

Report to Cabinet

Report reference: C-048-2011/12
Date of meeting: 12 March 2012



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Support Services

Subject: Public Relations and Information Service Revisions

Responsible Officer: Tom Carne (01992 564039).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) Subject to the successful completion of negotiations, delegate authority to the Support Services Portfolio Holder for the transfer of the provision of Epping Forest District Council's satellite information services in Loughton and Waltham Abbey to Essex County Council Library Service;**
- (2) To note the issue of 'at risk' of redundancy letters to affected staff and steps taken to maximise available alternative employment options;**
- (3) To approve the cessation of the Service Level Agreement for the provision of Information Services on behalf of Epping Forest District Council by Buckhurst Hill Parish Council; and**
- (4) To note discussions with Uttlesford District Council to explore the potential for shared Public Relations services and delegate authority to the Support Services Portfolio Holder to approve a Service Level Agreement in the event of satisfactory negotiations.**

Executive Summary:

In light of recent reductions in central government funding and the requirement of the Council to seek revenue savings, the Public Relations and Information service has been asked to explore ways in which savings might be achieved whilst continuing to protect its front-line roles. Following an analysis of usage, officers have therefore placed Buckhurst Hill Parish Council on notice of the potential termination of the Service Level Agreement for the provision of District Council services from the Parish Council offices. Furthermore, Officers have opened discussions with Essex County Council and Uttlesford District Council to explore alternative means of service delivery and provision aimed at preserving services while reducing costs.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To endorse the principles of providing satellite information services through a third party at reduced cost to the Council, and to create an income stream through the provision of specialist communications services to another public sector organisation.

Other Options for Action:

- To continue the provision of Information Services via Buckhurst Hill Parish Council.
- To continue the direct provision of information services from Loughton Library and seek alternative accommodation for the provision of direct information services in Waltham Abbey.
- To cease provision of information services in Loughton and Waltham Abbey.
- To withdraw from shared service discussions with Uttlesford District Council.

Report:

1. Epping Forest District Council provides information services to its residents directly from three centres at the Civic Offices in Epping, Traps Hill Library in Loughton and the offices of Waltham Abbey Town Council. Epping Information also provides the main reception service for visitors to the Civic Offices. Under a Service Level Agreement entered into in 2001, Epping Forest District Council provides Information Services through Buckhurst Hill Parish Council at a cost to the District of £15,000 per annum. Under an informal arrangement, Essex County Council staff at Ongar Library also provide limited information services on behalf the District Council since the withdrawal of the part-time information assistant post due to low-usage some years ago.

2. Each Information Desk fulfils a corporate role in providing information and access to Council services from decentralised centres across the District. Staff are trained to deal with enquiries relating to all types of District Council provision, including Housing, Council Tax, Planning and Leisure. Where enquiries cannot be dealt with directly, the Information Assistant will refer the issue to specialist officers usually based at the Civic Offices in Epping or various satellite offices and depots by a combination of e-mail and phone. Information Desks provide some of the main outlets for recycling sacks.

3. A growing element in the workload of the Information service is 'Contact Us' requests for information or services submitted by members the public via the District Council website. Again, Information Assistants assess each enquiry, deal directly with each one where possible and refer the remainder to specialist officers elsewhere in the Council.

4. As well as face to face and Contact Us enquiries, the Information Assistants take general enquiries by phone. The Desks also provide general information about non-District Council services such as Social Services, Highways, local voluntary organisations and religious groups.

5. Information Assistants log each enquiry for monitoring purposes. In summary, during the 12 months to the end of September 2011 each Desk dealt with the following face to face, phone and Contact Us enquiries:

	Face to Face/Phone	Contact Us
Epping Information	50,061	4,065
Loughton Information	31,449	4,683
Waltham Abbey Information	30,812	6,308
Buckhurst Hill Information	14,122	-

Much higher figures for Epping reflect its additional role as the main corporate reception point

for visitors to the Civic Offices.

6. Loughton Information desk is situated within the main library at Traps Hill. Epping Forest District Council pays an annual licence fee of £5,280 for the occupation of the desk by its own directly employed staff. Waltham Abbey Information Desk is situated in an office within the entrance foyer of the Town Council in Highbridge Street leased from the Town Council. Waltham Abbey accommodation is combined in a single lease also covering the District Council's Cashier Desk situated on the opposite side of the entrance foyer. Rental for the combined Information/Cashiers accommodation is £11,880 in the current financial year.

7. Historically, the three information desks at Epping, Loughton and Waltham Abbey have each employed two part-time members of staff, a morning and an afternoon assistant ensuring service to the public without the need for closure over the lunch period. However, following the resignation of the Loughton afternoon assistant, Loughton Information has been operating as a morning only service for the last nine months, supported informally by Essex Library staff issuing recycling sacks and basic information on the District's behalf at other times.

8. Management of the three information centres and supervision of the Buckhurst Hill SLA is carried out from the Public Relations Office. The office also co-ordinates cover and in some instances provides direct support, for example by providing lunch time cover at Epping when a member of the Information staff is absent and the other required to work full-time. The recent transfer of an assistant (Epping Afternoons) to the Housing Directorate is being covered by a combination of PR staff, Information Assistant overtime and 'casual' cover from a pool of relief Information Assistants. Of the six information assistant posts, only four are therefore currently occupied.

9. The District Council has been placed on notice by Waltham Abbey Town Council that it wishes to take back the accommodation currently occupied by the Information Service for its own purposes. A firm requirement is therefore in place to find alternative arrangements.

10. Essex County Council has standing arrangements for the provision of District/Borough Council information services in place with Colchester Borough Council and Braintree District Council. An examination of the Braintree SLA by Epping Forest District Council officers indicates that subject to the negotiation of a mutually satisfactory sum, Essex County Council would be in a position to provide District Council Services through its Library staff and infrastructure.

11. At a minimum, District Council Officers would recommend the provision of equivalent services from Loughton and Waltham Abbey Libraries. Subject to negotiation they would also aspire to additional information provision at Buckhurst Hill and Ongar or other libraries within the District. It may therefore be possible to extend the geographical reach and hours of availability beyond that currently provided through the District Council's direct provision.

12. Excluding staff related on-costs such as pension and National Insurance and potential redundancy payments, it is estimated that a reduction in the Information Staff establishment from six to two (Epping Reception remaining under the direct control of Public Relations), plus the cancellation of the Buckhurst Hill SLA, termination of the Traps Hill licence and withdrawal from the Waltham Abbey Office would achieve savings in the region of £63,000 per annum. Under the proposed SLA, ECC would boost staffing levels at Loughton and Waltham Abbey Libraries to compensate for the additional workload. Costs of a SLA with Essex County Council (see below) for the provision of Information Services would reduce the net saving to £43,000.

	Loughton Library	Waltham Abbey Library	
Additional Staff Hours	16	12	
SCP 16 basic	£7,109.2	£5,331.9	
4% flat rate	£284.37	£213.28	
Inner fringe	£258.81	£194.11	
On costs @29%	£2,219.2	£1,664.4	
Peak Relief to cover leave, sickness			£1,052.8
Line Management costs			£1,670
Total (excluding VAT)			£19,998.06

13. Should a SLA be successfully negotiated with Essex County Council, a reduction in the amount of managerial and support time required by the Public Relations Office can be anticipated. Under the Memorandum of Understanding between Harlow, Uttlesford and Epping Forest District Councils, officer level discussions have taken place to explore ways in which the Councils might offer support to each other. Circumstances have arisen where Uttlesford District Council has a requirement for specialist Press and PR support.

14. Informal discussions between officers at Uttlesford and Epping Forest have established that it may be possible to share PR Officer capacity. Although these discussions are at an early and informal stage Uttlesford Officers have adopted a positive approach to the proposals and are consulting relevant members involving the purchase of Epping Forest Officer time for approximately two days per week. However, should the proposed Information SLA with Essex County Council not be achieved, it is difficult to see how the Epping Forest District PR office would be able to provide the capacity to support the Uttlesford while continuing to hold day to day management and support responsibilities for directly provided satellite Information Desks.

15. Although at an early stage, officers estimate a potential income stream from entering into a PR SLA with Uttlesford District Council in the region of £14,000 per annum in addition to the £43,000 net saving on the Information Service. The potential overall net gain to the Council is therefore in the region of £57,000.

16. Epping Forest District Council Officers have taken HR advice at an early stage, particularly with regard to staff welfare. Unison has been consulted and approved of the steps being taken to ensure staff receiving 'at risk of redundancy' letters are given the maximum levels of support and time to minimise the risk of forced redundancy. HR procedures are in place to ensure all suitable internal vacancies that arise in the Council are notified to 'at risk' staff, and that they are given as much support as possible in applying for alternative positions, should they wish to do so.

17. Subject to Member approval, officers aim to implement the changes outlined above early in the new Financial Year 2012/13.

Resource Implications:

Potential savings on Information Service provision of £63,000 per annum off-set by Essex County Council SLA costs £20,000. Potential income of approximately £14,000 per annum from shared services with Uttlesford District Council subject to negotiation of a satisfactory SLA and consultation/approval of Uttlesford District Council Members.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Termination of Buckhurst Hill SLA
Termination of Traps Hill Accommodation Licence
Approval of new ECC Information Service SLA
Approval of Uttlesford PR Support SLA

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Reduced travel costs/emissions associated with direct managerial support and supervision of satellite Information Desks.

Consultation Undertaken:

Staff
HR
Unison
Essex County Council Library Service
Uttlesford District Council
Waltham Abbey Town Council

Background Papers:

Confidential – Essex County Council / Braintree District Council Information Service SLA

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

Reduced risk of service disruption through staff absence due to larger numbers of staff employed within ECC Library Service.

Enhanced on-site supervision and health and safety provided by ECC line-management

Protection of front-line information service provision and potential extension of reach and hours of availability enabling residents' access to council information and services across the district. Face to face local support in the provision of decentralised service delivery to residents.

Equality and Diversity

Did the initial assessment of proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications?

Yes

Where equality implications identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken?

Yes

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?

Recommended options would preserve district-wide access to services from local locations in Loughton and Waltham Abbey. Potential extension of services in Buckhurst Hill and Ongar including weekend access. Of particular relevance for social and economic groups unable to travel longer distances or in need of additional customer support. Other options not recommended could lead to reductions in access the services for vulnerable and hard to reach groups.

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?

Recommended options seek to provide enhanced service delivery utilising Library opening times beyond current levels of provision.