

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY
PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 12 JANUARY 2010
IN COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 10.44 PM**

Members Present: D Jacobs (Chairman), , K Angold-Stephens, J Philip, A Watts, Mrs L Wagland and J M Whitehouse

Other members present: R Bassett, Mrs D Collins, Mrs M Sartin, D Stallan and C Whitbread

Apologies for Absence: J Collier, J Hart and W Pryor

Officers Present D Macnab (Deputy Chief Executive), C O'Boyle (Director of Corporate Support Services), R Palmer (Director of Finance and ICT), J Preston (Director of Planning and Economic Development), A Hall (Director of Housing), J Gilbert (Director of Environment and Street Scene), I Willett (Assistant to the Chief Executive), P Maddock (Assistant Director (Accountancy)), B Moldon (Principal Accountant), D Newton (Assistant Director (ICT)), B Bassington (Chief Internal Auditor), S Amin (Senior Accountant) and A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer)

32. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that there were no substitute members.

33. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Pursuant to the Council Code for Members Conduct, Councillor Richard Bassett declared a personal interest in agenda item 10, update on information and communications technology section, by virtue of working for Hewlett Packard. He declared that his interests were not prejudicial and that he would remain for the discussion and consideration of the item

34. PRESENTATION ON THE EQUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Panel noted that this presentation had been postponed to the February 2010 meeting.

35. MINUTES FROM THE LAST MEETING

The minutes form the previous meeting held on 17 November 2009 were agreed.

36. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted that item 15 on the work programme, Customer Transformation Programme had been discussed at the last Cabinet meeting and that an updating report would be coming to this Panel at a future date.

37. COMPREHENSIVE AREA ASSESSMENT 2009/10 - ORGANISATIONAL ASSESSMENT

The meeting welcomed Ian Davidson, the Comprehensive Area Assessment Lead at the Audit Commission. He gave a short presentation on the Organisational Assessment carried out on this Council at the end of last year. It looked at how the Council worked in partnership with other organisations, how public services were delivered and how they worked together to achieve improvement and progress towards long-term goals. There was also an Area Assessment that looked at the wider picture, covering three areas - Essex, Southend and Thurrock. A copy of his presentation is attached for information.

The Audit Commission had given EFDC an Overall Organisational Assessment mark of 2. There were some good quality services such as housing, waste recycling and crime reduction; with strong local partnership working. However they thought our track record for improvement was weak, the benefits performance slow and there were some tensions between some senior officers and some members which affected relationships. They identified the following as future challenges for the council such as: improvement of trust and relationships, being clear around priorities and to allocate funding accordingly, improvement speed of service (such as benefits services), address outcome of gypsy and travellers consultation and to consider services for deprived areas. Also the council needed to identify its role in the safeguarding of children. In Essex as a whole the services for safeguarding children were weak. As for area assessments, how well did local council's priorities express the wider communities' needs?

Questions and comments from Councillors to Ian Davidson:

Q: What would have to be done to improve children services?

A: There was a need to highlight policies and clear guidance on what an officer would do if they saw a child at risk. A short guidance note could be produced, so that the officer could carry it about in their daily duties and refer to. They would need to know where to take their concerns. There was also a need to talk to the County Council as different areas would have different needs.

The Deputy Chief Executive commented that EFDC officers did make referrals and that the Council had an active children's partnership which had recently converted into a Children's Trust Board. However, this was seen to be too large and unwieldy. They needed convincing that this change was for the better. Mr Davidson said they were also hearing this from other sources. Councillor Mrs Collins remarked that the County Council were not that well organised on this matter.

Comment: The assessment was giving out good news but a low score. A lot of things commented upon were outside this council's control such as the gypsies and travellers, which was a long drawn out process. Things have moved on since this report was written. Although we should focus on the "could do better" comment, a lot of the things mentioned are being addressed.

Comment: We are working hard on partnerships and are now working closely with the LSP. Gypsies and Travellers have been extremely difficult. There are about 100 recognised pitches in the district. The council had received about ten and a half thousand replies from residents, and this had taken up a lot of officer's time. The Council is now asking to see a Minister to discuss this. Mr Davidson endorsed the partnership working comments.

Q: What do the authorities, who had got it right, do what we don't.

A: They had identified not just a strategy about also priorities. Officers and Members need to come together and focus on their priorities. They need to know the issues they were facing.

Comment: Your report was useful but confusing. It blows hot and cold. We are a low tax authority which is a clear priority. When you were compiling your report we were in the midst of improving our services. We have reinvested in and improved our services; we have gone into partnership with SLM for good leisure centres, improving our partnership working. This was not reflected by the score we had.

Mr Davidson agreed that they had only reflected on what was happening when the report was written. The plans may be in place but the public needs to see them in operation. He looked forward to coming back next year and seeing how much progress the council had made. The Council was at a tipping point just now.

Q: Were there any concrete examples on what we needed to improve on.

A: The Benefits Service needs to improve in speed and accuracy; there needs to be improved working between senior officers and councillors. The rate of improvement has been slow compared to other organisations. An example of excellence would be Southend's Children's Services. They had problems some years ago, but they put in money and staff into it and achieved a rating of 3.

The Chairman thanked Mr Davidson for his presentation and for answering the questions put to him.

RESOLVED:

That the Council's Organisational Assessment for 2009/10 be noted.

38. KEY PRIORITY OBJECTIVES 2009/10 AND 2010/11

The Portfolio Holder for Performance Management, Councillor Bassett, introduced the report on the key priority objectives 2009/10 and the proposed ones for 2010/11. He noted the performance improvement plans were always being reviewed. The key priorities for 2010/11 were just headlines and are to be reviewed and improved on during the year.

Questions and comments:

Q: Why had specific objectives had been replaced with five general objectives and why were they vague.

A: Portfolio Holders and Senior Officers would look at each objective and review them.

Q: How would the Council as a whole know when they had achieved a key priority or even what they needed to achieve.

A: As soon as a priority had been achieved then they would publish it. The priorities were more fully explained in the Council (now Corporate) Plan.

Q: Appendix 1 (key priorities for 2009/10) makes sense and have objectives, but Appendix 2, key priorities for 2010/11 bear no relationship to Appendix 1. Appendix 2 is not quantifiable or achievable.

A: Maybe they should be classed as goals and not objectives to link up with priorities.

Comment: There was a need for priorities, we need to sort out benefits system; there was a need for measurable results and to provide clarity of purpose. Priority 2 on Gypsies and Travellers is not our priority. We need to develop our own strategy with the LDF and work out our relationship with Gypsies and Travellers.

Comment: Key objectives need to be in place before the start of the next municipal year so that we could look at them as a scrutiny panel.

Comment: Where does the budget tie into our development plans? They should refer back to specific priorities in our objectives so that we have “joined up thinking”

Comment: In Appendix 2, the first objective is to safeguard our frontline services. The second emphasises that a low Council Tax was important to us. The third was to make sure that in such services as Benefits we are making the right type of progress. The fourth was to enshrine these ambitions in the Council Plan. And the fifth and last was to remind us not to be consensus politicians, we can only drive through by being bolder.

Q: What is regarded as statutory front line services?

A: That is something we have to do as a District Council and something that residents expect us to do as a council. Things such as the youth council and the museum are non-statutory but important to us. We must protect our core services and the background services.

The Chairman remarked that as the priorities list for 2010/11 was only a broad summary there was a need to define several key objectives for each of the five priorities, identify funding and priorities and define what could be done.

Mr Davidson commented that as a Council you have to base your key priorities on local needs and statutory services. It's about having that balance in delivering appropriate services. He appreciated the debate had on this item. There was a need for clear targets so that he could come back next year and do another report.

The Chairman asked if the Panel had questions or comments for the 2009/10 priorities.

Comment: There was a need for measurable performances over time.

Comment: Some are not progress reports but just status reports such as key priority 18 – the deadline had not been met so there should be a date for publication and a reason for the delay.

Q: Key priority 22 on health inequalities there was a need to understand why the road accident figures were so high.

A: There are two motorways that pass through the District and we have no jurisdiction over them, these are County Council Figures.

Comment: In order to understand this we need it explained in the text.

The Chairman summed up by saying that the Panel needed more clarity and definition for future priorities and much more information under the headings in Appendix 2. This needs to be looked at and brought back with a budget and an improvement plan.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the first eight months of the 2009/10 performance priority objectives were noted by the Panel; and
- (2) The Council's key objectives for 2010/11 be reconsidered and more detailed improvement plans with budget implications be brought back to the next meeting of this Panel.

39. DETAILED BUDGETS REPORTS

The Director of Finance and ICT, Bob Palmer, introduced the budget estimates for 2010/11. Overall, the Panel noted that the CSB target was down to £18million and that the DDF target was up. Reserves would be about £100,000 better than was forecast.

The Panel look at each Directorate in turn, starting with the Office of the Chief Executive (OCE).

OCE.

- No CSB growth and limited DDF growth was identified;
- Noted the furniture exchange scheme was suspended and that there were no district elections in May 2009;
- There was a year on year increase of £79k on corporate activities, elections and member activities;
- There was a reduction in the support services for Democratic Services;
- Looking for savings in Internal Audit as they had outsourced part of audit.

Corporate Support Services

- There was a year on year increase on income on land and property;
- There was a net income increase for MOTs;
- There was an increase in licensing appeals;
- DDF for accommodation services were increased by £20k;
- Noted that some of the licensing charges were fixed by government causing the council to make an overall loss – the council could only charge enough to cover their costs.

Deputy Chief Executive

- Noted there were no substantive CSB growth items;
- Expenditure on Limes Hall Farm for 2009/10 and 2010/11 are DDF expenditure – while members consider the options for the long term development of the hall.

Environment and Street Scene

- There was a 4% reduction in overall expenditure;
- Some saving were to be had on the Continuing Services Budget;
- A DDF saving was made due mainly to recycling credits;
- Car parking support charges had increased as well as a new support IT system coming into operation;
- Savings were made in the flood defences and land drainage;
- The Council still pays for extra cuts of the highways verges during the year;

- Extra money had not been factored for extra manning and enforcement for parking in Debden, but payment by mobile phone was to be introduced, which would increase use and revenue.

Finance and ICT

- Noted the reduction in investment income;
- That the employers contribution on pension fund increased by 1% each year;
- Resources are to be put into the benefits section to increase performance and for improvements to the reception area;
- There was a year on year increase in Housing Benefits, but the Council would get a lot of the money back from the government;
- Noted that the workload of officers had increased a lot over the last 12 months.

Housing

- Noted that the Housing Revenue Account figures were on the supplementary agenda and amended on the blue sheet;
- Anticipating a small deficit of £7k in the HRA budget this year;
- Government has set a guideline rent increase of 3.1% for next year, therefore based on this assumption the government would increase the amount of negative subsidy we should pay them next year by 3.1%;
- The HRA budget was therefore based on a 3% rent increase, which represents an average increase of £2.32 per week, but other options have also been considered;
- An option of an average rent increase of 2.4% next year would result in the HRA breaking even;
- Officers were unable to tell what the highest percentage increase would be as they would need to do some detailed calculations. There was a need to ensure that the highest percentage increase was not too high.

Planning

- Noted the transfer of expenditure and overheads for the Roding Valley Reserve from the Deputy Chief Executive Directorate;
- £93,000 of the Planning Appeals contingency fund was carried forward into 2009/10, of which £7,800 was vired to Enforcement to carry out action at Blunts Farm Golf Course;
- £3,000 was estimated to be required to compensate residents living in the vicinity of the O2 mast at Waltham Abbey;
- £82,000 is to be carried forward to 2010/11;
- Although this seemed a lot, the recent rule changes in the appeals procedures would mean that it would become much tougher for the council soon;
- Development Control had savings of £8,000 on consultant's fees relating to pre-application advice.

RESOLVED:

That the draft detailed budget for the general fund and the HRA had been considered and noted by the Panel.

40. UPDATE ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY SECTION.

The Assistant Director ICT, David Newton, introduced the report updating the Panel on the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) section.

The Panel noted that:

- An ICT review had been carried out by an external contractor in 2008 and this had produced a number of recommendations;
- The ICT restructure had been completed with all post currently filled;
- The new helpdesk system (QSM) was now fully implemented and aligned with the ITIL framework;
- The telephony element of the ICT helpdesk is being redeveloped and was re-launched in December 2009, addressing the large number of cold calls being received;
- Internal ICT user group meeting now take place regularly;
- The Electronic Records and Documentation Management System (ERDMS) has been successfully implemented within ICT and will be implemented within Land Charges during early 2010;
- This system was first implemented in Planning and Benefits and will ultimately be rolled out across the whole council;
- Server virtualisation had been the major project this last year, it would result in:
 - a reduction in the number of servers from 104 to 14 – resulting on an expected energy saving of approximately £8,000 PA;
 - reduction in backup software licensing saving approximately £6,000 PA; and
 - a hardware maintenance savings of approximately £11,000 PA.
- Server virtualisation was due to be completed next year;
- EFDC was the first authority in Essex to achieve connectivity to the Government Connect system;
- The emergency SMS messaging system had now been implemented.

Asked if the Councillors VPN token system could be updated or replaced with a more up to date system Mr Newton said that the Government required that a VPN system be used and they could not circumvent this requirement.

The draft two year action plan for 2010/2012 was also considered, this would have to be revisited once the Council's budget had been approved.

The draft action plan consisted of the following projects:

- ERDMS implementation within Housing;
- Creation of a common property database as a prerequisite to any Customer Contact Centre implementation;
- Disaster Recovery – revised procedure to be created;
- Compliance with Government Connect required;
- To investigate mobile working for some officers such as use of Blackberry mobile technology.

RESOLVED:

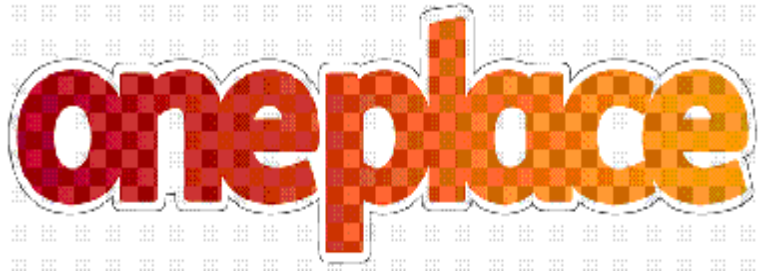
- (1) That the progress on ICT projects and the 2009/2011 action plan be noted.
- (2) That the outline schemes for 2010/2012 action plan be noted.

41. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

To report back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a general update on the reports considered at this meeting.

42. FUTURE MEETINGS

The schedule for future meetings were noted.



Epping Forest Organisational Assessment & Area Assessment

Ian Davidson

Comprehensive Area Assessment Lead
Essex / Southend / Thurrock



Organisational Assessment

Overall Organisational Assessment – 2

Managing performance – 2 & Use of Resources – 2

Organisation meets minimum requirements performs adequately

- Some good quality services
 - Housing improvement and meeting DHS
 - Increasing recycling
 - Crime reducing
- Some strong local partnership work

However

- Track record of improvement is weak
- Benefits performance is slow
- Tensions between some senior officers and some members which affects relationships



Organisational Assessment

Green and unique

- Recycling increased slightly from 42% to 43% in 2008/09
 - Improved to 46% by September 2009
 - Improvements planned – new food and garden waste collection
- Ongoing consultation for gypsy and traveller site provision
 - Significant capacity required
 - No decisions yet made
- Progress on Core strategy and LDF has been slow – this has been due to legal challenges to East of England plan



Organisational Assessment

Homes and neighbourhoods

- Innovative approach to housing regeneration
- Increased supply of decent and affordable homes
 - Only 97 out of 6500 not meeting standard
 - Reduced number of homeless families
 - Most tenants satisfied with council as landlord
- However, slow progress on bringing private owned empty properties back into use
- Neighbourhoods improving – good satisfaction keeping the area clean, helped by *Environmental Response Unit*
- Good partnership work – *Stay safe and sanctuary* schemes
- Some progress on access to services but little progress on customer transformation programme



Organisational Assessment

A safe community

- Crime reduced – overall rates down 8% for 2008/09
 - Criminal damage down 20% and violent crime down 5%
- Safer Communities Partnership working well to ensure all partners recognise key issues and contribute
- Cross border arrangements with other councils
- Council part funds 6 PCSOs



Organisational Assessment

Fit for life

- Initiatives for improving health include:
 - Active Health Programme
 - DVD to help elderly people exercise
 - Allotments for older people created at Parsonage Court, Loughton
 - Joint Health Promotion Officer with other councils
- *But too early to assess outcomes yet*



Organisational Assessment

Economic prosperity

- Overriding focus of keeping Council Tax low
 - Some tensions of quality of service compared to costs
- Benefits weak
 - Slow to pay benefits
 - Access mixed – e.g. opening times do not meet expectations with 40% dissatisfied with opening hours
 - Investment in service – but improvements not sustained
- Some good work to support people through the recession
- Developed residential facility in Epping for particular groups such as excluded children / vulnerable adults to develop skills through the arts



Organisational Assessment

- Improved community leadership – with Councillors proactive
- Proactive work with PCT and police
 - Focus on deprived areas
 - Housing, health and youth work
- Good work around anti social behaviour
- LSP members need to ensure they know the role they play in the issues facing Epping



Organisational Assessment

Future challenges

- *Big challenges and opportunities for Epping*
- Improve trust and relationships
- Be clear around priorities and allocate funding accordingly
- Improve speed of service improvement
 - Only met 44% of targets in 2008/09 (and 58% excluding issues relating to East of England Plan)
 - Improve benefits services
- Address outcome of gypsy and traveller consultation
- Consider services for deprived areas
- *What is your role in safeguarding children?*



Area assessment

Forward looking, focused on outcomes in local priorities

- Answers three questions:
 1. How well do local priorities express community needs and aspirations?
 2. How well are the outcomes and improvements needed being delivered?
 3. What are the prospects for improvement?



Ofsted
raising standards
improving lives



CareQuality
Commission



oneplace





Essex – Local Strategic Partnership

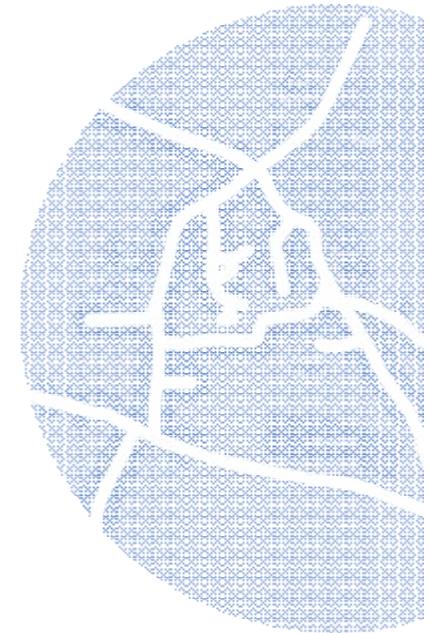
Four themes

Our People

Our Communities

Our Economy

Our World





How well do priorities express community needs

- Partners understand the needs of local communities across Essex and listen and respond to local people.
 - Higher alcohol related crime in Harlow being tackled
 - Range of services to support 4,000 gypsy and travellers. But lack of coordination for the long term solution of high number of illegal traveller sites in Essex
- Good understanding of changing needs e.g. increasing number of older people



Our People

- Partners working well to address health inequalities
 - Partners responding to great health inequalities in Tendring through additional funding to GP practices
- Good understanding of health needs
 - County / PCT / district / ward / neighbourhood level
- Partners supporting people to give up smoking
 - PCT areas are amongst best in region to support people to quit smoking
 - Rates of smoking for children under 15 have dropped
- Good support for older people independence



Our People

- Services for safeguarding children are **weak**
- Partners recognise Children's Trust not working effectively and are reviewing its structure
- Some partners are not clear or understand their role in safeguarding
- Insufficient capacity is affecting safeguarding of children.
 - Proactive solutions are being sought but is it enough?



Our People

- Despite key weaknesses, lots of good work going on
- Partners responding positively to increase in 16 – 18 year olds not in education, employment or training.
- Essex Partnership Forum committed £4 million into developing skills for young people including through delivering some vocational centres.



Our Community

- Low overall crime rates
- People agree that partners are dealing with anti social behaviour – Essex now ranked 12th (improved from 32th)
- Partners successful at reducing people killed or seriously injured on roads (falling by over 23% in one year)
- Developed residential facility in Epping for particular groups such as excluded children / vulnerable adults to develop skills through the arts
- Domestic violence and repeat incidences are above average and an area of concern



‘Our Economy’

Essex partners delivering wide range of initiatives to improve the economy and alleviate impact of recession

- County wide initiatives include,
 - ‘Banking on Essex’
 - Reopening of post offices
 - Apprenticeship scheme (LSP target for additional 1000)
- Local initiatives include:
 - In Tendring early summits and range of support work
 - SoS bus in Colchester providing debt clinics
 - Work in Harlow including benefits take up campaigns



‘Our World’

- Effective partnership between councils increased amount of waste recycled & diverted from landfill
 - Financial support to districts to increase recycling & partnership work to develop food waste recycling
 - Partners exceeded county target recycling over 40% in 2008/09
- Partner introducing a range of initiatives and changing practices to reduce their carbon impact (LAA target)
 - Shared use of facilities between partners
 - Essex delivering against plans to reduce carbon emissions by 10%
 - Partners such as PCT’s also working to reduce carbon impact
 - Countywide programme planting over 417,000 trees



Next steps

Thank you for your help and co-operation

- Final publication was 9th December
- Website called *One Place*

