, and was considering further ways of assisting people to own their homes. In addition, the first few weeks following the transition of the Housing Repairs staff to Qualis had been successful with more repairs being undertaken by staff for tenants.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Qualis Quarterly Monitoring reports for quarters 1, 2 and 3 of 2020/21 be noted.

39. QUALIS QUARTERLY MONITORING REPORT - Q3 2019/20

This item had been considered in conjunction with the previous item on the agenda.

40. COVID-19 UPDATE

The Strategic Director, A Small, presented an update report on the Covid-19 pandemic.

A Small reported that the Council had responded to the pandemic in a proactive and positive fashion and had also played an active part in the co-ordinated Greater Essex response. Most of the Council's services were now operating normally but with some necessary restrictions to ensure the safety of staff and residents. With the easing of the national lockdown, the Council's response had moved from 'Response' to 'Restoration' with a forward look to the 'Recovery' phase. However, there was the continued threat of a second spike in infections, and since the report was written the infection rate within the District had increased significantly from 49 to 90 infections.

A Small stated that Officers felt that the Council had acted quickly to help residents, businesses and staff during the first wave of the pandemic. The Council ensured that local democracy had continued through the implementation of virtual meetings, and the regular Portfolio Holder Advisory Group (PHAG) meetings had helped to shape the policy decisions taken by the Council. It was felt that the support infrastructure was now much more resilient and the Council was better placed to cope with further spikes of infections, but it would be interesting to understand the Member perception of the Council's response to the pandemic.

The Vice-Chairman, Cllr R Jennings, felt that the Council had responded quickly for the benefit of residents, but wondered what services were suspended and the impact of this. A Small stated that Leisure provision and children's play areas were initially suspended, but they had now reopened to the public albeit with restrictions. However, many core services such as waste collection had been able to continue as normal, and the Corporate Communications Team had issued a significant number of press releases to keep residents informed.

Cllr J H Whitehouse highlighted that the Careline alarms service had not been provided during the first wave of the pandemic, which was a vital service for elderly people living on their own, and the Councillor requested that every effort be made to not suspend this service again. A Small accepted that community alarms were important to the people who received them, and the Council would ensure that this service was prioritised during any second wave of infections. In the future, it was planned for Essex County Council to provide a county-wide service for Careline.

Cllr D Wixley enquired whether there were any notes taken of the PHAG meetings for Councillors to examine, and where were most of the infections in the District occurring? A Small replied that the notes of the PHAG meetings were informal but he could discuss any particular areas of concern with individual Councillors if they wished. Although the spread of infections had been seen across the whole District, they were concentrated in Loughton, Buckhurst Hill and Waltham Abbey. The current total of 90 infections was above average for the East of England, but below average for the whole of the country. However, unless the Council took action now then there was the possibility of the District being in the same position as some of the larger cities throughout the country.

Cllr S Murray commented that the Council did what its residents could reasonably expect of it, and it did it well. The Councillor shared the concerns raised about the Careline service, but pointed out that the County Council had delayed their takeover of the service until April 2021. The Council's waste collection service had performed well, as had its management of the homeless and the economic support grants were also progressed quickly by Officers. Cllr S Murray also wanted to congratulate Cllr C Whitbread on his leadership of the Council during the first wave of the pandemic. However, there had not been as much done to encourage social distancing in Loughton as there had in Epping, and the Councillor was also disappointed at the response of the Member of Parliament for Epping Forest during the pandemic as the corresponding Member for Harlow had had a much higher public profile during the pandemic.

Cllr D Sunger was concerned that two of his residents had passed away during a weekend and had to be buried within 24 hours for religious reasons, but this had not happened. Could not the Council assist with such requests in the future. The Chief Executive, G Blakemore, informed the Committee that the Council had taken up this request with the County Council to provide an out-of-hours service for residents to access.

Cllr J Lea highlighted the issue of many people not wearing face coverings, and there had been no social distancing in a nightclub in Waltham Abbey. A Small reassured the Committee that the Council was taking enforcement action against some establishments due to the lack of social distancing measures. Cllr H Whitbread added that the Council's Licensing Team was working closely with the Police on these issues, and if Members observed any further breaches of the regulations then please report them.

Cllr J M Whitehouse praised the efforts of the Council's staff over the summer, but queried when the Council's Housing Repairs team would be able to respond to requests in accordance with those set out in the Tenants Handbook? A Small agreed that planned maintenance work was more problematic, and would investigate further before responding to the Councillor.

The Leader of the Council, Cllr C Whitbread, informed the Committee that on Friday of last week, there were 45 patients in Essex hospitals with Covid-19; as of 8.00am this morning (6 days later) this number had risen to 87, therefore the County Council was right to request that the county be moved into Tier 2 of the restrictions. The Council had been fully tested by the pandemic and had done the right things for residents. The Council had received support from the national Government, and Officers had performed well to make the payments to local businesses in a timely fashion. The Leader felt that there had been a number of positives for the Council during the pandemic: the waste collection service had been excellent; the homeless had been taken off of the streets and looked after; and the Management Team had performed excellently also. However, the Council should also learn any lessons from the first wave and be ready for any possible second wave of infections.

Resolved:

- (1) That the good response of the Council thus far to the Covid-19 pandemic be noted, but that lessons be learnt for any potential second wave of infections in the near future.

41. CORPORATE PLAN KEY ACTION PLAN 2020/21 - QUARTER 2 PROGRESS

L Wade, the Service Manager for Strategy, Delivery & Performance, presented a report on progress with the Service Plan objectives for the second quarter of 2020/21.

L Wade reported that the Committee was being asked to determine the level of reporting that should be presented to the Council's Scrutiny function, either: a summary of progress at the programme and project level; or a summary of progress at the programme level with exceptions reported at the project level. It was also reported that there were three projects within the programmes that were currently 'red' in terms of the progress made during the quarter. For the Telecare Offering project, there had been a delay in the cessation of the service following the withdrawal of the Essex County Council tender, there had also been a delay in the completion of the ICT restructure, and in the review of the main modifications document for the Local Plan resulting from the Planning Inspector's limited capacity to undertake the review. The Committee was also requested to review the performance of the Key Performance Indicators for the first two quarters of 2020/21, and review the recommended Indicators for reporting in quarter 3.

Due to the lateness of the hour, Cllr D Sunger proposed that this report be deferred until the Committee's next meeting, which was seconded by Cllr D Plummer, and L Wade confirmed that she was happy for this report to be held over until the next meeting.

Resolved:

- (1) That the report be deferred until the next meeting of the Committee on 19 November 2020.

42. UK INNOVATION CORRIDOR - SCRUTINY OF EXTERNAL ORGANISATION

The Chairman, Cllr M Sartin, requested that if Members had any questions or key lines of enquiry for the external scrutiny of the UK Innovation Corridor then they inform the Team Manager for Democratic & Electoral Services – G Woodhall. Cllr R Jennings requested that the contact details for the UK Innovation Corridor be placed in the Council Bulletin as well.

43. CABINET BUSINESS

The Committee considered the Executive's current programme of Key Decisions.

Cllr J H Whitehouse raised a general point that new Council policies should be considered by Overview & Scrutiny first before they were agreed by the Cabinet, and cited the proposed Right-to-Buy Disposals policy as an example. The Housing & Community Services Portfolio Holder, Cllr H Whitbread, explained that the policy would simply use Right-to-Buy receipts to buy new properties as part of the Council Housebuilding Programme before the receipts expired and had to be returned to the Government.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Executive's current Programme of Key Decisions be noted.

44. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME

The Team Manager for Democratic & Electoral Services, G Woodhall, presented the Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for 2020/21.

Following on from the earlier external Scrutiny of local adult Mental Health Services, Cllr M Sartin proposed that external scrutiny of local youth Mental Health services be undertaken – either later this municipal year or during the next municipal year.

Resolved:

- (1) That the external scrutiny of local youth Mental Health services be added to the Work Programme; and
- (2) That, as revised above, the current Overview & Scrutiny Work Programme for 2020/21 be noted.

45. SELECT COMMITTEES - WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee considered the current Work Programmes for the three Select Committees.

Stronger Communities Select Committee

The Chairman of the Stronger Communities Select Committee, Cllr D Sunger, informed the Committee that the District Police Commander was due to attend the Select Committee's next meeting in January 2021.

Stronger Place Select Committee

The Chairman of the Stronger Place Select Committee, Cllr R Bassett, informed the Committee that the corporate governance policy for Select Committees had been

reviewed, as well as the Council Housebuilding Programme; phase five would see another 256 properties added to the Council's housing stock.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Work Programmes for the three Select Committees be noted.

46. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Committee noted that there was no other urgent business for consideration at the meeting.

47. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

The Committee noted that there was no business which necessitated the exclusion of the public and press from the meeting.

CHAIRMAN