

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**OF THE EXECUTIVE**

**2006/07**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This report is submitted under Executive Procedure Rule 4(b) of the Constitution (Page H6) and represents a résumé of issues dealt with across the various Council Portfolios during the Council year 2006/07, the fifth year of full operation of the new Executive Constitution under the Local Government Act 2000.

## **2. PORTFOLIO CHANGES**

- 2.1 The number of portfolios covered by Cabinet Members was 9. Details of the Portfolios and Portfolio Holders are set out below:

Leader's Portfolio - Councillor Mrs Di Collins  
Civil Engineering and Maintenance - Councillor Andrew Green  
Community Wellbeing - Councillor Ms Syd Stavrou  
Environmental Protection - Councillor Mrs Mary Sartin  
Finance, Performance Management and Corporate Support Services -  
Councillor John Knapman  
Housing - Councillor David Stallan  
Customer Services, Media, Communications and ICT - Councillor Stephen Metcalfe  
Leisure and Young People - Councillor Chris Whitbread  
Planning and Economic Development - Councillor Mrs Anne Grigg

- 2.2 Issues falling within the Leader's Portfolio included constitutional matters, management and co-ordination of Cabinet business, local land charges and major property/development proposals affecting the Council's portfolio (not including estate management).

## **3. LEADER'S PORTFOLIO**

### **3.1 Elections – May 2006 and 2007 and Electoral Registration**

- 3.1.1 The May budget provision for elections in 2006/07 had been £59,000 but, in the event, the actual net cost of the May 2006 election amounted to £71,000. A subsequent analysis had revealed a number of reasons for the overspend.
- 3.1.2 Following the abandonment of the electoral pilot, which had included electronic counting, the number of count assistants required had been increased from 12 to 92, increasing the Council's costs by approximately £4,500. The Department of Constitutional Affairs had determined that this cost would have to be borne locally. Furthermore, in May 2006, one third of the District Council seats had been up for election. This, along with a Town Council by-election, resulted in extra costs. Combined elections and electoral pilots had shrouded the need to increase the budget by more than inflation as the costs of the elections had been shared with the Government. Thus, it was considered necessary to independently estimate the elections' budget annually rather than simply increase the existing budget by inflation, to avoid future budget fluctuations. It was also felt that an additional £2,500 should be set aside for any unforeseen by-elections arising during the remainder of the municipal year. The gross expenditure for the elections due in May 2007 had been estimated at £95,000.
- 3.1.3 In respect of electoral registration, £11,000 had been included in the budget to cover the requirements of the Electoral Services Act, which became law during 2006/07. However, a further £6,000 was necessary to cover the cost of increased postage and

canvassing, required as a result of the new Act, as well as a decline in income from the sale of registers.

- 3.1.4 The Department of Constitutional Affairs had subsequently agreed to refund £9,500 in respect of the abortive electoral pilot. The additional costs for electoral registration had predominantly arisen from the addition of a mandatory 'nationality' box on the 'A'-form which, when left blank, had necessitated the return of forms to respondents. It was agreed to defer the contingency of £2,500 for District Council by-elections, but that the request for an additional £6,000 in respect of electoral registration costs be noted and reviewed when the total cost for the municipal year was known.
- 3.1.5 A new basis for the budgeting of elections was agreed to avoid budget fluctuations occurring in future. The budget would be further significantly reviewed annually in case it proved necessary to negate the effect of inflation.

### **3.2 Development Proposals - Langston Road Industrial Estate, Loughton**

- 3.2.1 The T11 development site for Langston Road Industrial Estate comprises an area of approximately 2.6 acres. The Council had let 1.5 acres of the site to Galliard Homes as an employee car park until March 2007 for a rental income of £26,000 per annum. The County Council's development land comprises an area of 4.5 acres situated next to the T11 site behind the Prospect Business Park and the Seedbed Centre. However, vehicular access for the site is only obtainable via the T11 site or adjoining land on the other side within the Britannia Sports Ground. The site has been identified within the Local Plan as suitable for business or general industrial purposes, whilst the County Council feel that part of their site could be used for a new Waste Transfer Station, Civic Amenity Point and Materials Recycling Facility.
- 3.2.2 The T11 site could be developed on its own as a high quality office or light industrial scheme. However, Essex County Council had requested that the two councils undertake a joint sale to achieve a comprehensive development in the area. Preliminary negotiations with the County Council had produced a provisional agreement whereby the District Council would grant a vehicular access route through the T11 site to the County Council's land. The County Council would then reimburse the District Council for the costs associated with establishing the vehicular access route. The County Council would also reserve sufficient land for a possible Waste Transfer Station within its site.
- 3.2.3 The T11 site has potential for retail warehouse development. However, such a proposal would be contrary to the Local Plan and Government advice. It had previously directed that the sale of the T11 site should include a restrictive covenant prohibiting the use of the site as a vehicle showroom or a retail warehouse, to maximise the employment generation of any development.
- 3.2.4 There were traffic issues at the junction that led to the site and parking issues, at the site itself. Accordingly, authority was given to the Head of Legal, Administration and Estates, in consultation with the Leader of Council, to agree the principal terms of an agreement with the County Council for vehicular access rights through the T11 site and subject to satisfactory conclusion of that agreement, for the adjoining land to be marketed.

### **3.3 Top Management Structure**

- 3.3.1 Approval was given to a restructuring at the top management level within the District Council's officer structure. The first stage, to take effect on 31 July 2007, will involve

the deletion of the posts of Joint Chief Executive (Community) and Joint Chief Executive (Resources) and the creation of a single post of Chief Executive. Thereafter there will be a review of the current service area structure with a new structure anticipated later in the 2007/08 Council year.

### **3.4 Council Plan 2006/10**

3.4.1 An extensive consultation exercise was carried out with Members, residents, staff, partner agencies and other local representation organisations to inform the process leading to the finalisation of the Council Plan for 2006-10 and ensure that resources were targeted at those areas of greatest importance for the District. A number of comments were received as part of the consultation and, as far as practicable, these were provided for in the final approved Council Plan as follows:

- *District Council relations with Local Councils:* The comment of Loughton Town Council was noted but it was also recognised that specific proposals for delegation of powers from the District Council to the Town Council would be required.
- *Infrastructure for regional growth:* The views expressed regarding the provision of sufficient infrastructure for regional growth were supported.
- *Levels of Affordable Housing:* The problems in attracting and retaining key workers for local services, given the District's close proximity to London, were recognised.
- *Waste Incineration Facility within the District:* It was already the Council's policy to oppose the siting of a waste incineration facility within the District, and a statement regarding its opposition was added to the Council Plan.
- *Capital Expenditure Profile:* It had been suggested that the split between Housing and Non-Housing was disproportionate. However, it was felt that the split was justified if the Council was to remain committed to meeting the housing needs within the District.
- *East of England Plan:* it was agreed that the term 'economic prosperity' should be replaced with the term 'economic health'.
- *Local Agenda 21:* It was agreed that to make mention of Local Agenda 21 principles and the Council's contribution towards them.

## **4. CIVIL ENGINEERING AND MAINTENANCE**

### **4.1 Darby Drive Car Park, Waltham Abbey – Change of Designation**

4.1.1 Following the opening of the Tesco supermarket in Waltham Abbey, with free car parking, the use of the Darby Drive short-stay car park had declined to approximately 25% of its capacity. Approval was therefore given to a change of the designation of Darby Drive from short-stay to combined long/short-stay to ease the pressure on Cornmill car park, provide long-stay parking to the east of Waltham Abbey directly behind the shops and businesses, and potentially attract users of the Tesco and Lee Valley Park car parks back to the centre of Waltham Abbey.

4.1.2 The Waltham Abbey Town Centre Partnership had been consulted and were in favour of the proposed change. It was also felt that the change in designation might reduce on-street parking in the area.

## **4.2 Free Saturday Car Parking**

4.2.1. One of the Council's key pledges was the provision of free car parking on Saturdays as a way of providing further economic support to the District's town centres. Free parking had already been provided on Saturdays throughout the District during December to boost trading during the Christmas period. A decision was taken to provide free car parking on Saturdays throughout the year in a number of long stay or combined car parks in the District. The car parks concerned were at Traps Hill and Smarts Lane, Loughton; Queens Road (lower) in Buckhurst Hill; Cornmill, Darby Drive and Quaker Lane in Waltham Abbey, Bakers Lane in Epping and The Pleasance in Ongar.

4.2.2 There were a number of factors taken into account in determining the locations of the car parking which should be free on Saturdays. It was felt that residents would better understand an all-day free regime. The proposals would provide free parking at an approximate cost of £75,150 per annum, with £56,000 in lost income and £19,150 in lost enforcement income, compared with £215,500 in lost income if free all-day Saturday car parking were to be provided in all of the Council's car parks and on-street locations. It was estimated that there would be additional costs of £10,000 associated with new signage and amendments to Traffic Regulation Orders. The regime provides in excess of 800 free parking places in the town centres which it is felt facilitates local shopping and supports the town centre economies.

4.2.3 The new arrangements started in April 2007, thereby allowing time for the necessary changes to Traffic Regulation Orders. Approval was given to the use of monies from the Local Authority Business Growth Incentive Scheme to offset the £10,000 additional costs for signage and required alterations to these Orders.

## **4.3 New Parking Enforcement Contract**

4.3.1 A review of the operation of parking enforcement was being carried out prior to the new contract due to come into force in October 2007: Specialist consultants, Parking Associates, had been appointed to assist in the process. The current contract was of the traditional 'adversarial' type, but changes introduced as part of the Traffic Act 2004 required a more flexible approach with a closer contractual arrangement. It was agreed that the British Parking Association Model Contract be used as the basis for the Council's new contract, as it was less adversarial and closely aligned payment with performance. It also placed a greater emphasis on quality. Following the return of the Highways function to Essex County Council, difficulties had been experienced in organising simple maintenance jobs such as repainting yellow lines and replacing signs. The County Council therefore gave the District Council approval to commission minor works of this nature, subject to the use of a County approved contractor.

4.3.2 A consultation exercise was undertaken with all members, town and parish councils, and town centre partnerships. Four key issues were raised as a result and it was agreed that these be included in the new contract specification. The National Parking Adjudication Service's recommendation that a 'Parking Shop' be established was also approved.

#### 4.4 Possible Development of Council Car Parks

4.4.1 The Council commissioned a report on the development potential of the following public car parks:

- Bakers Lane (long stay), Epping;
- Cottis Lane (short stay), Epping;
- Church Hill, Loughton;
- Burton Road, Loughton
- Cornmill, Waltham Abbey; and
- Queens Road, Buckhurst Hill.

4.4.2 The report provided a preliminary assessment of the development potential of each site, albeit with the proviso that some element of public car parking had to be retained. The report concluded that there were pros and cons in each instance but all of the car parks identified had some form of development potential, which could generate revenue or a capital receipt, or meet other important objectives such as the provision of affordable housing and/or the encouragement of business within the town centres.

4.4.3 On the basis of the outcome of the feasibility study, approval was given to the preparation and submission of an outline planning application for residential development of the car parks at Church Hill, Loughton, incorporating a minimum of 40% affordable housing with no public car parking provision. It was agreed that the Burton Road, Loughton car park be retained as a public car park until such time as a scheme was identified complementing The Broadway Town Centre Enhancement Scheme. It was further agreed that the remaining sites under consideration should be retained as public car parks for the foreseeable future.

### 5. COMMUNITY WELLBEING

#### 5.1 Grant Aid Scheme and Voluntary Sector Assistance

5.1.1 During the course of the year a total of £92,275 was allocated from the grant aid scheme, either through longer term three-year agreements or on individual schemes, to the following voluntary and community groups:

<b>Long Term</b>	<b>£</b>
Alzheimer's Society	1,180
Crossroads	4,200
Epping Forest District Swimming Club	3,490
Loughton Voluntary Care Association	2,310
Home-Start	2,820
North Weald Airfield Museum	2,100
Ongar Voluntary Care	1,180
Rural Community Council for Essex	1,180
Samaritans	2,100
Theatre Resource	4,200
Victim Support	3,690
Waltham Abbey Young Persons' Information Centre	4,200
<b>One-off Major Grants</b>	
Avenue Tennis Club	5,000
Chigwell Disabled Group	2,000

<b>Long Term</b>	<b>£</b>
Epping Forest Community Church	500
Epping Golf Club, Juniors	300
Free Fall Home Safety Scheme	5,000
Hertfordshire Boat Rescue	1,575
King Harold Day Society	2,500
Loughton Athletic Club	2,000
Loughton Brook Project	3,800
Loughton Operatic Society	1,000
Music @ LMC (Loughton)	2,500
North Weald Cricket Club	2,500
Ongar Art Society	150
Ongar Boxing Club	2,000
Radio Forest	1,120
Roding Players Orchestra	280
Royal British Legion – Roydon Branch	1,000
SEFTA (Supporting Epping Forest Families in Temporary Accommodation)	2,500
Toot Hill Village Hall	10,000
Traps Hill Club	1,000
Vitalise	1,000
Volunteer Plus	5,000
Waltham Abbey Music	2,500
Waltham Abbey Youth 2000	4,000
Willingale Cricket Club	400

5.1.2 Further grants totalling £105,060 and £31,520 were awarded respectively to the three Citizens' Advice Bureaux in the District and Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF). VAEF also received further assistance to offset accommodation and other overhead costs.

## **5.2 Grant Aid 2006/07 - Waltham Abbey Youth 2000**

5.2.1 Approval was given to funding from the Grant Aid Scheme in the sum of £4,000 to Waltham Abbey Youth 2000. Approval was also given to a three year funding agreement between the group and the District Council for service provision from Waltham Abbey Youth 2000 commencing 1 April 2007.

5.2.2 The group provides a range of youth services from its premises at Brooker Road, Waltham Abbey, including a "drop in" youth centre and confidential counselling services. As part of the evaluation process, the Leisure and Young People Portfolio Holder had undertaken a visit to the Group's headquarters, accompanied by officers. Conditions regarding the centre's opening hours and assurances regarding the long term funding of the Youth Worker had been attached following discussions between the Group and officers.

5.2.3 Approval of the grant was conditional upon clarification of the centre's opening hours and assurances regarding the long term funding for the Youth Worker. Conditions would also be included in any longer term funding agreement to ensure that the service expected of Waltham Abbey Youth 2000 was clearly defined.

### **5.3 Grant Aid - King Harold Day Society**

- 5.3.1 Approval was given to an application from the King Harold Day Society for a grant of £2,500 from the Council's Grant Aid Scheme. The Society arranged the annual event in Waltham Abbey to increase awareness of the local heritage and history connected with the town. The grant was used to purchase some permanent interpretation boards. The application from the Society was deemed worthy under the terms of the Grant Aid Scheme as it would provide and promote opportunities for residents to participate in cultural activities held within the District.

### **5.4 Civil Contingencies Act 2004 - Emergency Planning Officer New Post**

- 5.4.1 Prior to the introduction of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, the Council's role had been to support the emergency services, provide humanitarian assistance for incidents within the District, maintain an emergency plan and provide training for the Emergency Planning Team. The introduction of the Act had meant that the Council had to participate not only in local planning but also in wider regional arrangements that included London. There was also an additional responsibility to provide business continuity management advice and assistance to local businesses and voluntary organisations.
- 5.4.2 It had been previously agreed to support joint arrangements with Essex County Council, whereby a Joint Emergency Planning Officer dedicated half of their time to work for the Council at a cost to the Council of £15,000 per annum, with provisional approval being given to the establishment of an Emergency Planning Officer. In addition, Emergency Planning was to be brought within the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process, whereby formal evidence would need to be presented to demonstrate the Council's level of preparedness. Accordingly, it was agreed to create a new Emergency Planning Officer post, to cover this role.

### **5.5 Concessionary Fares**

- 5.5.1 Under the provisions of the Transport Act 2000, elderly and disabled people are to be offered a minimum of a half-fare reduction for travel on buses within the District. This was further extended to free travel, with effect from April 2006. The Council worked in partnership with Essex County Council to provide an enhanced version of the statutory scheme, whereby the bus passes issued provided free travel for elderly and disabled people within Essex. The Council also had a Concessionary Fare Scheme running in conjunction with Transport for London, providing free travel on buses in the North East of London, although a small charge was levied by the Council for the issue of these passes.
- 5.5.2 The increase in passes issued for the Essex Countywide Scheme had been 25% which was less than anticipated. There was a reduction of 51% in the number of passes issued under the Transport for London Scheme, as the Essex Countywide bus pass can now be used for free travel on a number of London buses. This reduction was anticipated and therefore had not generated any budgetary savings. A number of bus companies had challenged the re-imbursment process under the Transport Act 2000. As a result, the Council was advised by the consultants who co-ordinated the scheme in Essex that the detailed scheme documents should be specially approved. Consequently, it was agreed that the Council remain a member of both schemes for 2007/08, and that authority be delegated to the Head of Finance to agree the detailed documents for both schemes.



## **6. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

### **6.1 Civic Offices - Refuse Collection and Disposal Arrangements**

### **6.2 Contaminated Land**

- 6.2.1 The Council is obliged to produce a Contaminated Land Strategy, indicating how potentially contaminated land meriting detailed individual inspection can be identified in an ordered, rational and efficient manner. The Council's current strategy, adopted in 2001, had assumed a risk-based approach whereby a prioritised list of sites was produced, with those sites of greatest risk to human health at the top. It was agreed to maintain this approach in the future.
- 6.2.2. A problem had arisen in relation to the public disclosure of information on potentially contaminated sites, whereby a number of potential purchasers of properties had undertaken an environmental survey through an independent company, revealing that the property was either on or close to a site that was potentially contaminated. Consequently, the sale had not been completed and the Council had received calls from potential sellers requesting that information be made available in respect of the site. It was considered prudent not to release information to the public in respect of a particular site until it had been investigated and declared as contaminated or not. This would not contravene the Freedom of Information Act 2000, as the Council would publish the information at a later date.

### **6.3 Bobbingworth Tip Remediation Project**

- 6.3.1 The remediation scheme at Bobbingworth Tip had been due to commence in June 2006. However, the start of the project had been delayed because of the need to complete a Section 278 Agreement with the Highways Authority (Essex County Council). The cost of repairs had been estimated at £200,000 and, following negotiations, the Council was requested to, and agreed, to pay a maximum of £65,000 towards the cost of any repairs. This was felt to be acceptable, as it would avoid any further delay in the implementation of the project with a resultant increase in costs.
- 6.3.2 The delay had impacted on the cost. The original agreed target price had anticipated the project to have begun by August 2006. However, as the infrastructure and heavy engineering works had been rescheduled for the spring and summer of 2007, it was expected that the cost of the project would rise. A sum of £255,560 had been allocated as a contingency of which only £32,278 remained available. Based on the industry standard of 10% contingency, it was agreed that there should be a contingency of £115,000. With an estimated underspend of £32,728 for the project, it was further agreed that an additional sum of £82,000 be made available from the contingency fund to enable the scheme to proceed. It was also important to control the future use of the site following the completion of the remediation project, and it was agreed that by-laws be made to enable these controls to be enforced.
- 6.3.3 Ongar Town Council had expressed grave concern regarding the proposed traffic management scheme, especially in relation to the associated safety issues in Moreton Road, but the Highways Authority (Essex County Council) would not consider alternative routes. Given the concerns, every effort would be made to minimise any risks to residents. A public meeting had been held to inform residents of the final arrangements for the project.

## **6.4 Gambling Act 2005 - Adoption of Statement of Principles and Consequential Changes to the Licensing System**

6.4.1 The Gambling Act 2005 modernised the legislation governing gambling through the creation of a single regulatory body, the Gambling Commission. This gave responsibility for licensing premises where gambling took place to local authorities, making them designated Licensing Authorities for the purposes of the Act. In respect of each 3 year period, starting in January 2007, each Licensing Authority had to publish a "Statement of Principles" before the beginning of each period.

6.4.2 The Statement of Principles described how the Licensing Authority would promote the licensing objectives set out in the Act, which were:

(a) the prevention of gambling being a source of, or associated with crime or disorder, or being used to support crime;

(b) ensure that gambling was conducted in a fair and open way; and

(c) the protection of children and other vulnerable persons from being harmed or exploited by gambling.

6.4.3 Conditions and restrictions of the Gambling Act 2005 could only be applied where they were relevant to meeting the licensing objectives, all other restrictions would be illegal and challengeable in the courts. Furthermore, objections ("representations") were restricted to what the Act defined as "responsible authorities" or "interested parties". If no representations were received, or they were not associated with one or more of the licensing objectives, then an application would have to be approved.

6.4.4 The Act also stated that all matters related to the discharge by a Licensing Authority of its licensing functions were to be delegated to its Licensing Committee and that the Committee had to discharge those functions on behalf of the authority. This placed the Licensing Committee in the same position that it held relative to the Licensing Act 2003.

6.4.5 The Statement of Principles made under the Gambling Act 2005 were adopted, thereby ensuring that the functions undertaken by the Council were constitutionally and legally correct.

## **6.5 Waste Management Contract - Fleet and Recyclates**

6.5.1 The Waste Management contract places responsibility for fleet provision and the marketing of recyclates with the waste management service provider. This made the service provider responsible for any fleet failures, and thereby not exposing the Council to the vagaries of the recyclate market. It was agreed that the risks for both should remain with the service provider. This arrangement also helped the Council to maintain the fleet and manage an emergency situation more effectively.

## **7. FINANCE, PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND CORPORATE SUPPORT SERVICES**

### **7.1 Violence at Work Policy**

7.1.1 Approval was given to a Violence at Work Policy for the protection of the Council employees when dealing with members of the public. The policy provides a framework for individual services to develop their own arrangements, suited to local

circumstances and needs, setting out the support that can be made available to staff subject to violence or abuse.

## **7.2 Age Discrimination Regulations**

- 7.2.1 The Age Discrimination Regulations came into effect on 1 October 2006. Modifications were made to two of the Council's procedures to make them legally compliant with the regulations.
- 7.2.2 The Council had previously had an interim policy enabling staff over the age of 65 to continue working, subject to annual medical check. This had been potentially discriminating as it placed a condition on staff over the age of 65 not placed on younger employees. It could not therefore be justified. Any medical issues would need to be considered as a normal part of employment rather than on attaining the age of 65. Thus, it was agreed to replace the current interim policy with the statutory provisions.
- 7.2.3 In addition, the existing Redeployment and Redundancy Procedure had included a reference to an individual's length of service as one of the potential criteria for selection. Again, as this could have been regarded as discriminatory, the procedure had been redrafted. The Council's existing application form included a reference to an applicant's date of birth. It was agreed to retain this reference, as it would prove useful in checking an applicant's career history, but with provision that the practice be reviewed in two years' time.

## **7.3 Child Protection Policy**

- 7.3.1 The Council's previous Comprehensive Performance Assessment had highlighted the lack of an overall child protection strategy at the corporate level. With the greater national prominence of child protection issues, it was felt necessary to address this deficiency with the roles and responsibilities of designated staff set out to ensure that appropriate arrangements were in place.
- 7.3.2 It also became necessary to review current arrangements for carrying out disclosure checks under the Disclosure of Criminal Background Regulations. Previously, disclosure checks were carried out on potential employees prior to their offer of employment, but there were no arrangements in place to re-check staff who might commit relevant offences whilst in employment and which the authority might not be aware of. Thus it was agreed that all staff in designated posts be checked every three years. This would be a contractual requirement for all newly appointed staff, although for existing staff this process would be optional as it was not an existing contractual requirement.

## **7.4 Work Experience Policy**

- 7.4.1 The Council has a longstanding commitment to the provision of work experience placements to students of all ages, which has sometimes led to students gaining permanent positions within the Council. It became clear that there needed to be common standards applied across the Council and for the expectations on students and managers offering placements to be clear. Accordingly, a policy was agreed seeking to address these issues and provide a clear, corporate framework.

## **7.5 Treasury Management and Investment Policies**

- 7.5.1 The Council adopted the CIPFA Code of Practice for Treasury Management in the Public Sector in 2002, and its Treasury Management Service operates in compliance with this Code. The prime objectives of the Council's Treasury Management activities are the effective management of risk and that any borrowing activities are undertaken on a prudent, affordable and sustainable basis.
- 7.5.2 The original Treasury Management strategy for 2005/06 outlined a cautious approach, in response to advice provided by the Council's Treasury Advisers. The main change was in the part of the portfolio kept available for instant access, whereby funds previously used for call deals on the money market had been invested in an instant access deposit account with the Bank of Scotland instead. The interest rate was set at the Bank of England Base Rate, generally 0.3% better than the average call deal struck on the open market. This approach was further modified in January 2006, when the Bank of Scotland informed the Council that they could not maintain the current rates of interest. After comparing similar accounts offered by the Council's main banker, NatWest, a seven-day notice account was opened with the Bank of Scotland, to run alongside the instant access account, at an interest rate based on the three-month LIBOR. It was intended to keep funds within this account to the highest possible level whilst still maintaining the required level of funds available for instant access for short notice withdrawals.
- 7.5.3 The Treasury position as of 31 March 2006 was as follows: £43million invested in fixed interest products generating an average return of 4.58%; £1.52million invested in variable interest products generating an average return of 4.51%. This gave the total funds under investment as £44.52million generating an average return of 4.58%. Throughout the year, the Council had maintained an average investment of £46.7million that had generated an average return of 4.73% in comparison to an average net return of 4.51% for money market funds. The benchmark for local authority Treasury performance was the average seven-day LIBID rate, which was 4.53% in 2005/06, and in exceeding this benchmark the Council had earned an additional £92,000 in interest. The Council had also met all its Prudential Indicators for 2005/06: the Net Borrowing position was negative as the Council was debt-free and an investor; and gross borrowing had been maintained within its authorised limit. No external loans had been drawn to finance the Council's Capital Expenditure programme, which had enabled the Council to maintain its debt-free status.
- 7.5.4 The Council had complied with all relevant statutory and regulatory requirements, limiting the levels of risk associated with its Treasury Management. The adoption and implementation of both the Prudential Code and the Code of Practice for Treasury Management had ensured the Council's capital expenditure was prudent, affordable and sustainable, and its Treasury activities had demonstrated a low risk approach. The Council was aware of the risks of passively managing its Treasury portfolio and, with the support of the Council's professional Treasury Advisers, had proactively managed its debt and investments during the year.

## **7.6 Council Tax Discounts - Long-term Empty Properties**

- 7.6.1 The owners of empty properties are currently eligible to a six-month exemption from Council Tax, provided the properties are substantially unfurnished and not the sole or main residence of a person. Currently, the Council applies a 50% discount after the expiry of this six-month period, although regulations permit this discretionary discount to be reduced or removed completely.

7.6.2 If the Council reduced or removed the discount for long-term empty properties, it would be taken into account when the tax base for Council Tax purposes was calculated and the Council would not retain the financial benefit. The discount for long-term empty properties was reviewed to ascertain whether the removal of the discount would help alleviate housing problems within the District by bringing more empty properties back into use. Ultimately it was decided that, as a number of empty properties were sold between the period of six months and one year after becoming empty, the discount should remain at 50% for a period of six months after the expiry of the exemption period and that a full charge should then be levied one year after the property becomes empty.

## **7.7. Postal Vote Personal Identifiers**

7.7.1 The Electoral Administration Act 2006 requires all postal voters at elections to provide their signature and date of birth on a postal vote statement and return this with their postal ballot paper,. The ballot paper will not be regarded as valid without the accompanying statement, and the statement has to be checked against the identifier on the postal vote application form.

7.7.2 Approval was given to the purchase of the Postal Vote Personal Identifiers upgrade to the Council's Xpress Electoral Register and Election Management IT system so that the verification process could be performed electronically, generating forms in the standard format, storing data and comparing electronically the scanned data.

## **7.8 Youth Initiatives Scheme - Work Programme**

7.8.1 The District Council has included within its capital programme a Youth Initiative Scheme consisting of approximately £100,000 per annum for the financial years 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08. The schemes had been put forward by Town and Parish Councils and assessed by the District Council for their suitability based on a number of different criteria. The maximum grant permitted for an individual scheme was £40,000.

7.8.2 A number of projects had been included in the 2006/07 programme, one of which was an application from Buckhurst Hill Parish Council relating to the teenage element (a ballpark) of an all-ages facilities in the Roding Valley Recreation Area. Because of uncertainties regarding the timescale of this project, this has been replaced in the 2007/08 programme with projects at Upper and Lower Sheering Playing Fields, where Sheering Parish Council was in a position to commence work in the near future. The project at Roding Valley was, accordingly, transferred to the list of projects to be included in the future programme, along with other schemes at Chigwell, Matching and Roydon.

7.8.3 Experience had shown that the provision of youth facilities helped reduce youth nuisance and anti-social behaviour. Such facilities were required throughout the District, but particularly in the more remote rural areas. The projects that had been put forward had the support of the Parish and Town Councils and residents in the localities concerned.

## **8. HOUSING**

### **8.1 Tenant Satisfaction Survey**

- 8.1.1 Government guidelines require that, at least every three years, a survey of tenants should be carried out to provide the information required for Best Value Performance Indicators BV74 (overall tenant satisfaction) and BV75 (satisfaction with opportunities for participation). The survey has to be carried out in accordance with the National Housing Federation (NHF) STATUS standard tenant satisfaction methodology: this is a postal survey sent to a sample of tenants in respect of which a 10% sample response is considered adequate for the size of the Council's housing stock.
- 8.1.2 The previous survey had been carried out by the NHF in 2003 for approximately £9,500, and the NHF had been very efficient in its conduct of the survey, analysis of results and provision of reports. The response rate had been extremely good with 70% of the sample replying. The NHF had provided a quotation of £9,993 to repeat the survey in 2006/07. The quotation was considered satisfactory and, in view of the expertise and knowledge of the NHF, it was agreed they should be appointed to undertake the 2006/07 survey.

### **8.2 Mandatory Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation**

- 8.2.1 The Housing Act 2004 came into force on 6 April 2006, and replaced the provisions in the Housing Act 1985 relating to unfit homes, disrepair, overcrowding and registration of, plus control orders for, houses in multiple occupation. All houses in multiple occupation of three or more storeys, with five or more residents forming two or more households, are now subject to mandatory licensing. The aim is to ensure that those properties that potentially pose the greatest risk to their occupants are identified, with any issues of safety and management recognised. A survey of all three-storey potential houses in multiple occupation was undertaken identifying thirty properties within the District required to be licensed. The Council still had a statutory duty to inspect and assess the remaining five hundred or so properties within the District.
- 8.2.2 To facilitate the licensing of houses in multiple occupation, as the Council did not have the resources to subsume the function within current budgets, it was agreed that a charging régime for these functions be introduced, in common with other local authorities in Essex. The charges for 2006/07 were set at a basic fee of £550 for up to five units, with a further £50 per unit charged beyond that number. It was also agreed that this function should be the responsibility of the Licensing Committee with officers granted delegated authority to issue licenses in accordance with the policy approved. Furthermore, with the necessity to undertake an inspection and assessment régime of up to five hundred properties, approval was given to the appointment of an additional Environmental Health Officer to introduce the régime necessary to fulfil the Council's statutory requirements.

### **8.3 Housing Tree Maintenance Budget**

- 8.3.1 The amount of maintenance work required to trees on Housing Revenue Account owned land throughout the District has continued to increase. This has resulted in the accumulation of a backlog of work in recent years, estimated at a cost of £42,000 to clear. As the Housing Revenue Account had achieved an additional surplus of £357,000 in 2005/06, it was agreed to use £42,000 of these monies to clear the backlog of major tree maintenance work. In addition, future budgets for major tree

maintenance were increased by £15,000 per annum, commencing in 2007/08, to ensure that the trees were maintained to a reasonable standard.

#### **8.4 Springfields Improvement Scheme, Waltham Abbey - Repurchase of leasehold flats**

- 8.4.1 Previously, it had been agreed to repurchase the leasehold flats at Springfields, Waltham Abbey to progress the improvement scheme planned for the area, as negotiations to vary the leases to account for any changes that might occur as a result of the works would be time consuming. Initially, seven of the nine leaseholders had agreed for their flats to be repurchased by the Council at a cost of £596,000. However, a further leaseholder had now expressed an interest in the Council repurchasing his leasehold property. This meant that eight of the nine leaseholders would then have sold their properties back to the Council, with the remaining leaseholder willing to contribute their share of the cost of the works as determined by the lease.
- 8.4.2 The Valuation Office confirmed the value of the leasehold as £90,000, with the monies to be made available from the savings resulting from the Wickfields stock transfer to complement the £596,000 previously agreed. As a consequence, £310,000 savings generated by the Wickfields stock transfer, £162,000 had been spent, with £148,000 still available.
- 8.4.3 Approval was given to the additional repurchase to facilitate the continuation of the works with a view to completion in the near future, thereby making the properties available to let to persons on the housing waiting list.

#### **8.5 Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme**

- 8.5.1 The Council is legally required to have a Housing Allocations Scheme, detailing procedures for allocating its housing accommodation and making nominations to registered social landlords. In September 2004, the Council introduced a banding system to form the basis for the prioritisation of housing applications, and this had worked well with no major problems. A number of minor amendments were agreed in respect of the scheme's general information to take effect from 1 April 2007, along with the current scheme's bands two and three to reduce the number of bandings within the scheme from seven to six.
- 8.5.2 The Council had also decided to introduce a choice based letting scheme through an agreement with a choice based lettings agency and in partnership with the local authorities within Herts and Essex Housing Options Consortium. As a result of this, further changes were approved in relation to the scheme's general information and band one to meet the requirements of the scheme following its implementation in 2007.
- 8.5.3 The proposed changes would meet government targets and ensure all applicants on the Housing Register were treated in a fair and equitable manner.

#### **8.6 Private Sector Housing Strategy**

- 8.6.1 The Housing Act 2004 grants the Council additional powers as the Government intends the private sector to make a bigger contribution towards meeting the housing needs of local residents. This in turn requires the Council to review its private sector housing strategy. The revised strategy would lead to substantial changes in the

enforcement of private sector housing standards and the provision of financial assistance for the repair and improvement of sub-standard private sector housing.

- 8.6.2 Given difficulties surrounding the Waste Management Contract, it was agreed, for the time being, to seek the minimum additional resources required and to reprioritise the private sector housing workload within the existing resources to provide the critical elements of the strategy and to maximise the existing capital funds plus the additional funding received from Government Office for the East of England (Go-East) In effect this meant the adoption of the private sector housing and the empty property strategies, whilst delaying their full implementation pending a review of available resources and the Housing Assistance Policy.
- 8.6.3 Proposals implemented with immediate effect included the appointment of a specialist consultant to prepare a revised Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy, facilitating a move away from grant aided assistance towards a system of loans or equity management for the repair or improvement of private sector dwellings. It was also intended to replace the current Renovation Grant with Decent Homes Assistance, along with the existing Homes Repair Assistance with Small Works Assistance, and implement Thermal Comfort Grants. These measures would enable the Council to utilise the additional Go-East funding available to bring sub-standard private sector dwellings up to the Decent Homes standard. It was agreed that the capital allocation for mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants should remain at £500,000 per annum, but that an additional £5000 be allocated to fund the empty homes 'Finders Fee Scheme', whereby one-off payments would be made to landlords whose properties were let to tenants from the Housing Register.
- 8.6.4 An amended Housing Assistance Policy, forming part of the overall Private Sector Housing Strategy setting out the basis on which the Council would offer financial assistance for works or repair, renewal or adaptation, was also approved.

## **8.7 Bed and Breakfast Accommodation for Homeless Persons**

- 8.7.1 Under the Housing Act 1996, the Council has a statutory duty to arrange interim accommodation for homeless applicants with a priority need for accommodation. To meet this duty, the Council uses a variety of interim accommodation, in which most homeless households spend approximately six months. Although families are not generally placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation, such accommodation is often used for single homeless applicants when there is no capacity at the Council's homeless persons hostel or, if that is not suitable, to place them in other temporary or interim accommodation. All hotels used for this purpose are inspected to ensure that adequate living conditions are provided and costs reasonable. Although room rates are negotiated on an individual basis, to date there has been no competitive process used to obtain rooms rates.
- 8.7.2 Often, Bed and Breakfast accommodation at hotels whose rates are not the lowest or are located outside the District have to be used. Following a tendering exercise, a revised list of suitable establishments expressing an interest in providing Bed and Breakfast accommodation for, mainly, single homeless applicants was agreed. The contract period was for three years, with a price quoted for the first year and annual inflationary increases applied for the subsequent two years. Generally, it was expected that the most economically advantageous hotel would be used. However, authorisation was given for applicants to be placed in accommodation not provided by the lowest tenderer if such accommodation was not available or not suitable for the applicant.



## **8.8 Review of Garden Maintenance Scheme - Older and Disabled Tenants**

- 8.8.1 In December 2004, approval had been given to the continuation of the Garden Maintenance Scheme for a further period up to the end of 2005. Under the scheme, £20,000 per annum, provided through the Housing Revenue Account was utilised to fund Voluntary Action Epping Forest's (VAEF) part time Garden Maintenance Co-ordinator post, and the purchase of some necessary equipment. VAEF oversaw voluntary garden maintenance work to older and disabled Council tenant's properties and undertook some work for private sector residents. During the two year period, works on 230 gardens at an average cost of £174 per garden had been carried out. This was considered extremely good value for the service provided. VAEF had undertaken a re-organisation of the scheme, which was expected to result in an increase in the number of gardens being maintained.
- 8.8.2 VAEF confirmed that they could continue with the scheme for a further two years at the same level of funding received in the previous two years (representing a real term reduction in cost), which would cover staff costs and the maintenance of equipment. VAEF received separate, additional funding for works to gardens of non-Council tenants. Funding from the Housing Revenue Account only contributed to works undertaken on the gardens of Council tenants.
- 8.8.3 Approval was given to the continued utilisation of Housing Revenue Account funding of £20,000 per annum, for the scheme for an additional two years from 2007/2008, subject to a further review at the end of that period.

## **9. CUSTOMER SERVICES, MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND ICT**

### **9.1 Single Non-Emergency Number (SNEN)**

- 9.1.1 The Government announced proposals for a Single Non-Emergency Number (SNEN) a new national service providing the public with direct access to community safety advice, information and action through a new three-digit number, '101', whilst releasing '999' services to exclusively handle genuine emergency incidents. SNEN is a joint initiative between the Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The cost of the new service is to be fixed at 10p per call from both landlines and mobiles to deter inappropriate calls to the service, but will be reviewed following the wave 1 implementation.
- 9.1.2 The service is to be launched in five Wave 1 areas, and implemented across the country in wave 2 and wave 3 by 2008. The initial scope of the service will cover:
- Vandalism and graffiti.
  - Noisy neighbours.
  - Intimidation and harassment.
  - Abandoned vehicles.
  - Rubbish or litter.
  - Drunk and disorderly public behaviour.
  - Drug related anti-social behaviour.
  - Street lighting.
- 9.1.3 Both Essex Police and Essex County Council feel strongly that it will benefit all local authorities in Essex to participate in Wave 2 as: there is Home Office funding available for both the development of proposals and implementation stages; local authorities have already invested in e-Government infrastructure that SNEN could

utilise; and it will assist in the joint services proposals being developed for Essex local authorities. All District Council Chief Executives within Essex were asked to sign up to the 'expression of interest' as this allows the partnership to gain access to Home Office funding to develop their proposals. The final proposal would also need agreement by each District Council prior to submission to the Home Office.

- 9.1.4 Participation in the Wave 2 'expression' of interest was also endorsed. This expression of interest was accepted by the Home Office, who awarded a £100,000 grant to the Essex SNEN Partnership to develop a full proposal and implementation plan.
- 9.1.5 The Government had originally intended to make local authority involvement with SNEN mandatory by 2008. Although it is still the intention to make it mandatory, a decision as to the final implementation date has been put on hold.

## **9.2 Customer Services Transformation Programme**

- 9.2.1 Following the decision by the Council in September 2005 to implement a Customer Services Transformation Programme, a Programme Plan was developed for the implementation to improve customer service for the residents of the District. The Programme addressed current concerns such as the failure to answer 30% of phone calls, residents being passed from service to service when calls are answered, consistent telephone standards across the whole authority, extending current opening hours and providing access to the Council's services for residents via a single ground floor reception area. The benefits of the Programme would be the development of first-class customer service, a more efficient authority and better information on residents' needs for members and officers.
- 9.2.2 The Programme Plan was developed through meetings of the Programme Board, interviews and discussions with Heads of Service, Senior Managers plus other staff. This process had revealed strong support for a corporate telephone contact centre and the rationalisation of all reception points into one place on the ground floor. The Plan promoted a phased implementation with an early emphasis on the construction of the corporate telephone contact centre before developing the new reception area. It also envisaged the integration of the main switchboard with the corporate telephone contact centre and the creation of one number to call for all Council services.
- 9.2.3 Over the full three-year life of the project, a capital provision of £2.2million had already been set aside, along with one-off DDF expenditure of just over £1million and approximately £250,000 of CSB expenditure for staffing and software costs. In addition to these costs, there would also be savings generated by the Programme, but these would not become apparent until the project had been progressed.
- 9.2.4 Subject to consideration of the staffing structure, the Programme Plan for the implementation of a Customer Services Transformation Programme was approved. However, given the difficulties arising in respect of the Waste Management Contract and consequent significant additional costs arising, the implementation of the Programme was put on hold until the 2008/09 financial year.

## **9.3 WASTE MANAGEMENT CONTRACT AND SPECIFICATION**

- 9.3.1 Approval was given to the basis on which the new contract should be tendered for the waste management service. It was anticipated that the new seven year contract

would become operational on 1 October 2007. The contract tender would include the following elements:

- A price for an alternate weekly residual collection but with a weekly collection for the period May to September.
- A price for an all year round weekly residual collection.
- Both options to retain the existing alternate weekly collection of dry and wet recyclable materials.
- The waste contractor to be responsible for fleet management, but the possibilities for alternate methods of fleet procurement including the Council purchasing the vehicles to be explored.
- The principle of partnering being accepted with provision for a Partnership Charter and Innovation Forum.
- The contractor being required to collect the widest possible range of recyclable materials and that, as part of the collection methodology, the fewest number of vehicles and passes as is practical being used.
- The contractor putting forward proposals for the marketing of recyclable materials.
- The contractor submitting proposals for managing the various bring schemes (recycling banks).
- The existing Bank Holiday collection arrangements being retained with any proposals for change being dealt with through the partnership arrangements.

9.3.2 It was further agreed that, subject to an assessment by the Council's consultants, of the potential increased costs of meeting this enhanced street cleansing standard, the following principles should be included in the specification for street cleansing:

- All high intensity zones (currently zones 1 and 2) to have an input based specification requiring a high standard to be achieved throughout the day.
- The first 10 metres of any road adjoining a high intensity zone to be classified as high intensity and the same standard applied.
- Areas subject to the 'evening economy' to be allocated a special EFDC zone with a more stringent standard (high intensity 'plus') reflecting difficulties with takeaway shops, pubs and clubs, etc.
- All medium and low intensity roads to be dealt with on an output based basis.
- All complaints or reports of standards not being met in medium and low intensity zones to be responded to within 1 day.
- Litter picking alone will not be accepted as street cleansing (i.e. where there is clearly defined kerblines).

- Standards of street cleansing never to be allowed to fall below the government requirements for BV199(a), and nor shall the standard in one year be allowed to fall below the year proceeding it.
- The possible inclusion of graffiti and fly posting removal as part of the street cleansing service to be considered.
- The cleansing and maintenance of all litter bins to be the responsibility of the contractor (replacement and new bins to remain with the Council).
- The contractor to provide street cleansing services to those local councils requesting additional services at the same unit costs as being charged through the contract.
- The collection of furniture for the Furniture Recycle Scheme to be included within the conditions regarding the collection of bulky waste.

#### **9.4 Corporate Procurement Strategy**

- 9.4.1 Approval was given to a new Corporate Procurement Strategy for the period 2007-09. Effective procurement aids the Council in delivering high quality services, meeting the needs of local people and providing value for money. The Council's key strategic procurement objectives are closely aligned to those of the National Procurement Strategy for local government and utilise the nationally recognised 'gateway approach'. The strategy also recommended that the Council sign up to the National Procurement Concordat for small and medium enterprises, setting out what small firms and others supplying local government could expect when tendering for local authority contracts, and also the standards that public sector buyers could expect from their suppliers. The strategy sets out an approach aimed at reducing the impact on the environment, whether in production, delivery, use or disposal.
- 9.4.2 The strategy enables the Council to achieve the 'procurement milestones' set out in the National Procurement Strategy and acts as an essential tool for the efficient use of resources and sustaining best value. Some significant procurement cost reductions have been achieved through the Council's membership of both the Procurement Agency for Essex and the Essex Procurement Hub. Furthermore, the strategy enables proper co-ordination of these initiatives, as well as achieving best value and effective procurement practice.

#### **9.5 Replacement of Local Taxation and Benefits System**

- 9.5.1 On 4 September 2006 approval was given in accordance with the Corporate ICT Strategy to the replacement of the ICT system for local taxation and benefits (Orbis). Quotations were obtained using the catalyst system managed by the Office of Government Commerce.
- 9.5.2 A number of expressions of interest from the relevant companies listed within Catalyst were sought and a tendering exercise undertaken. The tender evaluation identified Computacentre (UK) Limited as the preferred option. The decision was therefore taken to replace Orbis with the system provided by Computacentre as it was more able to deal with the frequent changes to benefits and local taxation legislation.

## **10. LEISURE AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **10.1 Loughton Leisure Centre - Teaching Pool Gallery**

10.1.1 Previously £2000 had agreed been for low cost works to alleviate the overheating of the Teaching Pool Viewing Gallery at Loughton Leisure Centre. However, a detailed design study had established that the proposed works had potential health and safety implications, and would not be sufficient to achieve acceptable environmental conditions. To overcome the problem, approval was given to the installation of comfort cooling at a cost of approximately £12,000.

### **10.2 Fisherman's Car Park, Chigwell - Resurfacing and Maintenance**

10.2.1 Fisherman's Car Park is an area of hard standing used by members of the public visiting either the Roding Valley Nature Reserve on the east bank of the River Roding or the recreation area on the west bank. The car park comprises road scalplings compressed into the soil surface. For some time it had been in an extremely poor condition with numerous potholes. A narrow strip of vegetation adjoined the car park, which was overgrown, unsightly, and contained a considerable amount of wind blown litter and dumped rubbish. There had been a number of complaints from users regarding the condition of the area and it was felt that work should be undertaken to prevent any health and safety issues arising. In addition, the Council was negotiating with both Buckhurst Hill Parish Council and Loughton Town Council to lease these areas to them for a period of 125 years. Thus, it had been anticipated that future maintenance would not be the responsibility of the Council. However, the car park required maintenance to bring it up to an acceptable standard before it could be leased.

10.2.2 Accordingly, approval was given to works in the sum of £7,000 involving the levelling of a sufficient depth of road scalplings across the entire site and compacting this into the existing base. This would provide a firm, even surface that was both hardwearing and cost effective, with a minimum life expectancy of five to seven years. In addition, a monthly cleaning regime was instigated to improve the general appearance of the site, open up the site through cutting back the vegetation, and deposit a layer of wood chippings along the grass pathway from the car park to the footbridge spanning the River Roding enabling the path to be used throughout the whole year.

### **10.3 Waltham Abbey Sports Centre - Installation of Disabled Toilets**

10.3.1 In October 2005, the District Sportability Club in Waltham Abbey was launched to provide sports and activities for children and young people with learning and physical disabilities. The Club met weekly on a Saturday at Oakview School in Loughton, with the Sports Development Team from Leisure Services providing support and direction for the programme. However, participation levels had been limited by the constraints of the building and the long-term aims of the Club were not being met. The Sports Development Team had been successful in securing £27,000 of funding from the Children's Fund Essex over the next two years to widen opportunities available through Sportability, achievable by transferring the Club to a larger venue.

10.3.2 Waltham Abbey Sports Centre was the most accessible District Council operated sports centre for wheelchair users, but it did not have any disabled toilet facilities. There was no space for a new toilet within the sports centre's existing changing facilities. However, the Head Teacher of King Harold School, which currently had a joint use agreement with the Council, had agreed that the staff PE room located within the sports centre could be converted into a disabled toilet facility.

10.3.3 Approval was given to a funding of £10,000 to provide for the relocation of the Sportability Club to Waltham Abbey Sports Centre. It was considered that the provision of a disabled toilet and subsequent full disabled access at the Sports Centre would enable many more children with disabilities to access the sports and leisure provision. Although the future of the Sports Centre was currently under review pending the end of the Dual Use Agreement in September 2007, the provision of a disabled toilet would provide considerable community benefit and ensure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. The Epping Forest Sportability Club provided the only multi-sport environment for children and young people with disabilities within the District.

#### **10.4 Ongar Leisure Centre Playing Fields - Improvements**

10.4.1 Ongar Leisure Centre accommodates three full-size football pitches, one of which is a good quality match pitch. Although the pitches are used for weekly training sessions and casual bookings, they have been under-utilised. In view of the scope for a range of future development opportunities, approval was given for a range of improvements, including provision of a multi-sports site offering quality facilities and maximising participation in sport by people of all ages and abilities.

10.4.2 The playing fields have the potential to become the first multi-sport hub site in Essex and an example of good practice in local authority sports provision. The benefits of establishing a multi-sport facilities include whole family involvement, social inclusion and community cohesion. The Football Foundation have also indicated that they would not provide any funding towards the new facilities unless it includes a four-changing room pavilion and an Astroturf pitch.

### **11. PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

#### **11.1 Charges for Copying Documents**

Historically there has been a charging structure for copies of plans, decision notices and other planning documents. The current income generated is approximately £14,000 per annum. The main users of the service are Solicitors involved in the conveyancing process. The current service offers a response within two or three days.

11.1.2 The Information Commissioner ruled, on 28 March 2006, that the charges imposed by Kings Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council did not comply with the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Charges should not exceed 10p per sheet of photocopying unless the justification for a higher cost can be made clear, and also should not include any element to cover staff time. The charging structure in use by Kings Lynn and West Norfolk had been similar to the District Council's, and the ruling had dismissed the notion that planning information was exempt from the Freedom of Information Act 2000, due to its availability to the public under the various Planning Acts.

11.1.3 Therefore, with effect from 1 September 2006, the charge for copying documents in Planning and Building Control was reduced to no more than 10p per A4 sheet with a threshold of £5, below which there would be no charges applied.

## **11.2 Planning Services Performance Issues**

The new structure for Planning Services was, essentially, implemented by 1 April 2006, with virtually all positions filled and training 'undertaken' to enable staff to perform their roles within the new teams. The Assistant Conservation Officer post had previously been funded for four days per week. However, increasing workloads for this post, particularly in support of development control performance improvement, had necessitated the post being made full-time. The additional costs arising had been met from within existing budgets.

Since October 2005, the number of outstanding applications over eight weeks old had been reduced from 33% to 15% by May 2006. The employment of a development control 'Hit Squad' had been a significant factor in the improvement in performance. In budgetary terms, £100,000 had been allocated to the Hit Squad. Despite the focus on performance, there was no evidence to suggest that the quality of the decisions had diminished, as indicated by the continuing high success rate with planning appeals.

## **11.3 Building Control Fees and Charges**

11.3.1 The Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 1998 require each local authority to adopt a scheme of charges for carrying out functions under Building Regulations. The charges are required to be set such that the estimated income derived is not less than the cost of providing the service, but neither should a significant surplus be made. The previous scheme had been introduced on 1 January 2003.

11.3.2 Between 2000/01 and 2004/05 the service had covered its costs, and in some cases had made a small surplus, subsequently used to improve the service. Since 2005/06 this had not been the case, because of reduced levels of income and the need to contribute to the development of the new integrated Planning Services ICT system. In addition, the team had been short-staffed for a considerable period, with the consequent effect on service, and had utilised costly consultants and agency staff to maintain the service at a basic level. To fund the current service, and the recruitment of further staff with the possible payment of market supplements, it had been considered prudent to increase charges by 10%, effective from 31 July 2006.

## **11.4 Planning Delivery Grant 2006/07**

11.4.1 The Council received £128,851 in Planning Delivery Grant for 2006/07, for which the only stipulation was that a maximum of 25% of the grant could be spent on capital projects. It was agreed to allocate £33,000 for capital expenditure, £13,000 for a replacement vehicle for Countrycare and £20,000 for further work on accommodation Planning Services. Of the remainder, £41,000 was allocated to complete the Planning Services Scanning project, and £15,000 for expenditure on either training or the Development Control hit squad, with the remaining £39,851 earmarked for expansion of the Forward Planning Team.

## **11.5 Broadway Town Centre Enhancements**

11.5.1 As phase II of The Broadway Town Centre Enhancement Scheme had progressed, some unforeseen additional works had been necessary at a cost of approximately £756,300. The key elements of this were additional works to the Burton Road Car Park required by Essex County Council, including drainage work, and replacement of paving outside the central area with granite slabs. Some compensatory savings were identified totalling £467,650 but this had still left a budget shortfall of

approximately £290,000. To save costs in the order of £228,500, the scope of the scheme had been reduced through the removal of the additional granite paving and the central wind vane feature.

## **11.6 Conservation and Landscape Team**

11.6.1 A number of alterations to the method of operation of the Conservation and Landscape Team in Planning Services were agreed, along with changes to the way that the Conservation Grants budget was spent. Furthermore, it was agreed to set up a specific budget to deal with claims against the Council for subsidence to properties affected by preserved trees. It was also decided to undertake a review of wildlife sites within the District during 2007/08.

11.6.2 Within the Conservation Policy budget, there had previously always been a specific sum to enable the Council to offer Historic Building Grants for repairs to listed buildings. The maximum possible grant of £1,000 had been the same for over fifteen years, and was now seen as only a token gesture towards the cost of repairs. The Council was also now required to produce both Character Appraisals and Management Plans for each of the twenty-five Conservation Areas. Thus, it was agreed that the Conservation Grants budget be directed only at Conservation Area enhancement schemes identified in agreed Management Plans and the repair of listed buildings in non-residential use, with priority given to any buildings on the "Buildings at Risk Register".

11.6.3 When an application to fell a preserved tree was refused and the owner claimed that, as a direct result of retaining the tree, underpinning of the property was then required, the Council could be liable for compensation. Claims were becoming increasingly common as insurance companies took actions against the Council, citing preserved trees as the cause of any subsidence. The Council was now employing the services of consultant structural engineers to review such cases, which cost approximately £500 per case, and there had been 14 such cases in the past two years. These costs had been met from the Development Control Consultants budget, but it was felt that the problem should be addressed, with a minimum separate budget of £5,000 per annum.

## **11.7 East of England Plan**

11.7.1 The final formal consultation stage for the East of England Plan for 2001 – 2021 (due for adoption in mid-2007) was reached, with the closing date for responses to the consultation on 9 March 2007. The Secretary of State's Proposed Changes and Statement of Reasons had been received in December 2006, and were a response from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to the recommendations published in June 2006 by the Panel conducting the Examination in Public. The Council made its initial comments on the Panel's recommendations in September 2006. The majority of the Panel's recommendations had been accepted, with some changes. In addition, the Secretary of State had proposed a number of changes, which included: a stronger emphasis on Harlow as a major growth location; a review of Green Belt boundaries between 2021 and 2031 as a result of the anticipated growth of Harlow; housing targets for individual authorities to be regarded as minimums, to be exceeded where possible; and a greater focus on reducing carbon dioxide emissions and increasing sources of renewable energy.

11.7.2 Following consideration of the Secretary of State's proposed changes to the East of England Plan, the Council's intended response was based upon a number of factors.



- 11.7.3 The omission of North Weald as a major development location was welcomed, along with an acknowledgement that there were development constraints south of the Stort Valley. The Council supported the recognition that Green Belt policy in the District would preclude a long-term supply of new housing, and the increased local discretion granted to policies such as housing densities, affordable housing and parking standards. The reduction of carbon emissions and promotion of renewable energy sources for new developments was welcomed, but there was an issue over vehicle emissions and the performance of existing developments. The Council supported the reinstatement of a major urban extension to the north of Harlow, but felt that a revised Sustainability Appraisal should be undertaken so that the localised impacts of the proposed changes could be fully considered.
- 11.7.4 In its final response the Council repeated arguments opposing urban extensions to the south and west of Harlow, as well as any excessive growth to the east of Harlow, on the grounds of insufficient infrastructure to support such developments. It was felt that there were better alternative sites along the West Anglia main railway line. Concern was also expressed that the proposed scale of development had not been matched by guaranteed funding for the necessary accompanying infrastructure improvements, which in turn raised doubts about the achievability of the proposed development in the area.
- 11.7.5 Serious reservations were repeated concerning the proposed job and dwelling provision in the District, with the exception of the extensions to Harlow. The Council made clear its continued willingness to work with other stakeholders to prepare options appraisals and Local Development Documents once the East of England Plan had been finalised.