

Report to the Cabinet



Report Reference: C-053-2010/11

**Epping Forest
District Council**

Date of meeting: 31 January 2011

Portfolio: Finance & Economic Development

Subject: Town Centres Officer Post & Future Management of Town Centres

Responsible Officer: Kassandra Polyzoides (01992 564119).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Town Centre Officer (TCO) post be continued for a further temporary period until April 2012;**
- (2) That an existing District Development Fund underspend within the Planning & Economic Development Directorate in the sum of £25,410 be allocated for the further temporary extension of the Town Centre Officer post until April 2012;**
- (3) That the option of creating a Social Enterprise for the future operation of the six Town Centres within the District be considered.**

Executive Summary:

The Town Centre Officer (TCO) post (PPC08S) is funded until July 2011. Ongoing work and projects are being delivered by the TCO with the Town Centre Partnerships (TCPs) that are proving worthwhile and important in promoting and supporting EFDCs town centres, especially through the recession. As a way forward, the key option considered for the future management of the Town Centres is via a Social Enterprise arrangement. This will require dedicated officer and Town Centre Partnership support, for a further extended period of time, beyond July 2011, in order to be delivered and established.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

Current funding for the Town Centre Officer post is running out in July 2011. Given the recession and the ongoing work that the Economic Development team are delivering in order to boost local economies and town centre regeneration it was felt that the post of Town Centre Officer should be considered for continuation, even in light of the recruitment freeze. The role is seen as important by the Town Centre Partnerships and provides vital support for their function.

The above recommendations were submitted to Planning Services Scrutiny Standing Panel on 10 January 2011. The panel recommended the extension of the TCO post to April 2012, for a further eight months, on the basis that this post is delivering valuable work in the District in particular related to Town Centre Partnership and local business support.

It was recommended that the DDF underspend within Planning & Economic Development initially allocated for Town Centre Partnership support and other purposes such as

succession planning training be utilised for the salary costs for the post. It was also recommended that should Cabinet agree to this, that discussions are held with TCP's to inform them of changes to initial arrangements regarding funding support.

Other Options for Action:

(i) To make the post permanent as an addition to the establishment; at an annual CSB cost of £39,260; or

(ii) to discontinue the post once the current budget has expired in July 2011, at NIL additional cost.

Report:

1. The Town Centres Officer post (PPC08S) has been funded for a 3 year period from 2008 by LABGI monies. Because the initial post-holder went on an extended period of sick-leave which included a period of reduced salary, the budget will extend for a short period into the financial year 2011/2012. The post is currently a Grade 8.

2. The main duties of the post are:

(a) to develop effective working partnerships with the District's 6 Town Centre Partnerships (TCPs) and other stakeholders such as Town Councils;

(b) to suggest and support programmes of activities, promotions and events specific to each locality; and

(c) to work closely with the Economic Development Officer and attract external funding for projects and other events.

3. The creation of the post, which was funded for its first 3-year period through Section 106 monies from the Sainsbury's development in Old Station Road, Loughton, reflects the Council's commitment to Economic Prosperity and, in particular, Corporate Objective EP6 of the Council Plan 2006 – 2010 (To maintain and improve the links between the Council, local town centres and the business community of the district). The post along with that of the Economic Development Officer plays a key role in delivering Objective 2 of the Council's key objectives 2010/11 (mitigating the impact of the current economic conditions on local people and businesses through the development and implementation of appropriate initiatives).

4. As of mid December 2010 there has been a recruitment freeze on external recruitment to vacant posts within EFDC. Exceptions have been made for posts that have implications for health and safety, demonstrate that they generate surplus income, or are externally funded. Whilst the Town Centre Officer post does not directly fall into these categories it provides added value to existing Council initiatives such as freezing car parking rates, in helping boost local economies and support business income generation specifically. So while there is no direct income generation for the Council, the work that the Economic Development Officer and the TCO provide, assist in sustaining viable town centres, promoting businesses and ensuring shop units remain occupied.

5. The current post-holder, who has been in position since March 2010, is from an agency and has many years of town centre management experience with other authorities, mainly but not solely in Essex. She has introduced a number of initiatives including the Vacant Units Project (often known as "Pop-up" Shops) the first of these opened in October 2010 in Ongar. Loyalty Cards, which encourage shoppers to visit the District's 6 centres, which are to be introduced in early 2011. Other current work includes:

- (a) helping Buckhurst Hill TCP with a Special Projects Grant application to fund the creation of a website;
- (b) preparing a questionnaire for Epping businesses asking them how they would like the town centre to develop;
- (c) working with ARU students to design a re-branding for Loughton TCP; and
- (d) developing a marketing strategy for The Broadway (Debden) and (e) working with the Waltham Abbey Town Partnership on a marketing seminar to be held in Waltham Abbey in January 2011 and supporting their plans for celebrating events leading up to the Olympics and maximising the legacy especially for businesses in the area.

6. During the previous post-holder's period of sick leave, concern was expressed by a number of TCPs about the lack of cover for this post, and this included articles in the local press. This was reported to Cabinet in December 2009, when it was agreed that temporary cover should be provided. The current post-holder has established much better and closer working relationships with the TCPs, and it is therefore likely that concern will again be raised about the deletion of the post when the current budget expires.

7. Members are therefore asked to consider extending the post for an additional 8 months beyond its current 3-year term.

8. The Social Enterprise option described below may fund the Town Centre Officer post if successful as a set up for managing the Town Centres. It would be estimated that the Town Centre Officer post will be funded via this route from 2012/13 onwards when the Enterprise set up is fully established.

Social Enterprise as an Option for the Future Management of Town Centres

9. This would be a positive option for the future management of the TCP's and links in with the Government Localism and Big Society agenda. There are currently funding opportunities to set up and assist with the operation of Social Enterprises and these would be sought. Part of the concept is that the Social Enterprise for the 6 Town Centres would offer services to towns and to Town Centre businesses. These services would be offered by a variety of people, returners, trainees, semi-retired persons and young people with minimum qualifications who found main stream work difficult to access. The services would include:

- (a) event management;
- (b) web design;
- (c) administration;
- (d) temporary sales assistant cover; and
- (e) marketing.

10. There are a series of potential partners already expressing an interest in providing some of these activities and a Town Centre Partnership would be an ideal vehicle for moving things forward. Businesses would only have to pay for services they required and could afford. It is important to add that these services would be provided by local people who in time would build up skills and experience so that they were in a position to enter the jobs market independently. Further wider discussions would be required with the TCP's and other

potentially interested parties to ensure a robust set up that would deliver on all the key tasks and initiatives.

11. Any profits from the social enterprise would be put back into the project supporting local businesses and local people. The enterprise would therefore use operational activities (stewarding at events, window cleaning, retail assistance etc) to finance strategic work provided by a Town Centre Officer.

12. As discussed, the Town Centre Officer would work within and on behalf of the Enterprise set up. It is envisaged that formal partnership agreements would exist between the Enterprise and associated partners including EFDC.

13. At Members request further work will be done to assess the feasibility of this as a future option for the Management of Town Centres, with a subsequent progress report to be submitted to Members for discussion.

Resource Implications:

The extension for the TCO post for 8 months at £25,410.

Legal and Governance Implications:

None.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

None.

Consultation Undertaken:

Within Planning & Economic Development, with the Town Centre Partnerships and Finance Officers.

Background Papers:

N/A.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

Anticipating and preparing for a future vacancy/deletion of the Town Centre Officer post and what impact this would have on the Council, delivering Corporate objectives as identified in this in this report .

Equality and Diversity:

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?
None.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?
N/A.