

# **EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL CABINET MINUTES**

**Committee:** Cabinet **Date:** 21 June 2021

**Place:** Conference Suite - Civic Offices **Time:** 7.00 - 8.26 pm

**Members Present:** C Whitbread (Chairman), N Avey, L Burrows, A Patel, S Kane, D Sunger and H Whitbread

**Other Councillors:** P Bolton, S Heap, S Heather, A Lion, C McCredie, S Neville, C P Pond, M Sartin, D Stocker, B Vaz, J M Whitehouse and D Wixley

**Apologies:** N Bedford and J Philip

**Officers Present:** G Blakemore (Chief Executive), T Carne (Corporate Communications Team Manager), N Dawe (Chief Operating Officer), D Fenton (Service Director (Housing Revenue Account)), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), J Houston (Specialist Partnerships & Economic Development), J Leither (Democratic Services Officer), P Messenger (Town Centres Project Manager), S Mitchell (PR Website Editor), R Moreton (Corporate Communications Officer), A Small (Strategic Director Corporate and 151 Officer) and G Woodhall (Team Manager - Democratic & Electoral Services)

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## **1. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION**

The Leader of Council made a short address to remind everyone present that the meeting would be broadcast live to the internet, and would be capable of repeated viewing, which could infringe their human and data protection rights.

## **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

1. It was noted that all relevant Town and Parish Councillors had a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 14 – ‘Town Centre Regeneration – Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping Town Centres’, by virtue of being a member of those Town and Parish Councils. The Councillors had determined that their interest was non-prejudicial and that they would stay in the meeting for the consideration of the item.

2. Pursuant to the Council’s Member Code of Conduct, Councillor C Whitbread declared a non-pecuniary interest in agenda item 14 – ‘Town Centre Regeneration – Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping Town Centres’, by virtue of having three shops in Epping High Street. The Councillor had determined that his interest was non-prejudicial and that he would stay in the meeting for the consideration of the item.

## **3. MINUTES**

That the minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 20 April 2021 be taken as read and would be signed by the Leader as a correct record, subject to the following:

- page 7 of the minutes - Loughton 'Shores' should read Loughton 'Shaws'; and
- page 8 of the minutes – Councillor Wixley wished to clarify that he wanted to know if Jessel Green could receive the 'Fields in Trust' status.

#### **4. REPORTS OF PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

There were no verbal reports made by Members of the Cabinet on current issues affecting their areas of responsibility.

#### **5. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND REQUESTS TO ADDRESS THE CABINET**

The Cabinet noted that no public questions or requests to address the Cabinet had been received for consideration at the meeting.

#### **6. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**

The Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee reported that they had met on two separate occasions in June once on 3<sup>rd</sup> June and once on 8<sup>th</sup> June.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> June they looked at the Council's overall priorities for 2021/22 and also on the policy on our approach to Trees causing structural damage which we pre-scrutinised. The work programme for the year ahead was noted and they went on to appoint members and chairmen to the various Select Committees.

At the 8<sup>th</sup> June meeting they received a report on the sale of Pyrles Lane to Qualis asking for comments before it went to Cabinet. They also received the Qualis quarter 2 monitoring report and a Town Centre Regeneration report on Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping Town Centres, asking for comments before they too, went on to the Cabinet.

#### **7. COUNCIL HOUSEBUILDING CABINET COMMITTEE - 16 MARCH 2021**

##### **Decision:**

That the minutes of the Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee held on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2021 be noted.

#### **8. REFURBISHMENT SCHEME (OLDER PERSONS SHELTERED HOUSING)**

The Portfolio Holder for Housing Services, Councillor H Whitbread, introduced the report on the refurbishment scheme for older persons sheltered housing.

Following the recent review from ARK and the Covid outbreak officers had reviewed what was important to residents. One of the areas was the value of the communal lounges. As such a programme was developed to renew the 'look' of the communal areas, taking an interior design approach. It was important that this was undertaken in a cost-efficient manner and where residents had input. As such, officers had researched the options to refurbish the communal areas of the sheltered housing stock to include the upgrade of fixtures, fittings, and redecoration. Officers had started work with an organisation called Buckingham Interiors, part of FRC Group which had been supplying contract furniture and associated services to the social housing sector for more than 30 years. Operating from three national distribution sites, and with a team of over 120 staff, FRC Group held contracts for furniture supply, ranging from specialist services such as dementia friendly schemes to housing for people with support needs. In addition, they worked with temporary

housing and homelessness services, local welfare response services and furnished tenancies. Their customers included Birmingham City Council, Manchester City Council and the AGMA group of local authorities, Places for People Group, Optivo, Torus, North Tyneside Council, Thirteen, Citizen, Orbit, Network Homes, EMH Group, Cheltenham Borough Homes, Nottingham City Homes, Stroud District Council and many others.

Officers recognised the impact Covid had on residents, particularly around those who have not been able to go out for many months. The remodelling of the lounge would provide a renewed feel to the scheme and would have many social benefits. Officers also planned to approach partners with the aim of making the sheltered housing schemes a hub so that older people living in the local community could access activities held at the scheme.

Councillor Patel asked if we were looking at altering the spaces as well. Also, would the replacement furniture be fire retardant; and how would we incorporate principles in making the environment dementia friendly? And finally, how much of a choice did the residents have over the colours scheme. He was told that they were not only looking at modernising the furniture but also changing the spaces and making things more accessible. As for fire retardant materials, this was something that had been taken into account as a standard consideration. It was also important to ensure that our places were dementia friendly. As for the colour scheme, residents would have a choice, they will be given a choice from two mood boards and a range of furniture, to choose what they wanted.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked if they were talking about all communal areas, such as lounges, hallways and kitchens etc. or specifically about residents' lounges. Would other issues such as storage space or access to plugs etc. be taken into account and their fitness for the future. And, was there only one suitable supplier for this service, surely we can go to any supplier once we have the budget to purchase furniture or services needed. He was told that they were looking mainly at the lounges and the main communal spaces, but they were also looking at the other spaces and taking a more holistic view of the spaces. As for the supplier; this supplier had a good track record for delivering such services throughout the country in sheltered housing schemes. D Fenton added that they had looked at a couple of frameworks and this company had come top in each as they had delivered successful projects across the UK. They were also part of the Social Enterprise and so support a lot of young people who work for them and lead fulfilled lives.

#### **Decision:**

1. The Cabinet approved the proposed renewal and remodelling of the communal areas of the Council's sheltered housing schemes using Buckingham Interiors. As a pilot in the first instance at Frank Bretton Court; and
2. The Cabinet noted the method of funding would be based on a costed options appraisal using either leasing or borrowing against the HRA. This was currently being carried out by Arlingclose. They noted that the full cost of the scheme would be covered via a service charge which was eligible for Housing Benefit subsidy.

#### **Reason for decision:**

Members were being asked to approve the renewal of fixtures and fittings at our schemes beginning with a pilot at Frank Bretton House, this was important as it fits

with our social recovery work and a report had already been to Overview and Security(O&S) for review

#### **Options considered and rejected:**

Officers considered whether to carry out a smaller scale upgrade, however this was rejected due the importance of providing a communal area which was bright and flexible. Especially given Covid and the need for our vulnerable tenants to meet and socialise indoors.

### **9. NEW POLICY - DISPOSAL OF HRA ASSETS**

The Housing Services Portfolio holder introduced the report on the new policy on the disposal of small land sites. EFDC owns approximately 12,000 assets including properties and garages. In addition to these, the Council owns other assets such as parcels of land, pathways, un-adopted roads, alleyways and grassed areas on residential estates. In order to make best use of our HRA assets there were circumstances where a disposal would be of benefit to the Council and would lead to a net overall benefit. An example of this could be a one off property which requires structure works which were not cost effective to carry out. Or small pieces of land which add little or no value to the council.

To ensure that the sale of land or assets meets the highest standards of Governance, a policy had been written to set out the framework in which these disposals would take place.

Councillor Lion welcomed the report and wondered if this had been considered in relation to Qualis and would we offer this type of land to them. Does the SAP rating mean the energy rating; on self-build plots, how would that work; and is there an asset register? He was told that they were really talking about small parcels of land that would not really be viable for Qualis development. SAP or Standard Assessment Procedure was for assessing energy ratings for new homes. And, yes, we do have an assets list along with a mapping system.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked if ward members would be consulted on proposed sales; would this replace our old list or work in parallel to it; and would these sales be done by way of Portfolio Holder reports or does this policy supersede that regulation. He was told that this policy would supersede the old policies. Any parcel of land that required consultation would be consulted on with local members if it was big enough. Councillor Jon Whitehouse suggested that it should be made explicit in the report that this policy replaced the old one. He added that he also had some concerns about some missing safeguards from the policy. D Fenton noted that they were committed to creating place and were sympathetic to any land that had community value and would consult on these.

Councillor S Kane asked if there was an estimate of capital receipts for this. He was told that last year it had brought in about £80,000. We had also formed a partnership with a landowner and would be building on this site. They were also looking an entrance to a site and were looking for upwards of a million pounds.

Councillor Sunger welcomed the report. On parcels of land, would officers be looking for adjacent owners to purchase, would they be asking them or waiting for them to contact us. He was told that initially they would be contacted, but they could always contact us in the first instance.

Councillor Wixley commented that ward councillors should be consulted on small parcels of land to be sold off.

The meeting agreed to add a sentence to say that this would be a replacement to the previous policy.

**Decision:**

The Cabinet approved the new policy (replacing the previous policy) on the disposal of small land sites and individual properties.

**Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

This report set out to introduce our policy on the Disposal of HRA Assets. Such a policy was viewed as good practice and would fit with our Asset Management Strategy which will be available for approval by this Cabinet in the new financial year. This policy had been presented to O & S

**Other options for action:**

Not to consider an updated new policy.

**10. REGENERATION OF HRS ASSETS - CREATING PLACE**

The Housing Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor Holly Whitbread, introduced the report that was looking at Limes Farm. An innovative and forward-thinking approach was being proposed to develop a 'Place Approach' to the regeneration of our Estates.

A review had been carried out to inform the future planning of our asset and property management programme. There were 2 specific reasons for this. Firstly, the Social Housing White Paper expressly discusses the need to take a combined approach to upgrading and developing communities. Much research had been carried out about the value of taking a holistic and 'Place' approach and treating the whole community, rather than specific asset management improvements, such as painting the outside of a building in isolation. In addition to this, officers had adopted a new approach which was about 'creating places where people want to live'. As such, officers had formed a project group which had assessed the estates and developed a priority list. This paper set out the approach and detailed the importance of protecting our assets in addition to the value of taking a 'Place' approach.

Councillor Patel welcomed the report noting that the last 18 months had shown how important our community spaces were. Regeneration of these areas was important, and we could learn from this for other sites. Councillor H Whitbread added that social recovery was a key theme and really important for the district.

Councillor Sunger welcomed the report and the resident engagement it represented.

Councillor Lion as the Ward Councillor also welcomed the report and noted that he was part of the consultation team. There had always been an issue about crime and more about feeling secure; CCTV would be fundamental for residents. Also, most of his casework came from residents who wanted to stay on the estate but move to a larger/smaller house etc. Consideration of more accommodation would be welcomed. Councillor H Whitbread agreed that crime and security was an important thing to

highlight and our Community Safety team were looking into this. As for housing units on the estate we would look more strategically at this area. She also noted that monitoring of this initiative would go to the Council Housebuilding Cabinet Committee.

**Decision:**

1. The Cabinet approved the proposed approach to regenerating and protecting our assets;
2. The Cabinet noted the pilot scheme (Limes Farm Estate) formed part of the overall Capital Expenditure for improvement and works programme for the next year; and
3. The Cabinet agreed to receive a further paper in September outlining a 5-year capital plan, which would form part 1 of the Estate Regeneration plan, this would be subject to agreement of the budget which would take place in line with EFDC budget setting timetable.

**Reason for decision**

Members were asked to approve our approach to estate regeneration and note the benefits to both the customers and the organisation. Furthermore, that Cabinet note the future requirements of the Social Housing White paper in regard to communities and note our approach is in line with this.

Members were also asked to note our approach to the project which was to initially use Limes Farm as a pilot scheme. This would form the basis of our approach going forward and allow us to test our process.

**Options considered and rejected:**

Officers considered whether to carry on with our current approach which was to carry out work in an isolated manner based on 'time due' only basis. This was rejected as it did not follow our vision which is to 'create places where people want to live'.

**11. RECOMMENDATION OF THE SUPPLIER FOR THE PROPOSED HOUSING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

The Housing Services Portfolio Holder introduced the report on the recommendation of a supplier for the proposed housing management system. It was noted that EFDC was currently using OHMS housing management system. It was usual practice to review a system on a periodic basis to assess current suitability. It was agreed in 2019 that a soft market test be undertaken to understand the products which were now available, and how they may meet the needs of a progressive service in a fast-moving environment. The review revealed that we could purchase a product which was capable of:

- Negating the need for manual processes and spreadsheets;
- Enabling agile and mobile working in the field (mobilising the housing officer);
- Enabling housing services to be delivered digitally;
- Build / rebuild super user expertise within Housing;
- Easier production of regulatory and statutory returns, reducing staff effort;
- Greater customer insight through analytics enabling mitigation of

- tenant risks, focused service delivery and resource optimisation;
- Increased staff satisfaction and productivity;
- Operational and management information providing early warning indicators of issues and supporting business decisions;
- Measurable process efficiency – ability to reflect more streamlined ways of working;
- Reduction in arrears (rents and service charges);
- Significant reduction in time taken to process estimates and actuals for service charges.

This would provide an excellent opportunity to use technology to reshape the service to be digital by default and enable the team to concentrate resources on those most needing the support. In addition, providing a system which meets the aspirations of both our staff and customers.

Councillor Lion asked if it would have a 24/7 back up and how would our ICT operations fit into this contract. He was told that the backup service would be based on priority, with urgent jobs being carried out within four hours, similar to other IT systems in this way. As for our ICT and their involvement, we will have staff who are dedicated in supporting the management of this system.

**Decision:**

1. The Cabinet agreed to proceed and appoint Civica to provide our new Housing Management system; and
2. The Cabinet noted the methodology used to appoint the successful supplier.

**Reason for decision:**

Members were asked to approve the appointment of Civica as the preferred provider for the Housing Management System.

**Options considered and rejected:**

Officers considered whether to carry on with our current system, however this would not suit the business needs of EFDC.

**12. QUALIS QUARTERLY MONITORING REPORT - QUARTER 2 - 2020-21**

In the absence of the Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder, the Leader of the Council introduced the Qualis quarterly monitoring report. It was noted that the Governance framework for Qualis, as agreed by Cabinet in February 2020, included the requirement that Qualis should report to Epping Forest District Council on its performance Quarterly.

This report presented the second Quarter's monitoring report for the Qualis trading year 2020/21 and covered the period from 1 February to 31 March 2021. This reflected a shortened quarter due to the change in the Qualis year end. This report had been considered by Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 8th June.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked about the progress on the Community Interest Company, and what was the money spent on. He was told that they had done some initial scoping work and the next stage was to go out and talk to the community and

residents. They would do this over the summer and comeback in the autumn with a detailed report.

**Decision:**

The Cabinet considered and noted comments made by Overview and Scrutiny and discussed the report.

**13. TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION - LOUGHTON BROADWAY, LOUGHTON HIGH ROAD, BUCKHURST HILL & EPPING TOWN CENTERS**

In the absence of the Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder, the Leader of the Council introduced the town centre regeneration report. It was noted that the Cabinet proactively commenced a series of actions in July 2020, to ensure the authority was in the best position to respond to the challenges and opportunities of Covid 19. One of the agreed actions was to weld together a Covid 19 response with the Council's priority to enable and assist the economic recovery and sustainability of local High Streets across the district.

Studio 3 Business Consultants were appointed to undertake a series of independent economic reviews. The purpose of these being to identify quick wins and to consider medium and longer-term recommendations to increase footfall to town centres; support local businesses and identify opportunities for attracting new business to the area.

The first of the studies focussed on Sun Street in Waltham Abbey and the second on Ongar. These had both been considered by Cabinet and approved, with work against recommendations subsequently commenced. The recommendations from the independent consultants provide an external view of projects and initiatives that could deliver resilient and vibrant high streets for the future. In order for the council to develop a detailed plan of work to be led by the new town centre project manager, Overview and Scrutiny Committees views were sought on the desirability and feasibility of these recommendations together with suggestions on prioritisation.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee wanted officers to look at how we could monitor our success. This could be done by looking at the figures for daily footfall etc. on our High Streets. This report was a starting point about how people worked together and pulled together in a partnership.

Councillor C Whitbread welcomed the report and noted it was good to have a start on partnerships and see businesses coming together but noted there was still a lot of work to be done. He praised the work being done by the Highway Rangers, they were doing a good job and making things look better.

Councillor Sunger said it was important to see the return to our local shops on the High Street.

Councillor Patel commented that this time last year they began looking at this and looked for quick wins. This was a plan for all partners to come together. It was also important for Town Councils and Parish Councils to invest in the local High Streets. He noted that recommendation 2 should say Waltham Abbey and Ongar, not Loughton.

Councillor Neville welcomed the report as the High Streets were the life and blood of our communities. He welcomed the way in which the report had been handled.

Councillor Wixley noted a reference to a 20 minute neighbourhood. This was no longer the case as some busses no longer ran, and he would like consideration given to their reinstatement. He also took issue with describing Loughton as a transit destination, people did come into Loughton to visit Epping Forest. As for Loughton Broadway, it had attractive 1950s architecture and should be made a conservation area. He would also like to see more parking on the Broadway and more disabled parking bays.

Councillor Sartin noted that there was no reference of people with disabilities in the report and it also said that more street furniture should be put in place. This would make it more difficult for people to move around safely especially for people with mobility or sight issues. She was told that officers would look closely at this.

Councillor C Whitbread commented that we should also be looking at some of our larger villages in the district and thinking about what we could do for them. He then went on to ask about Business Improvement Districts, which would be key for our larger towns. How could we get them to engage in this? He was told that this had been considered some years ago, but there was no appetite for it then, but this could all be changing now. They would need businesses to sign up to this if there was any appetite there.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse was disappointed that ward members were not consulted and some of the recommendations seemed to be different to what was emerging in the Local Plan. How was this going to be dealt with. Mr Houston apologised about the consultation as they were focusing on the external partners first. They only had 6 months to do this, not enough time to consult everyone. This was a starting point and they would continue to talk to people. As for planning, they were in discussions with the planning colleagues. They were looking at the long term asking if they had the right policies in place. Mr Dawe added that the planning department were currently looking at their guidance on High Streets.

#### **Decision:**

1. The Cabinet noted the reports which were produced by an external consultant, and indicated short-term, medium-term and long-term actions that were suggested to ensure that the town centres can best deal with current challenges and opportunities and can adapt to make use of future opportunities.
2. The Cabinet agreed with the short-term recommendations which were immediate actions to deal with High Street reopening as per the reports previously considered for Waltham Abbey and Ongar.
3. The Cabinet noted that the short-term recommendations and actions would be managed in detail using clear project management techniques that would identify, timescale, responsible officer, key actions, and evaluation criteria.
4. The Cabinet noted that the immediate actions proposed could be carried out by using current operational budgets, (as with Waltham Abbey and Ongar) and specific grants and funds already set aside in Epping Forest District Council/s 2021/22 Budget and from the legitimate use of other general initiative budgets set aside, e.g., tree planting and climate change.

5. The Cabinet noted that the proposed medium-term and long-term options, and alternate ideas would be developed over time and would by necessity be partnerships between enterprise, town and parish councils, other public bodies, and Epping Forest District Council itself.
6. The Cabinet noted that medium-term and long-term actions would necessitate full business cases, budget provision and inclusion where necessary in Qualis Business Plans.
7. The Cabinet required Planning to update their guidance for town centres to assist with encouraging an appropriate “look and feel” to the Town Centres.
8. The Cabinet noted the relationship between this project and other key projects, e.g., Development Plans Climate Change Action Plan, Sustainable Travel, Community Hubs, Investment Asset plans and Qualis Business Plans.

**Reasons for Proposed Decisions:**

This report formed part of the Council’s Covid Economic Recovery Programme, which had been designed to help support and improve economic viability of town centres across the district. The study conducted by Studio 3, was a completely independent view of the status of the economy in the six town centres and identified what was necessary to increase footfall, support local businesses and help sustain high street viability in the medium and longer term.

**Other Options for Action:**

Overview and Scrutiny could suggest amendments to the recommendations in the attached reports, or, to agree to some and not others.

**14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

It was noted that there was no other urgent business for consideration by the Cabinet.

**CHAIRMAN**