

**EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF STRONGER COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE
HELD ON TUESDAY, 18 JANUARY 2022
IN COUNCIL CHAMBER - CIVIC OFFICES
AT 7.00 - 9.25 PM**

Members Present: P Bolton (Chairman), T Matthews (Vice-Chairman), R Bassett, P Bhanot, H Brady, R Brookes, H Kane (Chairman of the Council), J Lea, S Neville (Leader of the Green Party Group) and J M Whitehouse (Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group)

Co-opted Member:

Other members present: N Bedford, L Burrows, S Kane, S Murray, J Philip, D Sunger, C Whitbread and H Whitbread

Apologies for Absence: J Jogia and R Morgan

Officers Present: J Budden (People, Culture & Employee Wellbeing Manager), C Graham (Project Team Manager (Performance)), C Hartgrove (Interim Chief Financial Officer), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), L Kirman (Democratic Services Officer), R Moreton (Corporate Communications Officer) and A Small (Strategic Director Corporate and 151 Officer)

34. 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 meetings.

35. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Committee noted that Councillor J Lea would substitute for Councillor R Morgan for the duration of this meeting.

36. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved:

That the notes of the meeting held 16 November 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

37. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(a) Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor R Bassett declared personal interests on item 7, Corporate Plan Action Plans and item 10, Draft Budget Proposals on the agenda by virtue of being the Chairman of Trustees for Epping Forest Community Transport and a Non-Executive Director of Qualis. The Councillor had determined that his interests were non-pecuniary and he would

remain in the meeting for the consideration of this item but not take part in any discussions concerning Qualis.

38. TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME

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

Councillor Murray asked about the current position on the item on Voter ID. He was told that officers would investigate and let him know.

39. CORPORATE PLAN ACTION PLAN (Q3) (KPIS BY EXCEPTION)

C Graham introduced the report on Corporate Performance reviewing progress for quarterly performance measurement delivery against Quarter 3 milestones.

Key Corporate Projects

It was noted that closure reports were being compiled for the various projects that had closed. Councillors could request a copy of any closure report, but they would not be coming automatically to the Committee.

Councillor Bassett asked why CPP009 (Housing & Asset Management Systems) had gone from green to amber and what was the plan to get it back to green, he was told that officers would ask for further information and how it could be brought back to green; this would be put in the minutes.

Councillor Brookes asked about CPP033 (Reprovision of Hostel) which had been completed, and what was the internal governance process. She was told that this was now managed by a specific service area and treated as business as usual.

Councillor H Kane asked about the Waltham Abbey Community & Cultural Hub. She would like to know if the council got external funding and how would it be progressed. She was told that it would not be a programme for next year. Councillor Bassett asked why it had gone straight from red to blue. He was told that was because there was no plan to move it forward at this stage. Councillor Murray expressed concern as he presumed that the Loughton Cultural Hub was also on hold and that the Epping Hub was in the wrong place. Councillor Philip commented that they had this building and repurposed it to have one of its uses as a cultural hub. The council was tight for money this year, so it was a choice between cutting services or setting up the cultural hubs. He also suggested that this item be removed from the report for now.

Councillor Neville asked to see the closure report for CPP037, corporate approach to resident engagement.

Councillors Bassett, Jon Whitehouse and Neville would like to see the closure report for CPP040. Councillor Whitehouse would be especially interested in seeing some of the figures for the project.

CPP024, Travel Local – Councillor Bassett commented that as the Chairman of Trustees for Epping Forest Community Transport he noted that this was a difficult time, but things were changing. Budgets were stretched and finding money was difficult. Councillor Neville asked if Harlow Council were happy to part fund bus route 87. Councillor Bassett said they were still in talks with them. They were also in discussions with Essex CC on the wider aspects of bus services in the area, and were looking to fill gaps.

Councillor H Kane asked if a report (on Travel Local) would be ready to go to the March Cabinet. She was told that officers were working on it.

Councillor Murray asked about CPP093 (Green Infrastructure Strategy) and if the Roding Valley Recreation Ground would become a Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG). There had been no consultations with any ward councillor or the Town Council about this who were the local experts; he was unhappy that this had not happened. Councillor Bedford said that he was not aware of anything about the SANG but they were spending money to improve the area and could not think of any reason why this would be designated a SANG.

Councillor H Kane and asked about CPP094 (Interim Air Pollution Mitigation Strategy) it had been adopted, but was there any progress by the portfolio advisory group. She was told that the group was active up until Christmas and was now looking to rebrand for the future as it had not been fully engaged in by its members. They would be looking to see what they could do to improve it and drive it forward to help reduce emissions through the forest.

Councillor Bassett commented on CP095 (Local Enforcement Plan). Members had an interesting briefing which had been useful. He asked if we had any idea when the Local Plan would come back to us. Councillor Bedford said that, hopefully, the Local Plan would come back from the inspector quite soon; at the end of February or early March. It would then go to a third party to check the report. Once she has signed it off, it would come back to the council and we would have three weeks to digest it and then put it to full council to agree it.

Councillor asked about CPP089 (Local Skills & Opportunities – DevelopMe) and if the Committee could agree that this be removed from the report. She was told that it was in their power. It was then agreed by the Committee that this item be removed from the report.

Councillor Bassett asked about CPP100 (Attracting Onboarding & Retaining Talent), which had gone from green to amber. The comments section said that this would be updated verbally at the select committee. He was told that there was a lengthy update, but this could be put into the minutes. It was agreed that this would be acceptable.

Councillor Neville asked about CPP104 (Engagement and Wellbeing). The 'Workbuzz' survey response had been low, what had been done to encourage a higher response rate. He was told that a response would have to be sought by officers.

Councillor Bassett said that he would like to get a closure report on CPP120 (Councillor Portal). Councillor Lea commented that most contact in the future would be digital, but she did not find it any easier and there was no one in the offices to see. A Small noted that this was an ongoing piece of work and they were aware that not everyone could access these services. We helped where we could and helped people to access digital services where possible.

He then asked what was the member involvement and input on CPP124 and CPP125 (Digital Customer Journey / Digital Member Journey). He was told that both projects had now finished, and that officers would send him a copy of the closure reports along with copies for Councillors Brookes and Neville.

Councillor Brady commented on CPP135 (Telephony Solution). She was thankful that she could still contact IT by telephone because she could not do it via her IT if that was down. However, not all the members of the IT team know how all the devices worked so they were reliant on certain officers with the relevant knowledge. A Small noted that we must have the right services for the right people (telephone or digital access) with better access points improving the digital experience to get people to move onto it as a better way to do things. Telephone access would not be removed until no one had a use for it. Councillor Brady remarked that he was saying that telephone connectivity will eventually be taken away but noted that there would never be a time when a 100% of residents were completely digital. Councillor Bolton posed the question, for how long must no one use it before it was taken away. Councillor S Kane commented that for as long as he had been working in IT there had never been a time when the IT always works, so the telephone service would remain.

Quarterly KPI Reporting

Councillor Bassett commented that there had been complaints about the SLA for the street litter pickers. He acknowledged that this was also down to the general public who just littered the streets. There was also a large volume of nitrous oxide canisters on the streets. It was noted that street cleansing was part of the Biffa contract. Other Councillors at the meeting had various experiences with street cleaning in their area from it being very good to being not as good as it could be. Officers said that they would take these comments back to the waste team and raise it with them.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked about Customer Services and how the figures given out by the Contact Centre was validated as he thought a lot of wrong information had been given out, such as which council (District or Town Council) was responsible for certain things. And, were the resource issues now over and were they now fully resourced, or were more resources needed. He was told that the resource issues were still not resolved, there was still a staff shortage in that area. They also monitored the first point of resolution, so that when people got an answer, it was the right one. We were also monitoring why people called and if they phoned back if they did not get the right answer. Councillor S Kane noted that the long term solution would be an IT solution. Also, they had some long term vacancies and because of the pandemic sickness problems, in small team, this exaggerated the problems.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse commented that it was advantageous to have first contact resolutions, but they needed the staff. They should look at why they could not recruit staff to the posts. Councillor S Kane noted that they did not have a large turnover, but they were small teams, so a loss of one or two people represented a large percentage loss and loss of knowledge.

Councillor Brady commented that if planning could not help a customer with a query then that person would go to their ward councillors who would then contact a planning officer (by phone); this she had found to be really helpful, with planning officers using their new IT equipment, which proved to be very good.

Councillor Brookes expressed concern that as more people had IT and access to our website, why were the waiting times so long. She was told that that residents came through because they could not find or do what they wanted to online. Officers recognised that waiting times were long and were trying to improve them.

Councillor H Kane noted that the Planning and Development KPI was in the red and we needed to do something about it. She noted that Plans West had not had a

meeting since 2021, why was this. Also, there was a backlog of planning applications, decisions that were made last year still did not have their permissions. Councillor Bedford commented that the Plans West area did not have a lot of major applications, so their applications were usually decided by officers. There was just not a lot of work for them to look at and we could not create any. However, there was a backlog for other parts of the district due to the impact of the SAC and Natural England's intervention. Officers were doing their best to clear this and things were improving.

Councillor Matthews wanted some clarification on what could go to a planning meeting or be decided by officers. It seemed that some contentious applications were decided by officers and noted that the next upcoming Plans West meeting had three 'minor' applications on there. Councillor Bedford could not answer that as he did not know what was on the Plans West agenda. Councillor Philip noted that the rules of delegation were covered in the constitution, as to what officers could do and what went to committee. Councillor H Kane noted that there were some significant applications that went to officers and even if called in they did not go to a committee. Councillor Philip expressed concern that if an application had been called in by a councillor then it should come to a committee. Councillor Bedford said that he was not aware of any applications being called in at present. He was aware that Councillors were being asked to call in applications simply because the applicants thought that the officers would refuse them.

Councillor Bolton commented on the Diversity & Inclusion KPI, noting that people were withholding their information. This would be a trend that would increase as people felt that their privacy was being invaded and may not be reporting the correct information.

Councillor Bassett asked about the KPI for sickness absences. He had asked this before but had not had a reply; he wanted to know if Covid absences went into these figures or were they recorded separately. He was told that they were reported as part of the overall absence figure.

Councillor Bolton noted that absences and sickness were not quite the same, in the NHS Covid absence was not counted as sick leave. Could this be clarified. J Budden clarified that it would be recorded as an absence; not as a sickness absence. Officers off sick with Covid were also recorded separately. Because of this Councillor Bolton noted that the figures given were useful but also confusing.

Councillor Lea brought up the contention that a lot of people with Covid were also working from home while they were isolating as they tested positive. How was this recorded? A Small said that the vast majority of staff had worked from home during Covid, but we need to clarify how these were recorded for the next report. Councillor Bolton said that it would be interesting to split up the people who stopped working and those that carried on. We need clarification.

RESOLVED:

That the committee reviewed the report and noted the progress of project delivery against Q3 milestones.

40. PEOPLES STRATEGY

The report on the People's Strategy was introduced by J Budden, Service Manager, People, Culture & Wellbeing.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse remarked on the proposals for the restructuring of the legal team and noted that they were increasingly reliant on bringing in lawyers from outside; had we looked at the balance between inhouse expertise and outsourcing for advice. Also, at our last meeting we had discussions about resourcing issues in different areas of the council and filling in with agency staff or consultants. What were the current areas of concern? And what action was being taken to ensure we had permanent staff? A Small replied that the Legal staff were people that the council could permanently occupy all the time. We then brought in specialists when we needed them, which was more cost effective. We needed to strike a balance here and this area was kept under constant review. J Budden added that they now had a lot of data on recruitment and knew where the 'hot spot' areas for recruitment were. They could share this as a report to members if needed.

RESOLVED:

The Committee considered the report as information on the continuing People Strategy for 2022.

41. QUARTER 3 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2021/22

C Hartgrove introduced the quarter 3 budget monitoring report for 2021/22. The report set out the 2021/22 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account positions, for both revenue and capital, as at 31st December 2021 ("Quarter 3"). The report updated the Stronger Council Select Committee on how the Council's services had performed against their budgets in the first nine months of the financial year and projected forward to the anticipated outturn for the end of the financial year.

In terms of General Fund revenue expenditure – at the Quarter 3 stage – a budget over spend of £0.396 million, with projected net expenditure of £17.265 million against an overall budget provision of £16.869 million was forecast.

Councillor Bassett thanked the officers for sorting out the budget for the last year and he noted that the Council was in better position than many other authorities; we had not withdrawn any frontline services, but maybe had to cut down on our plans and perhaps delve into our reserves. He was happy with the report but thought it would need close monitoring. Councillor H Kane echoed these sentiments and suggested that when this was over, we could perhaps see how much Covid had cost the council.

Councillor Philip welcomed the thanks on behalf of his officers. It had been a very challenging year and next year would be even more challenging. We needed to replenish our reserves and at the end of quarter 3 we seem to be in a reasonable place.

RESOLVED:

1. The General Fund revenue position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2021) for 2021/22, including actions being or proposed to improve the position, where significant variances have been identified, was noted;
2. The General Fund capital position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2021) for 2021/22 was noted;

3. The Housing Revenue Account revenue position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2021) for 2021/22, including actions proposed to ameliorate the position, where significant variances have been identified, was noted; and
4. The Housing Revenue Account capital position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2021) for 2021/22 was noted.

42. DRAFT BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2022/23

C Hartgrove introduced the draft budget report for 2022/23. He noted that the Cabinet had considered an early draft Budget proposal for 2022/23 at its meeting on 6th December 2021. The full report included revenue and capital proposals for both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account as well as a schedule of suggested Fees and Charges for the forthcoming financial year. An updated Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) covering the financial years 2022/23 through to 2026/27 was also included, which reflected both the impact of the draft Budget proposals as well as the latest available intelligence at the time.

In recognising the important role of scrutiny in developing a robust budget, the Cabinet also requested that the Stronger Council Select Committee considers the draft Budget proposals for 2022/23, as well as the associated documents.

The Cabinet were advised by the Section 151 Officer at their December meeting that – as required by law – that a balanced revenue position (eliminating a previously identified projected deficit of £1.504 million) had provisionally been reached for 2022/23 and that the medium-term financial position was broadly unchanged compared to the position presented on 11th October 2021 (and subsequently to this Committee on 16th November 2021); with a particular challenge still anticipated in 2024/25 and 2025/26 as a consequence of the forthcoming new Waste Management Contract. Some significant uncertainties remained however, especially as the annual Settlement for 2022/23 had yet to be announced by the Government at that stage.

The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2022/23 was eventually released on 16th December 2021; the outcome for Epping Forest District Council was generally as expected and provided further assurance as to the underlying financial sustainability of the draft Budget proposals as currently presented.

Councillor Bassett thanked the officers for the report and making it easy for the layman to understand. He asked about the recent high rise in Gas and Electric prices and asked if the figures shown were current. C Hartgrove replied that these were the figures that he was given, but he would cross check them in the coming week. A Small added that inflation was one of the greatest risks facing the Council now. There was doubt about energy prices and now also about wage settlements. We have now got a one year Government settlement for the year ahead. We were expecting a three year settlement to give us some certainty but the government was still intending to implement a 'fairer funding' change to the way it distributed grant settlements and we did not know how that would impact upon us. But, the situation could be worse, and justified having a council tax increase after many years. Now was also the right time to build up the Council's balances. It was a sound budget.

Councillor Neville thanked the officers for their hard work. It had been a difficult financial situation over the last few years. As for the fees and charges, he would like to see the figures associated with them as they had show with the car parking fees. If we could have a breakdown on how much you had expected to raise with these fees, it would give us a better understanding going forward.

Councillor Philip said that car parking had been discussed at Cabinet and it was one of the areas where we had to raise our charges. The draft fees and charges table in the agenda showed where we would have an impact and that they were all interrelated. We had made the report easier to read this year and all credit to the finance department for doing this.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse said that this was a good report and was easy to read. He noted that there were still uncertainties until the budget was finalised. He was pleased to see an increase in the disabled facilities budget in the HRA budget. He noted the £165k set aside for the improvement of the Council Chamber, this was a lot of money, why was it so much. A Small said that this was just a marker for now, we would have to look closely at what needed doing. Councillor Philip added that this was a listed building and so it would be difficult and costly to do. We must make a good investment for the future as you paid for what you got.

RESOLVED:

The Committee considered and commented on the Cabinet's draft Budget proposals for 2022/23.

43. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted their future meeting dates.