

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF STRONGER COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY, 13 APRIL 2021
IN VIRTUAL MEETING ON ZOOM
AT 7.00 - 9.03 PM**

Members Present:	P Bolton (Chairman), D Stocker (Vice-Chairman), R Bassett (Member), R Brookes, D Dorrell, S Heather, S Neville (Leader of the Green Party Group), M Owen, S Rackham, M Sartin and J M Whitehouse
Other members present:	S Kane, S Murray and J H Whitehouse
Apologies for Absence:	H Brady and H Kane (Chairman of the Council)
Officers Present	A Small (Strategic Director Corporate and 151 Officer), L Wade (Service Director (Strategy, Delivery & Performance)), M Hassall (Interim Service Director (Strategy, Delivery & Performance)), P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services)), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), J Leither (Democratic Services Officer) and R Moreton (Corporate Communications Officer)

35. 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 virtual meetings.

36. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Committee noted that Councillor S Heather would substitute for Councillor H Kane and Councillor M Sartin would substitute for Councillor H Brady for the duration of this meeting.

37. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved:

That the notes of the meeting held 19 January 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

- (a) Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor R Bassett declared a personal interest in item 10, Qualis Quarterly Monitoring Report, Q1 2020/21, by virtue of being on the Qualis board. The Councillor had determined that his interest was non-pecuniary and he would remain in the meeting for the consideration of this item.
- (b) Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor R Bassett declared a personal interest in item 10a, Corporate Performance Reporting

Q4, by virtue of being the Chairman of Community Transport. The Councillor had determined that his interest was non-pecuniary and he would remain in the meeting for the consideration of this item.

39. TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME

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

40. ICT UPDATE

The ICT Manager, M Hassall, introduced the updating ICT report to the meeting. It was noted that over the past year they had focused on completing the ICT restructure and improving the basic ICT service that the team delivered. Seventeen colleagues had left the team, and 10 had joined. The team was now at capacity.

A business partner model had been implemented with meetings held with each service area every month. This had led to better alignment of ICT services and service area requirements.

The team had implemented a service desk management tool that provided better visibility and management for incidents, changes and problems. They had facilitated the home and remote working for all colleagues across the council, and provided laptops, Microsoft teams, and BYOD support. This had been essential due to the Covid restrictions and the mandate for all colleagues to work from home if possible.

The accommodation project had required significant ICT resourcing and the team had been involved in aspects covering networking, AV, equipment fitting, resource booking systems and decanting of equipment.

Security of the system had remained good and they now had a new Disaster Recovery Solution which allowed services to be run from the cloud in case of total loss of on-site solutions. It was now time to move IT services to the Azure cloud and Initial assessments had been completed which supported the business case of moving to a hybrid cloud model initially.

Councillor Brookes noted that 17 staff had left, and they now had 10 new staff. Were the new staff on short term contract or full time? Councillors had also been having problems with their iPad, how could this be tackled. Also, backup to people who worked from home was mentioned. What extra work did this entail? M Hassall said that the new staff were in permanent roles. The team did have some agency support on a temporary basis, doing such things as covering the service desk. As for providing help for the iPads etc. we had a specialist in this but they were now broadening it out so that more than one person could help. They were mapping out a skills matrix to understand what they would need in the future. As for support for homeworkers there were some practical things that could be done such as showing people how to do certain things, however one of the problems was in contacting the people working from home.

Councillor Dorrell asked about the costs for the cloud, as he had recently seen that Microsoft had recently jacked up their prices for people already on their platform, how long were we locked into the current deal we were negotiating, and could we renegotiate it if needed. He was told that we had an enterprise agreement for three years with Microsoft, the costs would go up or down depending on how many people we had, because we pay 'by seat' so each person costs us more. But we also had projects which were evaluating all costs as 'running costs' and could be expensive.

We would only move over services once we had understood the costs involved. But also not doing anything could prove to be very expensive as well. That was not to be recommended.

Councillor Sartin was concerned about by the large staff turnover over such a short space of time and asked what was happening that councillors were not aware of. As for accessing IT help it seemed a complicated process and seemed to take a long time in which to get help. Did it need to be that complex? M Hassall agreed that the numbers of staff turnover were quite high, but the roles were quite different and that the overall team size had moved from 35 down to 27. We also looked at the skills needed and wanted to broaden out each person's skills, so they did not work in a silo. Also, some people took this as an opportunity to re-evaluate their careers and move on. As for access to IT help, they were working on process to make it simpler and would have another look at this, if it did not seem so straightforward. We always gave help as soon as possible in an emergency. Councillor Sartin said that they would appreciate having a contact for emergencies. She was told that officers would investigate that.

**Subsequently M Hassall has added that in line with Councillor Kane's comments we have removed a single named individual to call as this process had not been working. In case of emergencies with an ICT issue, members can ring the service desk directly on 01992 564888.*

Councillor Rackham was also concerned about staffing and asked how many people who had left IT were retained in other jobs or took redundancy? Also, a lot of Councillors had problems with their iPads which was a concern. Was there a troubleshooting manual they could have? She was told that only two officers had moved into a new job. A manual was a good idea and officers hoped to put together some sort of guide.

Councillor Bassett asked why they chose Azure over AWS. And he was also concerned over the security of the network and bandwidth and resilience; had we done any work in this area in connection with the current changes taking place? M Hassall said that they chose Azure was because that although the costs were similar, we used a lot of Microsoft products already, so got more benefit from using this system. As for bandwidth in the new model, applications would go straight to Azure so it would be quicker without having to go into our servers in the Civic Centre. And once we were in Azure, we could easily increase our capacity.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse said that in her experience the ICT Helpdesk was just not working. She had experienced problems 10 days ago had not heard anything since. Could the officer who started an issue see it through to the end. She was told that processes were being put in so this would not happen. M Hassall would go back and investigate the Councillor's issues. Councillor Whitehouse then asked if the officer could give their name when they contacted them, she did not like the anonymity. M Hassall said she would look into this.

**Subsequently M Hassall has added that she had looked into this and depending on what issues, it may require different people in the team to deal with it. Once the issue was assigned to an individual, it was normal practice for that person to follow it through, unless they were due to go on holiday or would be unavailable, then a colleague would pick up that issue.*

A Small added that it was the case that ICT was just not meeting the needs of the Councillors and Officers, so a wholesale change was needed. It had been a large

change, but services were now improving, and they were getting a lot of positive feedback. He was keen to make sure that members' problems were addressed.

Councillor S Kane echoed Mr Small's points, noted that a high amount of changes had taken place in IT and it needed people with different skill sets to do different jobs. We had now got the right people doing this work, revamping our systems and the new civic centre. Members were just a small part of this work. He had taken on board their suggestions and comments and were working very hard on member issues. It was his request to take away named officers and make it a corporate responsibility.

Councillor Murray said that he could only access his councillor email address on his iPad. Could he access it on other devices? He was told that he could be set up on other devices and that someone would contact him about this.

Resolved:

That the Select Committee to considered and commented on the ICT update report.

41. PEOPLE'S STRATEGY UPDATE

The Service Director, Paula Maginnis, introduced the updating report on the Peoples Strategy. It was noted that the People Strategy and Plan 2020/2022 set out clear actions and timescales over a two-year period to support the Council to deliver its strategic objectives and was divided into 6 workstreams:

- Attracting, on boarding and retaining the best talent
- Developing our leadership
- Embracing change to support EFDC evolution
- Creating a culture of engagement and wellbeing
- Developing our skills and behaviours to make EFDC a great place to work
- Achieving organisational goals through a high performing and flexible workforce

At its core was transforming the People Team to become an enabler for the organisation.

The Strategy set out the ambition for our workforce – the right people with the right skills, highly motivated high performing and business efficient.

Appendix 1 to the report set out the achievements realised during Year 1 of the Strategy, 2020 – 2021. In summary, the People Team supported the organisation's wellbeing, the accommodation project developing new ways of working, developing the culture to become more resilient, improving policies and process, including the use of technology to automate as much as possible.

And Appendix 2 of the report sets out the work programme to achieve Year 2 of the Strategy 2021 – 2022.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse noted that there were different streams of work in the report and asked how they measured the impact on staff given the recent turbulence and when was the last staff satisfaction survey set up. Ms Maginnis answered that they used a platform called 'Perkbox' which along with staff discounts and medical services also carried out regular polling surveys. The results were taken to the Service Directors for analysis. The fourth survey of which came out recently. This

was an ongoing process. Councillor Whitehouse then asked what proportion of staff took part in these surveys. He was told that the proportion would be put in the minutes. There was more work needed on the promotion and development of this but there was a high level of management support. The surveys consisted of 50 random questions, so after 4 or 5 surveys we get to understand what was happening across the organisation. Councillor Whitehouse then asked who in the organisation knew the overall picture. He was told that it was the people team.

Councillor Bassett said that it had been a difficult year and it was difficult to know how teams were performing when you did not actually see them. As a manager you were effectively working blind. How could a member of staff get feedback if they were struggling working from home or had other difficulties? Ms Maginnis said that they had a process of having one to ones in place and also had a number of tools for dealing with change and working remotely. They were also hoping to deliver an interim project in the coming months with a view to making a bid on funding to do this digitally for managers and employees. As for feedback the survey asks these questions, about work remotely etc. via the 'Perkbox' tool. Officers had also carried out an online DSC assessment regarding what difficulties and concerns our employees were facing and a wide range of issues were picked up by managers. Councillor Bassett then asked if managers received training in mental health issues. He was told that they did, and that the Council also had 10% of the workforce as mental health first aiders. Mr Small added that working from home had been popular but had its challenges and Councillor Bassett points were well made. We needed to look to the wellbeing of staff and to make sure the staff needs were being looked after; we also need to make sure they feel part of a single organisation and make sure the organisation continues to perform. There were some of the challenges we had to recognise. He was not sure that we had got it right just yet; we needed to continue to focus and put the right amount of effort into it to make sure it was working effectively as well as looking after our staff's wellbeing.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse asked about the induction for new staff, they were told to look at the appropriate section of our website on how decisions were made. A lot of them came from private industry and were new to how local authorities worked and they did not seem to be told anything about scrutiny. Would a way forward would be to set up a meeting between HR and Councillors and bring forward a report on what members would like new officers to be told on how we worked. It could be brought back to either this committee or to the Constitution Working Group, which ever was more appropriate. Scrutiny was very important and new officers should understand this. She would be interested to hear other people's view on this, perhaps not at this meeting.

Councillor Neville asked about the proposed salary sacrifice scheme for private health care and what involvement the unions had had. He was told that they met regularly with the trade unions and had an ongoing dialogue with them. This scheme meant that an employee would pay on a monthly basis before tax and NI for private health care; something like BUPA, but it would not be subsidised by the Council. Councillor Neville then asked who had decided on 'Perkbox' and 'Insight'. He was told that the People Team looked at several systems and decided upon these systems. The unions were also involved in this choice.

Councillor Brookes asked if the council had made special arrangements for staff to carry over excessive annual leave over this pandemic period. She was told that arrangements had been put in place last year on this but they had insisted that staff took at least 20 days annual leave during the year for their own health and wellbeing. Councillor Brooks noted that in the last two years she had never seen such a large

turnover of staff. Also, 'Perkbox' was not a substitute for a private survey for council employees to enable management to take note of what was said. We also needed to know about changes in the top management structure and who was responsible for what. Ms Maginnis said that she could provide the turnover figures for the last two years, except for Q4 when the IT staff left. Employees were offered an exit interview to provide us with feedback. We were supporting staff as there was a lot of change taking place and we also carried out anonymous surveys. Councillor Brookes added that a lot of staff had gone above and beyond of what was expected and councillors did appreciate that.

Resolved:

That the Stronger Council Select Committee considered and commented upon the People Strategy Update report.

42. ACCOMMODATION UPDATE

L Wade introduced the accommodation report. She noted that work had now been completed on the Civic Centre and they were starting to repopulate the building in a Covid safe way. One of the first things to take place there would be the issuing of postal votes which will by necessity, have a large amount of people doing this.

A positive meeting had been had with Essex libraries and Portfolio Holders, where they were encouraged by the light open space that had been created and the additional spaces that could be used for community events.

There had been a huge effort by the organisation to clear out the existing space in the Conder building. It had highlighted that as a council we can contribute towards the climate change emergency, by relying less on paper by streamlining services and storing data and documents within the cloud.

A new print to post service was currently in pilot development stages with Democratic Services, which would reduce the amount of printing that would take place within the Civic offices.

With the 2nd floor now available for viewings, we have had some very positive interest which we are hoping results in offers being made.

The refurbishment continues to be within the agreed budget and is forecasting a positive variance.

Councillor Bolton asked about the court action being taken to extend the Zoom meetings. He was told that the Zoom emergency legislation terminated on 7th May. The government was being taken to the High Court who should make a decision by the end of April. Currently officers were looking at how to hold Covid safe meetings.

Councillor Neville asked if we were ready for all eventualities if we had to meet in May. He was told that once the decision had been made it would be reviewed again.

Councillor Brookes noted that there were limited car parking facilities for staff and other people; what sort of provision had been made for people who wanted to use their cars? L Wade noted that there was still parking available especially for essential services, but they would encourage the use of alternative modes of transport.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse asked when members could have a tour of the Council Offices and as for parking there were a lot of spaces offered for the commercial lets on the 2nd floor. Will there be enough parking for Councillors, especially in winter nights. She was told that visits to the Council officer would not be happening until around the mid-May period after the local elections. The 2nd floor lets were offered the same amount of parking as council staff, for evening meetings most of the occupants would have gone home, freeing up space.

Councillor Sartin asked about members who had to come in for daytime meetings, such as the Licensing Sub-Committee meetings, they have to come in for these meetings and will have to park. L Wade said this would all be taken on board and consideration given once we started to return to the offices.

Resolved:

That the Committee noted the summary of progress on the Accommodation Programme and any verbal updates.

43. QUALIS QUARTERLY MONITORING REPORT - Q1 2020/21

A Small introduced the Qualis Quarterly monitoring report (qtr.1 -2020/21). This report presented the Qualis first Quarter's monitoring report for the Qualis trading year 2020/21 and covered the period from 1 November to 31 January 2021. With Housing Maintenance services having transferred to Qualis in Quarter 4 (end of September 2020) of the previous trading year, this quarter represented the first whole quarter of both service delivery activity, commercial investment and regeneration work.

Councillor Neville noticed the delay in the business case for the Roundhills and Pyrles Lane development and wanted to know when they would have sight of these plans. Mr Small said that they would have to come to a cabinet committee and so would be available then.

Councillor Rackham asked what were the major risks to the expected outcomes and had the pandemic affected the assumed projected value of the projects. She was told that the major risks were the planning permissions for the sites. As for the pandemic, house prices had remained buoyant throughout, though there was a slight risk at the end of the stamp duty holiday.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked about cash flow; what was the position of the company at present as they had their loan and had incoming rental income along with their outgoings, but with major developments there would be a lot of up front expenditure before income came in. Also, the report had pre-pandemic assumptions in there and then noted that these assumptions had changed but did not say what these new figures were. Finally, a big consideration was given to a media consultancy, what consideration had been given to doing this though the Council. A Small replied that for cash flow, the next couple of years they would be concentrating on development. As for the financial assumptions, these would be updated in the next quarter's report. And on media support, our own communications team was under resourced and would be unable to support Qualis. We would also like to keep some distance between the Council and Qualis. We may need to look again at our strategy. It maybe they may need to look again at their communications strategy, and this was something to take back to the Qualis board.

Resolved:

The Select Committee noted and discussed the report.

44. CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORTING - Q4

The Chairman, Councillor Bolton, introduced the report on the results of corporate performance for quarter 4. He took each page of the report and asked for members to stop him if they wished to discuss any of the outcomes.

Commenting on page six of the supplementary agenda 'Museum Collection Rationalisation', Councillor Sartin noted that the comments did not make any sense. L Wade said that it was referring to refreshing the collections to ensure a rotation of exhibits that were available, and which was constantly being update and rationalised when it was not being used.

Councillor Bassett made a general point on the report saying that generally when there was a red coded item the route to green was just to reset the target. L Wade said that it showed where milestones had not been achieved, which may have indicated that the dates were not right in the first place. Councillor Bassett said that he did not like it when a red indicator said it was to re-baseline to go back to a green indicator. He was told that was just a date change, not a change to the delivery or the outcomes.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse noted that the 'Private Sector lettings' item was now abandoned and asked if we still did not have the resources to achieve this as it was important that we did. L Wade said that she would ask the appropriate officers to provide a response to this.

Councillor Sartin asked what was meant by 'reduced mobile phone ownership and usage' under the 'Mobile Phone Review' item. She was told that it was to enable the council to look at new Mobile Phone providers as we now used a lot of other applications such as 'Teams'. The policy was now being reviewed for potential savings.

Councillor Sartin then asked why we were "onboarding suppliers" and was told that this was the start of engaging with the suppliers.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked if the applications for the Council Housebuilding programme had gone in on 29 March? He was told that yes they had gone in.

Councillor Neville noted that under the Local Plan item there was to be a consultation in May/June 2020 – should this be 2021? He was told that yes this was a typo and it should be 2021.

Councillor Sartin commented on the appointment of the Town Centre Project Manager, had this been completed and the report written? Officers were unsure about this and would have to come back to her with an answer.

L Wade noted that the KPIs would be updated within the minutes as there were not available at the time the agenda went out. She briefly went through some of the exceptions listed.

Councillor Neville noted that the figures for Household waste was much higher for this last year due mainly to the fact that people were confined to their households and noted that this may go on for some time yet. It may be that we would need to

rethink the target figures for the future. Councillor Bassett noted that these were rolling figures increasing every quarter but the target figures did not increase for Q2 and Q3 so the figures may be misleading. L Wade said she would feed this back to the appropriate director to address the figures and set a realistic target for next year.

Councillor Bassett also noted that a lot of the major planning applications were over their due date. He was told that this would be taken on board and discussed with the Portfolio Holder and officers.

Resolved:

That the committee reviewed the report and noted the progress of project delivery against Q3 milestones, specifically the projects currently highlighting exceptions.

45. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee wished to add something in the induction programme for new officers about scrutiny, especially as more officers were coming in from outside Local Government and did not know or understand the rules we had to work under. Councillor S Kane said he would take this up with P Maginnis and report back.

The Committee noted that this was their last meeting for this municipal year.

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