

EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL CABINET MINUTES

Committee: Cabinet **Date:** 12 July 2021
Place: Conference Suite - Civic Offices **Time:** 7.00 - 7.48 pm
Members Present: C Whitbread (Chairman), N Avey, N Bedford, L Burrows, A Patel, J Philip, S Kane, D Sunger and H Whitbread
Other Councillors: A Lion, C McCredie and D Wixley

Apologies:

Officers Present: G Blakemore (Chief Executive), N Blaken (Interim Planning Policy Manager), A Buckley (Communications Officer), T Carne (Corporate Communications Team Manager), N Cole (Corporate Communications Officer), N Dawe (Chief Operating Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), J Houston (Specialist Partnerships & Economic Development), S Jevans (Qualis Group Managing Director), J Leither (Democratic Services Officer), S Mitchell (PR Website Editor), N Richardson (Service Director (Planning Services)), A Small (Strategic Director Corporate and 151 Officer), M Warr (Economic Development Officer), P Hewitt (Qualis Group Operations Director), B Johnson (Managing Director Qualis Management) and S Rutter (Development Director, Qualis Commercial)

15. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Leader of Council made a short address to remind everyone present that the meeting would be broadcast live to the internet, and would be capable of repeated viewing, which could infringe their human and data protection rights.

16. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Pursuant to the Council's Member Code of Conduct, Councillor A Lion declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 8 – 'Essex and Herts Digital Innovation Zone – Annual Report', by virtue of being the Chairman of the Essex and Hertfordshire Digital Innovation Zone. The Councillor had determined that his interest was non-pecuniary and that he would stay in the meeting for the consideration of the item.

17. REPORTS OF PORTFOLIO HOLDERS

There were no verbal reports made by Members of the Cabinet on current issues affecting their areas of responsibility.

18. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS TO ADDRESS THE CABINET

The Cabinet noted that no public questions or requests to address the Cabinet had been received for consideration at the meeting.

19. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

In the absence of the Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee it was reported that at their last meeting the Committee had considered the Qualis 4 year business plan, which was on this meetings' agenda, where they had a full and frank debate on Qualis and thoroughly discussed the report.

The Committee agreed that the Overview and Scrutiny 2020/21 Annual Report of the work undertaken during the past municipal year be submitted to Council for approval on 29 July 2021 and they also went on to consider their and the Select Committees' work programmes.

20. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LOCAL PLAN: UPDATE ON PROGRESS

The Planning and Sustainability Portfolio Holder introduced the update on progress of the implementation of the Local Plan.

This report was prepared by the Policy & Implementation Team to provide members with an update on the progress of Strategic Masterplans, Concept Frameworks and Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) within the District, including major projects and planning applications dealt with by the team. Scheduled meetings and workshops continue to take place with site promoters and developers in accordance with project plans agreed within PPAs. Consideration was being given to whether some workshops/meeting could take place in person later this year, subject to COVID restrictions. The majority of community engagement were still taking place virtually and this would be reviewed periodically.

The District's emerging Local Plan was progressing well and was at an advanced stage. As such, the Local Plan was being given substantial weight in the assessment of planning applications. The Local Plan Inspector was close to finalising the Main Modifications Schedule which will be published for consultation. Preparation includes a member briefing session, presentation of all consultation materials and guidance on the Council's website, communication via the consultee database, press releases, information at libraries and on social media. Following the consideration of the representations, the Inspector would determine if the Local Plan was 'sound' and if so, was likely to be adopted by the District Council in later 2021.

The consultation will commence on 15 July and end on 23 September. The statutory 6 week period will be extended to 10 weeks to allow for consultation over the holiday period. The consultation is on the Schedule of Main Modifications and supporting documents associated with the Main Modifications only.

It was worth remembering that this was now the Inspectors Plan and no longer the Council's plan; it was just the major modifications that were being consulted on.

Decision:

(1) The progress of Masterplans and Concept Frameworks, including the use of Planning Performance Agreements and the progress of other proposals at pre-application and application stage was noted together with the positive progress being made on the Local Plan as it reaches the next stage of Main Modification Consultations; and

(2) The Cabinet approved the Housing Action Plan and its publication.

Reasons for Proposed Decision

To ensure that members were kept fully up to date on the progress of Masterplans and Concept Frameworks and other major proposals being promoted within the District.

To comply with the Council's general obligations as a local planning authority and the requirements set out in national planning guidance.

Other Options for Action:

Not to update members on the progress on the above issues would be contrary to the commitment made by the Implementation Team as noted in the 18 October 2018 Cabinet Report.

To not prepare or to delay the publication of the Housing Action Plan would be contrary to advice contained within NPPF and NPPG.

21. ESSEX AND HERTS DIGITAL INNOVATION ZONE - ANNUAL REPORT

The Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder introduced the Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) annual report.

It was noted that the award-winning Essex & Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) was established by Epping Forest DC and was supported and led by EFDC officers and members. The key roles of the DIZ was to make this area the best connected place of its type in the UK, attract and deploy investment in digital infrastructure from the public and private sectors and to encourage that the greatest value was derived from this investment through using it to allow: more flexible business activity, increased community engagement and skills and knowledge sharing, and specific purposes such as the GP practices and Hospitals being better connected.

The DIZ Annual Progress Report set out the partnership's work programme over the twelve months, April 2020 to March 2021, highlighting key achievements and challenges, as well as initiating a discussion on future priorities.

Councillor Lion noted that the DIZ had been set up following the delivery of the Broadband Rural Challenge Programme. The intention was to make Epping Forest the best connected District in the UK. There were now 5 District Councils and 2 County Councils involved in the DIZ, attending monthly meetings to receive updates and get involved. He went on to thank Mike Warr and John Houston for their hard work and the tremendous amount of background work carried out in setting this up. When we started, we were told by the big operators that we were too small as a District Council, so we eventually established 5 districts, 3 in Essex and 2 in Hertfordshire. And since, we have been very successful in getting a number of projects off the ground, including providing full broadband services to GPs. It's been a real innovation and made a substantial difference to Epping Forest.

Councillor C Whitbread echoed the thanks to the officers concerned.

Councillor Bedford commented that he had attended a meeting at Whipps Cross and noted that following the Covid situation, Whipps Cross Hospital were looking to move to virtual outpatients appointments and hopefully we could mirror that with our new hospital; also they made a statement that they hoped to be the most digitally advance hospital in the country and he hoped we could match that and if possible improve on it. Councillor Philip added that clearly Health was an important part of this scheme

and he noted that we had over 80% of our premises covered by gigabit broadband. That made us a leader in Essex.

Councillor Patel welcomed the support we were giving our partners, especially the GPs. He went on to ask at what point were we going to commercialise this and make money for the council. Councillor Lion noted that the DIZ was set up to reflect the Princess Alexandra Hospital footprint to manage and improve the digital services from a digital NHS point of view. We were now the first in the country to do so and were being studied by other NHS services to see how they can use a similar model to ours. Mr Houston added that the NHS was a critical partner to the DIZ, and we had been working closely with them. One of the things we were looking at was how to maximise the benefits for our residents/patients and have more efficient person focussed treatments. Whipps Cross has the aspiration to do this and in practical terms, Princess Alexandra Hospital, in terms of securing funding, have a very ambitious investment plan with a potential £50 million to invest into the whole area of digital services. Our project was not just to connect up the GP surgeries but also provide a 'backbone' of fibre that then could be used for a lot of other things. A key part of our project was to maximise returns so that we could enable, potentially, thousands of premises to get cost effective, full fibre delivery. Hopefully the infrastructure we had brought into Epping Forest over the last 4 to 5 years puts us in a good position to be a path finder and leader in ensuring our residents get the latest first.

Councillor Philip added that we were facilitating the deployment of digital infrastructure, not doing it ourselves. In terms of getting payback from our residents that was in making this district very attractive to businesses and bringing in more money that way by making this a better place for people to live and work. He noted that we could not compete with the commercial broadband providers. We need to just keep doing what we are doing and making it more attractive for businesses.

Councillor Kane noted that the report was asking for guidance on our longer term ambition. He thought we ought to be capitalising on our investment and the infrastructure that we have put in place by looking at the 'Internet of Things' projects; things like digitalised bus stops, where car parking spaces were, where there were available charging points etc. To look at projects to utilise the infrastructure we have in place to benefit our residents. Councillor Philip said that was good guidance, and it had been suggested that we looked at some of this around schools. It may well be that we can provide a service that we could charge for. But we need to make places better for living and then we can decide whether we do it by covering through our Council Tax or by charging for specific uses of things.

Councillor Lion noted that we only had two officers working on this, but we got a lot of "bangs for our buck" and we also have seven partners, each one contributing financially to make the DIZ successful. It was all about improving our services to our residents and he was not sure how they would charge for this as we would have to get our other partners onboard. As for Councillor Kane's point on the IoT, whilst it is something that we have not yet been able to drive forward, we are looking at concepts such as street electronics and air quality monitoring which would tie in with an IoT approach and could be of value in Harlow Gilston Garden Town as they examine how they deploy services.

Councillor Sunger asked if we had any more Local Authorities Partners. He was told that the DIZ was constrained around the area were working on and we were not looking to expand at present. It may be that we can expand to include other Local Authorities as commercial partners where we could possibly charge for our services.

Councillor H Whitbread was keen that we let the residents know about the DIZ. She was told that we could start by telling them that our GP surgeries were connected and about digital consultations, how less travel would be involved, also broadband connections for dementia related homes where broadband services could be a lifeline.

Councillor McCredie asked about transport for schools and parking and traffic around schools. She was told that the council did monitor parking at schools but had no hand in transport for schools.

Decision:

(1) The Cabinet received and commented on the Annual Progress report of the Essex & Herts Digital Innovation Zone; and

(2) Provided guidance on the district's longer-term digital ambition around place-making.

Other Options for Action:

Not to comment on longer-term digital ambitions.

Not to refer the report to the Stronger Place Select Committee.

22. QUALIS 4 YEAR BUSINESS PLAN - 2021/22 TO 2024/25

The Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder introduced the 4 year Qualis Business Plan. He noted that this had also been keenly debated at the previous Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting. No amendments were considered necessary. He emphasised that the Council was not putting its Council Housing stock to Qualis.

This report presented the 4 Year Qualis Business Plan and sought the Council's permission to adopt this as its direction and focus. As a four years business plan it would inevitably change every year according to circumstances but a there will be a one year interim plan submitted each year.

Councillor Patel asked when Qualis proposed to raise its own capital and what was the longevity of the loan finance, and how would it be used. He was told that Qualis were hoping to call down finance from the marketplace in the coming year. They would be reinvesting profits back into Qualis. As for the council loan, this was tied into particular projects which will have to have their own business cases.

Councillor H Whitbread was pleased to see that Council Housing was protected and asked what was Qualis' plan for affordable housing. She was told that Qualis was looking for a mixture of housing, including affordable housing according to the needs identified.

Councillor C Whitbread commented that it was important to the Council that Qualis was a success as it underlined much of what we did. He was pleased that it was made clear that we had no intention to transfer our Council Housing stock to Qualis and that although there were two members of the District Council on their Board, there were no members of the Cabinet that sat on the Qualis Board.

Decision:

- (1) The Cabinet considered the views expressed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and made any amendments considered necessary to recommend to Council; and
- (2) The Cabinet approved the 4 Year Qualis Business Plan, including the specific permission set out within the covering report.

Other Options for Action:

None, it was a requirement of the Shareholder agreement that each year Qualis produce and present to the Council a one year and a 4 year Business Plan for the Council to consider and sign-off.

23. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

It was noted that there was no other urgent business for consideration by the Cabinet.

CHAIRMAN