

A stylized illustration of a forest scene. The background is a light blue sky with green foliage. In the foreground, two deer are silhouetted against the trees. The text 'Epping Forest District Council' is overlaid on the scene.

 Epping Forest District Council

Overview and Scrutiny

2022 – 23

Annual Report

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Report by: V Messenger, EFDC Democratic Services Officer (April 2023)



Chairman's welcome and introduction

May I welcome members of Epping Forest District Council and introduce the 2022 – 23 annual report.

This annual report highlights the work undertaken by the Council's four scrutiny committees, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the three select committees – Stronger Communities, Stronger Council and Stronger Place that are aligned to the Council's key objectives and aims within its Corporate Plan.

This year, I supported a greater focus on scrutinising the Council's services and activities. Scrutiny of outside bodies where the Council was unable to affect or influence their activities was agreed to be held as all-member briefings.

May I take this opportunity to thank the chairmen and members of the select committees and especially my Vice-Chairman, Councillor David Wixley, for all his help and support throughout this challenging year.

And of course, I would like to thank all the officers who have worked so hard to keep the members of the scrutiny committees informed and their help in providing any background information that members needed to carry out their investigations.

Cllr Helen Kane

Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

What is scrutiny?

- ▶ Scrutiny in local government is the mechanism by which public accountability is exercised.
- ▶ In practice the purpose of scrutiny is to examine, question and evaluate in order to achieve improvement.
- ▶ Value of scrutiny is to use research and questioning techniques to make recommendations based on evidence.
- ▶ Scrutiny enables issues of public concerns to be examined.
- ▶ At the heart of all the work is consideration of what impact Cabinet's plans will have on the local community.
- ▶ Overview and scrutiny functions are not meant to be confrontational or seen as deliberately set up to form an opposition to the Cabinet. Rather the two aspects should be regarded as 'different sides of the same coin'. The two should complement each other and work in tandem to contribute to the development of the authority.

Alongside its role to challenge, the scrutiny function has continued to thrive. Scrutiny members have engaged positively with the Cabinet, which is why a Cabinet member cannot be a member of a scrutiny committee. This scrutiny has continued to provide valuable contributions to the Council and the Cabinet remained receptive to ideas put forward by the scrutiny committees throughout the year. The Constitution also allows members to call-in Executive decisions and for the public to ask questions at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Scrutiny committees

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The main scrutiny committee has sole responsibility to discharge the Council's statutory duties and responsibilities under the Local Government Act 2000, as defined in the Constitution under [Article 6 – Overview and Scrutiny](#). All the scrutiny committees have a Terms of Reference. Their work programmes are continually updated throughout the year to reflect the progress of their ongoing scrutiny of Council business in relation to corporate performance reporting, service areas, strategies, policies and Qualis.

The committee regularly reviews the Cabinet's Forward Plan of Key Decisions to identify suitable matters for its work programme and for the overview of specific decisions being proposed. The Cabinet can equally ask Overview and Scrutiny to pre-scrutinise any of its business.

Select Committees

Restructured into three select committees at the start of the 2019/20 municipal year, they are mainly aligned with the Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2023 and the three pillars of its corporate ambitions:

- **Stronger Communities**
- **Stronger Council**
- **Stronger Place**

Their Terms of Reference are agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its first meeting in the municipal year, which sets out a rolling programme of ongoing and cyclical issues specific to their corporate alignments. A lead officer of the Executive Leadership Team, appointed to each select committee, helps to facilitate this and co-ordinates member-led scrutiny throughout the year.

Task and Finish Panels

These panels can be set up by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to deal with ad-hoc projects or reviews that are included in the annual work programme for overview and scrutiny. The Panels are restricted to those activities which are issue-based, time limited and non-cyclical in character and also have clearly defined objectives.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee held six meetings this municipal year. The committee membership was approved at Annual Council on 26 May 2022. The first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was held on 16 June 2022 when the 2022/23 membership appointments to the select committees and the chairmen and vice-chairmen positions were approved. Councillor C Whitbread, Leader of Council, also presented an overview of the Council's corporate priorities.

Members for 2022–23



CHAIRMAN:
Councillor Helen Kane

VICE-CHAIRMAN:
Councillor David Wixley

COUNCILLORS:

Raymond Balcombe, Roger Baldwin, Richard Bassett, Pranav Bhanot, Elizabeth Gabbett, Ian Hadley, Steven Heather, Bob Jennings, Jeane Lea, Jaymey McIvor, Stephen Murray, Smruti Patel Janet Whitehouse

Led by the new incoming Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny, a general set of principles was agreed with the newly appointed select committee chairmen and vice-chairmen at the first Joint Meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen on 28 June 2022.

General principles

- Less scrutiny of outside bodies where the Council was unable to affect or influence their activities. Where members would like to understand the work of these bodies, this might take the form of an all-members briefing and not form part of the scrutiny function.
- A greater focus on the financial overview of the Council's activities.
- Cabinet members should be more accountable to scrutiny for their service responsibilities.
- The implementation of agreed actions should be tracked by each committee.
- Project closure reports be made generally available to all councillors and not just available upon request.
- The function of scrutiny should be to assist Cabinet through pre-scrutiny of decisions.
- Scrutiny committee chairmen would attend Cabinet to present their committee's discussion on items coming through scrutiny to Cabinet.

- Performance Reporting (KPIs) should focus on exceptions and better explanations would be provided for these. Accountable officers should be on hand (virtually) to provide further information, if required.
- Strategies and policies generally to go through the Select Committees unless central to the Council's Corporate Plan objectives.
- Key Qualis decisions to go through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.




Pre-scrutiny highlights

Corporate Plan 2023 - 2028

The committee pre-scrutinised the Council's Corporate Plan 2023 – 2027 introduced by the Continuous Improvement Specialist (N Gambrell) on 27 September 2022. This key strategic plan detailed a new set of corporate aims including a new set of key results, developed to support the aims and key objectives. These corporate aims would be reviewed annually through objectives and key result measures, to deliver and work towards the achievement of each objective that year. The report included digital links to improve reader use. The committee made several suggestions during its scrutiny of the Corporate Plan. It was subsequently agreed by the Cabinet on 10 October and adopted by Council on 20 December 2022.

Corporate Plan Key Action Plan Year 5 2022/23

Detailed pre-scrutiny by the committee was undertaken on a quarterly basis with quarter 1 on 27 July 2022, quarter 2 on 17 November, quarter 3 on 31 January 2023 and quarter 4 on 20 April. These reports detailed the project status summaries, key milestones and RAG status for those projects identified as 'priority projects' within the portfolio aligned to the corporate objectives of the Council. All KPIs regardless of status were also included with comparisons to previous quarters, so progress could be tracked. The committee reviewed the performance data in detail at their meetings.

Green	Project on track to achieve milestones
Amber	Project at risk of missing milestones
Red	Project has missed milestones/project has serious issues
Blue	Project complete/on-hold
	Project status is unchanged since previous report
	Project status has improved since previous report
	Project status has declined since previous report

Qualis 1-Year Business Plan

The Strategic Director and Section 151 Officer, A Small, introduced the 1-Year Qualis Business Plan at the 27 September meeting. Currently, in the rapidly changing economic climate, considerable economic pressures were not limited to the Council's finances and residents, but also to the Council's partners, e.g., in the construction industry. Although Qualis should produce a 4-Year business plan under the Shareholder Agreement, in this time of great uncertainty, the decision had been taken that a 4-Year Business Plan would be too challenging and be out of date sooner than forecast. The appendix to the report detailed the financial conditions and how Qualis would address them. Qualis had assessed its opportunities. It had reviewed the Council's commercial assets / portfolio with some success and therefore, the transfer of assets seemed the right time, as Qualis had more opportunities to maximise return. The Conder Building had been demolished. Development of the Epping Sports Centre site had started. The Council was confident good governance was robust at Qualis. S Jevans, Qualis Group Managing Director, continued that Qualis was building strong skills. There were challenges but the report set out the savings made,

and had identified the key risks, strategic priorities and was optimistic on growth. The committee's many scrutiny questions were mainly answered by the Finance Portfolio Holder, Councillor J Philip.

Minutes of the meeting can be viewed at [Overview and Scrutiny Committee 27 September 2022](#)

Transfer of Grounds Maintenance Service to Qualis

An extra meeting of the committee was scheduled on 3 November 2022 to pre-scrutinise the business case for the transfer of this service ahead of the Cabinet decision on 7 November. The Strategic Director and Section 151 Officer introduced the report, which proposed to transfer the service in April 2023. Qualis had established a vision for itself as a property company promoting and undertaking property development, management and maintenance. The report provided a high-level summary of the current costs of delivering the existing in-house service, including an indicative Contract payment in the event of the transfer of the Grounds Maintenance service. The business case for the transfer represented an efficient way to deliver this service. It enabled the Council to reduce its back-office costs and offset these against the Qualis Management charge.

A lively debate followed as the committee's questions covered a wide range of concerns, which were mainly answered by the Finance Portfolio Holder along with the Strategic Director and Section 151 Officer.

However, the committee's recommendation to the Cabinet was that at this stage the committee felt unable to support the transfer of Grounds Maintenance to Qualis, as a proposed motion was carried. The Finance Portfolio Holder addressed the concerns raised by scrutiny members at the subsequent Cabinet meeting on 7 November. The Cabinet's decision approved the transfer of the Grounds Maintenance service to Qualis in April 2023, in accordance with the broad terms and approach proposed within the Cabinet report.

[The recording of 3 November meeting is available to view](#)

Qualis – Overview

As members felt that a lot of people did not understand what Qualis was all about and in light of the committee being unable to support the transfer of service above, the Qualis Management team was invited to attend the next meeting. At the 31 January 2023 meeting, the Chairman introduced Qualis Group Managing Director, S Jevans, and the Managing Director of Qualis Management, B Johnson, who gave a presentation. This encompassed an oversight of the property management and housing repairs service Qualis provided on behalf of the Council. It also covered Qualis' values, complaints and lessons learnt, performance in 2020 / 21 and how the Council monitored Qualis and its key objectives. This presentation was included in the minutes of the meeting for information. Qualis Management also replied to a variety of questions from the members present.

Annual review of work undertaken by the Epping Forest Youth Council

Our high-profile and national award-winning Youth Council comprised 23 young people, who represented 8 Epping Forest secondary schools, New City College (Epping Forest Campus) and one who was an independent and home schooled. These young people represented the views of their peers and wider school communities. The current cohort would stand down in May 2024. The committee was presented with an annual review of the work they had undertaken at the meeting on 20 April 2023. Paarth Patel and Olu Ayandare from Davenant Foundation, Sarah Chufoon from King Harold Business Academy and William Ayrton from Chigwell School highlighted the key areas of their work, which encompassed:

- ▶ **EFYC project 2022/23 'Repair My Pocket'** – focused on the cost-of-living crisis. Youth councillors had designed a 12-question survey and conducted street interviews at the Essex Police and EFDC community day of action. The survey was shared with all the District's secondary schools for students to complete. The aim was to assess how young people were being affected by financial pressures and to get a better understanding of how services could help them. The findings were presented at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- ▶ **Jack Petchey Foundation Funding** – £1,000 was received from the Jack Petchey Foundation to help educate young people about scammers. This was used to purchase 800 copies of the 'Little Book of Scams'. Youth councillors arranged a presentation to students in year 10 and above in their own schools during the spring term when these were distributed. Produced by Thames Valley Police, the Little Book of Big Scams was a valuable resource to avoid being scammed and losing money.
- ▶ **Independent Advisory Group (IAG) Safety Survey** – three youth councillors attended the Brentwood and Epping Forest IAG. Youth councillors presented the results of a survey that had been conducted in all schools by the end of the spring term to identify how safe young people were feeling in their area and in their schools. It covered safety, including speeding, inappropriate parking, street lighting, scams and crime.
- ▶ **MiLife Blue (legacy project)** – the successful MiLife C19 mental health project for schools was designed by the 2021/22 youth councillors. The Council and the Red Balloon Foundation jointly worked on a new model to update the resources. The project remained available to local schools in the new format but was only available to schools outside the District at a cost. The project renamed MiLife Blue, supported a trauma informed response to young people dealing with mental health issues. This would sit alongside the inaugural award winning MiLife Green project, which related to more general mental health awareness.
- ▶ **EFYC Training** – youth councillors had completed their intensive induction training, covering professionalism, team building, leadership, presentation skills and public speaking. Their training would continue to address projects such as Dementia Friends, Hate Crime, Gaming and Gambling addiction, the environment, Ride London and positive mental health.

Routine scrutiny business

Scrutiny undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at every meeting included:

- ▶ **Key Decision List** – regularly reviewing the Cabinet's Key Decisions enabled the committee to identify appropriate matters for the overview and scrutiny work programme and the overview of specific decisions proposed in the Forward Plan.
- ▶ **Work programme** – the committee regularly reviewed its progress on business transacted and also to identify additional items for its current work programme. Scrutiny of the Epping Forest District Museum's operating model was added to the work programme for 2023/24. It was envisaged the timeframe would extend to a 2-year period.
- ▶ **Select committees' business** – the Chairmen of the select committees had the opportunity to report back on their progress against the achievement of their respective work programmes and make any recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Public questions

Public scrutiny in action at the 17 November 2022 meeting saw a resident submit a question on safeguarding at the meeting. Responding to a question on whether any reports had been made in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 8.2 of the Shareholders Agreement with Qualis Group Ltd since it was signed in February 2020, the Chief Executive, G Blakemore, replied on behalf of the Chairman, "yes" and also replied to the follow-up question.

Call-in of Executive decisions

When an executive decision is made by the Cabinet, a Portfolio Holder or a Cabinet committee, or a key decision is made by an officer with delegated authority, such a decision is published in a notice specifying when the decision will come into force and be implemented, unless it is called-in.

Further information in the Constitution under Article 6 (Overview and Scrutiny) provides details of the call-in arrangements and protocol for councillors. This year there were no decisions called-in.

Agendas and minutes

Please view at this link [Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#)

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Joint Meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen

The joint meeting is held twice a year, usually every six months. It provides the scrutiny chairmen and vice-chairmen with an opportunity to discuss any issues raised with the Executive Leadership Team and the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager. The following items were discussed at the joint meetings held on 28 June and 6 December 2022.

Overview and Scrutiny procedures – review

The agreement of a set of general principles that all scrutiny committees would follow was led by the Chairman, Councillor H Kane, at the June joint meeting, as detailed above. This included the specific allocation of scrutiny review tasks between the work programmes of the four scrutiny committees.

External scrutiny

Reviewing external scrutiny at the June joint meeting, it was noted there was a distinction between partner and external organisations. In previous years, external scrutiny had taken up a large part of those meetings, but the reality was that members could not influence an outside organisation to make any changes. Although the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was responsible for discharging the functions under the Local Government Act 2000, the legislation did not compel external organisations to attend a Council scrutiny meeting. It was one of the functions that the Council could choose to do, so a principle was agreed not to preclude external scrutiny but just do it in a different way as all-member briefings in future. At the joint meeting in December, it was also agreed that the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager would organise three all-member briefings throughout the municipal year, which should suffice, but this could be flexible.

Minute actions

Since the Chairman was keen to track actions from previous meetings these were to be detailed in the minutes, so every scrutiny committee could review any actions identified to ensure replies had been provided and none were outstanding.

Scrutiny training

A well-attended member training session with an external scrutiny trainer was held in the autumn at the Civic Offices. As the feedback from those present had been very positive, the Democratic and Electoral Services Team Manager, G Woodhall, advised members at the joint meeting on 6 December that further scrutiny training would be organised for the next municipal year. This should take the form of the external trainer presenting two courses – essential scrutiny questions in June 2023 and learning key questioning skills around September 2023.

The Local Government Association and East of England LGA did offer various courses to councillors one of which was on chairmanship skills that members were recommended to do. There was a range of information on the LGA website all aimed at councillors. LGA had also produced a scrutiny handbook for members.

Agendas and minutes

Joint meeting agendas and minutes can only be accessed on the Intranet / Extranet (via the Members portal).

Waste Management Task and Finish Panel

The Task and Finish Panel concluded most of its work at the last meeting in early March 2020 before the first Covid lockdown. At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 July 2020, a recommendation was made to reconvene the panel when there was any new information arising from the Environment Bill, which was re-introduced to Parliament on 30 January 2020 following the general election in December 2019, and /or any new legislation introduced by the Government.