

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee:	Stronger Council Select Committee	Date:	Thursday, 28 April 2022
Place:	Council Chamber - Civic Offices	Time:	7.00 - 8.18 pm
Members Present:	Councillors R Bassett, R Brookes, S Heather, H Kane and P Keska		
Members Present (Virtually):	Councillors P Bhanot, J Jogia, R Morgan and J H Whitehouse		
Other Councillors:	Councillors N Bedford, S Kane and D Sunger		
Other Councillors (Virtual):	Councillors N Avey		
Apologies:	P Bolton, T Matthews, H Brady, S Neville and J M Whitehouse		
Officers Present:	C Graham (Project Team Manager (Performance)), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), P Seager (Chairman's Officer) and A Small (Section 151 Officer)		
Officers Present (Virtually):	J Leither (Democratic Services Officer)		

53. Election of Chairman

In the absence of the Chairman and Vice Chairman, the meeting appointed Councillor R Bassett as Chairman for the duration of the meeting.

54. Webcasting Introduction

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

55. Substitute Members (Council Minute 39 - 23.7.02)

The Committee noted that Councillor S Heather would substitute for Councillor H Brady, Councillor P Keska would substitute for Councillor P Bolton, and Councillor J H Whitehouse would substitute for Councillor J M Whitehouse for the duration of this meeting.

56. Notes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the notes of the meeting held 03 March 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

57. Declarations of Interest

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

58. Terms of Reference & Work Programme

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

59. Stronger Council Update

The Committee were presented with a set of answers to matters that were raised at the last Stronger Council meeting.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse said that she was pleased to see the item, but she was concerned that the training indicated was not taking in the needs of new councillors who worked full time. The new member's training was a full day on a Friday and that would be difficult to attend for some members. Also, the evening training sessions were getting earlier, some were now starting at 6pm. Would it be useful to have a consultation with members on start times. There was also nothing there about the skills that councillors would need for doing their job and keeping safe or dealing with difficult people, most of the topics were inward focused.

One of the other things missed, was getting to know what the various departments of the Council did. We used to have presentations where we could meet the officers and have a talk on what their sections did. This would inform the new members what the council did and what we were responsible for. A Small replied that dates and times were a bit of a balance as there was quite a lot of training that members had to go through and to squeeze those all into evenings would be a challenge, concentrating a day's worth of courses gives an opportunity to get the bulk of the training done which can be supplemented with further evening sessions. He noted the comments about the timings of evening meetings and would investigate with Democratic Services. As for the more general courses mentioned such as keeping councillors safe, there was an intention to have this on the councillor new learning system for the more general training referenced in the next item. He would also take back the points made about what the council services were and who provides them.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse noted that there was nothing about the member/officer budding proposal and what this was; and she wondered why the training for Chairman and Vice Chairman of planning was not mandatory as it was an important role. Mr Small said the budding proposal was a point raised at the last meeting to help new members. This was something we were looking into.

Councillor H Kane noted that years ago we had a whole day's training with a lunch, this was a heavy schedule, and this should be for every councillor as they needed to attend both as a new councillor and also as experienced ones that may need a refresh.

Councillor Brookes welcomed the fact that you had listened and to have that face-to-face interaction and not virtual. When you first get elected you get inundated with case work and we do need that training in those first few months.

Resolved:

The update was noted.

60. People Strategy Overview

A Small introduced report updating the committee on the People's Strategy for 2022. He noted that the current people's strategy was coming to an end, and they were in the process of developing a new one which would come to Stronger Council in due course with the objectives for the 2023/25 period.

Councillor Bassett noted that there was a lot of changes and postulated if it was worthwhile to have a module for members on how to use it, especially with iTrain etc.

Councillor Brookes asked about getting legal advice. She said that it was difficult to get advice on monitoring issues. There also seemed to be less expert legal advice in house and more use of external people. Mr Small replied that this came under the heading of the Common Operating model devised four years ago when all council teams went through a restructuring process. The legal team was yet to go through this process. We were mindful of members concerns about having legal advice and structures were being devised to make sure there was more capacity in house. The nature of legal was that there were a lot of specialist areas, and we could not maintain such experts in house; these were the areas we would have to go out for. The restructure would leave the legal team in a better position.

Councillor Sunger thanked the team for their work on this project, especially the mental health first aider team and the apprentices.

Councillor Keska commented that for some of the more longer serving members on the council, this report looked like it was written in a foreign language, it was full of buzz words such as 'onboarding' and 'work buzz'. As far as licensing was concerned, we seemed to have adequate legal advice when we needed it. However, if you went back a few years if you wanted advice, you just went to the relevant office and spoke to whoever was in charge. Now that was just not possible, and you had to leave messages for officers to get back to you. Councillor Bassett noted this and said it may be worthwhile to have an appendix explaining the buzz words used. Councillor Sunger noted that you could usually work out what they meant. Councillor Bassett replied that you could make assumptions on what they meant but you could get it wrong. Mr Small added that most of these were internal initiatives, and we were always trying to rebadge a new initiative and make it sound interesting to get employee's interest; not necessarily intended for an outside audience. But he took the point that we should explain to members what they were.

Resolved:

The Committee considered the report on the continuing People Strategy for 2022. They also noted the People Strategy for 2023-2025 was currently in review and draft format.

61. Corporate Performance Reporting

C Graham introduced the report reviewing progress for quarterly performance measurement delivery against Quarter 4 milestones.

Key Corporate Projects.

The Chairman went through the report page by page asking for any questions as they arose.

CPP014 (Rentsense) – this had a request that this could be removed, who could authorise this? The officer said that came from the project management office as the project had been completed and closed.

CPP024 (Travel Local) – Councillors Bassett, H Kane and Janet Whitehouse would like to see this report. Councillor Janet Whitehouse wanted to know what sort of input did members have in these reports once they were closed or before this. She was told that once a project was closed and a report agreed, any comments from members were welcome and would be considered by the relevant steering group. Councillor Bassett suggested that if there were any problems identified by a councillor it should be brought back to this committee via the chairman. Councillor S Kane suggested that the reports could be published, and a link provided via the weekly bulletin.

Asked what input members had into the reports, officers noted that they had none as they were operational issues that just get reported to the committee. Members generally got issues that were strategic and part of the council's priorities and part of the corporate plan.

CPP037 (Corporate approach to resident engagement) – noted that this had been cancelled, would this come back. Officers noted that there was a revised project ongoing at present meeting the statutory requirements that we now have for engagement. It is now just being done in a different way.

CPP100 (Attracting, onboarding & retaining talent) – Councillor Bassett would like to see this report.

CPP092 (Climate Action Plan) – Councillor Bassett would like to see the report.

CPP093 (Green Infrastructure Strategy) – Councillors Bassett and H Kane would like to see this report.

CPP094 (Interim Air Pollution Mitigation Strategy) – Councillors Bassett and H Kane would like to see this report. Councillor Bedford noted that project closure was probably appropriate at this point as the air quality monitoring would be starting again in 2024/25, which will be a new report that can be compared to what has already been completed.

CPP096 (Local Plan) – Councillor Bedford noted that the inspector was currently on maternity leave, but we were progressing where we could.

CPP131 (Back-office System (Digital Planning System)) - noted that we did not have any dates as yet for this. Councillor Bedford stated that there was a new digital solution being implemented to come in by end of May, when there should be a vast improvement on what we have at present. Bearing in mind that we had to transfer about 2million bits of information into the new system and officers need to be trained etc. We have invested in the new IT system to help relieve some of the pressures on the planning team.

CPP120 (Councillor Portal) – Councillor S Kane noted that this had now closed, but as the portfolio holder he was not happy with the results and would be reopening it.

CPP124 (Digital Customer Journey) – it was asked why this had been cancelled as it was very important. They were told that it was a major area of activity for the council and that it had now been superseded by the digital strategy.

Key Performance Indicators (KPI data for Q4).

Overall Customer Satisfaction – though stated it was improving it had gone down from 65% to 62% this quarter. The Chairman asked for a remedial report on what the plan was to get it back up 80%. Councillor S Kane noted that we have had continual staffing issues within customer support. It had been a continual battle over the last 12 to 18 months and we were not there yet. Mr Small agreed and it had not been helped by extra government initiatives such as Covid Grants and energy payment. The support unit worked closely with the revenues and benefits teams which also placed an additional workload on that team. The new Planning system and the new housing system was intended to improve the statistics by taking the need for some of these people to contact us, to doing it online. Customer services would be something to look at next year for this committee.

Customer complaints resolved within SLA – it was asked if the complaints received about waste was related to the staffing problems being experienced at present by the contractor. They were told that there was an issue, largely around capacity, and the waste operatives crews. This was reflection of a wider industry challenge. Councillor Bassett noted that 60% was related to conduct and behaviour. Councillor Avey noted that that there was a lot going on behind the scenes to keep the base contract going on a day-to-day basis. We currently had a large problem underlying the industry as a whole (across the country). However, they were hoping that they would be back to normal by next week. They have also done all they could to let members and residents know about these problems. It was noted that there had been a good service all through the pandemic and that part of the problem was a national driver shortage as well as a shortage in other areas.

Other problems reported by councillors was that the lorries were now bigger and cannot get down some roads and can end up destroying verges and wrecking kerb stones. It was noted that they did have smaller trucks for the smaller streets. There were also complaints about inappropriate parking by residents which made it impossible to manoeuvre the lorries.

It was noted that there was no narrative for Q4 for the KPI on Community Health and Wellbeing, number of homelessness approaches. They were told that that there had been 887 in total over the year, averaging just under 75 per month, a slight increase on the previous quarter.

Also, it was noted that the numbers were rising on numbers of households in Temporary Accommodation; was this increasing due partly to the rise in the cost of living and especially energy? Officers will ask those responsible for this service area to report back on this. This was a generally accepted risk at this point in time.

Councillor Whitehouse asked why the KPI on gym visits were no longer to be reported she was told that there was an agreement made at the Leisure Management Partnership Board that this no longer needed to be reported.

Noted that the Housing Management Rent Arrears, Q3 and Q4 were both awaiting data. They were told that Q3 was 1.41% and Q4 was 1.21% below the 1.55% target set.

Planning and Development (% of applications determined within agreed timelines) - we were increasing the numbers, but we still had several complaints. Councillor Bedford acknowledged that there was a large backlog, but we were still waiting for the Local Plan to be signed off. We were slowly clearing the backlog. It was noted

that planning did have a lot of agency staff, but they were now recruiting to these posts, but the new entrants had to be trained.

It was asked if the sickness absences included or excluded Covid. They were told that it excluded Covid. The figure for Q4 was 2.08 days, below the target of 2.15 days, so it was getting better.

Corporate Performance Transition Report

The committee considered the refreshed list of priority projects as detailed on page 51 of the agenda. There were a lot of projects but not all of equal significance. There was a list of 140 projects or so, but not all needed to come to members. There should be a focus on the critical ones for direction and performance and the list in the agenda was what officers' thought should come to the committees. Stronger Council had a role to monitor performance while the other committees can look in detail at certain things. This committee should focus on things central to the organisation; the other committees should then delve into the details of projects that were relevant to their terms of reference. There was a new Corporate Plan in development that would lead to new targets.

Councillor Bassett would like to see the list of all the projects as members may want to look at some of these, taking a different view to officers. He appreciated that we would look at them at a high level. Councillor Whitehouse noted that it was agreed (some years ago) that relevant KPIs would go to the relevant committees, such as KPIs on housing would go to the Housing Committee. But this seems to have been forgotten. The relevant KPIs should go to the relevant committees. Councillor Bassett said there should be a list of what projects there were and next to that which Committee should be managing and/or reviewing it. Councillor S Kane agreed that it would be for the individual committee to decide what they should scrutinise rather than being presented with a list that they could scrutinise. This should be the first item on the new committee's agenda for the new year. Mr Small said that was a fair comment. However, if you presented a long enough list to enough people then almost everyone would find something they would wish to look at. But, how could they rationalise a list that was focused on the issues that were corporately and operationally significant. He was also mindful that everything that came to committee had officers time in preparing it and that we should be streamlined enough that we were not taking up unnecessary officer time and that we were focused on things that added value to the organisation. But he accepted that was a decision for the scrutiny committees rather than officers.

Councillor S Kane added that maybe this should be an item on the main O&S Committee's agenda to identify an appropriate chairman for each of the stronger committee and their work programme for that year. However, he agreed that there would have to be some selection from officers to identify the key projects that should be scrutinised and not the day-to-day work.

Councillor Bassett agreed this as a way forward and perhaps the Chairman of the O&S Committee should be consulted at the beginning of the year.

RESOLVED:

1) That the committee reviewed the 'Corporate Performance Report' report and noted the progress of project delivery for Q4.

2) That the committee considered the 'Corporate Performance Transition Report' and agreed to consult the chairman of the O&S Committee and that the individual Stronger Committees should decide on what they should scrutinise.

62. Dates of Future Meetings

The meeting noted that this was the last scheduled meeting for the municipal year.