

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**OF THE EXECUTIVE**

**2005/06**

## **FINANCE AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT**

### **Local Authority Business Growth Incentive Scheme**

Under the Local Authority Business Growth Incentive Scheme (LABGI), local authorities receive a direct financial incentive to encourage business in their areas, by allowing local authorities to retain a proportion of revenues created by increasing business growth above a pre-determined level. Business growth is measured in terms of the increase in a local authority's rateable value during a calendar year. Each authority has a target level of growth in rateable value they have to achieve to benefit from LABGI, known as the 'floor'. The floor level is calculated using historic growth figures.

It was agreed that income arising from the scheme should be credited to the District Development Fund with a view to expenditure of some of this income on measures to promote economic development in the District.

### **Council Plan for 2006-10**

The Council Plan is a summary of key actions the District Council intends to take over the four-year period ahead. All the actions detailed in the Plan arise from priorities that it has set. Progress in meeting targets is reviewed on an ongoing basis with each successive plan updated in the light of changing circumstances, needs and priorities.

The format for the 2006-10 Plan was improved to make it more user-friendly and to set more realistic and achievable targets. The contents of the draft Council Plan for 2006 to 2010 were agreed for consultation purposes with residents, partner agencies and other organisations with a view to the Plan being adopted later in 2006.

### **Public Consultation and Engagement Strategy and Policy**

The Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the District Council identified a number of areas for improvement in terms of 'user focus' and engagement with the local community. As a consequence a new overall corporate approach to consultation and engagement was agreed, with the new policy and strategy embedded in the Council's Constitution, to include minority groups and communities, which have not always been engaged or represented.

From the 2006/07 Council year, an annual Consultation Plan will also be developed, setting out the issues the Council intends to consult on, the objectives for each consultation exercise and the methodology to be used.

### **Release of Restrictive Covenant – Land at Epping Forest College Campus**

In 1998, the Council released a covenant on 7.9 acres of land owned by Epping Forest College at the campus to facilitate residential development. The College requested that the Council, without charge, release the covenant from a further 2.4 acres of land, adjacent to the original plot. The College applied for and obtained planning consent for residential development on the whole 10.3 acres, which included the provision of 30% of the units for affordable housing.

Approval has now been given to the release of the covenant, on the basis that it was obsolete and of no value to the Council. Furthermore any sale of the residential development site will raise valuable funds for the proposed redevelopment of the campus and associated highway improvement works.

## **Discretionary Rate Relief – Community Amateur Sports Club**

Registered charities and sports clubs registered as 'Community Amateur Sports Clubs' are entitled to 80% rate relief, funded from the National Non-Domestic Rating pool. The Council has the option to grant an additional 20% discretionary relief, of which it has to bear 75% of the additional relief granted. At present the Council's guidelines restrict the 20% discretionary relief to local scouts and guides groups, village halls that provide a post office facility and hospices.

A review of the policy was carried out and it was decided not to extend the range of clubs to which the discretionary relief should be applied. It was felt that granting the discretionary relief to Community Amateur Sports Clubs would make it difficult to refuse similar applications from other charitable sporting organisations and their 20% contribution to their National Non-Domestic Rating liability would be lost. The loss of revenue that would arise should the categories be extended was estimated at £258,000 per annum.

## **Council Tax Discounts – Second Homes**

A recent change in regulations permits billing authorities for Council Tax purposes (i.e. the District Council in the Epping Forest District) to either reduce the current 50% discount to a minimum of 10% for second homes, and to completely reduce the discount for long-term empty properties within their area, whereby long-term is defined as more than six months. A Council decision is required to change the discount for either second homes or long-term empty properties.

It was agreed that the discount for Class A properties (those subject to planning restrictions) should remain at 50%, for Class B properties (second homes) reduced from 50% to 10% and for Class C properties (long-term empty properties) be unchanged at 50%.

The reduction from 50% to 10% on second homes will mean the Council receiving an extra £11,000 per annum for expenditure on general council services. In addition, a scheme has been instigated between the County Council and the District Councils whereby 60% of the additional income raised for the County Council as a result of the removal of the second homes discount, is repaid to the District Council for expenditure on concurrent functions. This was estimated to provide a further £44,000 per annum. Furthermore, Essex Police have agreed to allocate any additional funds generated by the removal of the second homes discount to the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership in the area. This was estimated to raise a further £4,000 per annum. This meant that the reduction in the Council Tax discount for second homes could potentially raise an extra £59,000 in income per annum, although there was the possibility that the extra Council Tax could be difficult to collect, with the Council bearing the full administrative cost for collecting the additional revenue.

The removal of the discount on long-term empty houses might provide an incentive for owners to find a use for their property. However, unlike with second homes, the Council would receive no additional revenue. It was felt that the owners of long-term empty properties should be encouraged to bring them back into use and help alleviate housing problems within the District, although it was recognised that there would be no financial benefit to the Council if the discount was reduced or removed.

## **PEOPLE FIRST**

### **Member Remuneration Scheme - Review**

To implement the requirements of the Licensing Act 2003, the Council has established a Licensing Committee. In addition, the Council's Overview and Scrutiny functions were reviewed and new arrangements put in place for the 2005/06 municipal year. Furthermore, the Cabinet was reduced to nine members at the start of the 2004/05 municipal year, with a number of changes in responsibilities of individual portfolios.

As a consequence, it was agreed that the Independent Remuneration Panel should be commissioned to review the Member Remuneration Scheme to take account of these changes with a view to them reporting back in readiness for the 2006/07 budget.

### **Civic and Ceremonial Budget**

In view of the greater costs involved in holding the Civic Awards Ceremony, an increase of £2,000 in the budget for staging the event in 2005/06 was approved. Furthermore, given that the Chairman of Council had made more frequent use of the civic car than his predecessors, approval was given to an additional £2,000, to be met from underspendings elsewhere, to cover the costs for the remainder of the municipal year. A decision on whether to set the budget for the civic car at a higher level was deferred pending a more detailed review being carried out by the Head of Research and Democratic Services.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

### **Introduction of Wheeled Bin Service**

Following an extensive review, including a public consultation exercise and visits to see similar arrangements operating in other local authority areas, a wheeled bin service for refuse collection was agreed. The wheelie bin scheme and associated alternate weekly collection of domestic refuse commenced in Chigwell and Lambourne in October 2005 and is being extended gradually to other parts of the district. It is anticipated that it will be operational throughout the district by April 2007.

It is estimated that more than 50,000 tonnes of domestic rubbish are thrown away by residents in the district each year. The introduction of the wheeled bin and enhanced recycling service will increase the amount of waste diverted from landfill, avoid the need for incineration and increase the amount and range of items recycled. Those households unable to participate in the new scheme will be provided with alternative facilities for disposing of their domestic rubbish and encouraged to recycle as much as they can.

### **Recycling of Plastics**

Approval was given to include plastic bottles as part of the doorstep recycling service, thereby removing them from the residual waste stream. To facilitate the collection of the plastic bottles, which are lightweight but high volume, it was agreed to continue with the existing clear plastic sacks for the collection of all recyclables except glass. Glass will still be collected in the existing blue plastic boxes in the parts of the district where this service applies. These arrangements also help facilitate the introduction of the alternate weekly wheelie bin residual service.

## **County Waste Management Scheme – Procurement Contracts**

In terms of the procurement of services for dealing with waste management, the District Council works in partnership with the County Council and other District and Borough Councils through the Waste Management Advisory Board and the West Essex Joint Waste Management Committee. The likely cost for Essex in terms of waste management is estimated at £25 billion over the next 25 years, economies of scale can be achieved only through joint working and integrated procurement as reflected in the development of a countywide waste management strategy. In addition DEFRA and the Treasury have become concerned about the reluctance of Essex to adopt a fully integrated PFI solution. DEFRA want collection authorities to agree an “affordability envelope” approach, whereby if the tendered sum is between two fixed levels then all would enter into the contract no matter what the nature of the proposed collection service. A number of collection authorities are opposed to this approach because of the loss of discretion over their collection services.

An assessment of the ‘Best Practicable Environmental Option’ indicated that a three-area based approach was not the best option. The feeling was that, although collection could remain on a three-area basis, disposal ought to be on a one or two area basis, with the two-area approach regarded as the most practical solution. With a view to maintaining existing partnering arrangements to achieve the most efficient and cost effective waste contract procurement, all options will be kept under review. These options include joint collection arrangements with the West Essex grouping of collection authorities and aligning collection arrangements with the County Council disposal contract.

## **Civic Offices – Refuse Collection and Disposal**

As a means of identifying ways in which the amount of recycling at the Civic Offices could be significantly increased, a review of the current arrangements was carried out. Previously, general waste was collected in ten 1100-litre Eurobins, which were emptied weekly: this equated to approximately 600 kg per week. Most of this waste was paper based or cardboard, as well as drinks cans, plastic bottles and other general office waste. Four other Eurobins were used to collect white paper for recycling. These were emptied fortnightly and equated to 160 kg per week. In addition, an average of ten skips were hired each year to dispose of waste from building works and office alterations. Approximately 25% of the general waste was recycled, with the remainder going to landfill.

The Eurobins have now been replaced with a portable compactor, which takes all the general waste and recycling material, as well as 50% of the skip waste. When full, the compactor is taken to a central depot where, it is estimated, 80-90% of the contents are recycled. One Eurobin is retained to deal with food waste.

## **Bobbingworth Tip – Landfill Remediation Project**

Approval was given to 'Cleanaway' to carry out remediation and restoration of the Bobbingworth Landfill site at a target price of £1.35 million for the capital works involved. The works will involve treating the leachate drained from the site and discharged to the Moreton Sewerage Treatment works through the installation of a reed bed and aeration plant to remove the dissolved methane. To restore the surface of the site, contaminated material will be buried and the site covered with clean soils. This will allow for future public access over the site, with the surface regraded to match the surrounding countryside. It was anticipated that a planning application would be submitted in 2006/07 and, if approval were forthcoming, that all work would be completed by 2010.

## **Kerbside Collection of Glass**

A system of kerbside collection of glass has operated in the district for a number of years, the Council having previously agreed to fund the service until the end of the 2005/06 municipal year, taking into account that the DEFRA funding ceased in November 2005.

Approval has now been given to extend the existing contractual arrangements for the service with 'Lucy and Martin' Contractors with a view to a tendering exercise being undertaken and a new three year contract commencing in October 2006.

It was recognised that the service was costly and that the amount of glass collected had been only 70% of the anticipated amount. However, the recycling credit has increased by £6 per tonne. In addition, residents have become familiar with the service and, without it, significant amounts of glass would end up in the residual waste stream. The Council wished to give every encouragement to recycling.

## **LEISURE**

### **Alternative Management of the Council's Leisure Facilities - Award of Contract**

A range of options for the future management of leisure facilities having been explored and a competitive tender exercise having been carried out, the contract for the running of the Council's Sports and Leisure Centres was awarded to Sports and Leisure Management (SLM). SLM were regarded as the most suitable tendering in terms of meeting the leisure objectives within the Best Value and Council Plans and in relation to providing the partnership approach required for the operation of the leisure centres in the district. SLM took over the running of the centres with effect from January 2006 on the basis of a seven-year contract (three years for Epping Sports Centre).

### **Dual Use Agreement with Roding Valley School - All-Weather Pitch**

It was agreed to transfer to the Roding Valley High School responsibility for the management, administration and maintenance of the all-weather pitch at the school. The all-weather pitch and sports hall have been provided as part of the Hanbury Park development by Bryant Homes, which utilised an area of the school's playing fields. To facilitate both school and community use, the County and District Councils had entered into a 30 year Dual Use Agreement with effect from March 1997.

It was agreed that responsibility for the management of the all-weather pitch should be transferred to the school. As the school's management were nearby this would ensure the site was managed more efficiently. Whilst taking responsibility for the pitch and associated costs, the school's management would also achieve a return from its hire and retain all income. The current users would continue to enjoy use of the facility whilst Leisure Services would have access to the pitch to run activities as agreed with the School.

### **District Museum Service - Redisplay and Archive Store Relocation Proposals**

Proposals aimed at achieving a significant improvement to the District Museum Service, by increasing access to and participation in it, were approved. The enhancements included a Redisplay Programme, the Community Venues Outreach Project and provision of a new access store.

Phase 1 of the Redisplay Programme involved redevelopment of part of the shop as an introduction area, the creation of an Archaeology Gallery on the ground floor covering the prehistory to medieval periods, redevelopment of the current Tudor Room into an enlarged

Tudor and Stuart Room, and upgrading of the Victorian/Edwardian Gallery. To increase access to collections, the current outreach programme was being expanded through the installation of a range of object-based displays in educational and community venues across the district. Display cases, drawing on the reserve collections, would be located with schools and Parish Councils, with themes changed each term or on an annual basis as appropriate. The redevelopment of a new access store would involve the creation of a new storage and research facility, with good access for the general public to make use of and work on the collections, in close proximity to the Museum itself. Finally, Phase II of the Redisplay Programme, would involve the creation of an education room for formal class groups, informal activity sessions and adult education seminars, the creation of a 20<sup>th</sup> Century gallery and the provision of a lift to the upper floor and chair lift to the middle floor.

The improvements were needed to enhance the experience of visiting the Museum for the local community. The option of relocating the Museum within the District had been examined, but it was felt that the current building was the most appropriate setting.

## **PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

### **Planning Delivery Grant 2005/06 – Development Control**

Funds of £100,000, through the Government's Planning Delivery Grant, were made available as a one-off payment to employ a 'squad' of staff specifically to deal with the backlog of planning applications. The squad, which was employed for a six-month period from September 2005, sat with other professional staff but specifically taking new cases through the development control process. At the time the squad began work some 35% of cases were not being dealt with in the statutory period (i.e. within eight weeks of receipt of the planning application).

The use of the squad was one of a range of measures, which also included investment in technology and training for Councillors and staff, aimed at ensuring the District Council became a top 'quartile' performer in terms of the processing of planning applications.

### **Paynes Lane, Nazeing – Clearance of Site**

Approval was given to a sum of £100,000 being allocated towards the costs of clearing the site on land to the rear of Landridge Cottages, Paynes Lane, Nazeing, following its unauthorised occupation by travellers. Works involved removal of the surface debris, materials and buildings. Rather than approving a fuller remediation, at this stage, involving restoration of the site to agricultural use at a cost of between £300,000 and £450,000, it was agreed to seek recovery of costs through registering a charge on the land and investigate further the option for the Council to acquire the freehold interest of the land, thereby controlling its future use.

### **Loughton Broadway Regeneration Scheme**

Approval was given for the Loughton Broadway Regeneration Scheme to be procured through a 'Design and Build' contractual arrangement with Gabriel (Contractors) Ltd. The cost of the works was estimated at £3 million and, in essence, it reflected the original 1998 design which included the following:

- removal of the central reservation of The Broadway;
- creation of a raised paved area in the central area to create a 'public space';
- redesign of the Burton Road car parks to provide additional and controlled parking;

- redesign of car parking areas in Vere Road;
- Vere Road and Burton Road becoming 'one-way' streets;
- separation of public and private space at the rear of premises in Burton Road;
- improved street lighting;
- extensive CCTV;
- resurfacing of highway and footway surfaces;
- replacement of street furniture as required; and
- demolition of garages

It was anticipated that work on site would commence in the summer of 2006 and would be completed by the summer of 2007. The work would be undertaken in two phases with Phase I in the period towards the Christmas holiday period and Phase II commencing in the new year, thereby minimising disruption to shoppers and residents during the festive period.

### **Loughton Town Centre Enhancement**

Work on the Loughton Town Centre Enhancement Scheme commenced on 1 August 2005, approximately one month later than originally planned and there had been a number of minor issues resulting in short delays which needed to be attended to during the earlier part of Phase I of the works carried out before Christmas 2005. However, there had been no major hold-ups and site liaison arrangements had worked well throughout. Phase II of the works had commenced in January 2006 and was completed in April 2006.

### **Local Plan Alterations Deposit**

The Local Plan is a statement of the Council's policies for the control of planning and development. It also sets out proposals for the development and use of land, and the allocation of land for specific purposes such as housing and community facilities. An effective Local Plan thereby helps preserve and enhance the countryside for the benefit of future generations.

The District Council's comprehensive district-wide plan was adopted in 1998. It is incumbent on the Council to update the plan on a periodic basis to take account of changing circumstances. A review of the Plan was duly completed during the Council year and a number of amendments to it agreed.

## **CORPORATE SUPPORT SERVICES AND ICT**

### **Corporate Contact Centre**

'In principle' approval was given to the introduction of a Customer Service Transfer Programme, the centrepiece of which would be a Customer Contact Centre. The decision followed consideration of a detailed report by consultants on the implications of the programme for the District Council.

It was envisaged that the programme of works would take up to three years to implement fully, with the first area of change being the 'front office' of the authority. Based on a volume of 1.3 million calls per annum, it had been estimated that the authority would require a staffing level of approximately 40 people for its Customer Contact Centre. There would also be significant investment in the supporting ICT infrastructure such as personal computers, networking and telephoning equipment.

Approval was also given to the appointment of external consultants to assist with various aspects of the implementation, including programme and change management, business



process re-engineering support, staff selection, recruitment and training, system software configuration and technical and integration services.

### **E-Procurement Strategy**

As part of implementing its E-Government Strategy, the Council has identified the importance of an effective and efficient procurement system. To assist in modernising its procurement practices, approval was given to a number of enhancements. These included changes to whole range of ICT systems including finance, creditor and purchase order systems, and the use of the Essex e-Market Place, an e-procurement system which could be accessed over the internet by Council Officers and which could exchange data with the Council's financial management system.

### **Energy Procurement**

Approval was given to the Council joining an energy procurement consortium. The invitation to join had been received from the Procurement Agency for Essex which had been established to improve collaboration between all local authorities in the county and of which the District Council is a member. The Procurement Agency had carried out a study which had indicated that, although current energy purchases were efficient. A consortium approach could lead to further saving of £20,000 per annum.

## **CIVIL ENGINEERING AND MAINTENANCE**

### **District Funded Traffic Schemes**

Given the current funding position and the transfer of highways professional resources to the County Council, it was agreed that, for the immediate future, parking reviews should be given preference over traffic calming or solely traffic management based schemes. Parking reviews which were in progress in 2005/06, due for completion during 2006/07, included those for Buckhurst Hill, Epping, Clifton Road, Loughton, a number of interim reviews and parking bays for the disabled. In that regard, it was agreed that £200,000 from the 2007/08 allocation should be brought forward so that work on parking reviews could be accelerated. Traffic calming and traffic management schemes had been identified and prioritised for various locations throughout the district and these would be undertaken when resources permitted.

### **Provision of Free Car Parking Spaces - Quaker Lane Car Park, Waltham Abbey**

The local trading situation in Waltham Abbey had suffered since the opening of a new local superstore. To help alleviate the affects of this situation and meet the concerns of local people, it was agreed to provide 24 free car parking spaces in the Quaker Lane Car Park.

### **Possible Development of Council-owned Car Parks**

Following a review of the Council's public car parks it had been agreed to investigate the development potential (whilst retaining public car parking) at a number of sites in the district. The appointment of consultants to carry out the investigation at Queens Road, Buckhurst Hill, Bakers Lane, Epping, the Broadway and Church Hill, Loughton and Quakers Lane, Waltham Abbey, was approved. It was anticipated that the consultants would complete their review of the potential of the sites during the earlier part of the 2006/07 Council year.

## **Watercourses and Flood Defence Assets - Allocation of Funding for Remedial Works**

Following the transfer of responsibility for critical ordinary watercourses to the Environment Agency on 1 April 2006, the Council were to become responsible for the five flood relief watercourses on Council land, twelve flood relief watercourses constructed by the Council on third party land and a further twelve flood alleviation schemes not transferred. Accordingly, the Council had taken the opportunity to assign a higher priority to the principal ordinary courses in its ownership, which it had constructed and which represented the highest risk of flooding to residents. Whilst the existing capital allocation was reduced from £451,000 to £200,000, an amount of £290,000 was agreed for the inspection, rehabilitation and reinstatement of these schemes to their original condition. The flood alleviation schemes concerned were those at Hillmans Cottages, Abridge, Boxted Close, Buckhurst Hill, Nazeing Brook and Cobbins Brook, Nazeing.

## **COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

### **Concessionary Fares**

The Council's Concessionary Fare Scheme, run in conjunction with Transport for London, had been amended from 1 April 2005 to allow free travel on buses following the withdrawal of half fares. To finance the enhanced scheme, charges had been raised from £20 to £30 per pass (£7 to £10 for those in receipt of benefit) on the assumption that the number of passes issued would not increase dramatically. However, the revised scheme had proved enormously popular with the number of passes issued rising from 190 to in excess of 700. To cover the additional costs incurred approval was given to a supplementary estimate of £68,000. In view of changes to the pricing structure employed by Transport for London it was also agreed that, whilst the charges for passes would be held at their present levels, the scheme should be amended in 2006/07 to no longer include travel on the underground network.

In addition, approval was given to the Council's continued participation in the Countywide Concessionary Fares Scheme. Participation in the Countywide Scheme offers residents benefits equivalent to other districts. Approval was also given to a scheme involving postal issue of passes which it was envisaged would be beneficial to pass holders and improve the efficiency of the process.

### **Graffiti Removal**

Approval was given to additional funding of £8,000 so that the Graffiti Removal Service could be maintained throughout the 2005/06 financial year. In addition, in the light of the importance of the service to the community, a sum of £20,000 should be set aside each year from 2006/07 onwards to enhance the scheme.

### **Epping Forest Homestart**

Homestart is a charitable voluntary group whose aim is to help families and parents with at least one child under five whom, for whatever reason, need personal and particular support. That support includes practical help to families under stress in their own homes, prevention of family crises and breakdown by means of a home visiting scheme. In recognition of the invaluable role played by Homestart, the Council has approved a further lease to them for the premises at Unit 36 Oakwood Hill Industrial Estate, Loughton and has substantially increased the concessionary rate for the rental of the premises. That concession now stands at £7,750 out of a revised market rental of £8,435.

## **HOUSING**

### **Development of Small Council Housing Sites**

In 2002 'in principle' approval had been given to the development of eight small Council-owned sites by a housing association, in partnership with the Council, to provide affordable housing. The sites concerned had been identified as under-utilised within the Council's estates (e.g. disused garage sites) and were at Hornbeam Road, Buckhurst Hill, Acres Avenue, Ongar, Homefield, Waltham Abbey and at Hillyfields, Oakfields, Oakley Court, Poundfield Road and Pyrles Lane shops in Loughton.

The selected developer, Estuary Housing Association, had re-appraised each of the development sites and had concluded that the number of properties developed could be increased to 57 from the original assessment of 30. During the Council year approval was given to the development to proceed on this basis. To maximise the amount of affordable housing which could be provided, it was agreed that some of the developed properties would be sold on the open market, with the financial surpluses arising being used towards affordable housing provision.

### **Fresh Start Scheme**

The Council operates in partnership with East Thames Group to provide an Open Market Leasing Scheme (Fresh Start) whereby the housing association leases up to ten properties from private landlords, which are then sub-let to homeless households nominated by the Council on shorthold tenancies at rent levels with local reference rents for housing benefits purposes. Approval was given to extending the scheme from 10 to 20 properties. The initiative had previously been known as the New Start Scheme but a change of name to Fresh Start was agreed to avoid confusion with a separate national initiative.

### **Introductory Tenancy Scheme**

The Council brought into effect an Introductory Tenancy Scheme. The Housing Act 1996 gives local authorities the discretionary power to operate such a Scheme, whereby any new tenant was not secure and did not have the same statutory rights as other tenants until they had been tenants for a twelve month period.

An Introductory Tenancy can be terminated following a breach of any tenancy conditions. Similar schemes are operated by a number of other local authorities and housing associations and make it easier to take action against new tenants accruing rent arrears or causing a nuisance to neighbours. The scheme also enhances additional powers available to the Council following the introduction of the Anti-Social Behaviour Act and assists in the reduction of crime.

### **Choice Based Lettings Scheme**

Under a Choice Based Lettings Scheme all vacant social rent properties are advertised to applicants on the Housing Register. Applicants can apply for a property by 'bidding' either in person, by post, telephone, text, e-mail or Internet. At the end of the bidding cycle, the bids are analysed and each property allocated following a prioritisation and selection process in accordance with the Allocations Scheme. In general, each property is then offered to the applicant in the highest band, who has been registered the longest and who has bid for a specific vacancy.

Approval was given to the terms under which the Scheme would operate within the district. The implementation of a Choice Based Lettings Scheme is necessary to meet the

requirements of Government that such a scheme be in place by 2010. In addition, the Council will benefit from working in partnership with neighbouring authorities in the Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium through which the Scheme operates, as this is recognised as good practice and cost effective. In addition, the Consortium will receive £96,000 funding for the setting up of the scheme.

## **KEY EXECUTIVE PRIORITIES**

**To remain one of the lowest tax authorities in Essex by setting a Council Tax increase for 2006/07 of less than 4%.**

- This priority was achieved with an increase of only 2.46%, the lowest increase of any District Council in Essex. A commitment was also made that Council Tax increases in the following three years would be held in line with increases in the Retail Price Index, assumed to be 2.5%.
- The Council still has the third lowest band D charge amongst Essex districts. However, as the increases set by Uttlesford (4.5%) and Tendring (4.9%) were above ours the gap between our band D charges has narrowed.

**To seek reductions in the number of houses indicated in the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) plan below 11,000 and to seek autonomy in deciding where housing should be built within the District.**

**To improve the delivery of front line services by focusing on customer issues, directing resources on priority areas and measuring achievement through the setting of demanding performance targets.**

- Street cleansing standards have improved through 2005/06 with an improvement in BV199 standards from 32% at the end of 2004/05 to 44% by the end of 2005/06. This was achieved through the introduction of locally based cleansing teams and better monitoring by Waste Management Officers.
- In 2005/6, Housing Services has:
  - Increased its rent collection rate to 98.58% of the collectable amount - 0.78% higher than the collection rate of 97.8% in 2004/5;
  - Following a targeted increase in staffing resources, increased the percentage of homelessness decisions made within 33 days from 66% to 80% (which was also increased from 50% in 2003/4);
  - Reduced the average response time to undertake non-urgent repairs by 15% - from 38 days to 32 days;
  - Reduced the rental loss from void properties by 27% - from 1.1% of the total annual rent debit to 0.8%;
  - Reduced the total average empty property period for Council properties by 16% - from 55 days to 46 days;
  - Continuing investment in the Council's housing stock has reduced the number of "non decent" Council homes by 20% - from 7.4% to 6% of the stock and we are on course to reduce the number of non-decent homes to zero by our April 2010 target; and
  - Been re-accredited with its ISO 9001:2000 Quality Assurance Award for a further 3 years.

**To achieve District Council top quartile status for at least 40% of the Council's Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPs).**

- The Cabinet agreed proposals for this on 5/9/05 and the Finance and Performance Management Standing Panel now monitor performance. An outturn report is currently being prepared for the Panel.

**To investigate opportunities for the transfer of capital balances into revenue generating schemes.**

- The main idea currently being pursued under this heading is the potential development of Council owned car parks. A number of sites have been identified where it may be possible to have some amount of development without a complete loss of the parking facilities. An external consultant has been appointed to assist in evaluating the development potential of the sites.

**To introduce the external management of Leisure Services if it can be shown to demonstrate better value for money and service improvement.**

- After a competitive tender process the Council appointed SLM Sports and Leisure Management, to manage four of its Sports Centres. The seven-year contract started on the 4th Jan 2006 and will deliver the Council's Key Objectives with respect to Value for Money, Capital Investment, Transfer of Risk and Continuous Improvement in Service.

**To deliver at least the first two phases of the Loughton Town Centre enhancement plan.**

- Both phases are well underway although will not complete by the end of 2005/06. This is the main has been due to difficulties with the diversions of statutory undertakers' equipment and the resultant need to re-programme the works. Completion is now anticipated for late summer 2006.

**To deliver a regeneration scheme for Loughton Broadway.**

- The phase I of the regeneration scheme has been approved by Cabinet along with the method of procurement. Final discussions are underway with the contractor to ensure the best value from the resources available whilst meeting as many local aspirations as possible.

**To take every opportunity to increase the amount of affordable housing in the district in order to contribute to meeting the needs of the local community.**

- 74 new affordable homes were completed in 2005/6 by the Council's housing association partners (a reduction from 113 in 2004/5).
- The Housing Scrutiny Panel considered a number of suggestions on ways of increasing affordable housing within the District, although it found many of them inappropriate for Epping Forest.
- The proposed Alterations to the Local Plan should result in an increase in the number of affordable homes in the future, particularly the proposals to reduce the threshold above which affordable housing is sought on development sites from 1 hectare or 25

units to 0.5 hectare or 15 units and to increase from 30% to 40% the amount of affordable housing expected on development sites in urban areas that are above the new threshold. The Planning Inspector's report is expected in May/June 2006.

**To work with Essex County Council through the new local area agreement to develop a process to enable Members to monitor that the new highways arrangement has led to a better service.**

- Liaison with the County Council has continued throughout the year, including the formation of a new West Essex Area Panel. This has been supplemented by 'one-to-one' meetings with the County Portfolio Holder, Councillor R Bass. Although the Local Service Agreement has not yet been signed off, the service has been operated as though it was in place. It is intended to conclude all negotiations and sign off the agreement by September 2006.

**To deliver the programmed schedule of new youth facilities identified by Town and Parish Councils within the capital expenditure programme.**

**To establish in partnership with Essex Police a new integrated system for delivering community policing.**