

EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Stronger Council Select Committee **Date:** Thursday, 3 March 2022

Place: Council Chamber - Civic Offices **Time:** 7.00 - 8.17 pm

Members Present: Councillors P Bolton (Chairman), R Brookes, H Kane, C Nweke and J M Whitehouse

Members Present (Virtually): Councillors P Bhanot, H Brady and S Neville

Other Councillors: Councillors N Avey, N Bedford, S Kane, D Sunger, C Whitbread, H Whitbread and J H Whitehouse

Other Councillors (Virtual): Councillors

Apologies: T Matthews, R Bassett, J Jogia and R Morgan

Officers Present: A Small (Strategic Director Corporate and 151 Officer), P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services)), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer) and N Cole (Corporate Communications Officer)

Officers Present (Virtually): V Messenger (Democratic Services Officer)

44. 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.

45. Substitute Members (Council Minute 39 - 23.7.02)

The Committee noted that Councillor C Nweke would substitute for Councillor J Jogia for the duration of this meeting.

46. Notes of Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the notes of the meeting held 18 January 2022 were agreed as a correct record subject to noting the councillor not named in the paragraph on page 7 of the agenda was Councillor H Kane; and that various councillors had been promised copies of reports which had not been sent as yet by the officers; and that there were places where further information had been requested to be put into the minutes post meeting, but had not been included.

47. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Member's Code of Conduct.

48. Terms of Reference & Work Programme

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

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked about the current position on the items 11 (new Election legislation) and 13 (Customer Services (overall satisfaction)). He was told that officers were still awaiting legislation for item 11 and that the customer services satisfaction item (13) would be investigated and an update brought back.

49. Learning and Development Programme 2021/22

P Maginnis (Service Director – Corporate Services) introduced the report on the Learning and Development programme. She noted that we had a new learning management system which had various virtual courses online for members of staff. These range from the short 'Skill Pill' sessions to the wider leadership programme to the apprenticeship programme. The Council was also expanding the role of the mental health first aiders to being dementia friends.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse asked if members could access the 'customer shoes' session and the staff resources library. Councillors did have access years ago, but not now. Could members have access to more of these resources? She was told that this was picked up in the next report.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked how were training needs identified now that officers mostly worked from home. He was told that this was picked up in various ways depending on managers and their requirements, such as the specialist needs for IT personnel and the various skills required. Managers would look at their corporate needs and identify needs via inductions for new starters etc. Some training was still carried out face to face, whatever fitted in with what was required.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse then asked what the current organisational training priorities were. He was told that some of this was listed in the report such as the development of the management spine, getting team management qualifications, developing new skills around agile working, to upskill our apprentices, understanding the impact of Covid on our staff with training on Mental health issues.

Councillor Sunger congratulated the teams on their mental health first aiders as it far exceeded the minimum quota as recommended by MHFA England for an organisation of our size.

Resolved:

That the Committee considered and noted the positive impact on employees of the Learning and Development Programmes 2021/22.

50. Employee Induction / Onboarding & use of the Litmos Learning Management System

P Maginnis (Service Director – Corporate Services) introduced the report on the Litmos Learning Management System. This would give new officers an insight into how the council worked and what the role of a councillor was; generally giving them an insight into the political world of our organisation. This has now been built into the Council's onboarding process and was also now part of the new Litmos system and

the onboarding of new starters. The Council can now also develop its own courses and host videos, policies and links. It is far more flexible and more up to date than the previous system. Its functionality will help develop employees.

The new system will also allow members access, enabling them to have access to courses such as members safety. Member services can be trained to administer this part of the system and enable access to the training.

Councillor H Kane asked when we would have an area for member learning available as we were soon to have elections and therefore new members; and could we take this out to the Town and Parish Councils. P Maginnis said that there would be some discussions about the 'when'. At present Member Services were concentrating on members use of IT. She would find out if Town and Parish councils could be given access.

Councillor Bedford asked if we had a 'ways of working' policy and noted that the government had said that Local Authorities should be back to 40% staff working in buildings. How would that tie in with our strategy of hybrid working. He noted at the beginning of the week there were never a lot of officers around and was wondering how we were going to achieve the increase in the balance so that members of the public, when making enquiries, could get hold of officers. He was told that officers were drafting a policy on 'ways of working' and were having discussions on getting teams back into the building. As for public queries, officers should be contactable wherever they were sitting. Councillor Bedford cited a query he had from a member of the public, they had a query about Council Tax and was told they would get a response within 10 days but had no response 4 weeks later; after chasing it an officer gave apologies for the delay. It was not acceptable to have such long delays. Response time should be monitored as he was getting concerned by response times from officers.

Cllr Neville was interested in the fact that many new starters lived further afield, e.g., Liverpool, Bournemouth and Manchester. He would like to know the proportion of new starters living further afield and assumed that a lot of people who worked for Epping Forest lived nearby. They would also know the area but the ones who work from further afield would not. He also welcomed the increased access for member training.

A Small commented that the number of staff living away from the district was comparatively few. It did give the Council flexibility, especially for staff with specialist's skills who were difficult to find locally, as it was currently very hard to recruit certain specialist skills. It also saves money by not having to procure a consultant – so it did have its advantages. As for how many staff should be in the office; we have surveyed staff; most staff indicated that they would like to work in the office 2 or 3 days a week. In practice we have not seen that many choose to return. Working from home has its attractions and also attracts staff to Epping Forest. We do encourage managers to call in their teams to do some group working and use the space as we had intended to share ideas and experience. This was still work in progress and we are trying to find the right balance.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse said that the Employee Onboarding Guide, indicated employees would be signposted to the Councillor portal on the Council's website. This had not happened as yet, and just directing staff to two items on the website was not adequate. She was also unsure as to just what the Councillor Portal was. She noted that article 17 of the constitution was important for officers to read as it was about the relationship between officers and members and about information sharing and was important for senior officers in particular to understand what

information they should be giving to political groups and individuals. Were officers directed to this bit of the constitution? Or the bit that covers Overview and Scrutiny, which was equally as important. Could officers at least be directed to Article 17, appendix 2. Ms Maginnis was not sure what was happening on this and she would take it away and find out.

Councillor Brookes said that around October 2019 members received an excellent map of Directors and what they were in charge of. It was helpful to see this and how the lines went down through the organisation, it then went quickly out of date. Could we have an updated version. A Small replied that he had a revised organisational structure to be signed off and would then send it out to members.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse picking up on one of the earlier points made, noted that there was a conceptual difference between a Civil Service model and a Local Government model, which people would not know about when they came into local government either from the civil service or private industry. It would be very easy to assume that people had knowledge that they did not have, which was where inductions were so important. His other point was that he got the impression that staff were as frustrated as members about the parking situation, and this was something that had been raised the first time the accommodation project had been brought up. Parking was raised, and it now remains an outstanding issue even after the project had been closed down. A Small replied that we had many more spaces available each day but were not taken up, there were spaces but there was the question why staff were not turning up in the numbers expected; he believed that it was just more comfortable to stay at home than just come into the office. Parking was perceived to be an issue, but it really wasn't. We were trying to use the management structure to arrange meeting with their staff to come in find out for themselves that it was not the problems that they thought it was. Post Covid we were now looking for this to happen.

Councillor Avey said he looked forward to seeing the new management diagram. He asked about the new platform (Litmos), did we licence it and how much did we pay. P Maginnis said it was a hosted system with an annual cost of £11k, but she would confirm for the minutes. This came out of the training budget. Other costs would be officers time for the content.

Councillor Janet Whitehouse said that we needed more than just a diagrammatic structure, we need names of the teams, the team leaders' names and what they did. The structure of the council was now a mystery for members. A Small replied that once the diagram was circulated members can point out what was missing.

Councillor Brady supported what Councillor Janet Whitehouse said about training. We had good training in past years and she now felt sorry for new councillors especially on planning matters. We need updated training on the latest revisions on planning. We used to be able to call up planning officers on any issues we had about planning. The new system seems to distance members from officers and, she was told, had been designed to do so as some members had been rude to officers. If this was so, then those members needed to be retrained. The whole system was breaking down. Also, if planning officers came into the office then they would not lose out on expertise and knowledge from other officers.

Councillor Bolton asked if members had to have training before they sat on a planning committee and were people sitting on planning committees without full training. Councillor Nweke as a new councillor, agreed that they had not enough training. A Small said he would take this up with officers. Members should be trained. He said that planning officers were not distancing themselves from members, but a

lot of officers were tied up with answering questions from the public. We will see if we can have better training for new members.

Councillor Bhanot agreed with Councillor Brady and the point she made. He noted that the planning training he had received had been at the end of a long day of training; maybe we should have either planning training at the start of the day or have a separate day for this important training and maybe go through some mock applications.

Councillor C Whitbread said that some interesting points had been raised. We have always had a good training programme for members up until the pandemic, and we may need to revisit planning training, both for new members and for refresher training for existing members, especially on the importance the Local Plan. He did not think that planning officers were staying away from members, but if they were, he wished to know about it. He went on to note that Member training was sometimes cancelled because members did not attend. He knew that all councillors needed to keep their knowledge up to a satisfactory standard by attending regular refresher courses. Perhaps in the future we would need a new training programme put in place; maybe this was something for scrutiny to look at.

Councillor Sunger agreed with Councillor Whitbread that members needed to attend training every year to update themselves and also, we needed to train Town and Parish Councillors. Councillor Bedford added that the constitution stated that new members must be trained on Planning matters and that they would also need updating on new Planning Laws. Councillor S Kane agreed that the planning training needed to be revised to take into account the new Local Plan. He hoped that all the training could be recorded so that members could refer back to it.

Resolved:

That the report on the new Litmos Learning Management System was noted.

51. Qualis Quarterly Monitoring Report - Q4 2020/21 and Quarterly Monitoring Report - Q1 2021/22

A Small introduced the quarter 4 (2020/21) Qualis monitoring and the quarterly monitoring report for 2021/22. He noted that this had already been to the Cabinet and the Council. The Auditors were satisfied with their accounts and he noted that recently planning consent had been given for the Epping plots and they were now considered as assets.

Qualis had paid £3 million to the council so far in interest payments and this helped balance the Council's budget.

Councillor Jon Whitehouse asked if the auditors had similar issues to our council's accounts around the documentation, which may suggest that the council had not internalised the importance of those procedures. On page 34 it talks about a separate report on operational performance procedures, and he wondered where that might be going to. And on page 53 it talks about the reduction in the voids specifications which had benefited the finances, but it was a reduction in quality not an increase in efficiency that had led to this. What did this mean in practice? He then asked if the overspend in the HRA had now been fully resolved. A Small replied that the auditors did say these were minor points and that Qualis was in the process of addressing these. As for the performance indicators as a separate report, he would try and get a copy to this committee. He was not sure about the reduction in quality that the councillor referred to. He thought that a discount had been negotiated in the

works that they had done which comes in as a discount to the cost they paid into the Housing Revenue Account. Part of this was to make sure that the specifications were not over specified so that no unnecessary work was carried out; in particular work was not being done to properties that did not need it. As for who was responsible for the HRA repairs split payments, he would talk to him separately afterwards on this as he needed more detail. There would be a separate report on this going to the Audit and Governance Committee.

Resolved:

That the Committee noted the report.

52. Dates of Future Meetings

The Committee noted their future meeting date.