

EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COUNCIL MINUTES

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| Committee: | Council | Date: | 28 October 2021 |
| Place: | Council Chamber - Civic Offices | Time: | 7.00 - 9.23 pm |
| Members Present: | Councillors H Kane (Chairman), N Avey, R Balcombe, R Baldwin, N Bedford, P Bhanot, P Bolton, H Brady, R Brookes, L Burrows, I Hadley, S Heap, S Jones, S Kane, P Keska, J Lea, J Leppert, T Matthews, J McIvor, A Mitchell, R Morgan, S Murray, S Neville, C Nweke, M Owen, A Patel, J Philip, D Plummer, S Rackham, K Rizvi, B Rolfe, M Sartin, D Stocker, D Sunger, B Vaz, H Whitbread, J H Whitehouse, J M Whitehouse and K Williamson | | |
| Members Virtual Attendance: | Councillors S Heather, B Jennings, J Jennings, H Kauffman, Y Knight, C McCredie, C C Pond, C P Pond, C Roberts, P Stalker, C Whitbread and D Wixley | | |
| Apologies: | Councillors J Share-Bernia (Vice-Chairman), D Barlow, R Bassett, D Dorrell, J Jogia, A Lion and L Mead | | |
| Officers Present: | G Blakemore (Chief Executive), G Woodhall (Team Manager - Democratic & Electoral Services), J Leither (Democratic Services Officer), N Boateng (Service Manager (Legal) & Monitoring Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), P Seager (Chairman's Officer), S Mitchell (PR Website Editor) and N Cole (Corporate Communications Officer) | | |

33. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Services Manager 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.

34. FORMER COUNCILLORS H TAYLOR AND D KELLY AND SIR DAVID AMESS, MP

(a) Former Member of Parliament Sir David Amess

The Chairman paid tribute to the sad loss of Sir David Amess who served as a Member of Parliament for Southend West from May 1997 until his death on 15 October 2021. Deepest condolences go to his family and friends and all those who knew him.

(b) Former District Councillors Harry Taylor and Doug Kelly

The Chairman informed members that former Councillors and Chairmen of Council Harry Taylor and Doug Kelly had recently passed away.

Former Councillor Harry Taylor had served as a Conservative District Councillor and represented the High Beach Ward of Waltham Abbey from 1974 to 1987 and then Waltham Abbey West from 1991 to 1995 and 1999 to 2003. He became Vice-Chairman of Council in 1978/79 and was elected Chairman of Council in the 1979/80 municipal year. During his terms of office

former Councillor Taylor served on various committees, sub-committees and working groups.

Former Councillor Doug Kelly served as a Liberal Democratic District Councillor representing the Roothing Country and Moreton and Fyfield Wards from 1996 to 2008. He became Vice Chairman of Council in 2001/02 and was elected Chairman of Council in the 2002/03 municipal year. During his terms of office former Councillor Kelly served on various committees, sub-committees and working groups.

Members paid tribute to the memory of Sir David Amess MP and former District Councillors Harry Taylor and Doug Kelly and a minute's silence was held in their honour.

35. APPOINTMENT TO VICE CHAIRMAN

In the absence of Councillor J Share-Bernia, who had tendered her apologies for the meeting, the Chairman requested that Councillor M Sartin be appointed as the Vice-Chairman for the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That Councillor M Sartin be appointed Vice-Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

36. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Council meeting held on 29 July 2021 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

37. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor S Murray declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 11 Motion, regarding Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit by virtue of being a weekly volunteer at the Epping Forest Foodbank and the Free Food for You, Loughton Hub.

38. ANNOUNCEMENTS

(a) Chairman's Announcements

- (i) The Chairman advised that she would like to acknowledge that one of our Members, Richard Morgan, who after a delay of over 18 months, had now been presented with a national honour at Windsor Castle by Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal. Richard Morgan MBE had been awarded with this honour in recognition for his services to the community. Without a doubt, Richard had been, and still was, one of the most active and influential Local Councillors serving Epping Forest District Council.

Richard was elected as a local Ward Councillor on the District Council in 1983 and as we all know he was still serving and representing local people to this day. He was elected Chairman of Council in the 2004/05 municipal year.

Richard, I speak on behalf of all Members, would like congratulate you on receiving this honour and we are all delighted that you have been recognised in such a way, by becoming a member of the Most Excellent order of the British Empire.

Councillor Richard Morgan thanked the Chairman for her kind words and stated that it was a great honour to have received this award from Princess Anne who he found to be an extremely nice lady to talk to. He advised that he should have gone to Buckingham Palace in March 2020 to receive this award which had to be postponed 2 days before due to the Pandemic.

Councillor Morgan stated that he and his family had a lovely day out at Windsor Castle and he felt really honoured to have received such an award.

- (ii) The Chairman advised that she had been very busy attending Civic functions since the last Council meeting in July. Although it had been good to feel that some normality was returning we still need to be very careful as Covid had not gone away.
- (iii) The Chairman highlighted some of the engagements that she had recently attended:
 - She stated that she was delighted to attend the all-day Health and Wellbeing event at the Civic Offices in the Community Hub, it was a great event to happen and in the newly refurbished Council offices; and
 - She advised that it was an honour to present the Arts Awards at the Waltham Abbey Museum. It was wonderful to see so many young people in the district and how they have been engaging with the arts, it showed what we did best, collaborate and work with the local community.
- (iv) The Chairman congratulated everyone who participated in the London Marathon, Councillor Jon Whitehouse who finished in record time, Keira Seager, the daughter of Pat Seager, who raised £3,500 for the Dogs Trust and one of our officers Gerry Greenwold who works in the Business Rates Team, well done to them all.

(b) Flowers

The Chairman announced that she intended that the flowers from this evenings meeting to go to the Community Hub in the Civic Offices to be enjoyed by all of the visitors.

39. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (IF ANY)

The Council noted that there were no public questions that had been submitted for consideration at this meeting.

40. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS UNDER NOTICE

Question by Councillor C C Pond to the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Sustainability, Councillor N Bedford

“Could the Planning and Sustainability Portfolio Holder agree;

To prevent uncontrolled exercise of inappropriate and deleterious development, will the PFH for planning please give 12 months public notice of issuing article 4 directions to prevent the use of permitted development rights in respect of the following:

- Conversion of shops to residential units;
- Conversion of offices and similar buildings to residential units; and
- Any works to frontages, boundaries, roofs and the surfacing of front gardens in conservation areas and heritage assets, similar to those imposed by EFDC on two CAs 25 years ago.

Response to Councillor C C Pond from Councillor N Bedford

The District Council can only impose an “Article 4” directions in very limited situations where it was necessary to avoid wholly unacceptable adverse impacts and protect local amenity. It must be based upon robust evidence and can only apply to the smallest geographic area possible.

The Council have controls in place through their policies in the emerging Local Plan which seek to limit the loss of office and retail space. Planning permission will not normally be permitted unless evidence demonstrates that there was no longer a reasonable prospect of the site being used for the existing employment use.

It was important to note that article 4 directions to restrict the change of use of shops/offices to residential use may accelerate conversions as applicants can apply for the change of use prior to the Article 4 direction taking effect.

There was also a risk of compensation for those owners/occupiers affected by the additional burden of securing planning permission for something that would otherwise be permitted development.

Additionally, it could be seen as contrary to the Government’s objective to provide flexibility and adaptability for businesses, particularly during periods of uncertainty such as the pandemic.

Likewise, seeking to restrict permitted development rights in relation to conservation area/heritage assets requires careful consideration. The Council would need to identify the harm being caused to such assets and assess their significance to justify Article 4 for restrictions. Again, it would need to be routed in evidence.

Conclusion

At this point, the Council does not have the evidence or justification to demonstrate that it would be appropriate and proportionate to consider the introduction of Article 4 directions. However, the Council will continue to monitor the loss of office and retail space and the economic and social impact it has upon the evolution of our town centres and any future compensatory measures that may need to be made to offset the loss of retail and office floorspace.

Councillor C C Pond stated that the question was phrased as it was, as by giving six months’ notice any question of compensation could be avoided. I have heard what the Portfolio Holder has said and I will write to him, particularly in respect of the bullet point added regarding demolitions, where some rather sharp practice has been going on.

41. REPORTS FROM THE LEADER AND MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

The Council received written reports from the Portfolio Holders. The Chairman invited the Leader of Council to provide an oral report and the opportunity for other members of the Cabinet to give any updates on matters concerning their relevant portfolios.

(a) Leader of Council

The Leader expressed his disappointment at having to join the meeting on zoom due to him having contracted Covid and he advised that it was bad enough to have Covid after having both vaccinations and would recommend to everyone present if you get an opportunity of having the booster vaccination to take it as well as the flu vaccination as he would not want to wish Covid on anyone and was quite unpleasant.

He advised that he had watched the DDMC meeting the previous evening and stated what a good result it was for Epping with a new sports centre with a swimming pool being approved, at a very well chaired and very well debated meeting and he thanked the Members that participated in the meeting.

The summer seemed a long time ago and much had happened since. Firstly the Boundary Commission were looking at the size and nature of the Council going forward. A Portfolio Holder Advisory Group had now been set up and the first meeting was on the 4 November 2021 and that would progress by starting to look at the make-up of the Council, the number of Members, whether the Council should opt for all out for selection or stay as thirds. There was a huge amount of work to be done around this review and Officers were addressing some of the background work.

He advised that he had recently met with the Leader and Deputy Leader of Essex County Council where he had the opportunity to show them around the Civic Offices and the Civic Hub which they were very impressed by and other Councils were now looking towards what EFDC had done as a way forward post pandemic, to make buildings work in a more productive manner. He stated that partnership working with County and all levels of local government was the way forward for the future to get the best value for money and the best services for EFDC residents.

He advised that he and Councillor J Philip had been meeting regularly with planning colleagues, the Harlow Garden Town Team and the Leaders of Harlow and East Herts. Members may be aware that there will be a new Leader of Harlow shortly and that he would speak more about that at the next Council meeting in December 2021.

There were challenging times ahead of the Council, the Government had done what it could to help through the Pandemic, to which we are still all recovering from and it was encouraging news that the high streets were starting to show signs of recovery. Everyone should still take precautions and wear a mask in closed areas, do the right thing to help protect each other and the local economy.

(b) Housing Services Portfolio Holder

Councillor H Whitbread advised that she had an update on the Key Policy Consultations and the work that was presently being undertaken, she advised that the Council were on their second round of consultation and scrutiny. A Policy Briefing had been arranged and the dates for this can be found in the Council Bulletin dated 22 October 2021. She appealed to Members to make sure that they took part in the online forms as well as the debate and the consultation.

Councillor H Whitbread then went on to highlight a great piece of work around tenant arrears, since March 2020 to May 2021 there have been no income related evictions at our council properties which was due to the approach the Council were now taking in relation to working with the tenants and supporting them in terms of debt and finance advice. This was a really good piece of news on the intervention the Council were doing to support tenants.

(d) Environmental and Technical Services Portfolio Holder

Councillor N Avey advised that an issue had been raised recently at the Waste Management Board Meeting. As Christmas was approaching it was likely that residents would buy more gifts online than ever before which leads to more packaging and asked residents, where possible, to break down cardboard boxes and put the packaging into recycling bags rather than pile it free on the roadside. This was leading to an enormous strain on the Biffa crews that collected the recycling around the district and delays the whole recycling process. A notice in the next collection calendar, due to be released shortly and delivered to all residents will highlight this issue.

(c) Corporate Services Portfolio Holder

Councillor D Sunger advised that he would like to update the Council on the Engagement and Wellbeing project that has been rolled out and was pleased to announce that we have a Director, Rob Pavey who has stepped up to become a volunteer mental health first aider which shows the initiative that he had taken to come onboard. Last month in training there were a cohort of around 90 trained mental health first aiders and it was important to note that these people really are the place where officers and staff can go to if they have any challenges with their mental health.

Councillor S Heap asked the Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder why was there was a delay in refurbishing the 2nd floor of the Civic Offices and getting the tenant in situ and was this one of the problems by renting to a start-up company.

Councillor J Philip advised Councillor Heap that the letting of the 2nd floor of the Civic Offices had no relationship to Qualis as Councillor Heap had pertained to before asking his question.

He stated that there was a delay on the agreement of the letting of the 2nd floor due to the Civic Offices being a listed building status therefore the fit out for the services offices were delayed due to the lessee not allowing the time for coping with a listed building permission and what it would entail. The way the Council were taking it forward was the overall term of the lease would stay the same and therefore the rent payments would start three months later but would also end 3 months later to enable the lessee to complete the fit out.

42. QUESTIONS BY MEMBERS WITHOUT NOTICE

The Chairman thanked Members for giving notification of their intention to ask a question without notice.

(a) Waste Management Contract

Councillor S Murray advised his question was to Environmental and Technical Services Portfolio Holder and expressed concerns regarding the shortage of suitably

qualified HGV drivers and that there were contingency plans put in place and what were these plans. Secondly what contingency plans are being made to deal with the issue around the shortage of wheelie bins.

Councillor N Avey advised that the Council were constantly discussing with Biffa driver issues and contingency plans around the countrywide shortage of HGV driver and that was affecting Biffa. They have advised us that they were managing to have enough drivers to meet the needs and I would like to praise Biffa, especially over the last couple of difficult years, at the wonderful service they had given the Council throughout the Pandemic and even with the HGV driver shortage they are providing a terrific and professional service to the residents of Epping Forest.

Regarding the wheelie bin shortage I believe there are still stocks of both the household waste and the green waste wheelie bins but as the Portfolio Holder I will be looking at that situation and find out why there was a shortage and when it would be resolved.

(b) Viability assessments on planning applications

Councillor K Williamson advised his question was to the Planning and Sustainability Portfolio Holder and stated with the viability assessments on planning applications that do not meet the 40% affordable housing criteria, who pays the consultants' fees for Epping Forest District Council (EFDC). If EFDC pay these then shouldn't it be on a similar basis to party wall awards where the applicant pays. He further expressed concerns with the basis that the 40% could not be achieved due to enhanced specifications.

Councillor N Bedford stated that the starting point for affordable housing provision for residential developments providing 11 units or more and a requirement of 40% of the total provided in-situ, as set out in the emerging Local Plan. The target set out in this policy included provision for the amount of affordable housing permitted under the policy to be subject to viability, in practice this meant that if the applicant wished to argue that their scheme could not afford to make the required on-site provision, or an offsite affordable housing contribution, in lieu of an on-site provision, the applicant could seek to make their case through the submission of detailed viability assessments and evidence to the Council.

The Council used viability consultants to consider the information and could decide to accept a lower amount of affordable housing where viability issues had been clearly demonstrated. The cost of the consultant was paid for by the applicant, the cost of what they have purchased for their site was not a determining factor in the viability argument and was not an issue for the Council.

The Council are looking to see if they could provide some member training or a better understanding of how this complicated issue could be more easily understood.

(c) Qualis debt

Councillor S Heap advised his question was to the Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder and asked if it would be unfair to describe Qualis's performance as a million pounds in debt and not a home built.

Councillor J Philip replied no.

(d) Customer dissatisfaction

Councillor Jon Whitehouse advised his question was to the Customer and Partnerships Portfolio Holder and asked about the customer dissatisfaction with residents not getting responses to queries and issues raised. In the Portfolio Holders report it was presented as mainly a technical issue to do with tracking software. I can understand that tracking software may have a part to play, but when the Portfolio Holder looks at this issue, could he also look at the wider picture in terms of staff who are motivated and engaged and understand their place in the organisation and have their workload balanced to enable them to respond to queries and staff that are not motivated or feel they don't fit in or just don't have the capacity to do everything they are expected to do. This problem cannot just be a technical issue there was obviously a wider issue.

Councillor S Kane stated that it was a valid point and agreed that it was not exclusively technical issues, there were staff involved, and over the last 18 months these staff were learning to operate in a completely different way, some working remotely and some working in the office and then the technical problems come back in again because of the way the telephone system works and group ringing. The Council were working on a number of front end challenges with one of the biggest challenges being a problem with staffing levels and the Council were constantly playing catch-up with staff moving on, being seconded or leaving. Staffing issues in terms of numbers of people, communication channels needed to stay open so there was team work, which was valuable in providing customer service to maintain direct connections between the support workers and the customers, also not forgetting the technical issues.

The Council recognises that not all residents are capable to go the digital route and a front facing service must continue either by telephone or face to face and we were working to resolve these issues.

He reiterated that anyone who comes across any difficulties that residents have encountered to please feed back to him with specifics of any issues.

(e) New Platform for Land Searches

Councillor P Bhanot advised that his question was to the Corporate Services Portfolio Holder and asked if he could provide more details on the rollout of the new platform for local authority land searches.

Councillor D Sunger stated that he was pleased to announce that the migration of the local land charges database had been successfully moved to the cloud environment. EFDC officers have completed all of the tasks in preparation of the date that would be migrated to Her Majesty's Land Registry (HMLR) database. The migration of the HMLR database will take place in quarter 4, HMLR have not yet confirmed a specific date when this will be rolled out. He advised he was pleased to report that the Council was on track to receive a transition fee of £75,000. The cost of the ICT applications required will be taken from the £75,000, costs have not yet been confirmed.

The HMLR database will allow the public to complete their own searches when buying a property, the searches will be available online 24/7. He thanked the officers for all their work into getting this ready for the database rollout especially Seth Mahadoo, Daniel Harris and Dawn Tracey.

(f) Budget shortfall for 2022/23

Councillor P Bolton advised that his question was to the Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder and asked him to comment on the potential shortfall in next year's budget of £1.5m, particularly in respect of the money spent on the refurbishment of the Civic Offices and whether Qualis has had an impact on the situation and how much reserves are involved.

Councillor J Philip advised as stated in his report the Council were currently looking at a potential gap between the amount the Council needed to spend and the amount that would be coming in and this was in the region of £1.5m. Although the issues Councillor Bolton had raised were good it was important to note that when you were looking at the budget in terms of the Council's ongoing expenses there were two different areas to look at, one was the expenditure which was where the £1.5m came from and secondly there was capital expenditure and it was the capital expenditure. It was capital expenditure that was used to refurbish the Civic Offices and it was worth pointing out that by renting out the second floor of the Civic Offices, a significant revenue stream would be coming in from that, it would not help the Council for next year but it will thereafter and we will therefor get a return for the capital spent on the Civic Offices.

In terms of Qualis, they had a significant impact on the budget but Qualis are making the job of the Council much easier and the revenue the Council were receiving from Qualis in terms of the margin of the loans we have given them mean that the Council only have £1.5m to look for. Qualis pay a significantly higher rate of interest that the Council were able to get on the Public Works Loans than we have for those particular loans. The Conder building had now been sold to Qualis and the Council were now getting the interest on that and it would be shown in the budget for next year. He stated that he would be working closely with Qualis to see if there was anything further that could be done to reduce the deficit.

Finally, onto the reserves, the Council were obliged to keep a certain level of reserves, it was prudent to keep roughly half of what the Council receive from Council Tax as reserves for the forthcoming year.

There were two main reasons why the Council's reserves are lower going into 2022/23 was an issue with the 2019/20 accounts which when agreed with the Auditors what needed to be done resulted in a reduction in the reserves that were available. When the budget was agreed for 2021/22 it was agreed to make use of some of the Council's reserves further to make this year easier for the Council and to reduce the pressure on our residents. Those two issues combined brought the Council's reserves down very close to the minimum that the Council could actually reasonably retain active and therefore that meant the Council could not make significant use of those reserves in the budget for 2022/23 to reduce the pressure.

Significant progress was being made towards this deficit with Cabinet Members looking closely at their Directorates to see where savings could be made and hopefully this gap would be closed in the appropriate time.

(g) Benefits for Local Businesses

Councillor J McIvor advised his question was to the Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder and stated that in the recent Chancellor's budget, which included many benefits for local businesses and tailored benefits specifically for the hospitality and fitness sectors and asked if the Portfolio Holder would be able to advise how the Council would be promoting those benefits to the various local businesses so they could make full use of the benefits, such as, a reduction in rates. He also stated that any major news which would affect the Epping

Forest District should be reported at Council, in the Chamber before it made the press.

Councillor J Philip advised in terms of publicity to our local businesses that there was a monthly newsletter that went out to businesses, unfortunately the copy date for that was Wednesday which made it a bit late to get anything published. He stated that he had made a request to see if we could get anything included to do with the rate changes but was still waiting for an answer. An in depth article would be published in the next publication.

It was worth noting that the agendas were published before a meeting, in accordance with legislation, therefore the news does become public knowledge before the meeting and that was why, when we meet in the Chamber, news stories have already been published and sometimes these stories were misrepresented and are corrected at the meetings.

(h) Supporting Elderly Residents during the Winter months

Councillor K Rizvi advised his question was to the Community and Regulatory Services Portfolio Holder and stated as a local GP and someone acutely aware of the forthcoming winter pressures that he was keen to understand how the District Council supported the elderly residents during the winter months, so for the benefit of the public and my member colleagues could you explain what the Council did in this respect.

Councillor A Patel stated that the County Council had the statutory responsibility to the elderly through Adult Social Care, we as a District Council support elderly residents in a different way and the team that lead on predominantly supporting these residents was the Community Culture and Wellbeing Team. On the 11 October the team held a 'Stay Well this Winter' community event to which they hold every year and I am pleased to advise that this was the first event of this kind to be held at the Community Hub at the Civic Offices. A number of partner organisations showcased the work that they did and spreading key messages around health and wellbeing. Residents that attended were also offered the flu vaccine whilst they attended. The next event would be taking place in Waltham Abbey on the 2 December.

The Community Culture and Wellbeing Team also support the 22 Community Champions that are available across the district and essentially the work of the Community Champions was to reach out to older residents and proactively signpost them to support services which they feel are needed whilst raising awareness around local befriending groups.

The Council work with partner organisations like the NHS and the Council were able to deliver the 'Falls Prevention Programme' which helped promote strength and conditioning in a bid to prevent falls in elderly residents. The Council were also trialling a range of other services that would support elderly residents.

(i) Late objection to the EFDC Local Plan Submission Version

Councillor C C Pond advised his question was to the Leader of Council and asked was he surprised to read press reports that Harlow District Council were at a very late stage of objecting to certain aspects of the Epping Forest Local Plan submission version and what did he think would come of these objections and how would they be processed in the timetable which was now very strictly limited of the Inspector.

Councillor C Whitbread stated that he was surprised but that had always been the position of the Conservative Group in Harlow they had issues that they wanted addressing and they have a right to make comments as does everyone else. The most important thing that they needed to bear in mind was that the Harlow sites weren't included in the main modifications. He stated that he looked forward to having a Local Plan that can be seen through to the end.

(j) Council House Building Programme - Ward Member Consultation

Councillor D Wixley advised his question was to the Housing Services Portfolio Holder and asked why the correct process had not been followed by the Council Housebuilding Programme with a particular site in his Ward.

The process was that Ward Members would meet with Officers to discuss the proposed site affecting their Wards before a formal planning application was submitted. He stated that he was surprised to find on the upcoming Area Plans South Agenda an application in his Ward. There were special circumstances relating to this application, which he would have liked to discuss with the Service Manager for Development, he advised that he had previously discussed with her the possibility of arranging a meeting which had yet to take place. He stated that while he appreciated that this was a resubmission of a previously approved plan, he still felt that the current practice of consultation with Ward Members should have been applied in this case. Therefore, would the Portfolio Holder use her influence, to have this application removed from next week's Area Plans Sub-Committee South agenda, pending the accepted process of consultation with the Service Manager for Development.

Councillor H Whitbread apologised that a meeting had not been arranged with the Service Manager for Development that that she would chase that now and make sure that a conversation would be had by the end of the week. She further added that she would consult with officers to find out the reasoning around this decision. It was very important that as the Council moves forward with the Council Housebuilding Programme that officers do engage with Ward Members which has been a foundation of the process. The Portfolio Holder advised that she would be in contact with Councillor Wixley the following day once she had an answer.

43. MOTIONS

(a) **Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit**

Moved by Councillor S Murray and seconded by Councillor S Neville

That Epping Forest District Council notes that:

- (1) The Government has, as from 6th October 2021, cut universal credit and working tax credit by £20 a week;
- (2) This weekly cut is equivalent to £1,040 a year;
- (3) The Epping Forest Food-bank estimates that here in Epping Forest this decision is likely to have a serious impact on more than 9,000 people.
- (4) That Epping Forest District Council resolves to ask our three local MP's to actively seek the reinstatement of this £20 cut as soon as possible.

Amendment moved by Councillor S Kane and seconded by Councillor N Avey

That Epping Forest District Council notes that:

- (1) The Government has, as from 6th October 2021, withdrawn the £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit- a temporary measure brought in to help people on lower incomes during the coronavirus pandemic;
- (2) There are currently over 8,000 claimants of Universal Credit in the District, some of whom may experience difficulties as a result of the decision to withdraw the uplift to UC;
- (3) Epping Forest District Council welcomes the increase in the minimum wage to £9.50 an hour and the cut in the Universal Credit taper by 8% by 1 December, bringing it down from 63% to 55% - allowing claimants to keep more of the money they earn; and
- (4) That Epping Forest District Council resolves to continue to support affected residents, providing access to:
 - **Household Support Fund**, Small grants worth up to £500 million intended to help struggling families meet costs for daily needs such as food, clothing and utilities;
 - **Free school meals**;
 - **The provision of half term holiday camps from Essex County Council delivered by Active Essex and school meal vouchers**;
 - **Food bank vouchers**;
 - **EFDC Hardship Fund**;
 - **Support and assistance** in returning to work through schemes such as:
 - **The Kickstart scheme** - this is funding to encourage employers to take on 16 to 24 year olds who receive Universal Credit, with the government covering the cost of 25 hours of work per week for a total of 6 months, as well as the employer's national insurance contributions. This will be extended until the end of January.
 - **Job Entry Targeted Support scheme** - people who have been on Universal Credit for more than 13 weeks can get employment support for 6 months, which includes a personal careers adviser.
 - **Apprenticeship Incentives** - this encourages employers to take on apprentices, with a payment of £3,000, in addition to the £1,000 already on offer.
 - **Working in partnership** – with local organisations including Voluntary Action Epping Forest, Epping Forest Food Bank and Citizens Advice to ensure that the most vulnerable receive the support they require.
 - **Ensuring advise and support is accessible** – enhancing delivery of such services through technology and the new 'Civic Hub.'

Carried

Motion as amended ADOPTED

RESOLVED:

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 - **Working in partnership** – with local organisations including Voluntary Action Epping Forest, Epping Forest Food Bank and Citizens Advice to ensure that the most vulnerable receive the support they require.
 - **Ensuring advice and support is accessible** – enhancing delivery of such services through technology and the new ‘Civic Hub.’

44. **APPOINTMENT TO OUTSIDE BODY - WHIPPS CROSS JOINT HEALTH OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

The Leader advised that clarification had now been sought for the appointment of a non-voting representative to the JHOSC and advised that as there were no other nominations Councillor J Share-Bernia would be the Council's representative.

45. COUNCILLOR D PLUMMER - RESOLUTION TO EXTEND 6-MONTH RULE - SECTION 85 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

The Chairman advised that as Councillor D Plummer had attended this Council Meeting there was no need to take this item as the 6-month rule had not been breached.

46. AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE - ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

Councillor I Hadley, Chairman of the Audit and Governance Committee

Councillor I Hadley presented the Audit and Governance Annual Report 2020/21. He advised that the Audit and Governance committee comprised of 7 members, 2 of which were independent members. The makeup of the committee was to ensure that EFDC was compliant and robust over financial and non-financial transactions, fraud, risk and value for money.

He advised that there had been a delay in the previous year's accounts being approved due to the Pandemic and going forward it had been recommended that the Audit and Governance Committee be given delegated authority to approve the Council's annual Statement of Accounts.

The Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder thanked the officers and members of the Audit and Governance Committee for their work throughout the year.

RESOLVED:

That the Annual Report of the Audit & Governance Committee for 2020/21 be noted.

47. CONSTITUTION WORKING GROUP

Councillor S Rackham, Chairman of the Constitution Working Group

Councillor S Rackham advised that at the Constitution Working Group meeting on the 2 September 2021 they covered the regulations governing the publication of the Council's Statement of Accounts that had changed with the deadline being brought forward by 2 months to the 30 September 2021. Currently the Audit and Governance Committee considered the Statement of Accounts and the report of the external auditors before referring this to Full Council.

The Constitution Working Group recommended:

- (1) That the Constitution be amended to give the Audit and Governance Committee delegated authority to approve the Council's Annual Statement of Accounts with effect from the 2020/21 financial year; and
- (2) That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make the necessary revisions to the Council's Constitution.

Councillor S Rackham also advised that the Constitution Working Group recommended the decision taken by the Cabinet Committee at its meeting on the 3 December 2020 (Report ref: C-045-2020/21). The Cabinet agreed the updated Procurement Strategy for 2021-2026, which came into effect on the 1 January 2021,

this had been updated to reflect how Procurement supported the delivery of the Council's Corporate Objectives and the Covid-19 recovery plan.

The Constitution Working Group recommended:

- (1) That the updated Procurement Rules amended in August 2021, as set out in the report be agreed; and
- (2) That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make the necessary revisions to the Council's Constitution, Part 4 – Procurement Rules.

Councillor J Philip stated that it made sense for the Audit and Governance Committee to be given delegated authority to approve the Council's Annual Statement of Accounts and if they felt there was something of sufficient concern with the Council's Annual Statement of Accounts then they could still refer them back to Full Council.

Councillor J H Whitehouse stated that at the Constitution Working Group meeting she did express some reservations regarding giving delegated authority to the Audit and Governance Committee to approve the Council's Annual Statement of Accounts as they were only a small committee and when that report came to Full Council it alerted all members. Councillor Philip had given assurance that it would be brought to the attention of Full Council, although would not be debated and I would ask him to repeat these assurances for members.

Councillor J Philip stated that he was happy to repeat the assurances and that it would be flagged in the Members Bulletin when the Annual Statement of Accounts would be going to the Audit and Governance Committee to be approved so that all members would be aware.

Councillor J M Whitehouse stated that he could see the practical advantages of the accounts going to the Audit and Governance Committee and thought that this was something all Councillors should take an interest in. He referred to page 98 of the agenda which had been added to the Terms of Reference of the Audit and Governance Committee which read:

- (r) **to review and adopt the Statutory Statement of Accounts (yearly).** Specifically, to consider whether appropriate accounting policies have been followed and whether there are concerns arising from the financial statements or from the audit. ~~that need to be brought to the attention of the Council;~~

Councillor Whitehouse expressed concern about the deleted part which read:

~~**'that need to be brought to the attention of the Council;'**~~

and as discussed earlier, Councillor Philip stated that if there were any concerns from the Audit and Governance Committee regarding the Annual Statement of Accounts, they could be referred to Full Council and therefore he suggested that the deleted line should remain in the Terms of Reference.

Councillor J Philip stated that he was happy for those words to be removed as it didn't restrict the Audit and Governance Committee bringing anything to Full Council that they believe the Council needs to be aware of. Keeping the Annual Statement of Accounts firmly within the Audit and Governance Committee was the right thing to do and it was discussed in depth at the Constitution Working Group and this was their recommendation.

RESOLVED:

That the recommendations of the Constitution Working Group as set out below be agreed:

- (1) That the Constitution be amended to give the Audit and Governance Committee delegated authority to approve the Council's Annual Statement of Accounts with effect from the 2020/21 financial year;
- (2) That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make the necessary revisions to the Council's Constitution;
- (3) That the updated Procurement Rules amended in August 2021, as set out in the report be agreed; and
- (4) That the Monitoring Officer be authorised to make the necessary revisions to the Council's Constitution, Part 4 – Procurement Rules.

48. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**Councillor M Sartin, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Councillor M Sartin presented her report from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on the 12 October 2021.

She referred to paragraph 2 of the report where it had been proposed to plant around 2,300 trees on Jessel Green, which had led to some discussion and subsequently a call-in had now been received regarding that item, which will go through the correct process to move forward.

Councillor S Murray stated that there was no malice behind the Jessel Green call-in and that an amicable solution to the issue could be found. He advised that he would like to absolutely acknowledge and thank Epping Forest District Council for the turnaround to not build houses on this green space but to save it and plant trees on the green instead.

Councillor H Whitbread thanked Councillor S Murray for highlighting this issue. Discussion regarding the call-in were in progress and she advised that she was very open to listen to those discussions and an amicable solution being found. She stated that a huge amount of grant funding from an external organisation, looking to plant thousands of trees to help offset carbon emissions and really buying in to the districts green agenda. Although 2,300 trees were to be planted they were very young trees and the survival rate of the young trees would mean that a majority of them would die. This was a really positive initiative and she advised that she was listening to local concerns and would be working with local community groups regarding this project.

Councillor C C Pond advised that this was a cordial call-in because he agreed with what Councillor H Whitbread had said and advised that he would be looking to plant the 2,300 trees, to which the Council had obtained grant funding, but in different locations.

Councillor C C Pond asked the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny committee whether the information in the report given by the Climate Change Officers regarding the proposed electric bus between the Broadway, Loughton and the Epping Forest Shopping Park, have indicated what form it would take and when would it start.

Running up to Christmas the footfall at the shopping park would more than double and the carbon emissions from idling vehicles would therefore also more than double.

Councillor M Sartin advised that she did not have an answer to Councillor Pond's question and asked Councillor N Avey if he could answer as this was in the remit of his portfolio.

Councillor N Avey stated that he did not have the answer but there would be a report at the next Council meeting on transport and it would be reported then.

Councillor D Wixley advised that he was the Ward Councillor for Fairmead which included Jessel Green. He stated that the Save Jessel Green Group would be involved with the tree planting proposed, the Climate Change Officer had contacted Councillor Wixley with a view to informing her of a lead contact in the Save Jessel Green Group to which he was able to furnish and he knew that they had now been in contact. He agreed with the call-in and stated that the trees must be planted in the correct places and excellent that this should move forward.

Councillor M Sartin stated that meetings were taking place regarding the call-in with Councillor C C Pond, Councillor D Wixley, the Portfolio Holder and Officers within the next week.

RESOLVED:

That the report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 12 October 2021 be noted.

49. JOINT ARRANGEMENTS & EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

(a) The Royal Gunpowder Mills

The Chairman advised that the Royal Gunpowder Mills was still closed to the public but work was being done in the background ready for them to open at Easter 2022.

(b) Roding Valley Meadows Nature Reserve

Councillor S Murray advised that he represented the Council on the Roding Valley Meadows Nature Reserve, a premier nature reserve in the district which was managed by the Essex Wildlife Trust. The Warden had left to take up a new position, a temporary Warden was in place and arrangements were being made to appoint a permanent Warden.

CHAIRMAN