

Report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 12 July 2010



Subject: Recommendations Arising from Review of Debt and Money Advice – Progress on Implementation

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Recommendations:

- (1) To note progress on the implementation of actions agreed following the review of Debt and Money Advice Provision in 2009 and the LSP review on the effect of the Credit Crunch; and**
- (2) To determine any further action required.**

Report:

Background

1. Following the adoption of a motion at Council on 16 December 2008, and subsequent discussion at Overview and Scrutiny on 29 January 2009, a Scrutiny Sub-Committee was set up to review current debt and money advice provision; to review the support the District Council offers the Citizens' Advice Bureau and whether this support should be extended; and to incorporate the outcome of the review into the budget process. In view of the urgency of the situation, a number of actions were agreed immediately. In addition, having carried out its review, the Sub-Committee submitted its report to this Committee which supported the recommendations contained in that report, at its meeting on 12 November 2009 (Minute 55 refers). The policy revisions and budgetary requirements arising out of those recommendations were approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 1 February 2010 (Minute 134 refers).

2. Set out below are the recommendations put forward by the Scrutiny Sub-Committee which were approved.

- That the District Council became a signatory to the Small Business Engagement Accord.
- That Local Banks/Building Societies be written to ascertain their current arrangements when customers have their property repossessed or there is a threat of repossession.
- That a Direct Link on the District Council website on benefits information be set up.
- That the significant impact of the recession on the number of cases dealt with by Epping Forest CAB and the CAB's excellent response to the increased workload be recognised and, in giving its support, the District Council continues to work alongside

the CAB as it seeks additional resources, be they finance, staff, volunteers or premises, to ease the effects of that additional workload.

- That the District Council foster an interest in volunteering and voluntary work by encouraging employees to become volunteers in their spare time (e.g. as part of the induction programme), through publicity in The Forester magazine and encouraging other major employers in the District to promote the benefits of voluntary work.
- That voluntary work also be promoted through the use of information available at suitable locations, including Council Offices and Job Centre Plus.
- That the need for more spacious facilities, also providing greater confidentiality, for interviewing benefits claimants be addressed as a matter of urgency through the Customer Transformation Programme or another Civic Offices work programme.
- That the District Council recognises and supports the vital role being carried out by Credit Unions in general during the economic recession.
- That the District Council also supports the work being carried out by Essex Savers in the District and, in giving encouragement to the extension of its operation to the more outlying rural areas, assists in publicising the role of Essex Savers generally, internally and through other major employers in the District.
- That the LSP be supported in its bid through the Future Job Fund for the creation of jobs in the District.

3. At a similar time the Epping Forest LSP (Now 'One Epping Forest') carried out a review into the effects of the 'Credit Crunch' on the District. Whilst that review was more specifically focused on the effects of the recession on the business sector, there was a degree of overlap in the areas covered by the two reviews. The recommendations of the LSP are set out below:

- That partners work with LSPs across West Essex to support and identify opportunities for improved access to external funding and identity and build on examples of good practice.
- That partners consider the scope for future events and identify further opportunities for joining up existing support in the District.
- That partners engage in and give full support to programmes designed to maximise access to Future Jobs Fund in the District.
- That the impact on advice-giving services such as the CAB is kept under review and partners commit to look at creative ways of meeting enhanced need if required in the third sector.
- That partners look at opportunities to support volunteering capability in the District.
- That further work on a business plan for the growth of credit unions in the District be undertaken.
- That the role of the Business Champion be kept under review and opportunities for developing the role be investigated.
- That plans be drawn up to agree a new economic development strategy in full consultation with key partners.

4. This Committee agreed that progress on the implementation of the various recommendations be looked at after six months. Accordingly this report sets out details of progress to date in the key areas identified by the two reviews.

Direct Link to Benefits Information on District Council Website

5. The need for a Direct Link on the District Council website to Benefits Information was identified and subsequently set up.

Work with Banks/Building Societies in Repossession Cases

6. Disappointingly no responses were received from any of the local banks or building societies when an approach was made to them regarding the possibility of working more closely together on reducing the impact of repossessions or the threat of repossession or individuals.

Interview Facilities for Benefits Claimants

7. Approval has been given to seek quotations from suitably qualified consultants to produce design options on the basis set out below.

- Refurbishment of the existing facility.
- Refurbishment and possible extension of the existing facility (shown in yellow and green on the attached plan).
- Refurbishment and possible extension of the existing facility including a redesigned entrance arrangement (shown in yellow, green and purple on the attached plan).

Epping Forest District CAB

8. The District Council and Epping Forest CAB have a Service Level Agreement (SLA) through which the CAB guarantees service provision at a given level (or above), subject to receipt of the necessary resources from the District Council. The District Council receives regular reports from the CAB on its activities, its caseload (broken down by category) and the impact of the caseload on its overall financial situation. The significant effects of the recession in terms of employment cases) have been widely recognised. A new three year SLA has now been agreed for the period 2010/11 to 2012/13 with funding from the District Council to the CAB for 2010/11 in the sum of £113,840 as part of the Agreement.

9. In 2008/09, the District Council, as the body providing most of the core funding, approved a grant of £6,250 in recognition of the additional number of cases Epping Forest CAB had to deal with as a consequence of the recession. An additional grant of £4,300 in recognition of the increased caseload was approved in 2009/10. As a consequence of the increased caseload, a considerable backlog in terms of the number of cases to be dealt with has built up. The difficulties have been exacerbated as a result of the limited number of suitable interview rooms available to the CAB. To ease the situation, the District Council has provided the CAB with additional accommodation at the EFDC's Community Services offices at Hemnall Street, Epping. The use of the room in the Community Services offices has enabled the CAB to advise an additional 151 clients and has reduced the waiting list, to see a debt adviser, to 4/5weeks.

10. Epping Forest CAB is continuing to see an increased number of clients. From 1 April – 10 June 2010 it advised 4579 clients – this is more than the total number of clients seen in the previously quarter and indicates a continuing upward trend. Debt continues to be the main enquiry area. The Loughton wards have the highest number of clients seeking debt advice. This is currently 62%. Information on the number of cases dealt with by Epping Forest CAB, broken down by category is attached as an Appendix.

11. Epping Forest CAB is of the opinion that the measures which EFDC introduced in response to the recession have undoubtedly had a positive impact on the area particularly as individuals with debt are coming to us earlier rather than as a last resort. The CAB is working closely with the credit union in the district and this has proved to be a lifeline for some of its clients.

12. The CAB is in the process of introducing Gateway across its offices. Gateway is a triage type service where clients have a short 10-15 minutes interview with a Gateway adviser and will then either be given an appointment with a specialist or generalist adviser, referred to another agency or given details of self help.

13. Epping Forest CAB has taken advantage of the future jobs fund. During the 2010/11 financial year, this will enable it to employ 12 young people whom the CAB will train to become Gateway advisers. This will enable the CAB to see more clients, thereby reducing the pressure on its volunteer generalist and specialist advisers.

Voluntary Sector/Volunteering

14. Like other sectors, the voluntary sector has suffered severely as a consequence of the recession. The problem is exacerbated by the effects of a “two-way squeeze” in the sense that the voluntary sector is having to deal with the effects of the resultant financial cut-backs and is also experiencing an increased demand for its services. Yet the economic downturn presents opportunities as well as threats. One effect of the economic situation has been an increase in the numbers coming forward seeking voluntary work. Whilst this creates pressures in terms of training placement and requirements, it is nonetheless welcome.

15. The District Council and several of its partner bodies currently provide for volunteering within their services (e.g. EFDC Countrycare, Lee Valley Regional Park Authority) and are committed to giving further encouragement to the volunteering concept and extending the range of volunteering opportunities within their own organisations. The County Council has now launched a volunteering policy (known as Essex Volunteers) allowing non-schools employees to take two days paid annual leave to engage in volunteering.

16. One Epping Forest, is fully committed to supporting the work of the Voluntary and Community Sector. The Partnership acknowledges the major benefits to the life of our community and to the quality of life of many families and individuals who rely on the investment, and the time and commitment of volunteers right across our district. As well as making a major difference to improving people’s lives, the time given freely by volunteers diverts pressures away from public services at a time when resources are becoming increasingly scarce, and enables often vulnerable people and communities to access services, activities or facilities: things that they would otherwise not be able to.

17. The principles below have been identified and agreed by the various partner organisations represented on the One Epping Forest as a means of engendering a positive attitude and approach to the concept of volunteering. This charter represents a statement of intent of the various partners to carry out their responsibilities to volunteers and in encouraging a volunteering philosophy.

- To allow staff to take 2 working days paid leave per annum to engage in volunteering within their local community in line with the priority areas identified in the Sustainable Community Strategy.
- To take a positive approach in promoting the importance of volunteering in their organisations, including provision within staff induction arrangements on the benefits of volunteering.

- To set out in publicity material/websites existing provision for volunteering opportunities in the partner organisation concerned and identifying a programme to identify further potential opportunities.
- To support annual awards programmes that publicly recognise the achievements and contributions of volunteers across our district.
- To encourage other local employers and service providers to sign up to this charter.

18. The VAEF and the District Council have agreed a new three year SLA with the funding to VAEF in 2010/11 in the sum of £39,120. The District Council also offers support in kind to VAEF through offsetting some of the accommodation costs (approximately £10,000) in respect of VAEF's occupation of Homefield House. The budget for grants to other voluntary groups is currently just in excess of £100,000.

19. A new Compact setting out the principles governing the relationship between the local authorities and the voluntary sector in West Essex has just been finalised.

The Role of Credit Unions

20. As a consequence of the recession, credit unions are playing an increasingly vital role in assisting the less well-off. In September 2009 the Epping branch of Essex Savers was launched in Epping. Further branches have been or are proposed in the District. Essex Savers has received a grant from the County Council to support its growth. Both the District Council and One Epping Forest are giving their support to Essex Savers, encouraging the extension of its operation to the more outlying rural areas, assisting in publicising its role generally, internally and through major employers in the District. Harlow Save, the long established credit union in Harlow, is also looking to expand.

21. Essex Savers now have 'face to face' access services in Epping at St John's Church on Mondays between 10 am and 12 noon, Waltham Abbey Library on Tuesdays between 10 am and 12 noon and Debden Library on Thursdays between 2-4 pm. Access services are also planned for Loughton (Methodist Church), North Weald Library and Ongar.

22. Credit Unions such as Essex Savers employ a number of volunteers and their role with them undoubtedly brings considerable benefits to the volunteers concerned:

- Credible references for CVs and job applications.
- Training and experience, including transferable skills.
- IT training.
- Volunteers joining the credit union becoming part of an innovative project.
- Experience of helping to run a social enterprise.

23. Discussions are taking place with both Essex Savers and Harlow Save and One Epping Forest on how the various partners could work together to ensure the services are accessible to the most disadvantaged, particularly those in deprived and remote rural areas. The outcome of those discussions will be reported to the LSP's Sustainable Communities Group on 23 July 2010.

Access to Funding/Funding Advice

24. Some of the partner organisations (e.g. VAEF, EFDC) already have individuals with external funding as a specific part of their role. Furthermore, a West Essex Partnership

consisting of representatives from each of the Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford areas has been set up. It has met on a number of occasions and has clarified its terms of reference and work programme to ensure each activity it is involved in should have real added value and there is no duplication of work already being carried out by the individual LSPs and/or partner organisations. The work programme is therefore to be around opportunities for greater efficiency/anticipating new challenges, monitoring future jobs and identifying gaps in funding and opportunities for joint bidding. Indeed, the partnership was successful in its bid to the Future Jobs Fund as referred to in paragraphs 23-24 below.

25. A 'funding alert' item is included on the agenda for each meeting of the One Epping Forest Sustainable Theme Group. This facility allows partner organisations to become aware of new funding opportunities as they arise.

Future Jobs Fund

26. The West Essex Partnership was successful in a bid to the Future Jobs Fund, resulting in the award of £1.1 million for jobs across the three Districts of Epping Forest, Harlow and Uttlesford. The money has been released in two tranches with 28 job placements (14 per tranche) in the Epping Forest District. The job placements are with the District Council, VAEF, Epping Forest College, the Gunpowder Mills and the CAB. The West Essex Partnership was recently nominated for an award in recognition of its youth employment work.

27. Under the previous Government encouragement was being given to the West Essex Partnership to submit further bids and seek to expand the scheme. The new Coalition Government honoured the commitment to the expenditure under the first two tranches but has otherwise abolished the Future Jobs Fund. The new Government has changed the emphasis with regard to jobs and welfare and made the following statement:

"The Government believes that we need to encourage responsibility and fairness in the welfare system. That means providing help for those who cannot work, training and targeted support for those looking for work, but sanctions for those who turn down reasonable offers of work or training.

We will end all existing welfare to work programmes and create a single welfare to work programme to help all unemployed people get back into work.

We will ensure that Jobseeker's Allowance claimants facing the most significant barriers to work are referred to the new welfare to work programme immediately, not after 12 months as is currently the case. We will ensure that Jobseeker's Allowance claimants aged under 25 are referred to the programme after a maximum of six months.

We will realign contracts with welfare to work service providers to reflect more closely the results they achieve in getting people back to work."

Business Support/Engagement

28. A series of business engagement events is being held during 2010. The subject areas covered by the events include rateable values, emerging planning policy, the M11 and resultant opportunities. It is also proposed to hold a Business Summit covering a range of issues including the Essex Apprenticeships Scheme, practical advice on finance availability and recruiting for employment.

29. One Epping Forest has drawn up a charter, currently in draft form, with the following principles, and with a view to all the partner organisations becoming signatories and committing to those principles:

- Payment of all invoices received within a 10 working day timescale with each partner organisation becoming a signatory to the Prompt Payment Code.

- Consultation and engagement with the business community on all major policy issues within predetermined timescales set out in a consultation and engagement plan made known to the business community.
- One Epping Forest to nominate a business engagement champion whose role will be to ensure that the views of the local business community are considered at every stage of any consultation exercise and whom will be tasked with creating effective links with all sections of the business community.
- Consultation with the business community not to be limited to formal consultation exercises but to be part of an ongoing dialogue.
- One Epping Forest to identify business owners that can be 'engagement champions' within the local business community.
- When tendering for work, seek a quotation from at least one business located in the District, provided that value for money is achieved and legal requirements met.
- When buying goods, purchases to be made from a company located in the District where one is available, provided that value for money is achieved and legal requirements met.
- A range of communication tools should be employed to promote better business engagement including, for example, consultation documents, newsletters, information on websites, local media or staff working directly with businesses.

30. Additional publicity and encouragement of take-up of Small Business Rate Relief has been given by the District Council. A significant increase in take up has resulted. The District Council is a signatory to the Prompt Payment Code, in respect of invoices from business suppliers. The District Council is also a signatory to the Small Business Engagement Accord through which it guarantees to follow certain principles including guaranteed standards in its consultation arrangements with the business community in terms of the documents used, the communication tools and the overall arrangements. The District Council also has a Public Consultation and Engagement Policy and Strategy, a Consultation Plan and Toolkit which set out similar commitments.

Economic Development Strategy

31. A number of key elements, which will feed into the new economic development strategy, already exist or are being worked on. These were highlighted in a 'Topics Paper' considered by One Epping Forest in 2009 and included, amongst other issues, educational/skills attainment, infrastructure provision, diversity in the local economy, achieving business start-ups, the viability and vitality of town centres, employment structure, the labour market and tourism. These will also help inform the new Sustainable Community Strategy.