

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Date of Meeting: 12 November 2009

Portfolio: Finance, Performance Management and Corporate Support Services

Subject: Epping Forest Place Survey 2008 Research Report

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To consider the Epping Forest Place Survey 2008 Research Report and what measures to take forward from issues identified in the survey.

Background

The Government produced a new performance framework for local government, outlined in the *Strong and Prosperous Communities* White Paper. The White Paper contained National Indicator measures about improving quality of life in places and providing better public services.

The 'Place Survey' contains 18 National Indicator questions within the new National Indicator Set and was intended to replicate much of the survey methodology of the Best Value Performance Indicator Surveys.

BMG Research carried out the survey jointly with other District Councils in Essex on behalf of Epping Forest District Council and its partners One Epping Forest (Local Strategic Partnership).

The survey took place from September to December 2008 and was a postal questionnaire delivered to a random sample of over 1350 residents. Residents were asked various questions about where they live, public services and questions about social cohesion.

The following key findings show the results of survey, along with some comments and background information.

Key Findings

Council officers were asked to give input, local knowledge and their understanding of issues which might explain these results e.g. knowledge about the Council's performance, constraints, difficulties in a particular area and delivering an excellent service over time, location and at speed. They were also asked how they might

address issues and concerns of residents and/or sustain best practice where indicated.

1.0 Views on the local area

- 1.1 *Residents feel that the most important factors in making somewhere a good place to live are the level of crime (55%); Health services (44%); and clean streets (38%) page 12. The issues which are considered to be in most need of improvement are road and pavement repairs (50%); activities for teenagers (45%); and the level of traffic congestion (32%) page 14.*
- 1.2 **Road and pavement repairs** - Road and pavement repairs concerns have not changed for many years and has not seemingly changed since the highways agency reverted to the County Council in 2005. Pot holes and pavement repairs always have and always will outstrip the resources available to deal with them. This will remain so until central government funding catches up with the reality that the highway infrastructure is deteriorating. In this district the main thoroughfares are pretty good, but away in the more local residential areas, there are some very poor conditions. In order to address this, we will continue to engage robustly with Essex CC in the main, through the newly formed Local Highways Panel, which will enable EFDC members to influence ECC maintenance priorities. However, the amount of resource available is limited, and therefore it is inevitable that low priority schemes will be deferred well into the future.
- 1.3 **Activities for teenagers** - Some anti-social behaviour is clearly linked to a lack of available activity for young people and similarly, many residents and particularly the more elderly, often cite as their reason for fear of crime as young people "hanging around". In order to address this, The Epping Forest Youth Council is one of the key forums to advise the Council about the needs of young people. In addition, under the new Essex Children's Trust arrangements, commissioning of children's and young people's activities will be dealt with by a West Children's Trust Board (WCTB) consisting of 32 representatives from the public and voluntary sector across Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford. To ensure that local needs are identified and communicated to WCTB, an Epping Forest Children's Partnership Group has been set up which will be chaired by The Council and will include partners from all agencies providing services for 0-19's within Epping Forest District.
- 1.4 Close liaison will also need to be maintained with the County Council and other agencies young peoples' services. There is also a need to address concerns which arise from cross border young people coming into this district to seek "entertainment".
- 1.5 **The level of traffic congestion** - This district is in a very difficult geographic situation, with two motorways within its area plus being very close to North London. The district carries a lot of through traffic on all of its roads, and when difficulties arise on the motorways, the district can soon suffer with very high levels of slow moving traffic. Some of our towns can suffer high levels of congestion at peak hours, especially during the "school run" and early/late rush hours where our proximity to a number of central line stations encourages commuters into the area. There are also HGV issues in some parts of the district, often in the more rural areas where the roads are least able to cope. In order to address this, action has to be seen across a number of fronts working with a number of agencies. Issues to be addressed include commuter versus local parking needs, getting children to school safely (especially in

more rural areas, liaison with Transport for London, Greater London Authority and London Underground Limited. There are no easy solutions, as can be seen from the outcomes of the parking reviews recently undertaken. The County need to be pressed into completing their Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) and freight studies as well as reviewing their signage policy for HGV routing.

2.0 Priorities for Improvement

2.1 *Priorities for improvement (i.e. the aspects that are regarded both as important and as in need of improvement) are the level of crime (55%); and cleanliness of streets (38%) page 16.*

2.2 **Crime** - Although crime is reducing the perception of crime as an issue remains high. Last year we had an 8% reduction in crime across the district with a corresponding reduction in anti-social behaviour. However, some local high profile issues can cause a more general alarm, for example, high streets in Waltham Abbey and Loughton have seen an increase in assaults and violent crime, which has increased perception of crime and anti-social behaviour in the district. Certain crimes such as burglary has increased. Burglary is a very personal crime, and affects residents perception of safety. National reporting of crime plays heavily on local perceptions. In order to address this we will have an Open day and question time at Waltham Abbey in November to better gauge public opinion and see how we can align the data with the perception and a future strategic assessment must include a wider public view.

2.3 **Health** - Health services are one of the most important services to residents in the district. Residents' perception of health related issues vary considerably with location and age. The latter is understandable given that health often worsens with age and the need to access health facilities increases. There are locations which are some distance from health facilities or are located between two Primary Care Trusts (PCT) and residents find themselves being passed between facilities. This added to often poor transport infrastructure limiting access to facilities will produce a high level of anxiety in some residents. In order to address this, we can do no more than to remain engaged, through the Local Strategic Partnership, with the PCT, health providers and Social care agencies to make sure residents concerns and wishes are heard, understood and where possible acted upon. At a local level, the Council's Community Services teams are working closely with the PCT and voluntary agencies, to deliver a wide range of activities and initiatives to address health inequalities across the district, including providing targeted services to children, young people and the elderly and, addressing key geographical areas that are identified within the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

2.4 **Clean Streets** - Our performance has increased and the new rapid response unit is able to provide a speedy resolution to many low grade environmental problems. It may be that the survey coincided with the withdrawal of some local cleaning teams, but these have now been reintroduced. In order to address this, the contractor has completely rescheduled street cleansing and the way the cleansing teams operate. This should bring further and sustained improvements. We need to undertake some analysis into why residents think the district is not clean when all our data suggests it is. The district is considerably cleaner than it was, yet the public do not see it that way. We need to find out why.

3.0 Overall Satisfaction with Area

- 3.1 *The majority of residents are satisfied overall with their local area as a place to live (87%), (NI5). Satisfaction ratings for this aspect are highest among residents living in Buckhurst Hill (97%); Theydon Bois (96%); Chipping Ongar (96%); and Moreton and Fyfield (95%). Satisfaction ratings for this aspect are lowest among residents living in Chigwell (78%); and Waltham Abbey (78%)* page 21.
- 3.2 Parts of the district show very high levels of resident satisfaction as places to live. Even in those areas that were rated less highly, most residents still express satisfaction. Lowest satisfaction levels can be seen in some of the urban areas of the district on the boundaries of London boroughs. Further data analysis might be able to establish links between satisfaction levels and perceptions of crime, social and economic causes or environmental issues.

4.0 Neighbourhood Belonging

- 4.1 *More than three fifths of residents report feeling a strong sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood (62.6%); and this tends to increase with age (76%), (over 65). The highest rated area is in Moreton and Fyfield (98%); and the lowest rating area is Lower Sheering (38%), (NI2)* page 22.
- 4.2 The council has held a number of events in local halls to engage the public on services and issues in their neighbourhood. These events have brought neighbours together to find out what is going on, and in a fun way discuss what their area needs to improve provision facilities and services. In addition, the Council's Community Services provide direct support to super output areas in the district, in terms of: community liaison; support to Community Associations; Education and training opportunities and local activities.

5.0 Satisfaction with Local Public Services

- 5.1 *The majority of residents agree that local public services are working to make the area safer (53%); and cleaner and greener (63%), (NI21)* page 26.
- 5.2 **Safer** - The Safer Communities Partnership still needs to develop stronger communications programme ensuring all the good work that does go on is disseminated across the district.
- 5.3 **Cleaner and greener** - 63% is a reasonably good outcome. The result of this may have been swayed by the street cleansing response which has been responded to earlier. The Place Survey questionnaire was not able to determine why residents see the district as not as clean & green as it should be. An investigation would help to show where, if any issues have arisen, as performance levels continue to be high. We will continue to develop the Safer, Cleaner, Greener initiative and as part of this we will engage with other agencies, such as the Corporation of London and Lee Valley Regional Parks Authority to see how we can better interface with them, since the public does not distinguish (and nor should it) between litter on Forest land and litter on the street - all they see is litter! The new enforcement team and response unit should also enable more enforcement and quicker responses to environmental issues.

- 5.4 **Fair treatment from public services** - Half agree that they treat all types of people fairly (50%). Agreement declines when asking whether they act on the concerns of local residents (36%), especially in Theydon Bois (40%), Chigwell Row (36%) and Loughton Alderton (32%); and/or promote the interests of local residents 37%, especially in Chigwell Row (46%) and Loughton Alderton (40%), (NI140) page 23.
- 5.5 This might suggest that concerns about certain developments in or near Theydon Bois which have had adverse local consequences (Blunts Farm) are still prevalent. Or it may be more of a concern about the loss of certain local community facilities within Theydon Bois once run by Essex County Council.
- 5.6 **County and Other Services** - Among respondents who have used public services in the past year, around three quarters are satisfied with their Fire and Rescue Service (77%); and Local GP/family doctor (76%). At least three fifths of those who have used them are satisfied with the local hospital (66%); and the local dentist (62%). While around half are satisfied with the local dentist (62%); and police force (51%) page 27.

A number of recent reports have rated various health facilities serving the district highly. Perceptions of crime-levels will impact upon Police satisfaction.

6.0 Environmental Services

- 6.1 *The majority of respondents are satisfied with environmental services; particularly doorstep recycling (81%); and refuse collection (74%). Satisfaction is lower in relation to keeping public land clear of litter and refuse (63%), particularly in Chigwell Row (25%); and Loughton (24%)* page 28.
- 6.2 There is no clear reason why the residents in particular areas feel as they do, especially since these are high priority areas and receive high levels of street cleansing service. In order to address this, we will increase monitoring of these areas, especially after the new cleansing schedules have been implemented and settled down.
- 6.3 **Door step recycling** - This is a good performance overall and reflects the work done to engage with residents around recycling services. In order to sustain this, we will continue to improve the service by monitoring and maintaining high levels of public information and education and putting pressure on the contractor to ensure a high level of service.
- 6.4 **Refuse collection** - The result may have been influenced by both the timing of the survey and how a particular respondent felt about issues such as alternate weekly collections. Responses around September were swayed by the reversion to alternate weekly collections, although this has now been superseded by the new services. There has been much national press around waste collection and high profile campaigns by some local newspapers to discredit wheeled bins and recycling arrangements. However, recycling rates remain high which suggests that residents are content. In order to sustain this, the new service should, once the initial period has settled, see an improvement. The contractor will be kept under pressure to deliver a consistently high level of service and to avoid missed collections etc which have a high impact on customer satisfaction.

6.5 **Local /tips household recycling centres** - In terms of the most frequently used are local tips household recycling centres (53%). The most popular service amongst those who have used them, around three quarters are satisfied with recycling centres (75%) page 29.

6.6 Recycling Centres for Household Waste are provided by Essex County Council and are now somewhat old and would benefit from some further investment by the County. However, the scale of investment in other waste plant/equipment precludes this. Some criticism of the centres arises from the controls now in place to regulate access and to ensure that waste is separated into recyclable and non recyclable waste. This can cause frustration but is necessary. Lastly, there are only three Recycling Centres for Household Waste in the area and that travelling times for some residents may also affect the performance rating. Liaison with Essex County Council over the operation and effectiveness of the Recycling Centres for Household Waste sites in the district would work towards addressing these issues.

7.0 Satisfaction with Leisure and Cultural Services

7.1 *In terms of leisure and cultural service, the most popular and frequently used facilities are parks and open spaces (17%) and around three quarters are satisfied with them (72%). Around half are satisfied with sport and leisure facilities (51%) page 30.*

7.2 **Parks and open spaces** - Given the amount and mix of open space in the district, this is a respectable outcome. Much of the land is not under the direct control of Epping Forest District Council is well managed and maintained. As with many other areas we need to ensure that our relationships with other major land owners Corporation of London, Lee Valley Regional Parks Authority and Parish Councils etc, are sound and that we are working in a joined up way when we can.

7.3 **Sport and leisure facilities** - There has been considerable investment, through Sports Leisure Management (SLM), at a number of leisure centres. The district suffers from not having a natural focus, with the need to provide and maintain a number of leisure facilities rather than being able to concentrate efforts on one key facility at a central location. Investment will continue and Members are shortly to decide on further investment at Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool in a new sports hall. A feasibility study for the provision of new facilities at Epping Sports Centre and/or St John's area development may determine the issues in the area. In addition to the provision of built facilities, the Council also provides a comprehensive range of sports and cultural activities throughout the district, based at local community halls and within Council Housing areas, which may not be perceived by local residents to be a 'Council' provided service.

7.4 *Respondents are more likely to be dissatisfied with local bus services (30%); local transport information (28%); and theatres and concert halls (30%)page 30.*

7.5 **Local bus service** - Despite encouragement to reduce reliance on cars and to use public transport more, the reality of the past few years has often been a decline in patronage of local bus services. Local bus services are difficult to operate economically and there are limited subsidised routes. The costs and low passenger numbers has lead to amalgamations or reductions of such services.

- 7.6 The nature of the district is such that the south is relatively well served, whereas the remainder is not. In the more urban parts of the District buses are a more common feature (as are rail services). For some in the rural areas, the car is an essential feature because local bus services have never operated to a high degree in those areas. Due to lack of customer support and operational costs the services have been forced to withdraw. Even within new developments (such as Meridian Park Waltham Abbey) where bus stops and subsidised services to the public transport interchanges at Waltham Cross were provided, did not bring about a step change in local bus use.
- 7.7 This is difficult to overcome for a district such as this. Residents demand better services (including free travel on the tube etc). An affordable local bus service for local taxpayers fails to meet customer expectations of choice and quality. This is plainly very frustrating for those who rely on such services, particularly if they contrast the position with services offered in London.
- 7.9 **Theatres and Concert Halls** - The Council does not own or manage any theatres or concert halls. There is one small Public Performance space in Loughton (Lopping Hall) and several other Theatres that are owned by Educational establishments and occasionally open to the public. Lopping Hall Theatre was built in 1884 by the Corporation of London, to compensate local residents for withdrawal of their traditional 'Lopping rights' in Epping Forest. It is now managed under an Endowment Fund and therefore does not secure high levels of funding for investment. However, a limited programme of productions are staged at Lopping Hall including Operatic performances by local groups and Pantomimes. The greatest public use of the remaining theatres is with The Corbett Theatre, based at E15 Acting and Technical Theatre School and this is also on a periodic production basis as part of the students work.

8.0 Value for Money

- 8.1 *Just under a third of respondents agree in relation to Epping Forest District Council provides good value for money (36%), and (30%) for Essex County Council page 31.*
- 8.2 In 2008 a value for money review of the way the Council spends tax payers money was undertaken and compared with other local authorities. In the four years 2004/05 to 2007/08 the council made efficiency savings of £1.15 million for a range of services and 84% of council tenants were satisfied with council services which is top quartile performance for a district council. To sustain the council's performance in all services, a Finance and Performance Management Scrutiny Committee was set up to evaluate performance data and create working groups to support services which need improvement.

9.0 The way the council runs things

- 9.1 *More than two fifths of respondents are satisfied with the way Essex County Council runs things (43%), and almost half are satisfied with the way Epping Forest District Council runs things (49%) page 32.*
- 9.2 **Information** - *Although the majority of residents feel well informed about how and where to register to vote (90%), (NI3) and how their council tax is spent (67%). Many feel that they are not well informed in terms of other aspects; in particular how to get*

involved in local decision making 59%; and what to do in the case of a large-scale emergency (73%), (NI37) page 33.

- 9.3 **Local decision making** – The Council provides web based features such as i Plan and webcasting to enable higher customer satisfaction. Becoming involved in the local democratic process can take place at a number of levels. This can range from completion of public consultation forms such as the council's survey prior to introduction of the new waste service, through membership of boards of governors or police authorities, to voting or holding elected office at Parish, District and County Council level. Local weekly newspapers have traditionally provided the main source of information for people to find out about local democratic issues. However, the local media is in a process of decline which has accelerated since the economic downturn. Vibrant local political party activity has also formed a traditional source of information and engagement with people in local communities. Online sources of the information have developed and partly fill the space left by the contraction of traditional local information and engagement sources. New news websites are developing. Single issue pressure groups have also found the internet to be a useful tool for developing and coordinating campaigns. At both member and officer level, local and national organisations are seeking to re-focus communications to take account of these changes.
- 9.4 Locally, general emergency planning messages have been disseminated through a concerted publicity campaign, primarily through The Forester. Articles regularly appear in the quarterly magazine and a centre pull out was included in the Winter 2008 edition. Emergency Planning Officers attend community events and engage directly with people.
- 9.5 Information is also available via the district council and many other agency websites. Residents are increasingly aware of websites, if not the term 'emergency planning' and turn to them for information, for example in the case of severe weather. Residents also turn to national sources such as 24 hour TV and Radio at such times. Other agencies including Essex County Council and the emergency services also work actively to raise public awareness and preparedness. The BBC has been particularly co-operative in helping to raise awareness through general publicity and planned activities such as the County Council 'If' campaign.
- 9.6 Public perception within the survey may not recognise issues as emergency planning awareness. For example, huge amounts of information have been issued at local and national government agency level in order to raise public awareness of swine flu. The issue has received massive amounts of local and national media coverage. Few people can be unaware of swine flu and the measures they may take to protect themselves against it. However, it is debateable whether the public perceives this an 'emergency planning' issue and would consider it in terms of the survey.

10.0 Local decision making and involvement

- 10.1 *A quarter of respondents agree that they can influence local decision making (26%, (NI4). Six in ten feel that, generally speaking or depending on the issues, they would like to be more involved in this process (60%) page 36.*
- 10.2 Regular publicity is carried out to encourage voters to register, continuing to spread the message on voter registration and the fact that regular updates are now published. Epping Forest District Council is not alone in finding problems in finding

members of the Community to come forward to stand for election. This is largely due to local government being perceived as having no independence from central government. The Cabinet system also works against involvement except for up to 10 Councillors. In order to address this the council will identify local people who want to get involved. Epping Forest District Council is trying a new initiative with potential candidates to give them information on what is possible if they become Councillor and what their duties and responsibilities could be.

- 10.3 Involving Council Housing Tenants in new and amended policies and decisions has been a long tradition within EFDC. The Tenants and Leaseholders Federation (TLF) hold meetings every six weeks with the Portfolio Holder and Officers to discuss new and amended policies and to give their views. The TLF representatives come from Residents Associations district-wide. The Chairman of the TLF sits on a number of council groups to report tenants perspective to the Housing Scrutiny Panel, the Repairs Advisory Group and our Customer Perspective Program Group. The introduction of Epping Forest Youth Council in 2007 has enabled the Council to have direct contact with young people on an ongoing basis and therefore provided a vehicle to enable young people to be directly involved in local decision making. The Youth Council is made up of representatives from every Secondary School in the district including Private Schools and Epping Forest College.

11.0 Volunteering

- 11.1 *Although the majority of respondents have not been involved with any volunteering work in the past year (34%), around one in six volunteer at least weekly (16%), (NI6) page 32. Few have been involved in any decision making groups (5%) page 36.*
- 11.2 The Council, and its partners such as Voluntary Action Epping Forest provide volunteering opportunities. In the case of Countrycare and the tree warden schemes the opportunities have been around for many years. Countrycare is one specific service where volunteers work in partnership with paid staff on a regular ongoing basis. In 2008 Countrycare was assisted by 5,500 volunteer hours equivalent to £73,500 based on the average national wage rate. They are engaged in a variety of projects including practical access, biodiversity, reserve and wildlife projects. The Council does not have a specific policy at the moment on volunteering but is looking at ways to foster an interest in the voluntary work sector and encourage staff to become volunteers in their spare time. There are various opportunities that exist to volunteer and to make real differences to local communities. These may be advertised in The Forester magazine. The Council's Community Services is currently in the process of developing a new volunteering strategy in conjunction with Tottenham Hotspur and West Essex School Sport Partnership, that will see the development of new volunteers to support local sports, arts and community clubs across the district.

12.0 Respect and Cohesion

- 12.1 *Around a quarter of respondents agree that parents in the local area take enough responsibility for the behaviour of their children (27%), however around half disagree (52%), (NI22) page 39.*
- 12.2 Nationally, social tensions are not a new phenomenon and continue to exist between young people and the adult population. The District Council and other agencies such

as the Police are working to engage with young people as a means of bridging gaps in understanding and communication.

- 12.3 *More than three quarters of respondents agree that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together (78%). Residents in the Waltham Abbey (28%) and Loughton (29%), are more likely to disagree (NI1), (NI23) page 40.*
- 12.4 The council introduced an Introductory Tenancy Scheme which means that all new tenants undergo a probationary period for the first year of occupation. If they cause anti-social behaviour in that period the council can use legal action to remove the tenants. This sends a strong message to would be anti-social tenants.
- 12.5 *Most respondents do not feel that there is a problem with people treating each other with respect and consideration in their local area (70%), and almost three quarters agree that they have been treated with respect and consideration by public services all or most of the time (74%), (NI140) page 41.*
- 12.6 The Councils Charter and Housing Charter sets out how we will respect and treat customers. The Housing Service Standards contain 80 separate commitments of the level of service people can expect from the council. The Housing Appeals Panel sits five Councillors that consider appeals decisions made by Housing Officers. This system works well as a number of decisions have been overturned.

13.0 Anti-social Behaviour

- 13.1 *The majority of respondents feel safe in their local area (89%), during the day and report anti-social behaviour issues to be fairly unproblematic where they live (NI21). There are fewer than one in five respondents who consider one or more anti-social behaviour issues to be a problem in their local area (17.8%), (NI17) page 45.*
- 13.2 Some areas such as Chigwell, Waltham Abbey and Loughton have been identified as needing additional attention from the Police, including the Mobile Support Division. These are areas located in close proximity to our borders with London Boroughs. It has been identified that around 45% of dwelling burglary offenders have come from the London area, (within 11 kilometres of our borders). Recent offences have included an increase in night time dwelling burglary where offenders were breaking into homes whilst residents were asleep in order to steal car keys to steel high quality cars on driveways.

Reason for Decision:

To identify what steps should be taken from receipt of this information following the Place Survey 2008 and subsequent Comprehensive Area Assessment.

Resource Implications: None

Budget/Personnel/Land: None

Council Plan/Best Value Performance Plan Reference: None

Relevant Statutory Powers: *Strong and Prosperous Communities* White Paper

Background papers: Communities and Local Government, National Indicators for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships

Environment/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: None

Key Decision Reference: (if required): None