

## **The District of Epping Forest – Story of Place**

### **Introduction**

'Story of Place' is part of Epping Forest District's contribution towards the Local Area Agreement for Essex. It describes the District from an objective perspective. The framework draws on the main headings of our Local Strategic Partnership Community Strategy (plus Children and Young People) incorporated within the themes published in the November 07 briefing paper provided by Essex County Council. In this approach we seek to create clear links between the issues identified by the LSP and the broader strategic issues dealt with under the LAA.

This response is based in large part on consultation carried out with partners on the LSP. The LAA themes identified by Essex County Council are wide-ranging. Categorising our local headings within the LAA must therefore carry a degree of flexibility. The narrative on Children and Young People in particular covers very broad themes and is therefore explicitly included twice below.

We face a series of challenges. Pressure for development, welfare and education of our young people, crime and fear of crime, traffic congestion and the general stress of 21<sup>st</sup> century life are at the top of our agenda. We look forward to the challenges and to change but always within the perspective of protecting and conserving all that is best in our District.

### **1. Protect and Enhance the Natural Environment for Prosperity**

- Green and Unique

Our District takes its name and much of its character from Epping Forest. Most of the 131 square miles of our District are green and rural. The Forest is administered by the City of London Corporation. It is an area of protected wildlife habitats and ancient woodland managed on behalf of residents and visitors. Much of our western boundary is formed along the line of the Lee Valley Regional Park, a green corridor stretching into the heart of London. We are entirely within the Metropolitan Green Belt. Horticulture and farming feature heavily in land use.

Approximately half of our 122,900 residents live in a very small and congested area comprising around 5.2 percent of the District close to our boundary with London. The main conurbation comprises Grange Hill, Chigwell, Buckhurst Hill and Loughton. Our other main population centre is Waltham Abbey which borders London and Hertfordshire.

Most of the rest of our population lives in a mixture of market towns such as Epping and Chipping Ongar, large villages such as Sheering, Theydon Bois and Nazeing or in small rural hamlets such as the Lavers.

Our District's long history has left its mark. We have outstanding historic buildings of many kinds. Waltham Abbey and Greensted Church, The Kings Head at Chigwell and the Royal Gunpowder Mills are among the best-known examples. We have many Grade I and Grade II listed buildings and extensive building conservation areas.

Pressure for development has always been intense. However, the demand for more sustainable homes, jobs and leisure has never been greater. The East of England Plan proposes an additional new 3,500 houses to be built by 2021 plus an estimated 3,000 more where the boundaries of Harlow might expand into what is currently Epping Forest District.

Balancing the needs of an increased population against the desire to protect and conserve the predominantly rural nature of the District presents a major challenge. The District currently suffers from inadequate infrastructure and services. Epping Forest is already the most polluted Site of Special Scientific Interest in the UK. Without careful planning at a local level and major regional investment, the fragile eco-systems of the forest and beyond that provide the green lung for Epping Forest District, London and other areas will be placed at serious risk.

## **2. Supportive Communities**

- Homes and Neighbourhoods

Each of the towns, villages and hamlets of Epping Forest District has its own unique identity and personality. We do not have a single homogenous population. Many of our residents moved from or are the descendents of people who moved out from the East End of London in search of a better life. We also have a large and well-integrated Jewish community and many people of Italian extraction.

Epping Forest District has a reputation for great affluence. In part this is true but the affluence has a tendency to mask the existence of areas of deep social deprivation. Four wards in Loughton, Waltham Abbey and Ongar are among the ten most deprived in Essex. Serious social deprivation and associated instances of poor private sector housing are also to be found 'pepper-potted' across the District in urban and rural areas. For those on the lowest incomes, fuel poverty and affordable warmth is a significant additional factor to other deprivation issues.

More than four fifths of housing is in private ownership, rented, mortgaged or owned outright. Levels of demand have contributed to high prices and a lack of affordable housing beyond the means of many people on average and low incomes. The Council's Housing Waiting List has in the region of 3,500 applicants. Despite the environmental concerns, there is a widely perceived need for substantial provision of more new affordable housing.

Historically, many of our communities have been small and isolated. Communication and access to services is a cause of increasing concern (see below). There is also fear that the social fabric that binds people together in mutual support is being eroded. Where the local church, post office and pub once provided much of the social foundation of rural life, these are now disappearing. The latest announcement of post office closures has been met with particular anxiety. The young, old and vulnerable are becoming increasingly isolated. There is increasing reliance on stretched voluntary services for support.

- Getting About

In Epping Forest opportunity and access is inextricably linked to the ability to get about.

The District is criss-crossed by the M11 and M25 motorways. It is the only District in Essex to enjoy the benefits of London Underground services. British Rail services touch the District briefly in Roydon but are also accessible to many of our residents via stations such as Harlow, Broxbourne and Chingford.

Travelling to and from work in London is part of the daily routine for thousands of resident commuters. For people travelling further, Stansted is just 20 to 30 minutes away. However, despite rail and road links, many people struggle to travel in and around our District.

High levels of car ownership are a sign of economic prosperity, but this in turn means a higher level of unsustainable traffic growth. Rail networks tend to allow easy travel to and from the district but not around it. Making bus services more attractive is key although in the rural areas it has to be acknowledged that where the traditional bus is not sustainable, using community transport and the voluntary sector may be the only viable alternative. People living without daily access to a car can be very isolated which can lead to restrictions in terms of work, health, education and leisure opportunities.

Elderly and young people, those groups with least access to the car, are particularly badly affected.

However, even easy access to a car can feel like a mixed blessing. Traffic congestion is a major problem with half the population of the District living in such a small area so close to London and many other people travelling through on a daily basis. This places pressure on road conditions from which there is a requirement to ensure adequate investment is secured. Parking is also a major problem as residents, shoppers, commuters and workers all battle for somewhere to leave their cars.

### **3. Fulfil Potential in Education, Work and Leisure**

- Economic Prosperity

Without doubt, Epping Forest District is an area of high prosperity. Unemployment is low and many residents enjoy a very high standard of living. For some people the 'Premier League' dream really does exist. Some of country's top footballers live in the District along with club owners and managers as well.

Many residents take advantage of the employment opportunities available in London. The local economy has also developed as companies such as Higgins, Keir, Clinton Cards and Sainsbury's have grown or moved in. These have replaced older employers such as Royal Ordnance (now gone), The Royal Gunpowder Mills (reinvented as a centre for heritage and tourism) and the Bank of England Printing Works, which was once the most important employer in the District.

Horticulture and farming continue to play a role but tourism and leisure is growing. The historic town of Waltham Abbey including the Abbey, Royal Gunpowder Mills and Lee Valley Regional Park, Epping Forest, North Weald Airfield and many pretty towns and villages are a draw to people from London and further afield. The scope for development of tourism has been further enhanced by the successful London Olympic bid. The District stands at the motorway gateway to Stratford and within a short distance of both the mountain bike and white water canoe events.

While much of the workforce is highly skilled and flexible, this can mask higher levels of unemployment in parts of the District, notably the socially deprived areas of

Loughton and Waltham Abbey. Demand for housing also requires sustainable local provision of jobs and services, placing more stress on a District already struggling to protect its fragile green areas.

- Life-Long Learning

Life-long learning begins before school and continues into old age. However, to maintain a motivated and skilled workforce it is essential that a good educational foundation is continually built upon and developed. Residents of Epping Forest District are generally highly skilled but as referred to above, pockets of social deprivation can be linked to poor educational opportunities. Lack of suitable public transport may also limit access.

- Children and Young People

Primary school education is perceived to be of a generally high standard though out Epping Forest District. However, the picture becomes more mixed at secondary and further education levels.

While moving in the right direction, three of the District's six state secondary schools have experienced periods of poor performance and special measures in recent years. Two others have performed well while one has achieved outstanding good results. Successful schools are heavily oversubscribed, a situation made worse in the south of the District where children from outside the District take up a large proportion of annual admissions. The local college of further education also takes the majority of its admissions from outside the District.

There is no secondary school provision within the District north of Epping. Many children are forced to travel large distances to school outside the District, motivated by the desire to attend a high performing school or simply because no place is available locally. For those parents able to afford it, they may pay thousands of pounds in annual travel costs. Poorer parents face real dilemmas in trying to find the best possible educational opportunities for their children.

The provision of secondary school education is perhaps one of the most controversial issues in Epping Forest. Nevertheless, there is a general feeling that greater confidence in local education is required and that some young people suffer from lack of opportunity due to current standards of school provision.

#### **4. Safe and Healthy**

- Children and Young People

Access to educational opportunity goes hand in hand with other issues facing children and young people in Epping Forest District. Substance abuse and life style issues such as sexual health can be linked to educational opportunities and attainment. Poor housing and social deprivation can also be linked.

Young people are prone to becoming victims of crime. Widely reported instances of street violence have occurred due to organised groups of young people travelling into the District from London via the Central Line.

- Safer Communities

In comparison with many other places, the District of Epping Forest is a safe place to live and work. However, crime is a cause of local concern. Fear of crime can be almost as debilitating for vulnerable groups within the community, particularly the very oldest and youngest generations.

Anti-social Behaviour and Dispersal Orders (mostly associated with young people) have been utilised. Essex Police is stretched and the demand for officers created by the influx of teenagers from outside the District can be hard to meet.

## **Fit For Life**

There are health inequalities between wards in Epping Forest and overall improvement in access to services is needed for the District to keep up with the improvement in health that is going on in the rest of the country.

Life Expectancy varies depending on where you live in Epping Forest District. Analysis of trends shows that for men, life expectancy is not increasing as fast as the national rate and there is a 10-year difference in life expectancy between the highest (80-86 years) and the lowest wards. (between 70 and 75 years)

All dimensions of deprivation (health, education, housing, access to services, isolation and barriers to opportunity) impact significantly on the health of the local population and although Epping Forest is considered to be relatively affluent there are nevertheless pockets of deprivation which are the focus of attention for health improvement activity.

Lifestyle factors (smoking, diet, exercise, levels of alcohol / substance misuse and people's sense of well being) also play a key role in both quality of life and life expectancy, the young, vulnerable and elderly being the most likely to suffer disproportionately.

Peoples' health and well being in Epping Forest is not only affected by how but also where they live. Transport impacts on 3 key areas of peoples' lives ie road casualties, access to services and social interaction.

The rate of people of all ages killed or severely injured in road traffic accidents in Epping Forest has been showing a steady decrease but still remains the highest in West Essex and consistently above the East of England and National average.

Although Epping Forest has a smoking prevalence of between 22% and 27%, which is below the Essex average, among 15- 17yr olds the prevalence is 27%, which is second highest across West Essex.

With respect to obesity, the national average for is 22.1% and whilst Epping Forest has only 3 wards that are above this, there is a 10% difference in obesity rates across the District.

Epping Forest adults compare favourably with the national average for adults participating in 30 minutes of exercise at least 3 days a week but attention needs to be paid to the exercise opportunities for young people who may not have the freedom or means to access physical activity programmes etc especially in the holidays.

## **Conclusion**

The District of Epping Forest is an area of contrasts. It is a green and open land of fields, hedgerows and woodland but parts of it suffer from heavy levels of congestion and pollution. It has good communications and transport links in and out but is difficult to get around. Access to many services can be very difficult if you do not have a car. Young people are at a particular disadvantage compared to friends in other districts or boroughs. Housing is at a premium and more affordable homes are needed.

However, sustainable homes also means infrastructure including employment, roads, sewers, shops, health, education and a wealth of other facilities. That needs to be balanced against the needs of fragile eco-systems we are committed to protecting and preserving. Our District is wealthy and healthy but we have some of the poorest areas of deprivation in Essex.

We are not one community but several but it is in our people that we are strongest and we look forward to the challenges of the future.