

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 (July 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 seven 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.

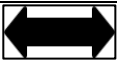


Pre-scrutiny highlights

Corporate Plan 2023 - 2028

The committee pre-scrutinised the Council's Corporate Plan 2023 – 2028 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 26 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 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](#)

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.

Stronger Communities Select Committee

The Stronger Communities Select Committee held five meetings this municipal year. The membership was approved at the first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 June 2022. The first select committee meeting was held on 12 July 2022.

Members for 2022–23



CHAIRMAN:
Councillor Jeane Lea

VICE-CHAIRMAN:
Councillor Jodie Lucas

COUNCILLORS:

Clive Amos, Raymond Balcombe, Ian Hadley, Stephen Murray, Chidi Nweke, Ronda Pugsley, David Stocker, David Wixley and Shane Yerrell

NON-VOTING MEMBER:

Mr Wyn Marshall – Chairman of the Tenants and Leaseholders Forum
Representing the views of the tenants' associations and acting as a consultative body for the Council on a range of housing issues, Mr Marshall was co-opted as a non-voting member of this select committee on 12 July 2022.

The select committee encompassed the corporate aims and objectives for stronger communities – people live longer, healthier and independent lives; adults and children are supported in times of need; and people and communities achieve their potential. Most of the work programmes were not cyclical apart from quarterly Customer Services updates, and the six-monthly update of the Council-funded Police officers' work.

Pre-scrutiny highlights

Review of Housing Strategy 2022 – 2027

At the first meeting on 12 July 2022, the committee was informed that although the Housing Strategy was not a statutory requirement, it provided a cohesive direction of travel for cross-cutting housing related services. Introduced by the Interim Team Manager for Housing Strategy, the aim of the strategy was to reflect and facilitate the co-ordination of activities for those services that directly impacted on the current and projected need for and supply of affordable housing in the District. A review of the Housing Strategy commenced in May 2021 which was underpinned by reviews of the Allocations Scheme, the Tenancy Policy and the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. Approved by the Cabinet on 1 March 2022, these would take effect in September 2022 for the period 2022-2027. Questions answered covered – retaining green spaces in schemes for recreational use that was a key feature of the Council's 'It's more than bricks and mortar' project; working on proposals and funding with E-ON for a pilot scheme to retrofit older Council properties

to become more energy efficient; and in relation to costs involved that the Housing Strategy planned a number of existing services and partnerships that would be delivered through greater collaboration between these services and partnerships.

Sheltered Housing Refurbishment Programme

The Housing and Property Director reported on the successful pilot refurbishment of the sheltered housing scheme at Frank Bretton House, which was completed within six months. The Council wished to continue the refurbishment program at other sheltered schemes within the District to make the communal areas feel modern, welcoming, and desirable. Residents' feedback from 75% of tenants on this pilot refurbishment would assist with the order of works and help improve the customer experience going forward. In July, the select committee recommended to the Cabinet that approval be given to continue the sheltered housing refurbishment programme.

Transfer of services from the Broadway Housing Office

Also, in July 2022, the Housing and Property Director advised the committee that following a review of the number of tenants visiting the Broadway office for housing purposes, it was felt that there was a better, more efficient way to provide the services for those people and for staff to spend more time in the housing estates. The proposal was to close the Broadway office creating a saving for the Council. Meanwhile, St John the Baptist Church in Loughton had contacted the Council to join up with partnerships and other professionals to provide a hub service for tenants and residents, thus enabling the Housing officers to provide a flexible service. The committee had supported this proposal. Furthermore, to assist cash paying customers using the Broadway office, Allpay cards would be issued for council tax and non-domestic rates. Following the initial rollout of the Allpay scheme, an opt-in service would be provided to other customers paying council tax and non-domestic rates.

Refresh of the Epping Forest Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022 – 2026

The strategy set out the aims and aspirations of the multi-agency Epping Forest Health and Wellbeing Board to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone living within the District. The partnership Board was made up of representatives from Epping Forest District Council, Essex County Council, the West Essex Health and Care Partnership and the NHS including a wide range of local health and voluntary sector organisations. The Board had published its original ten-year strategy back in 2018, but as a direct result of the Covid pandemic, the decision was taken to review and refresh the strategy early to ensure the District had a robust and meaningful roadmap to maximise resources and expertise to support the best possible outcomes for residents. Following a range of questions at the meeting on 15 November 2022, the select committee asked to receive an annual update.

Domestic Abuse and Domestic Abuse Workplace Policies

On 2 March 2023, the Directorate Specialist (Technical Services), C Wiggins, introduced these policies to the select committee. Members were informed the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance (DAHA) was launched in 2014 and was managed by Standing Together. The Council had aspired to achieve a DAHA Accreditation to support residents and staff by providing a positive, safe environment and encouraging them to have the confidence to approach the Council at a time of need. The policies set out the Council's commitment to take efficient and effective action to deal with all reports of incidents and explained how the Council would provide support tailored to the needs of the individual, working in partnership with specialist services to provide a coordinated response. The Directorate Specialist (Technical Services) advised that Qualis would have their own policies, although the policies would be shared as they formalised the services already being delivered by the Council.

Essex Police presentation

The select committee received a presentation at the meeting on 2 March from the Essex Police District Commander for Brentwood and Epping Forest, Chief Inspector Tina Cooper, who provided information on the following areas:

- Policing structure in the District

- The Force Plan 2022/25
- What community priorities were being delivered?
- Events held such as 'Walk with Us'
- ASB issues, actions, and outcome in Ongar
- Community Engagement events attended
- Performance of the last 12-month period to January 2023
- Public perception survey results

[The recording of the meeting on 2 March is available to view](#)

Epping Forest Community Safety Partnership Annual Strategic Assessment, Annual Report and Plan on a page

The Directorate Specialist (Technical Services), C Wiggins, reported on 2 March 2023 that the Community Safety Partnership was required to complete an annual Strategic Assessment that was used to direct and guide their activities, under the requirements as responsible authorities of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. The policing structure referred to in the annual report related to the Epping Forest District only and the officers were based at Loughton Police Station. The Crucial Crew event organised for the District's state primary schools would be relaunched and was to be held at the Civic Offices.

Discussion Paper – Overview and Scrutiny Committee Structure 2023/24

The Democratic and Electoral Services Team Manager, G Woodhall, advised that the Constitution Working Group had considered a report on 16 March 2023 about the proposed Overview and Scrutiny Committee Structure for 2023/24 but had requested that a scrutiny committee also discuss the report – hence its discussion on 21 March 2023 by the select committee. The select committee supported the Working Group's recommendation of option 1, which would go to Council on 4 April 2023 for adoption.

Routine scrutiny business

Council-funded Police officers 6-month report

The Council continued to fund the employment of an additional police sergeant and two police constables to supplement existing local policing resources. A third police constable funded by Essex Police joined the team in April 2022. The Police team, which started in July 2018 with an initial 3-year contract, had been extended. At the meeting on 20 September 2022, the Directorate Specialist (Technical Services) reported to the select committee that the police were tasked in-line with District Community Safety Partnership (CSP) priorities identified through the annual Strategic Assessment and aligned with the priorities set by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner's Police and Crime Plan 2021-2024 and Essex Police Crime Prevention Strategy 2021-2025. In response to a question, the Brentwood and Epping Forest District Commander provided a detailed reply after the meeting on whether the police could take enforcement action against drivers who obstructed pavements.

The next six-month report on the work and range of operations of the Council's funded Police team was presented on 2 March 2023 by the Directorate Specialist (Technical Services). The funded police team continued with the following primary functions of supporting functionality of Epping Forest District Council departments/teams; providing 'added value' to the District in supporting the Community Policing function; and targeting action against criminality in the District. By the end of 2022, the police team had accepted and completed thirty-nine tasking requests during that year.

Museum collection rationalisation programme

The Epping Forest District Museum was currently undertaking a review of its collections to ensure material held remained relevant, accessible, and safe for public and staff. This was a procedure recommended to be undertaken by all museums, and followed guidelines and ethics laid out by the Museums Association. The Heritage and Venues Team Manager, F Pellegrino, presented an update on the progress of the project over the last year, which the select committee noted at its meeting on 15 November 2022.

Annual Lettings report

The select committee reviewed the allocations and lettings performance between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022. Presented by the Interim Housing Strategy Manager, the report outlined the demand for social housing on 31 March 2022 from qualifying applicants in accordance with the Council's Allocations Scheme for 2018-2022. It covered typical waiting times and profiling information on age, mobility needs and ethnicity of the applicants that had been rehoused. Details were also provided on the number of mutual exchanges and management transfers that took place outside of the allocations scheme during the same period, and the number of properties that former tenants purchased from the Council under the Right to Buy. The select committee queried the appeals process, armed forces applicants and the statistics of applicants in different bands.

Housing Revenue Account Business Plan Update

The Interim Housing & Property Director, P Wharfe presented an interim update on the HRA Business Plan on 21 March 2023. It was noted that the stock condition survey was underway, and an Asset Management Strategy would be produced alongside the HRA Business Plan. It would be presented to the Committee in October 2023 and annually onwards. Members asked a number of questions on the report and answers were provided by the officer in attendance.

What are our customers telling us?

At the meeting on 20 September, the Service Manager (Customer Services), S Lewis, updated the committee progress over the last six months and answered several questions. These included – the wait time for customers phoning the Contact Centre, which was currently 5.5 minutes; Biffa was providing daily updates on waste collections which Customer Services passed on to residents; officers were working towards an automated response for all contact forms that would be part of the back office customer journey mapping; users of the Epping community hub were asked to complete a survey, so information could be compiled on where they had travelled from etc; and the Housing and Community Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, advised that the idea was to recreate the community hub in other areas in the District in a similar form or as pop ups across the District. The Customer Service Manager would also raise any problems that members were experiencing with their Council devices or their own as not all devices were compatible with the Council's systems. A Members Portal had been created on the Council's website, which provided members with useful information plus access to committee agendas and minutes all in one place.

The Service Manager (Customer Services) presented a further Customer Services Strategy update report and what residents had been telling the Council on 21 March 2023. Members asked several questions on the report and answers were provided by the Officers and Portfolio Holder in attendance.

Other work programme highlights

- ▶ **New support model for sheltered housing** (20 September 2022)
- ▶ **Review of proposal on caretaking in blocks** where residents rate the cleaning (21 March 2023)
- ▶ **Annual Housing performance report** (21 March 2023)
- ▶ **Estate improvements at Harveyfields, Waltham Abbey** creating great places where people want to live (20 September 2022)
- ▶ **Changing Landscape of Housing Paper 1** Building Safety and Health and Safety analysis (12 July 2022)

Agendas and minutes

Please view at this link [Stronger Communities Select Committee](#)

Stronger Council Select Committee

The Stronger Council Select Committee held five meetings this municipal year. The membership was approved at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its first meeting on 16 June 2022. The first select committee meeting was held on 21 July 2022.

Members for 2022–23



CHAIRMAN:
Councillor Jaymey McIvor

VICE-CHAIRMAN:
Councillor Smruti Patel

COUNCILLORS:

Richard Bassett, Rose Brookes, Elizabeth Gabbett, Ian Hadley, Steven Heather, Jayna Jogia, Richard Morgan, Sheree Rackham and Jon M Whitehouse.

The select committee had an overview of the Corporate aims and objectives for a stronger Council – democratic engagement; the People Strategy and a culture of innovation through improved workforce skills and performance through innovation and technology; and financial independence with low council tax. Therefore, much of the scrutiny work was of a cyclical nature, as the select committee regularly reviewed the following.

- ▶ Budget monitoring reports
- ▶ Qualis monitoring reports
- ▶ Financial planning
- ▶ Digital enablement
- ▶ People Strategy

Pre-scrutiny highlights

Azure – move to the cloud

The select committee reviewed the business case for the move to Azure on 21 July 2022. For more than 12 months the Council had worked closely on this project with Microsoft and Agilisys to complete a detailed costing analysis and to spec out the Azure option. The Council's digitisation strategic plan included standardising its infrastructure and services to a cloud first strategy and this project would create a cloud platform that supported the longer-term digital ambitions of the Council. If our existing data centre was destroyed by fire, the Council would be completely without any IT structure. Also, the Government's advice was to move to the Cloud and not have a single point of failure. With the majority of staff working from home, we were almost in a cloud environment already. Members were assured there would not be a major issue on performance for the end user as many of the applications that we were moving to were designed to be used in the

cloud. What was changing was where the data was stored and how it was delivered but not the end use. The select committee commented on the business case. The decision taken to award a contract to Agilisys for the procurement of Azure – move to the cloud, which was made under delegated arrangement by the Internal Resource Portfolio Holder, Councillor S Kane, in July 2022 (IRS-001-2022/23).

Outsourcing of the Concierge Service

On 24 November, members looked at the Concierge service provided at the Civic Offices. The service included numerous responsibilities – to open and close the building, manage and maintain our bookable spaces, monitor the employee car park, issue security cards, monitor CCTV and much more. The existing service covered 06.30-22.00 Monday to Friday, with out of hours, on site security being provided by a contractor between 22.00-06.30 on weekdays and across the whole weekend. Due to various operational and resource challenges, the Senior Leadership Team had agreed to explore the outsourcing of the Concierge Service by formally going out to tender, review the bids and then make a decision on whether the Council proceeded to the formal stages of outsourcing. Only one contractor, PCS Group, out of four had shown an interest and submitted a bid. It was noted that the current out of hours contractor had not made a bid. Members asked a range of questions. But in their comments passed to the Cabinet they wanted the current staff to be kept up to date on this proposal and that the new contracted workforce coming in, was trained properly on the ways of the Council and that there would be a continuity of those staff.

Draft Budget 2023/24

The Finance Portfolio Holder, Councillor J Philip introduced the draft budget report for 2023/24 on 24 January 2023. This had gone to the Cabinet in December 2022, with a final report still to come. The full report included revenue and capital proposals for both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) as well as a schedule of suggested Fees and Charges for the forthcoming financial year. An updated Medium-Term Financial Plan covering the financial years 2023/24 through to 2027/28 was also included, which reflected both the impact of the draft Budget proposals as well as the latest available intelligence at the time. As required by law a balanced position (eliminating a previously identified projected deficit of £4.126 million) had provisionally been reached for 2023/24, and the medium-term financial position, although having a similar profile, had some differences compared to the position presented to the Cabinet on 10 October (and subsequently to this select committee on 24 November). There was a particular challenge still anticipated in 2024/25 and 2025/26 because of the forthcoming new Waste Management Contract. However, some significant uncertainties remained. The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2023/24 released in December 2022 had provided further assurance as to the underlying financial sustainability of the draft Budget proposals as currently presented. The Council would be looking for voluntary redundancies but that might not be the case. Currently there were 18 roles involved in the overall budget package, with up to 48 staff involved in the consultation exercise. It was anticipated the loss of staff would be much smaller than that and mostly through voluntary redundancies.

Onboarding / induction

On 24 January 2023 the select committee was updated by J Budden, Service Manager People, Culture and Wellbeing, on developments made to the onboarding/induction process. In addition, a live demonstration of the system by A Cartwright, HR Corporate Business Partner, showed the various elements that went into the onboarding process. Candidates would form an impression of an organisation throughout the recruitment process. However, what was often overlooked was the period between a successful candidate accepting a job offer when they were working their notice and their start date, which could be a number of weeks or months. Pre-start date onboarding helped to settle a new employee into the Council and ensured they had everything they needed before their start date. It also supported the new employee in understanding more about the Council's culture and values, as well as some of the more practical aspects that might otherwise be overlooked. New employees would do their induction and job specific training with their line manager and there was the opportunity to attend a welcoming introduction when they would meet one of the Senior Leadership Team. The Service Manager advised there were plans for member induction via the system as it could be useful to new councillors.

Launch of the new employee Wellbeing Hub

The select committee learned about the launch of the new employee Wellbeing Hub at the January meeting, which included a short presentation. J Budden and S Kits, Business Partner (Corporate Communications), outlined the excellent wellbeing resources and support available to employees. In addition to the Employee Assistance Programme (Perkbox) that offered counselling sessions and support for all employees and their close family members, EFDC had focussed on developing a solid network of individuals within the organisation to help support colleagues. This included the Perkbox Wellness Hub for free content on wellness resources, and over 90 employees had trained to become Mental Health First Aiders. Members were impressed with the Wellbeing Hub, which set a high standard for other local authorities to follow. When querying the engagement of staff working from home, the select committee was advised that virtual coffee mornings for employees were organised and managers had been upskilled to educate them in mental health issues. In relation to staff retention, it did lead to a better understanding of what staff wanted.

Routine scrutiny business

Budget Monitoring Reports

The General Fund revenue and capital positions as well as the HRA revenue and capital positions were reviewed at the meetings on 21 July 2022 (quarter 4 (outturn)) for FY2021/22 and for FY2022/23 on 26 September (quarter 1), 24 November (quarter 2), 24 January 2023 (quarter 3) and quarter 4 (18 April 2023). The Strategic Director Corporate and Section 151 Officer, A Small, and Interim Chief Finance Officer, C Hartgrove, highlighted the current global, national and local economic malaise and the uncertainty this created for the Council. The financial pressures were detailed in the monitoring reports and outlined the current positions, which were dominated by a range of substantial spending pressures. The Council's budget for 2022/23 (both General Fund and HRA) had been approved by full Council on 24 February 2022. These reports updated members on how the Council's services had performed against their budgets each quarter and projected forward to the anticipated outturn for the end of the financial year. When the select committee acknowledged the general fund reserve of £4 million now stood at £3 million at quarter 3, the Finance Portfolio Holder advised there was a desire to get back to our minimum balance, but without impacting on our services.

Financial Planning Framework 2023/24 to 2027/28

Like virtually all local authorities, the Council was facing major financial pressure following a series of significant external World events – including Brexit, a pandemic, and the invasion of Ukraine – which had combined to create a worldwide economic crisis that was worsening almost daily. On 26 September the select committee reviewed the proposed approach to financial planning until 2027/28, which included the reporting and governance timetable. The select committee was advised that the Local Government Settlement was expected to be announced by mid to late December 2022, but it was unlikely there would be a two-year settlement. The Finance Portfolio Holder advised that the Cabinet was working with lead officers, initially over a gap of £4 million.

Updated Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)

Although the Cabinet considered the updated MTFP on 10 October, as agreed in the governance timetable, it should be scrutinised by the select committee and was reviewed on 24 November. As a forward-looking document, it provided a tentative look at the Council's financial picture over the next five years (2023/24 through to 2027/28) and set the scene by providing a framework for developing both the General Fund and HRA budgets for 2023/24. The General Fund forecast within the MTFP revealed a projected deficit of £4.126 million for 2023/24. This reflected major spending pressures driven by inflation. Looking further ahead – assuming a balanced budget was achieved for 2023/24 without recourse to the use of reserves – a budget gap was expected to open-up again on the General Fund from 2024/25, with annual budget pressures in the region of £1.4 million anticipated for two consecutive financial years. It was noted that the biggest expenditure currently was staff and not accommodation. A substantial amount of savings would therefore have to come from staff. The select committee was informed that salary costs had always been high, exceeding any other expenditure that the Council had. The comparatively high vacancy

rate captured some of the potential savings to be had without impacting on staff directly. Options had been presented to the Cabinet and they were working through them.

Qualis Monitoring Reports

Also in September, the select committee reviewed quarter 3 from 1 April to 30 June 2022 for the Qualis trading year 2021/22. Presented by the Strategic Director Corporate and Section 151 Officer, the Board report highlighted performance against the business plan targets using the recognised Red, Amber, Green (RAG) reporting system. This showed a continuing loss, which was primarily associated with delays in achieving planning consent at Roundhills, and challenges with finding suitable regeneration property to acquire. It was acknowledged that Qualis faced similar financial challenges to the Council. When the select committee queried if there were any economies that could be achieved by Qualis working with other third parties, the Finance Portfolio Holder emphasised that Qualis must remain a separate entity from the Council and detailed that Qualis had driven value from contracts. When asked if there would be any impact from changes in stamp duty, members were advised this would be difficult to predict owing to the position in the development sequence, but Qualis did ensure that external factors were regularly reviewed.

People Strategy 2020 – 2022

In July the Corporate Services Director, P Maginnis, presented a detailed report for 2022. Also, a draft version of the new strategy that would run until March 2023, was being reviewed. The Service Director answered members and advised that: the Council was not experiencing a higher turnover of staff; the HR Business Partners led power hour sessions on various issues for managers/staff; the review on 'creating our tomorrow' focussed on how officers wanted to work in hybrid and agile ways; and a glossary of terms used in the report was provided for the minutes.

In November the select committee received a presentation from the Corporate Services Director on 'Creating our tomorrow – our ways of working for the future 2022 and beyond'. This outlined the results of the One Poll employee survey from 1 June to 12 July 2022. The 77% response rate amounted to 410 employees taking part. The Council had a performance management programme, with managers holding regular one to ones with staff, and also set targets and measurements for individual staff and parts of the organisation. Also, line managers controlled the allocation of work and monitored it. Many teams had regular meetings on 'Teams' and there were benefits and gains from staff working from home. Also, working from home was easier for some roles than others – it was a balance. The select committee commended the officers for organising the recent member / officer meetings. It was noted that officers were looking at customers and their needs in what we did as that was key to what we would do. They were also looking at better ways in how we communicated and how we could improve our systems to make them more effective.

Agendas and minutes

Please view at this link [Stronger Council Select Committee](#)

Stronger Place Select Committee

The Stronger Place Select Committee held four meetings this municipal year. The September meeting was cancelled owing to the death of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, as it would have taken place during the period of national mourning. The membership was approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 July 2022. The first meeting was held on 5 July 2022.

Members for 2022–23



CHAIRMAN:

Councillor Raymond Balcombe

VICE-CHAIRMAN:

Councillor Ronda Pugsley

COUNCILLORS:

Ian Allgood, Richard Bassett, Peter Bolton, Heather Brady, Simon Heap, Steven Heather, Judy Jennings, Cherry McCredie and Richard Morgan

The select committee covered the Corporate aims and objectives for a stronger place – delivering effective core services that people want; a District with planned development; and an environment where new and existing businesses thrive. Its definition encompassed Epping Forest District as a physical Place and to scrutinise the direction, policies and projects of the executive that affect the spatial and infrastructure requirements of the District. Scrutiny of the work programme included:

- ▶ Local Plan updates
- ▶ Council housebuilding
- ▶ Economic growth, skills and employment
- ▶ District-wide Waste Management provision
- ▶ Leisure Management Contract updates

Pre-scrutiny highlights

Litter Strategy

The strategy would help to deliver the commitment to the Government's Litter Strategy for England along with the Environmental Protection Act (1990) and the Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse (2019). Officers would work with Keep Britain Tidy to ensure this strategy and any associated actions were in keeping with the aspirations of the Government's Litter Strategy. The strategy for a Cleaner Epping Forest District laid out the Council's plans to continue its work in the transformation of our open spaces and streets to ensure that it met the Government's expectations. It also reflected residents' desire to have a clean and healthy local environment free of litter, fly-tipping and dog waste. Street sweeping was one of the most important services any council operated to

improve the appearance of a street or area. With less litter, fly-tipping and dog fouling, the Council could reduce its spending on collecting and disposing of it. Having a litter strategy would contribute positively towards the Council's environmental policies to reduce carbon in response to the climate emergency. In addition to statutory performance indicators, success would be measured in the Council's reduced carbon footprint with less waste going to landfill. The strategy would provide a platform to engage with partners to enhance the local environment, by securing behaviour change. At the meeting on 5 July 2022, J Warwick (Acting Service Director (Contracts)) advised that five litter picks had been completed and 72 bags of litter collected during the Great British Spring Clean. There had also been sixteen applications for support for equipment for litter picks, with fifteen completed. The select committee challenged the strategy on a number of points and it was agreed that the strategy would be reviewed, strengthened and refined. On 8 November, the committee reviewed the Litter Strategy as approved by Cabinet in October and commended the revisions made to the draft version that had been scrutinised by the select committee in July. The select committee proposed that an update on the Litter Strategy should be included in the 2023/4 Stronger Place work programme.

Leisure Services Contract update

The Council appointed Places for People Leisure as its partner for the development and management of its four leisure facilities when the agreement commenced in April 2017. It was a 20-year design, build, operate and maintain (DBOM) contract. On 8 November, the Acting Service Director (Contracts) stated that the contract was managed through monthly leisure contract managers meetings, where performance of the delivery of services in accordance with the agreed contract was reviewed. The Leisure Management Contract Partnership Board provided strategic oversight and robust challenges over the contract, providing effective dialogue and resolution of issues at senior officer and member level. The Council monitored the services to ensure performance against set requirements and Key Performance Indicators in the contract. During the Covid-19 pandemic, EFDC provided financial support to Places Leisure in order to maintain the operations of the leisure centres in the District. The recovery rates in leisure centre usage had enabled Places Leisure to resume the payment of management fees. Rising energy costs were posing a significant challenge but mitigating the rising energy costs was being achieved by implementing measures across the centres to reduce the levels of consumption. In January 2021, Cabinet agreed that the new leisure centre in Epping was to be delivered by Places Leisure under the DBOM contract, as had the Waltham Abbey Leisure Centre. A formal Deed of Variation was issued, and an external legal adviser was appointed to prepare and negotiate the DBOM contract variation. The new Epping Leisure Centre project was currently in the second stage of the procurement phase, with the contract award anticipated early 2023. The construction phase for the new leisure centre was expected to start in summer 2023, with a two-year construction period.

Waste Management Contract update

On 8 November, the Interim Acting Service Director (Contracts) advised the Council was in contract with Biffa Municipal Ltd. for the delivery of waste, processing of dry recycling services and street cleansing. The Cabinet had agreed to undertake a full procurement process for this contract that would expire in November 2024. Officers had started the procurement process and market engagement events had been held with potential waste contractors. A Portfolio Holders Advisory Group would be established to consider the current challenges and support the procurement of a new waste and recycling contract. The Waste Management Partnership Board provided a strategic oversight of the contract at senior officer and member level. It was supported by monthly managers meetings and daily monitoring and inspections by the Waste and Recycling Team Manager and area waste officers. It was acknowledged that there had been unprecedented levels of missed collections over the course of this year. This was due to multiple factors including a national shortage of staff, in particular drivers and loaders, and vehicle breakdowns compounded by a lack of hire vehicles. Biffa had implemented a variety of investments and initiatives to improve their performance. The select committee asked for a list of missed collections to be highly visible on the Council's website when this involved whole streets or known areas; sought clarity on the wheelie bin trial in Theydon Bois; suggested narrow access vehicles could be used when there were cars parked on both sides of a road and in rural areas with restricted access; raised concerns that bins were not being repaired but replaced; and discussed the potential charging to collect garden

waste. A visit to the recycling centre at Edmonton for members of the select committee would also be arranged.

Parking update

At the meeting on 16 January 2023, the Interim Acting Service Director (Contracts) presented the update report highlighting that the tariff changes agreed by Cabinet in November 2021 had been successfully implemented on 4 April 2022. An annual increase of approximately £150,000 in parking fees and charges was projected, compared to the previous year (post-pandemic). The select committee was advised that although pre-pandemic parking income levels had not been reached, car park income and occupancy rates were continually reviewed by EFDC officers. Other parking updates comprised news of: further electric vehicle (EV) charging points; a school-led initiative (3PR) offered across the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP) to help prevent inconsiderate and dangerous parking around schools; and a new online process for Traffic Regulation Orders (TRO) applications. Also, as pavement parking was not prohibited in Essex, the NEPP could not enforce against obstructive parking, which could only be carried out by the Police.

Off Street Civil Parking Enforcement Policy

In January, the Leisure and Parking Team Manager, A Hoke, advised the Committee that the Civil Parking Enforcement policy had been reviewed and amended. The updated policy provided a simplified document with updated terminology. The policy reflected the legal process, covered EV bays, virtual payments and the introduction of a £50 administration fee, which had been added to suspension requests in addition to standard suspension charges per bay fee. The select committee was informed the policy stipulated that motorists could challenge penalty charge notices for exceptional circumstances including breakdown and each representation was considered on its own merits and assessed in line with best practice; the observation period for offences was set by legislation with the grace period set locally at 10 mins; and blue badge holders parked for free if they correctly displayed a valid blue badge. However, officers would look to develop publicity around the misuse and confiscation of blue badges.

Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP)

The Technical Services Manager, M Thompson, reported that the process to develop the AQAP was prescribed in law and required a public consultation exercise before submission to Defra for approval and the subsequent adoption by Council. The proposed draft AQAP sought to improve air quality in the District. It supported the aims of the Climate Change Action Plan and work around improving air quality for the Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The Technical Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor K Williamson, commended the plan to the select committee on 16 January. Councillor N Bedford, Place Portfolio Holder, also advised that the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group for Air Quality had held discussions on air quality in Epping Forest and as part of the mitigation strategy associated with the SAC. Monitoring sites near the Wake Arms roundabout had been agreed with the City of London (CoL) which was considering the installation of temporary signs to advise motorists to turn off their vehicle engines, rather than leave them idling. In addition, road improvements had also been agreed on the A1403 between the Wake Arms and Woodford. Members raised a number of points with the Air Quality Environmental Officer, A Ventura, and the Environmental Health Team Manager, B Stalabrass. Although the select committee endorsed the draft AQAP and approved the four-week public consultation between the months of January and February 2023, it suggested that transport was critical to the delivery of the AQAP and the impact on non-human sensitive receptors, e.g. bees, should be considered.

Sustainable transport update

S Lloyd Jones, Sustainable Transport Officer, presented highlights of this report to the select committee on 7 March 2023, which included:

- The national and local pressure on bus services and the extension of the national £2 flat fare for buses until the end of June 2023.
- The introduction of a Flexi-route app to support the EFDC funded DaRT86 Service, the promotional material available and the social value of this service, which was run in

conjunction with Epping Forest Community Transport and needed to be booked at least 24 hours in advance.

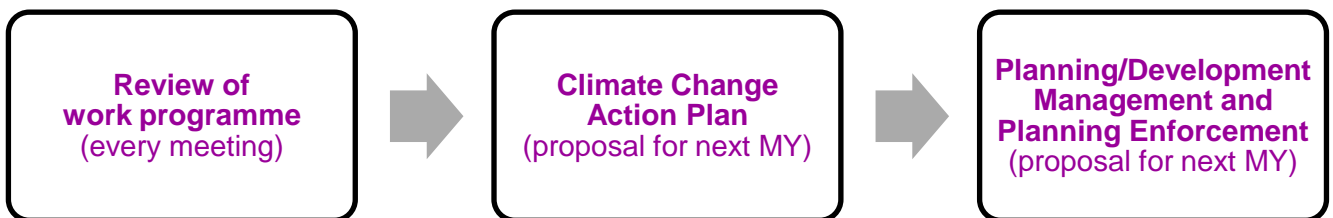
- The Electric Vehicle (EV) market share was increasing. EFDC had the highest number of Battery Electric Vehicles (BEV) on the road in Essex but the level of public EV charging points was an issue.
- Work with Instavolt would expand rapid chargers, these would be available in six Council car parks. The facilitation of planning requests for public or semi-public charges should increase the number of EV chargers to match the England ratio by the end of 2023.
- EFDC had very low utility and commuting cycling compared to the neighbouring boroughs. A Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) for Waltham Abbey should be carried out in 2023/24.
- The Local Plan could provide funding for active travel.

The select committee recognised the value of the DaRT86 and requested promotional material for distribution and to publicise the bus service to the local councils. It was agreed there was a need for more infrastructure to encourage the shift to, and use of, public transport but acknowledged that this would need to be addressed on a subregional or national basis. Members recognised that the infrastructure for on street EV charging could be restrictive and additional pressures and requirements could be required for rural areas. It was suggested that a relaxation on the rules for personal driveways and integration with mobility grants could increase the number of EV charging points. The select committee acknowledged the lack of cycle infrastructure and that safe cycling was an issue across the District.

North Weald Airfield development

The Commercial Service Manager, D Goodey, outlined the North Weald Airfield Master Plan and the proposed development of the eastern side of the aerodrome at the meeting on 7 March 2023. This would dictate a change to how aviation operations were performed due to the requirement to relocate the control tower building function, the potential need for a new entrance and alternative locations for operational buildings. Following a two-phase review that had been carried out by Osprey Consulting, the recommendation was that North Weald Airfield remained an unlicensed aerodrome but with improved facilities, security, and safety. Members had agreed with this recommendation and welcomed the aviation business and training opportunity this would provide. As the control tower building was listed it would remain in situ, but its function would be relocated. Details of the shared road and taxi runway space were provided at the meeting, in addition to the mitigation measures that were in place to minimise any risk of accident. Confirmation was received that the development for commercial use for freight was not a consideration of the report and that the London Metropolitan Police Helicopter base had moved back to Lippitts Hill, High Beach.

Other work programme highlights



Agendas and minutes

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