

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL
NOTES OF A MEETING OF FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SCRUTINY
PANEL
HELD ON TUESDAY, 15 NOVEMBER 2011
IN COUNCIL CHAMBER, CIVIC OFFICES, HIGH STREET, EPPING
AT 7.00 - 8.55 PM

Members Present:	D Jacobs (Chairman), G Waller (Vice-Chairman), K Angold-Stephens (Chairman of Council), R Bassett, R Cohen, J Hart, D C Johnson (Deputy Portfolio Holder (Estates)) and P Keska
Other members present:	Ms R Brookes, A Lion, Mrs M McEwen, G Mohindra, J Philip, D Stallan, Mrs L Wagland and C Whitbread
Apologies for Absence:	K Chana (Deputy Portfolio Holder (Safer and Greener)), S Murray, S Packford and W Pryor
Officers Present	D Macnab (Acting Chief Executive), J Gilbert (Director of Environment and Street Scene), A Hall (Director of Housing), J Preston (Director of Planning and Economic Development), S Bacon (Senior Systems Support Officer), T Carne (Public Relations and Marketing Officer), P Maddock (Assistant Director (Accountancy)), P Maginnis (Assistant Director (Human Resources)), D Newton (Assistant Director (ICT)), J Twinn (Assistant Director (Benefits)), S Tautz (Performance Improvement Manager), S Mitchell (PR Website Editor), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer) and S G Hill (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

33. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman reminded everyone present that the meeting would be broadcast live to the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the webcasting of its meetings.

34. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Panel noted that Councillor D Johnson was substituting for Councillor Chana.

35. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Pursuant to the Council Code for Members Conduct, Councillor Richard Bassett declared a personal interest in agenda item 7, Epping Forest District Council Website, by virtue of working for Hewlett Packard. He declared that his interests were not prejudicial and that he would remain for the discussion and consideration of the item.

36. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 20 September 2011 were agreed.

37. TERMS OF REFERENCE / WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted their Terms of Reference and Work Programme.

38. SICKNESS ABSENCE

With the Panel's agreement the item on Sickness Absence (agenda item 10a) was taken next.

The Assistant Director of Corporate Support Services (HR), Paula Maginnis, introduced the report on the Council's absence figures for quarter two in 2011/12. It included absence figures by Directorate, the number of employees who have met the trigger level, those who had more than 4 weeks' absence and reasons for absence.

It was noted that the quarter 2 figure was below the target level as well as being below the 2010/11 figures. Two thirds of staff had not taken any sick absence during this period. Currently the Council's target for sickness absence under KPI 10 for 2011/12 was an average of 7.75 days per employee. The Council's figure for quarter 2 was 1.64 days. 3.9% of staff had met the trigger levels or were above; 22.8% had sickness absence but did not meet the triggers and 73.3% had no absences.

Ms Maginnis asked the Panel if they still wished to receive this data or were there other things that they would like information on.

The Panel indicated that they liked the breakdown of the information, which showed the areas doing well, as well as the types of illness involved and the fact it helped you drill down into the information. They noted that the situation was improving year on year although it appeared that Local Government figures were higher than private industry. Although it had been recently noted by the press that EFDC compared very favourably with private industry on levels of sickness.

It was noted that a lot of problems seemed to be musculo-skeletal related; was this anything to do with RSI? Ms Maginnis replied that there were no recent recordings of that, although there had been a spate of broken bones recently.

RESOLVED:

That the report on sickness absence for quarter 2 be noted.

39. EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL WEBSITE

The Public Relations and Marketing Officer, Tom Carne, made the following corrections to the report published in the agenda. In paragraph 11 the KPI referred to as KPI 01 should be KPI 02; in paragraph 15 the KPI referred to as KPI 02 should be KP 04 and the same again in paragraph 16.

The Panel received a demonstration of the new Council's website, currently in development. The current website had been developed over the last ten years using the Punch Content Management System, costing the council approximately £16,000 per annum to run, including support. This system has now run its course and officers looked for a more powerful, flexible alternative. They found 'Joomla' which was easier and more efficient to use and would represent a significant potential, long term financial saving to the council. It was a free open source Content Management System, and officers had identified savings of £15,000 pa once it went live, with the possibility of more savings to come.

Stephen Bacon, the Senior Systems Support Officer, took the Panel through a demonstration of the new site, as it would look on line when up and running. The new systems would have one big bold image on the home page making it more user friendly, suitable for the casual browser, with rotating headlines. Officers were also

looking to put in advertising space on the pages. The home page would report the Council news, and have a Leaders blog. News feeds would be tailored to each Directorate and they were also looking at the possibility of putting Town/Parish Council pages on the site, linking in with 'Twitter'. Social media links would also be on the menu bar. Using free software from 'Joomla' officers would be able upload council's posts on to these sites as well. So far officers thought that the new website had only cost the Council €59; and it would have no ongoing costs. They were aiming for it to be user friendly, with any user having to use a maximum of three clicks to get to any page on the website, ideally only two; the present system can take up to nine clicks. Individual users could alter the colour scheme of the pages, change the font size and have it translated into other languages.

Officers were also looking to integrate the currently separate systems such as the Planning pages, into the main website and make it more efficient.

Councillor Bassett said that the new site looked good. Residents could pay their Council Tax on line, but there was some vulnerability in using open source software. Was it safe to use? Mr Bacon replied that they would be linked to the Capita site for transactions as they are now. They would not use open source software for payments.

Councillor Mohindra asked about tracking the use of the site. He was told that officers could not use 'Google Analytics' until the EU had decided on the implementation of the EU Cookies Directive; as without the use of Cookies a visit to our site could not be recorded. They were using a free trial system at present but this would have to be paid for once the free period ended. Officers were also looking to link this into intranet visits.

Councillor Philip commented that officers were currently tracking visits to the site; could not other things be monitored such as the number of page loads and response time be monitored. Mr Bacon replied that monitoring page hits could be valuable over time, tracking which pages people went to most often etc.

Councillor Philip went on to ask if users could save changes they made to the colour and font sizes. He was told that they could, but it relied on the use of Cookies.

Councillor Bassett wanted to know if links to other websites and organisations could be added to our site. He was told that officers were looking at putting in this facility using Google Search.

The Public Relations and Marketing Officer, Tom Carne, had looked at the indicators in place and asked that they continue with the current performance indicator measuring user satisfaction levels (KPI 04). But, they would like to adapt it slightly to not only measure the people who were 'very satisfied' but also the 'OKs', the 'quite satisfied' as well as the 'very satisfied' as this would give a better statistical database, and would enable us to revisit how we assessed the website. They would also like to set a satisfaction level of 80%, which would be well above the current national average.

Councillor Bassett said that 80% was a very high level to live up to especially in the first year of a new site. It would be more sensible to set the target at 70% for the first year and then revisit it next year, when they could set a target for improvement; this was agreed by the Panel. They also agreed to delete KPI 02 (visits to the Council Website) and 03 (Quality of the Council Website).

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the progress towards the implementation of the new Epping Forest District Council Website be noted;
- (2) That the Panel recommend that:
 - KPI 02 (Visits to the Council Website) and KPI 03 (Quality of the Council Website) be deleted;
- (3) That, pursuant to the deletion of KPI 02, the Director of Finance and ICT and the Acting Chief executive bring forward proposals for replacement website visits indicator once the Council's new website has been rolled out and the authority has determined its approach to meeting the requirements of the European Union Cookies Directive; and
- (4) KPI 04 (Satisfaction with the Council's Website) be amended to include the people who were OK, Quite Satisfied and Very Satisfied with the website; achieving a target of 70% for the first year, to be revised at the end of the year in light of the result.

40. KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR 2011/12 QUARTER 2

The Performance Improvement Manager, Mr S Tautz, introduced the report on the Council's performance against its adopted Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for the second quarter of 2011/12. Members were reminded that a target had been set for at least 70% of the KPIs to achieve target performance by the end of the year. The report now had the improvement plans immediately following on to each KPI.

The Panel noted that 14 KPIs (50%) had achieved the second quarter performance targets and that contrary to the statement in paragraph 13 of the report, KPI 24 (Fly Tipping) and KPI 48 (Non-decent homes) had met their respective second quarter targets.

KPI 02 – *How many times was our Council website visited* – This had just been deleted.

KPI 30 – *What percentage of the invoices we received were paid within 30 days* – noted that there was a problem with Housing, due to staffing shortages and an issue with building supplies, at present skewing the figures, but this was being rectified.

KPI 31 – *What percentage of the district's annual Council Tax was collected* – officers were complimented for exceeding their targets on this indicator. Councillor Stallan asked if the number of payment arrangements increased over the last year; officers were unsure but promised to find out and advise members accordingly. The Panel noted that there was currently a government consultation being carried out on Council Tax which may have implications further on.

KPI 33 – *On average, how many days did it take us to process new benefit claims* – Councillor Hart said officers were doing well to keep the indicator at just under 27 days especially with two officers down. Officers thought that they would not meet their target this year. They had just been another resignation and it was hard work for the officers to maintain standards. It was hoped to fill the vacancies by internal recruitment.

Councillor Brookes asked if the number of applications had gone up. She was told that there were around 9,400 cases at present; three years ago there were 7,500. The caseload had gone up considerably; also new claims were more difficult to process, more time consuming.

KPI 34 – *On average, how many days did it take us to process notices of a change in a benefit claimant's circumstances* - Councillor Bassett asked if there was a common reason for losing staff through resignations. He was told that there was no specific reasons, some went to London Boroughs and there was uncertainty about the new Universal Credit system coming in. Experienced staff are leaving and they needed experienced staff to replace them. They were also unsure if their investigative staff would be subsumed by the Department for Work and Pensions. There was a lot of uncertainty at present.

KPI 42 – *What percentage of emergency repairs to our council properties were completed within 24 hours* – The Panel noted that a new computer system would be installed after Christmas by Mears, the Council's Repairs Management Contractor and this should speed up response times.

KPI 46 – *How many affordable homes were built in the District* – Councillor Brookes asked about the Open Market Shared Ownership, the joint venture with Broxbourne Housing Association. She was told that the joint agreement with Broxbourne HA had achieved a number of applications from tenants and housing applicants; shortlisted applicants were currently being contacted to undergo a financial assessment. Unfortunately the KPI target would not be met this year, due to slippage with an affordable housing scheme in Waltham Abbey. However, the completions would be achieved next year.

KPI 47 – *How many households were housed in temporary accommodation* – Councillor Bassett asked how successful had the Council been in keeping people in their own homes? He was told officers were preventing around 80% of cases from resulting in formal homelessness applications. But numbers of homeless applicants were increasing as more people came to the Council in difficulties. Officers feared it would only get worse with the new Welfare Reform Bill.

KPI 50 – *What was the net increase or decrease in the number of homes in the district* – The Panel noted that if the relevant information had been made available earlier quarter 1 would have been above the target level.

RESOLVED:

That the first six months of the Council's performance for 2011/12 in relation to the monitored Key Performance Indicators adopted for the year be noted.

41. QUARTERLY FINANCIAL MONITORING

The Assistant Director of Finance, Peter Maddock, introduced the quarterly financial monitoring report. This report provides a comparison between the original estimate for the period ended 30 September 2011 and the actual expenditure or income as applicable.

The Panel noted that:

- The salaries budget showed an underspend of £413,000 or 4.2%, compared to 3.4% last year;

- Investment interest levels in 2011/12 are above expectations at quarter 2;
- Current indications are that the Council would receive between 86 and 90% of the original investment back from the Heritable Bank, however this would not be received until towards the end of 2012/13 at the earliest;
- Building Control income was on track and was slightly up on the previous year;
- The ring fenced account was looking healthy and was expected to return a surplus;
- Development Control income at month 6 was £40,000 above expectations;
- Hackney Carriage licensing income was in line with expectations but down slightly on last year;
- The Housing Repairs Fund showed an underspend of £767,000. It was now expected that a saving of around £250,000 would occur here;
- The budgets are currently being revisited and where appropriate would be revised in line with expectations.

Councillor Bassett asked what sort of returns were we getting on our investments? He was told it was just under 1%, with some longer term investments at 1%.

Councillor Stallan noted that some authorities would receive about a 100% return from the Icelandic Banks. Would this alter the report? He was told that it would be only right to wait until it was known for sure what returns the council would get. The report was based on what was thought was currently the most likely outcome.

Councillor Angold-Stephens asked about the recent burglary at the museum, would this cost the Council any money for items not covered by the insurance. He was told that the only cost would be a small excess on some items as all items were covered; and also any costs for reviewing / improving security arrangements.

RESOLVED:

That the Capital and Revenue Financial Monitoring report for the second quarter of 2011/12 be noted.

42. FEES AND CHARGES

The Assistant Director of Finance, Peter Maddock, introduced the annual report on the proposed fees and charges for the coming year as part of the annual budget process. This report gave members an opportunity to comment the proposed fees and charges for 2012/13.

A proposed general increase of 5% was recommended where possible, but it was noted that in a number of areas this may not be appropriate; also, it was noted that some fees were set by the Government. Car parking charges were not included in the report as they were subject to consideration by the Council's consultant and a report would be coming separately to this Panel at a later date. There were also a number of leisure related fees and charges, waste and the HRA that were proposed for increases.

Councillor Bassett noted that the charges for pest control for rats and cockroaches was said to be free. Was this correct? He was told that the Council now had a contract with 'Rentokil', so we received no fees for pest control; the money went straight to the company. The report was misleading and should be amended accordingly.

Councillor Bassett asked why we only charged £10 for dishonoured cheques, as banks would charge more and we incur this charge from banks. Councillor Mohindra noted that his bank charged £25 and thought that this was a standard charge. The Panel agreed that the charge should be increased to £25.

Councillor Whitbread commented that the Council had found more savings than the £300,000 needed. With this in mind he would not want to increase any fees and charges next year and give something back to the residents in this difficult economic situation.

The Chairman noted that there would be some exceptions to the 5% increase but that this would be up to the Cabinet to decide.

RESOLVED:

That the proposed general policy for the increase in fees and charges of 5% and the schedules attached to agenda be agreed with the exception of the charge for dishonoured cheques being raised to £25 and the wording for the charges for rats and cockroaches being revised, and that this be recommended to the Cabinet.

43. REPORTS TO BE MADE TO THE NEXT MEETING OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

To report back to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a general update on the reports considered at this meeting.

44. FUTURE MEETINGS

The dates for the future meetings of this Panel were noted.

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