

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL  
NOTES OF A MEETING OF STRONGER COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE  
HELD ON THURSDAY, 14 JANUARY 2021  
IN VIRTUAL MEETING ON ZOOM  
AT 7.00 - 8.40 PM**

- Members Present:** D Sunger (Chairman), J McIvor (Vice-Chairman), A Beales, I Hadley, J Lea, S Rackham, J Share-Bernia (Vice-Chairman of Council), J H Whitehouse and D Wixley
- Other members present:** R Brookes, S Murray, S Kane, A Patel and H Whitbread
- Apologies for Absence:** A Mitchell
- Officers Present** N Dawe (Chief Operating Officer), J Leither (Democratic Services Officer), D Fenton (Service Director (Housing Revenue Account)), J Gould (Service Director (Community & Wellbeing)), S Lewis (Customer Services Manager), R Pavey (Service Director (Customer Services)), R Perrin (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer) and R Moreton (Corporate Communications Officer)

**20. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION**

The Chairman made a short address to remind all present that the virtual meeting would be broadcast on the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings.

**21. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS**

There were no substitutes reported at the meeting.

**22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were declared pursuant to the Council's Member Code of Conduct.

**23. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Councillor D Wixley enquired whether an invitation to the District Police Commander had been made in relation the minute 16. (Six-Month report on the work of the Council -funded Police officers). The Chairman informed the Committee that the District Police Commander had been invited to the meeting on 30 March 2020 and officers were awaiting a response.

**RESOLVED:**

That the notes of the meeting held 15 September 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

**24. TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME**

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

**25. OPERATIONAL CHANGES AT BROADWAY HOUSING OFFICE**

The Housing Revenue Account Service Director, D Fenton presented a report on operational changes to the Broadway Housing Office.

She advised that operational changes were being requested following a review of the Housing Management Services and feedback from tenants, to ensure that the best use of resources and delivery of a customer centric service were being delivered.

The Committee were advised that following the Civic Office refurbishment, the Income Recovery Team would reposition itself alongside the Estate and Land Team at Debden Broadway and that the Broadway Office would be reinvented as a drop-in hub on Mondays and Tuesdays alongside the cash office. This would enable both a cash office and the opportunity for residents to engage with a range of services such as the Rehousing Team, Housing Benefit, Council Tax, Citizens Advice Bureau, Peabody Trust and potentially provide digital upskilling by Digital Buddies. This would enable the Council to continue to support the High Street, offer a cash collection service which was popular amongst residents and offer a wider range of services on the two days the office is open to the public and allow housing officers the flexibility to have an active presence on the estates, when office was closed to the public for the remainder of the week.

Councillor D Wixley raised a number of issues that this report had raised, which included the removal of the notice board in the window of the office; the reduction in opening days and whether this would effect the opening hours; what area of the district did the office cover; and whether Ward Councillors could be invited to and meet the Housing Officers. The Housing Revenue Account Service Director advised that the removal of the notice board had been completed in consultation with Loughton Town Council and an alternative position in the community had been offered. In regards to the opening days and hours, the number of residents attending the offices were around 13 per day with the majority collecting recycling bags, housing officers time could be put to better use, out in the community. In addition to ward members attending the office, the Housing Revenue Account Service Director advised that housing officers could also take members to look at the social housing and improvement projects.

The Customer Service Director, R Pavey advised that there were no plans to withdraw the cash desk at this office although the Council continued to review different ways to collect payments.

Councillor S Rackham asked how officers would engage with the residents going forward. The Housing Revenue Account Service Director advised that officers would be have more meetings, knocking on doors, completing tenancy and estate audits and visiting tenants with arrears directly rather via the telephone for a more holistic approach.

Councillor J H Whitehouse asked whether tenancy satisfaction survey could be brought to future meetings, so that members could have a chance to view the feedback; and whether the complaints received regarding repairs service, which had now transferred to Qualis, could be scrutinised by this Committee. The Housing Revenue Account Service Director advised that the tenant satisfaction survey were only completed every three years and she was not aware that it had previously been submitted to this Committee. The Chief Operating Officer, N Dawe advised that the repairs issues, formed part of the Service Level Agreement between the Council and Qualis and he would ensure a report would come forward in due course.

Councillor R Brookes enquired what percentage of tenants had replied to the tenant's satisfaction survey; what reasons were given for tenants using cash as a method of payment; and whether the Tenants Panel had approved this decision. The Housing Revenue Account Service Director advised that the Tenants Panel had been consulted and were broadly in favour. In regards to cash payments, the Service Manager Customer Service advised that the reasons given were payments by carers, people not having bank accounts or other methods of payment.

The Communities & Wellbeing Service Director advised that 9% of tenant had responded to the survey which translated into 565 responses out of the 6346 Council tenants.

Councillor S Murray comments that officers should collaborate with the St John's on the Broadway hub to prevent any doubling up on services as this also provides community services. The Housing Revenue Account Service Director advised that the relevant officer had the contact details of the St John's hub and officers would contact them.

The Committee were broadly supportive of operational changes.

**RESOLVED:**

That the Committee was supportive of;

1. the Broadway Satellite Office being retained to enable customers to access the Council's cash desk;
2. the reduction in the hours that the Broadway Housing advice counter was open from 5 days a week to 2 days a week; and
3. the Broadway Housing Office be repurposed, by bringing together a range of internal and external partners to provide a range of services on the days that the office was open.

**26. ROUGH SLEEPING UPDATE**

The Community & Wellbeing Service Director, J Gould presented a report on the Council's response to rough sleeping in the district throughout the pandemic and the additional funding secured to support the service.

The Committee were advised of the following points;

- A total of 27 clients presented as rough sleepers between April and 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2020;
- 3 were found to of had a priority need and were accommodated in line with Part VII Housing Act 1996 (as amended);
- 4 were made offers of accommodation but failed to engage and contact was lost;
- 20 were accommodated in emergency, nightly paid accommodation.
- 15 of the 20 were accommodated in response to the Everyone In directive and the remaining 5 were accommodated post October via the Next Steps Accommodation Programme (NASP).
- Funding for Rough Sleeper Initiative Grant and Next Steps Accommodation Programme had been achieved for 2020/21 and the costs associated with the

Everyone In directive would be returned to the Government as part of EFDC's additional Covid-19 spending strain.

- To assist with EFDC rough sleeper service delivery and housing solutions, a specialist link worker with particular expertise in assisting rough sleepers had been established in the homelessness team and progress was currently being made to secure a dedicated mental health specialist.
- In addition, a six-bed house of multiple occupation within the district had been secured which would provide long-term accommodation for single homeless clients on an assured shorthold tenancy basis and;
- A unit of EFDC's own housing stock was being leased to Chess to provide next step, supported accommodation to rough sleepers.

Finally, the Government had made a commitment to continue Rough Sleeper Initiative Grant funding and Rough Sleeper Accommodation Programme into 2021/22, which the council would work look to secure a share of the future funding.

Councillor J McIvor enquired whether the Council could work more closely with neighbouring authorities in addition to current collaborations. The Community & Wellbeing Service Director advised that currently the Council was in a working partnership with Braintree, Rochford, Chelmsford and Maldon, where discussions and initiatives were discussed. She advised that opportunities with Harlow District Council would also need to be explored, as many of the district rough sleepers sought services in Harlow rather than Chelmsford and this would need to be investigated over the next year.

Councillor S Rackham what happened to rough sleepers who continually refuse help. The Community & Wellbeing Service Director advised that it could be difficult, as the Council did not have any enforcement powers, although officers tried to keep in regular contact, offer help and had used some of the funding for a dedicated mental health specialist.

Councillor D Wixley enquired where mental health issues had been a factor in the increased figures of rough sleepers or if there was any other common reasons. The Community & Wellbeing Service Director advised that she would find out and report back to him. Although from experience, many rough sleepers had multiply and complex needs.

#### **RESOLVED:**

1. That the Committee was updated on the Council's response to rough sleeping throughout the pandemic between the period of April and 23 December 2020;
2. That additional funding from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government had been secured; and
3. That robust prevention and relief services had been developed.

#### **27. HEALTH AND WELLBEING - WHIPPS CROSS HOSPITAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME**

The Chairman advised the Committee that he had attended a briefing to update the key stake holders and community representatives on the progress of the Whipps Cross Hospital Development. It was noted that no substantial updates had arisen since the presentation given at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Chairman of the Epping Forest Health & Wellbeing Board, Councillor A Patel advised that he would ask officers to submit the general information of the Epping Forest Primary Care Networks in the Council Bulletin.

## 28. DIGITAL INCLUSION UPDATE

The Customer Service Director, R Pavey gave an update on the work taking place around the Digital Inclusion project. He advised that the pandemic had been a real challenge in reducing digital exclusion, in particular to providing a face to face services to support customers.

He highlighted the work being undertaken and planned by the Council and other partners within the Digital Inclusion Network as follows;

- Internal Digital Buddies – EFDC trained staff who were willing to assist residents and collaborate with other service areas and external partners to provide some initial digital support to residents;
- Community Based Digital Inclusion Programme - Projects being developed to reduce health inequalities and aid social recovery from Covid-19;
- Digital Inclusion Zone including Local Full Fibre Network (LFFN); Digital Inclusion Project; Digital Support for the High Street; Ultrafast Broadband; DIZ Event Programme; MDU Fibre Broadband Project.

The Digital inclusion is one of the key themes of the Customer Service Strategy and future updates around this would be provided within the wider Strategy update.

Councillor D Wixley enquired what was an Alcove phone. The Community & Wellbeing Service Director advised that they were video care phones, which had predominantly been installed in the Paternoster and the Shelley wards in sheltered housing schemes. They allowed residents who were isolating to contact various people via video.

The Customer & Corporate Support Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor S Kane advised that the Community hub's planned for Epping and Waltham Abbey would become bases for the Digital buddy network scheme to operate from and have equipment available for residents to use.

Councillor I Hadley commented that there could be an opportunity for the provision of a basic free broadband service. The Finance & Economic Development Portfolio Holder advised that the Council had considered an number of options to improve the broadband service although with competition rules would prevent this and it was probably a consideration for Government rather than local authorities.

### **RESOLVED:**

That the Committee noted that updates given on the Digital Inclusion schemes in the District.

## 29. CUSTOMER SERVICE UPDATE

The Service Manager for Customer Services, S Lewis, presented an update on what the customer was telling the Council and the Customer Strategy.

The following points were highlighted;

- Overall customer satisfaction for quarter 3 was 80%. - Customers had reported that the key frustration had been around missed waste collections and bin deliveries which had been due to scheduling issues. This was being addressed and feedback on the ease of finding information on the website would be addressed via the digital strategy.
- First point resolution was 45% - Call causation codes had been reintroduced to identify the reasons for contact and whether they could be dealt with at first contact. There was still a large amount of call transfers required to Qualis and the Planning department and this would be monitored.
- Complaints – 85% within the SLA – There had been 81 complaints received including noise issues; a delay in repairs in relation to availability of materials concerning Qualis and waste complaints.
- Call Volumes for quarter 3 -21,506 – Consistent with previous quarters.
- Corporate Communications – webcasting equipment was being upgraded for hybrid meetings and investigations into creating a community platform.
- Customer Strategy – Launched via the website and internal audit had completed an audit of the Customer Service Transformation plans which had received substantial assurances.
- Fix the Basics – the call centre would be using customer feedback to improve the customer experience.
- Customer shoes – Behavioural training to assist with difficult customer conversations.
- Embracing New Technology working group;
- New welcome lounge at Civic Office; and
- Members technology & contact process review for members enquiries.

Councillor D Wixley asked about the missed bin collections and what was Perkbox. The Customer Service Manager advised that the missed bins had been scheduling issues and Perkbox was a staff incentive platform, which allowed staff to access various benefits.

Councillor J McIvor asked whether any benefits had been seen with regards to the behavioural training for staff. The Customer Service Manager advised that the training had been completed in December 2020 and feedback was expected in a month time.

The Committee wanted to acknowledge the efforts of the Waste service in these difficult times.

### **30. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

#### **Co-opted Member**

The Chairman advised that a request had been received for the Chairman of the Tenant's and Leaseholders Forum, Mr Wyn Marshall to become a non-voting Co-opted Member of the Stronger Communities Select Committee.

The Committee were advised that Mr Marshall had previously been a member of the Housing Select Committee but following the review of the Overview and Scrutiny Select Committee Framework in 2019 and a subsequent review of the protocol for co-opted members his co-option had been removed. It was now requested that Mr Marshall, as the Chairman of the Tenant's and Leaseholders Forum become a non-

voting co-opted member of the Stronger Communities Select Committee to ensure that tenants had a voice at this level of scrutiny.

**RESOLVED:**

1. That the Committee agreed to the Co-option of Mr Marshall; and
2. The co-option would be recommended to Overview and Scrutiny Committee for approval.

**District Police Commander attendance on 30 March 2021**

The Chairman asked that questions for the District Police Commander be submitted to democratic services before the meeting to ensure that a details response could be given. This would not preclude members from asking question on the evening and a reminder would be placed in the bulletin.

**31. NEXT MEETING**

The Committee noted that the date of the next meeting would be held on 30 March 2021.

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