

ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE EXECUTIVE

2009/10

**FOREWARD BY COUNCILLOR DIANA COLLINS
THE LEADER OF EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL**

In 2009/10 we have met our objectives, approved strategies for the development of key sites in the District and set out our proposals for housing and economic development for the next 20 years as part of the Local Development Framework, progressed the Gypsy and Traveller Plan almost to completion and taken a number of measures as part of a newly agreed District Travel Plan.

All this has been achieved against the continuing backdrop of an economic downturn. The Council has been involved in a number of measures and initiatives aimed at reducing the impact of recession on the District and its residents. We have helped local businesses by appointing a 'Business Champion' who listens to their problems and we help wherever possible to inform them of available grants, paying bills more promptly, not putting up car parking charges (last year and again this year) and generally making it easier for them to compete for contracts. We also gave a large grant to the CAB because of the huge increase in their work-load through the recession.

In undertaking our community leadership role, we have worked in partnership with Epping Forest College, taking the Chairmanship of its governing body in October 2009. With our assistance, the College has achieved an much more positive Ofsted inspection in March 2020. The Inspectors were very satisfied with the atmosphere at the College, that the students were enjoying their studies and expectations had been raised everywhere. We are also working hard with local secondary schools to improve educational standards across the District.

All our Council Houses have reached the Decent Homes Standard well before the deadline of the end of this year, through prudent repairs and maintenance regularly over the years.

Our Waste Management Service has improved once again by collecting food and garden waste on a weekly basis. We are now recycling more than 50% of our rubbish which is well up with the performance of the best in the country.

We play an active role in the Local Strategic Partnership (One Epping Forest) and have received large grants from the Government from the Future Jobs fund to employ young people who are out of a job to give them some opportunities of work experience in West Essex.

Our Youth Council is thriving and the young people from all our secondary schools are helping to keep us on our toes with their enthusiasm and new ideas.

Crime has decreased again this year thanks to our 'in house' safer communities team and their co-operation with the local police. We have developed an excellent working relationship with the local farmers and the more rural areas. We have put up more CCTV cameras and are monitoring them regularly.

In spite of the recession we have managed to increase your Council tax by only 1.5% this year and we shall continue to use your money wisely and prudently so that we can continue to provide good services and value for money. We never forget it is your money we are spending.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report is submitted under Executive Procedure Rule 4(a) and (b) of the Constitution (Page H6). It provides a résumé of major policy issues determined and a summary of issues discussed by Cabinet across the various Council Portfolios during the Council year 2009/10, the eighth year of full operation of the new Executive Constitution under the Local Government Act 2000.

2. KEY PRIORITY OBJECTIVES

- 2.1 The Council set the following Key Priority Objectives for 2009/10. The major policy issues determined by the Executive during the year are a reflection of these priority objectives.

Leader's Portfolio

- To improve access to and information about the Council's services through the implementation of a Customer Transformation Programme
- The delivery of a Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan
- To work with Essex County Council, Epping Forest College and local schools to further the educational opportunities and facilities for younger people
- To deliver the Core Strategy of the Local Development Framework

Finance and Economic Development Portfolio

- To continue work towards the future development of key sites at The Broadway, Loughton and the St John's Road area of Epping
- To complete the strategic review of North Weald Airfield, through the continuing work of the North Weald Airfield Strategy Cabinet Committee
- To help mitigate the impact of the current economic conditions on local people and businesses
- To ensure the Council provides good value for money, through the development of a comprehensive value for money strategy
- To maintain the Council's sound financial position and its policy of not increasing Council Tax by more than 2.5%
- To improve performance on the processing of benefit claims and changes of circumstances
- To develop a strategy for the achievement of the level of efficiency savings identified within the Council's medium term financial strategy

Legal and Estates Portfolio

- To review the Council's landholdings in order to co-ordinate competing land use proposals, to fulfil the authority's operational requirements and achieve value for money

- To externally review the future provision of the Council's Estates and Valuation Service

Housing Portfolio

- To improve the responsive repairs service to tenants, particularly response times, through a partnership with a large private repairs management company
- To significantly increase the number of people receiving financial support provided to private occupiers, to help meet the decent homes standard, improve thermal efficiency and install disabled adaptations, through a new, properly resourced, Private Sector Housing Strategy

Performance Management Portfolio

- To improve performance on the processing of planning applications, as measured by National Indicator 157

Environment Portfolio

- With the Council's contractor SITA, to commence the implementation of agreed changes to the waste management service

Community Safety and Transport Portfolio

- To complete and publish the Executive summary to the Safer Community Partnership Plan
- To achieve accreditation for the Council's Environment and Neighbourhood Officers under the Essex Police Community Safety Accreditation Scheme
- To implement 'localism' for the Local County Highways Service and to ensure that the Council's Environmental Response Team and the County Council's 'Highway Ranger' service provided complementary services to the residents of the district
- To complete all the outstanding parking reviews in the district

Leisure and Wellbeing Portfolio

- To play an active part in the delivery of initiatives being co-ordinated by the Local Strategic Partnership, aimed at reducing health inequalities in the areas of greatest need across the district
- Subject to the outcome of the Feasibility Study, to commence the construction of a sports hall and changing rooms at Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool
- To implement the operational changes required following the completion of the review of the North Weald Airfield Strategy
- To build on the work of the Epping Forest Youth Council and implement the actions arising from the 'Big Youth Debate' in 2008

- To maximum the legacy benefits of the 2012 Olympic white water canoe venue in liaison with the Borough of Broxbourne and Lee Valley Park Authority
- To work with partners and the local community to provide improved facilities at Limes Farm Hall
- To develop a multi-sports facility at Ongar Leisure Centre, providing high quality facilities for a range of outdoor sports

3. PORTFOLIO CHANGES

- 3.1 The number of Portfolios covered by Cabinet Members was decreased from 9 to 8 and there were a number of changes to the range of responsibilities covered by the Portfolios. Details of the Portfolios and Portfolio Holders are set out below:

Leader's Portfolio - Councillor Mrs Di Collins
 Finance and Economic Development - Councillor Chris Whitbread
 Performance Management - Councillor Richard Bassett
 Community Safety and Transport - Councillor Ms Syd Stavrou
 Environment - Councillor Mrs Mary Sartin
 Leisure and Wellbeing - Councillor Heather Harding (from 21 May to 6 July 2009)
 and Councillor Brian Rolfe (7 July 2009 and thereafter)
 Housing - Councillor David Stallan
 Legal and Estates - Mitchell Cohen

- 3.2 The portfolio changes reflect the allocation of the key priority objectives within the portfolios referred to in 2 above.

4. LEADER'S PORTFOLIO

4.1 Forester Consultation and Local Strategic Partnership

- 4.1.1 The Forester the Council's magazine for residents, is produced four times a year. New arrangements were implemented for delivery to all households and businesses in the District following the transfer of the work from the Royal Mail to a private distribution company, D2D. Subsequent to the conclusion of the public consultation exercise, some recommendations for the future of the Forester were agreed. These included: the retention of the A4 colour format; greater use of imagery, shorter and more concise articles; retention of community news and features within the magazine; and better design of the front cover page. These recommendations will be subject to a further review during 2010/11.

4.2 Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan - Counsel Advice and Initial Analysis of the Options Consultation Responses

- 4.2.1 The Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan was debated and progressed in the light of Counsel advice received and the initial analysis of the Options Consultation responses. Various options had been either rejected or were still under discussion. The Council had been involved in discussions with the Minister and the Government Office for the East of England in the light of advice received and because recent decisions by the Department of Communities and Local Government had made significant in-roads into the Regional Spatial Strategy's targets.

- 4.2.2 The whole process was proving time consuming, impacting on the overall development of a Local Development Framework and undermining progress on the Core Strategy. Nonetheless, there had been significant progress on the Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan with an increase in authorised sites and a decrease in unauthorised sites since 2006.

4.3 Further Development of Langston Road Depot and Other Key Sites in the District

- 4.3.1 Approval was given to a strategy for the future development of Langston Road and other key sites in the District owned by the Council, providing for the relocation of Council services away from the Langston Road depot. As well as making progress towards achieving the objective of vacating and selling the site or, as an alternative, redeveloping it to achieve increased revenue income, this helped mitigate health and safety issues in relation to overcrowding at the depot.

The strategy included an 'in principle' decision to relocate the Grounds Maintenance Section, Vehicle Workshop, MOT and Service Bays, and the Waste Management Team, to an alternative site on the Oakwood Hill Industrial Estate. A detailed report on the construction and relocation costs arising would be considered before a final decision was made. In addition, the relocation of the Refuse and Street Cleansing Contractor from Langston Road Depot would be timed to coincide with the renewal of the contract in 2012 or 2014.

4.4 Epping Forest Youth Council

- 4.4.1 The Epping Forest Youth Council was established in 2007 with the original Youth Councillors completing their term of Office at Christmas 2009. Elections were held in local schools in Autumn 2009 to recruit new members for the period 2010-12. Twenty-three young people were elected, representing all the local secondary schools within the District, along with three independent candidates that went to schools outside of the District.
- 4.4.2 The operation of the Youth Council currently costs the Council approximately £12,000 per annum, covering general expenses and a wide range of training and development along with special events such as Youth Debates; and Youth Council uniforms. Approval was given to a budget in a similar amount for the Youth Council in 2010/11.

4.5 Conservation Resources and Planning Delivery Grant

- 4.5.1 Historically, at its peak, the Council's Conservation section has employed a Conservation Officer and one Conservation Assistant. A service level agreement with Essex County Council has been in place since 2008 for specialist advice on archaeology and statutory listed buildings. The previous Conservation Assistant vacated the post in December 2007, and that post had not been filled on a permanent basis since that time.
- 4.5.2 For the period from November 2008 to February 2009, a temporary Assistant Conservation Officer was appointed to carry forward work on three Character Appraisals and Management Plans. Another temporary Assistant Conservation Officer who was appointed in November 2009 and left in early February 2010. The value in having individuals in post to carry out work is illustrated in the fact that it became possible to carry out Character Appraisals and complete Management Plans which might otherwise have been delayed for some considerable time.

4.5.3 Accordingly, approval was given to the creation of a one year fixed term Technical Officer, via a secondment. The post will assist the Council in continuing its ongoing work, completing the updating and creation of the District's Conservation Area Character Appraisals and Management Plans. Additionally, the Conservation Officer provides support in helping maintain the high standard of Development Control applications, Enforcement Team advice and other statutory functions.

4.6 Local Development Framework - EERA Consultation - 2031 Scenarios for Housing and Economic Development

The District Council was consulted by the East of England Regional Authority (EERA) on the 2031 scenarios for Housing and Economic Development, and put forward its views as follows:

- That a fifth scenario should be considered dealing with the realistic assessment of infrastructure provision in terms of the implications for deliverable housing and economic growth;
- That the information on Harlow's future growth was misleading. The consultation document should give far more detail about how the figures for the various scenarios were going to be split between Harlow, East Herts and the Epping Forest District. This authority also believed that the growth totals proposed in scenarios 3 and 4 were unrealistic and undeliverable in this District;
- That scenario 1 of the four in the consultation was preferred, but the fifth scenario now suggested by the District Council was likely to be the most realistic;
- That the regional impact assessment should include consideration of the Green Belt as this is a significant important issue within the District;
- That the vision and objectives of the Plan remained suitable;
- That Policies H3 (Provision for Gypsies & Travellers) and H4 (Provision for Travelling Show People) from the Single Issue Review should be included in the next review of the Plan as they concentrate on provision only up to 2021; and
- That the evidence base and technical information presented be considered not satisfactory.

4.7 Other Issues

4.7.1 Other Issues dealt with under this portfolio included:

- Local Development Framework - Consultation on Minerals Development Document: Site Allocations - Issues and Options Paper
- Cartersfield Road, Waltham Abbey - Change of Use
- Forward Planning Staffing Resources

5. COMMUNITY SAFETY AND TRANSPORT PORTFOLIO

5.1 District Council Travel Plan

- 5.1.1 A 'Travel Plan' is a general term for a package of measures tailored to the needs of individual sites aimed at promoting greener, cleaner travel choices and reducing reliance on the car. It involves the development of a set of initiatives that enable an organisation to reduce the impact of travel and transport on the environment, whilst also bringing benefits to it as an employer and to its staff. Approval was given to the introduction and development of a District Council Travel Plan, identifying a number of areas for potential enhancements including car sharing, car park management, public transport improvements, cycling, walking facilities, and incentives, home working, 'green' fleet arrangements, changes through the Car Lease Scheme, working with local businesses and improvements through the planning process.

5.2 Local Highways Panel - Parish Council Representatives

- 5.2.1 A request was received from the Local Council's Liaison Committee for the number of Parish Council representatives on the Local Highways Panel to increase to four and for the representatives to be given full voting rights, in common with the District Council representatives on the Panel. Mindful that the advice contained within the Localism Manual recommended that Local Highways Panels should have four, rather than three, representatives, each with full voting rights, the District Council approved the request. In view of the perception that some areas were not represented on the Panel, it was also agreed that a geographical analysis of the areas covered by the Panels should be undertaken. A report on the operations and procedures of the Panel will be considered during 2010/11.

5.3 The Prevent Strategy and Preventing Violent Extremism Action Plan

- 5.3.1 The 'Prevent' agenda is a key part of the Government's approach to managing extremism within communities, and part of the overarching 'Contest' policy dealing with all types of extremism and terrorist activities. The District Council adopted the 'Prevent' Action Plan and, in doing so, requested the Epping Forest Local Strategic Partnership ('One Epping Forest') to oversee the delivery of the Action Plan.

5.4 Concessionary Fares - Grant Aid Consultation

- 5.4.1 The Department for Transport issued a Consultation Paper which proposed to reduce the special grant for concessionary fares to the Council in 2010/11 from £250,000 to £120,000.

The District Council was in an agreement with Essex County Council and the other Essex District Councils for the funding of concessionary travel in the county. This agreement had been based upon the original allocation of Special Grant. A final decision regarding the special grant payable to the District Council would not be made until later in 2010. However, if this Council was to lose £130,000 of Special Grant and adhere to the existing agreement, then funding would have to be allocated from the District Development Fund.

5.5 "Ring Go" - Mobile Phone Payments for Car Parking

- 5.5.1 The Council agreed to a trial of "Ring Go", which enables drivers to pay for parking in the Council's car parks using their mobile phones. This means drivers can pay for what parking they need and can buy additional time without having to return to the

car park. This should make payment for car parking more convenient, especially for regular users of the Council's car parks.

6. ENVIRONMENT PORTFOLIO

6.1 Safer, Cleaner Greener Strategy

6.1.1 The Safer Cleaner Greener initiative was adopted by the District Council in February 2008 and, during 2009/10, agreed a strategy setting out its approach to implementing the initiative. In respect of graffiti on private fences in public areas, each case was judged sympathetically and the Council would help wherever possible. Officers were successful in achieving their accreditation with Essex Police with a view to being able to issue Penalty Charge Notices. However the emphasis would be on education rather than prosecution. The Strategy was being funded from savings made by the Council and re-invested in front line services.

6.2 Environment and Street Scene Enforcement Policy and Guide

6.2.1 The Council adopted an Enforcement Policy and Guide for the Environment and Street Scene Directorate. The Policy sets out how the Directorate will undertake its enforcement role and particularly how officers will deal with those in the community when enforcement activities are undertaken. It was important for the Policy to be updated before the Environment and Neighbourhoods Team completed their Essex Police accreditation training and commenced their work within the District. Whilst the Policy was being revised, the opportunity was taken to produce a shorter, easier to understand guide for the general public. Both the Policy and the Guide would help to ensure that those members of the public who interacted with the Directorate during its enforcement activities were fully aware of what to expect from Officers and to be satisfied that they would be treated fairly and proportionately.

6.3 Waste Management Policies

6.3.1 A number of waste management policies were introduced following the implementation of the original wheeled bin service, which had dealt with issues around the size of containers, closed lids and contamination. With the successful implementation of the new waste management service in September 2009, it was essential that these policies were reviewed and amended to reflect the new service and current operational circumstances. Policy statement number 7 - the Exception Policy - was further revised in respect of a second food and garden waste wheeled bin for larger residences. Food waste wrapped in newspaper was now accepted if compostable bags were not available. Policy statement number 5 was amended to make clear that dry recyclables would be collected provided it was within a clear plastic sack and not necessarily the official sacks supplied by the Council. The revisions were critical to the success of the new scheme in that residents, the contractor and waste management officers, had a clear set of operational policies agreed and in place.

6.4 Fixed Penalty Notices Policy

6.4.1 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) are a means by which an authorised officer of the Council can give a person, whom they have reason to believe has committed an offence, the opportunity to discharge any liability to conviction for the offence by the payment of a fixed penalty. The Council is also able to retain the receipts from fixed penalties. Where a FPN is given, no proceedings are instituted for that offence before the expiration of 14 days following the date of the notice being issued and, if

the Fixed Penalty is paid, then the recipient cannot be convicted of the offence. If the Fixed Penalty is not paid, then the recipient will be prosecuted for the original offence, not the non-payment of the Fixed Penalty. The statutory minimum discount is to be offered to all offenders paying within 10 days of the offence. A policy incorporating these various elements was adopted by the Council.

6.5 Other Issues

6.5.1 Other issues dealt with under this portfolio included:

- Procurement Process for Major Tree Works Contract.
- Community Buildings - Waste and Management Recycling Fees
- Waste Containers - Provision of Replacements and Spare Parts
- Contaminated Land Budget
- Out of Hours Land Drainage Standby Service
- Loughton Broadway Town Centre Enhancement Scheme - Final Account
- Replacement of Lease Vehicle - Grounds Maintenance
- Award of The Major Trees Contract

7. HOUSING PORTFOLIO

7.1 Parking Enforcement on Housing Estates

7.1.1 Following an increase in complaints from the public about unauthorised parking on housing estates, particularly on grass verges causing damage to open green spaces, increased enforcement action was taken. However, this resulted in other residents complaining about having nowhere to park. The Cabinet therefore considered its future policy on this issue.

7.1.2 Four Options for Future Action were considered: Fully enforcing unauthorised parking; postponing enforcement in identified priority areas; continuing with the parking enforcement policy; or carrying out enforcement measures on an ad hoc basis. It was agreed that parking enforcement action (other than placing notices on vehicles or writing to residents) should be taken on an ad hoc basis following consultation with local residents and Ward Members, with the position being reviewed again in 2010/11. It was felt that this action would ensure that the correct areas were targeted and prevent severe congestion in side streets which would almost certainly occur if enforcement action was taken in all areas.

7.2 Review of Older People's Services

7.2.1 A review was carried out of Older Peoples' Services, including the provision of the Scheme Manager Service and Careline. In recent times, the service has expanded owing to a substantial increase in workload, which is expected to increase further in the future. The previous structure of the Section was no longer considered

appropriate, given the Housing Manager (Older Peoples' Services) needing to become more involved in day-to-day work and not having sufficient time to deal with the strategic direction of the services.

- 7.2.2 A number of factors had contributed to the increase in workload including the Supporting Peoples' Older Peoples' Strategic Review, which would bring changes to the way the Scheme Manager Service was provided, the expansion of Careline, the possibility of linking an external alarm provider into the Careline Service and the development of Telecare which provided additional monitoring equipment for alarm users. Consequently, it was agreed that one full time equivalent Senior Scheme Manager post be added to the establishment to enable the re-structuring of the Older Peoples' Service and to ensure residents were able to fully benefit from this important service.

7.3 Review of Interim Shared Ownership Policy

A review of the Interim Shared Ownership Policy highlighted the need to continue with the policy, given the current depressed state of the housing market. Whilst there appeared to have been some improvement in the property market, first time buyers were still finding difficulty obtaining mortgages and accessing the property market. The Interim Policy allows housing associations to offer shared ownership accommodation as a 'Rent Now - Buy Later' scheme, if they have difficulties in selling shared ownership accommodation in the current market. Therefore, it was agreed that the Interim Shared Ownership Policy be continued and reviewed again later in 2010.

7.4 Housing Strategy

- 7.4.1 Following wide consultation on the draft, involving the invitation of comments from 155 organisations, the Council approved the Housing Strategy for the period 2009-12. The Key Action Plan forming part of the strategy would be updated annually, with progress against the Action Plan monitored every six months by the Housing Scrutiny Panel.

7.5 Private Sector Housing Strategy

- 7.5.1 It was necessary to develop a replacement for the existing Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy, which was due to expire in 2009. An effective Strategy that fully maximised all the funding streams available can only be developed with a detailed understanding of private sector housing such as would be provided by a stock condition survey. To produce a new strategy it will be necessary to carry out a Private Sector House Condition Survey during 2010. Thus it was not possible to introduce a new strategy until early in 2011 and, accordingly, approval was given to the extension of the existing strategy until the new one could be implemented.

7.6 HRA Five Year Forecast

- 7.6.1 The estimate of income and expenditure over the next five years indicates that the financial health of the Housing Revenue Account remains good. Accordingly, the Capital Expenditure charged to revenue to keep the balance on the Housing Revenue Account was maintained at around £3.8m. There is expected to be a significant balance on the Major Repairs Reserve, meaning that the proposed switch in funding was unlikely to give rise to any significant issues. A further Five Year Forecast would be produced in March 2011 or sooner if the Council came out of the Housing Subsidy system following an agreed debt re-allocation.

7.7 Other Issues

7.7.1 Other issues dealt with under this portfolio included:

- Local Authority Repossession Prevention Fund
- Report of the Affordable Housing Group
- Redesign of the Epping Forest Careline Premises Extension
- Private Sector Housing Team Review
- Restructure of Combined Repairs and Building Maintenance Works Unit
- Formation of Local Housing Company
- Private Sector Housing Capital Funding Programme
- Housing Tree Maintenance Budget
- Springfield Improvement Scheme - Progress Report
- Redevelopment Scheme - Marden Close, Chigwell

8. FINANCE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO

8.1 Capital Strategy

8.1.1 The Capital Strategy for the period 2009-14 sets out the Council's Capital Strategy based on the Capital Programme. It is a key strategic document linked to other key corporate and strategic documents such as the Council Plan, the Community Strategy, the Best Value Performance Plan and the Asset Management Plan. It is important to update the Capital Strategy each year to maintain a high level of control over the Council's capital resources and fixed assets.

Approval was given to a ranking for each Key Capital Priority to assist future decisions regarding individual capital projects and for £272,000 of capital funding to be carried forward from 2009/10 to 2010/11. The Capital Strategy for 2009-14 incorporating these elements was agreed.

8.2 Council Budgets 2010/11

8.2.1 General Fund budgets containing the following elements were approved:

- Revised revenue estimates for 2009/10, with an anticipated reduction of the General Fund balance by £837,000;
- An increase in the target for the 2010/11 Continuing Services Budget from £18million to £18.1million (including growth items);
- An increase in the target for the 2010/11 District Development Fund net spend from £1.3million to £1.4million;

- An increase of 1.5% in the District Council Tax for a Band 'D' property to raise the charge from £146.61 to £148.77;
- The estimated reduction in General Fund balances in 2010/11 of £551,000;
- The four year capital programme 2010/11 - 13/14;
- The Medium Term Financial Strategy 2010/11 - 13/14; and
- The Council's policy on General Fund Revenue Balances to remain that they be allowed to fall no lower than 25% of the Net Budget Requirement.

8.2.2 Included in the revised estimates was the 2010/11 Housing Revenue Account. A number of rent increases and decreases were agreed in accordance with the Government's rent reforms and the Council's approved rent strategy which, with the addition of an extra element, resulted in an average overall increase of 2.4%.

8.3 Financial Assistance for Broadway Traders

8.3.1 Following consideration of the trading position, a scheme of rent refunds was put in place to assist the traders on Loughton Broadway. The scheme, based on temporary amendments to rateable values approved by the Valuation Office provided much needed financial assistance to the traders during the present uncertain economic climate.

8.4 Restructure of Benefits Division

8.4.1 Temporary "Hit Squad" funding previously made available in respect of the Council's Benefits Division had led to substantial improvements in performance. However, that funding had now been used up and, given the ongoing higher workload in the Division, it proved necessary to consider the impact on staffing resources. The additional workload had been recognised by the Government through the provision of further grant and it was agreed to use this grant to minimise the requirement for additional resources from the General Fund.

8.4.2 The caseload of the section had been increasing and the review indicated the requirement for two new assessment posts, one Benefit Officer and one Benefit Assistant, and a new System Administrator post. The two new assessment posts were on three year fixed term contracts, whilst the new System Administrator became a permanent member of staff. The new posts are being funded initially by the additional grant received and partly offset by the deletion of a vacant post.

8.4.3 It was considered that the new arrangements would better match workload and staffing resources so that a good service be provided to claimants could be continued.

8.5 Small Business Engagement Accord

8.5.1 The Council became a signatory to the Small Business Engagement Accord. The accord is a voluntary code of practice for local authorities in the East of England seeking to encourage a more productive dialogue with local businesses. The Accord brings together various aspects of consultation best practice, as well as specific proposals from the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) designed to improve the level of participation by businesses in local democracy. It represents a commitment

by local authorities to taking a productive approach in engaging with businesses so that they are given the fullest opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, and to fully understand the reasons behind decisions taken.

8.6 Debt and Money Advice Provision

8.6.1 A number of measures were agreed aimed at assisting the provision of debt and money advice given the severe, adverse impact the recession had had on such provision. In particular, having noted the significant increase in the number of cases dealt with by CABs and the CABs excellent response to the increased demand, the Council approved a further grant of £4,300 to Epping Forest CAB (in addition to the annual grant of £113,000). Furthermore, to help it clear the backlog of outstanding debt advice cases, the Council agreed to provide additional office space to the local CAB.

8.6.2 The Council agreed to foster an interest in volunteering and voluntary work through:

- Encouraging employees to become volunteers in their spare time (e.g. as part of the induction programme);
- Publicity in The Forester magazine;
- Encouraging other major employers in the District to promote the benefits of voluntary work; and
- Promoting voluntary work through the use of information available at suitable locations, including Council Offices and Job Centre Plus.

8.6.3 It was also accepted that there was a need for more spacious facilities at the Civic Offices for interviewing benefits claimants. This issue would be addressed through the Customer Transformation Programme or another Civic Offices Work Programme.

8.6.4 The vital role being carried out by Credit Unions during the current economic recession was both recognised and supported by the Council, including the work being undertaken by Essex Savers in the District. Encouragement was given to the extension of its operation to the more outlying rural areas, by publicising its role internally and through other major employers in the District.

8.6.5 The West Essex Partnership, of which the District Council was a member organisation, was allocated £1.1million from the Future Jobs Fund. The District's share of this funding would lead to 28 new job placements for long-term unemployed young people.

8.7 Sundry Income and Debt Policy

8.7.1 A review of the Council's Sundry Income and Debt policy was commenced. As part of the review, a number of other authorities were contacted regarding their Sundry Debt Policy. It was discovered that a number of authorities had yet to formalise a Sundry Debt Policy. Where a debt policy was available it was found that the Epping Forest District Council policy was in line with the vast majority. Nonetheless, a number of required enhancements were identified and implemented. These included the introduction of Direct Debits to the Sundry Debtor system and the upgrading of the system software.

8.8 Other Issues

8.8.1 Other Issues dealt with under this portfolio included:

- Treasury Management Annual Report of Prudential Indicators
- Tender for Insurance Policies
- 0² Mast - Honey Lane, Waltham Abbey
- Staffing Resources - Planning and Economic Development Directorate
- Capital Programme Review
- North Weald Airfield Strategy
- External Funding - Annual Report
- Internal Audit - Options for Service Delivery

9. LEGAL AND ESTATES PORTFOLIO

9.1 Marketing Exercise - Church Hill Car Park, Loughton

9.1.1 Approval was given to carrying out a marketing exercise in respect of the Church Hill Car Park site at Loughton to ensure that the site was developed to its optimum potential to achieve best value from either a freehold sale or a long lease agreement. The site was declared surplus to requirements as a car park in 2007. Given that there was presently a buoyant market for supermarket sites, the Council could dispose of the land asset which had the potential to provide a good investment with a substantial income stream. The provision of a small supermarket would provide a useful local facility currently lacking in the immediate area and reinforce the valuable service of the petrol filling station. Another alternative was to continue to hold the site until the residential market improves. These various options would be looked at in more depth and considered again on completion of the in-depth review.

9.2 External Review of Estates and Valuation Service

9.2.1 An external review of the Council's Estates and Valuation Service was undertaken by Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, with the brief to consider various options, including retaining the service in house or outsourcing either in part or in total, and make recommendations on how the service should be provided in the future. In conclusion it was agreed that best value would be achieved by retaining the service in house, with two permanent staff appointed at Principal Valuer and Senior Valuer level to form the core of the team, augmented with at least two further Valuer and Surveyors posts, plus a further resource to provide financial administration, and the agency appointments replaced with permanent contracts to further reduce costs.

9.3 Rent Deferral Scheme - Shops in Loughton Broadway

9.3.1 The possibility of a rent deferral scheme for the tenants of shops in Loughton Broadway and to provide assistance to all of the Council's shops and commercial premises tenants during the recession was looked at. After careful consideration it was decided not to undertake a rent deferral scheme at present, given the potential risk of loss of income to the Council and the fact that such a scheme would not necessarily alleviate the cash flow difficulties of tenants. However, it was agreed that every possible help should be extended to tenants of the Council's commercial and industrial properties during the current economic downturn, including the facility to enter into staged rent payments.

9.4 Other Issues

9.4.1 Other Issues dealt with under this portfolio included:

- New Licensing Officer Post
- 148 Brooker Road, Waltham Abbey
- Council Properties in Cartersfield Road, Waltham Abbey
- Parade Ground, North Weald Airfield
- Release of Restrictive Covenant - Epping Forest College

10. LEISURE AND WELLBEING PORTFOLIO

10.1 Provision of Sports Hall - Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool

10.1.1 Following the decision to withdraw from the Joint Use Agreement with King Harold School regarding the management of the Sports Centre at Waltham Abbey, consideration was given to the feasibility of constructing a replacement sports hall as part of the existing leisure complex at Waltham Abbey Swimming Pool. A feasibility study had recommended a new sports hall at the Pool site identifying clear benefits for the community. However, as it was not clear whether the project would generate the necessary income, it was agreed the proposal should proceed only to the pre-planning stage for the moment. The project would only continue beyond this stage if it was felt that it would be at least cost neutral to the Council.

10.2 Ongar Playing Fields/Waltham Abbey Town Mead Re-development

10.2.1 A comprehensive Playing Pitch Strategy carried out in 2007/08, had highlighted a shortage of football pitches in key locations across the District, and in particular junior and youth facilities in the Ongar area. To address this identified lack of provision, the feasibility of external funding opportunities was investigated and approval given to development of the Playing Fields at the Ongar Leisure Centre with a commitment of up to £527,000 from the Council's Capital Programme, depending on the amount of external funding gained.

10.2.2 Funding bids to the Football Foundation and the Sport England's Rural Fund proved unsuccessful and a bid to the Essex Football Association, in view of the delays in receiving notification from the other potential funders the Council, did not meet the timescales required. However, in the intervening period, the need for an all weather pitch in Ongar, diminished, after the provision of new additional facilities in Brentwood and Shenfield, and the proposed development at the Ongar Leisure Centre was no longer considered viable.

10.2.3 Other opportunities within the District were investigated, which would also meet with the Council's principle to only provide capital funding for revenue generating schemes. There was potential for the installation of a new Astroturf facility at the Town Mead Recreation Ground in Waltham Abbey and that was expected to meet these criteria. Meetings were held with the Town Council and a site visit undertaken where there was currently a floodlit all-weather pitch that needed replacement. The proposal was to provide a third generation Astroturf pitch, using the funds previously allocated for Ongar Leisure Centre.

10.2.4 Accordingly, the £527,000 capital provision for the Ongar Scheme was re-allocated to provide a new full sized general floodlit all-weather pitch at Town Mead Recreation Ground in Waltham Abbey.

10.3 The Essex Children's Trust - Memorandum of Agreement

10.3.1 The Children's Act 2004 provides the legal underpinning for the national framework established by "Every Child Matters: Change for Children" and District Councils have a duty "to co-operate in the making of arrangements to improve well being" for children and young people 19 years or under. The most specific is the duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children alongside the more general "duty to co-operate" within Children's Trust Arrangements.

10.3.2 At the Essex Children's Trust Partnership Board in November 2009, it was provisionally agreed that a Memorandum of Agreement should be entered into by all the constituent partners. The draft agreement was subsequently considered by the Essex Association of Chief Executives whereupon the District Council raised some concerns about the agreement being open-ended with no provision for review and in respect of the pooled funding arrangements. The Memorandum was subsequently amended to run for a two-year period, with funding being aligned where possible, although there was still the possibility of a future agreement to pool resources.

10.3.3 The aim of the Memorandum was to demonstrate a commitment to a shared approach and get all the partners working together to achieve common objectives. The Council would not be obligated to perform any additional duties or pool any funding as any agreements within the partnership would be based on consensus. The Council was already a member of the Trust under the terms of the Children's Act 2004 and the Memorandum was designed to bring all the partners together to work on an agreed set of priorities and objectives, with resources aligned as appropriate.

10.3.4 Nonetheless, the District Council remained concerned about certain aspects of the Memorandum including the lack of any mechanisms to share best practice between the partners, and there being no consultation over the improvement plan in place for the Trust. The District Council took its responsibilities seriously, as evidenced by the Key Priority Objective for 2010/11 to safeguard the welfare of children within the District, would to continue to meet its statutory obligations in this area and was prepared to work in partnership with other organisations. However, it was agreed that the District Council should not become signatories until such time as the required further information and assurances were received and that a letter should be written to the County Council outlining the Council's concerns.

10.4 Limes Farm Hall Development

10.4.1 Limes Farm Hall is a 1970's community building located in the centre of Limes Farm Estate, Chigwell. The building is functional, but requires significant investment for internal and external modernisation/improvement and complete roof replacement. It is currently used for a range of local groups and organisations and local residents in general. The District Council owns the building and the land it is situated on.

10.4.2 Responsibility for the hall was returned to the Council by Chigwell Parish Council in 2009 and the Council now manages the building.

10.4.3 Consultation with local residents and stakeholders indicates that the hall is inadequate for the current and future needs of the local community, and that a better community facility is an essential requirement for Limes Farm. A range of partners

provide services from buildings elsewhere on the estate and are keen to work closer with the Council and each other, to improve service delivery for local residents. This includes: NHS West Essex transferring their clinic services to a central location and providing additional outreach work for families and young people; Essex Police operating their community policing in conjunction with Safer Communities; Essex County Council extending their existing Children's Centre activity; London and Quadrant Housing providing front of house services alongside the District Council's Housing Service and the introduction of a new Housing Benefits Service.

10.4.4 Independent Consultants were appointed to undertake an options appraisal and feasibility study for the potential development of the hall. That appraisal looked at the following broad options:

- Refurbishment of the existing facility;
- Refurbishment and extension of the facility;
- Demolition of the existing building and re-provision of new build to accommodate a youth space on the same 'footprint'; and
- Demolition of the existing facility and re-provision of a larger new build to accommodate a multi-agency community facility.

10.4.5 A scheme based around an option for refurbishment and redesign, an extension for a Housing and Benefits Office and a further extension for a dedicated youth centre was approved at a capital cost of £802,000 on the basis that this would provide the best balance of service provision for the community. Although a number of external funding bids were unsuccessful, a further £270,000 was secured from Essex County Council Extended Schools Funding.

11. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT PORTFOLIO

11.1 Concessionary Travel on London Underground

11.1.1 The Epping Forest District has a number of London Underground Stations within its boundaries and, whilst residents who are holders of a Freedom Pass can travel free to and from Epping into London, residents of the District are unable to travel free in the opposite direction. Many residents perceive this to be unfair, particularly if they live close to either an Underground Station or the border with a London Borough. It is not possible to extend the Freedom Pass Scheme to cover this District and any similar concession would be prohibitively expensive, with an estimated cost of £7million.

11.1.2 The possibility of an approach to Transport for London to negotiate some form of concession was considered. It was acknowledged that such a scheme would be popular with residents in the south of the District. However the cheapest option would still cost the Council £200 per pass. In addition, the Oyster Card Scheme provides very cheap fares for journeys between Zones 2 and 6. Ultimately, therefore, it was decided not to approach Transport for London regarding the possibility of travel concession on London Underground for residents.

11.2 Managing Absence Procedure

- 11.2.1 A revised Managing Absence Procedure was agreed, aimed at providing a consistent approach for dealing with absences whether of a long-term or short-term nature. The new procedure involved changes in a number of areas including contact with staff on long-term absence, recording absence, Occupational Health referrals and challenging Occupational Health responses. A significant employment case recently considered by the Court of Appeal, House of Lords and European Court of Justice regarding workers absent from work on long-term absence and the subsequent impact on annual leave, had further highlighted the need for these changes.

11.3 Corporate Plan, Medium Term Aims and Key Priorities

- 11.3.1 A structure and format for the new Council Corporate Plan for 2010/11 to 2013/14 was agreed along with Medium-Term Aims for the same period, Draft specific key objectives for 2010/11 were also approved. The identification of the objectives provides an opportunity for the Council to focus attention on how existing areas for improvement can be addressed, opportunities exploited and better outcomes delivered for local people. It is important that relevant performance management processes are in place to review and monitor performance against the Council's aims and key objectives, to ensure their continued achievability and relevance, and to identify proposals for corrective action in areas of under performance.

11.4 Staff Car Park Management Policy

- 11.4.1 As part of the wider travel plan agreed by the Council, revisions were made to the management policy for the staff car parks at the Civic Offices. These amendments will facilitate further initiatives such as increasing car sharing, creating better provision for cyclists and motorcyclists and improving shower facilities at the Civic Offices to encourage more staff to cycle to work. Vehicle usage by staff will also be reduced through the encouragement of car sharing.

11.5 Emergency Planning

- 11.5.1 In accordance with the proposals contained in the Government document 'Draft Strategic National Framework on community Resilience', arrangements were put in place for the development of a coordinated emergency response that will incorporate Parish and Town views as well as the District Council's. The framework explores the role and resilience of individuals and communities before, during and after an emergency. Local emergency responders will always have to prioritise those in greatest need during an emergency, focusing their efforts where life is in danger. There will be times when individuals and communities are affected by an emergency but not in any immediate danger and will have to look after themselves and each other for a period until any necessary external assistance can be provided. The framework, therefore, invites individuals and communities to prepare themselves in the event of an emergency and provides examples of how to do so.

11.6 Other Issues

- 11.6.1 Other issues dealt with under this portfolio included the Local Government Pension Scheme and Planned Maintenance Programmes for the Civic Offices, Other Operational Buildings and Commercial Property.

