

Report to Council

Date of meeting: 17 December 2019



Subject: Overview and Scrutiny Report to Council

Chairman: Councillor M. Sartin

Democratic Services: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) That the Overview and Scrutiny progress report from July 2019 to the present be noted.

Report:

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 3 September 2019

1. The meeting of the Committee planned for 3 September 2019 was cancelled due to a lack of substantive business and the unavailability of the external organisations scheduled for scrutiny at that meeting.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – 19 November 2019

2. The Committee received a presentation from Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) on their activities within the District. Their mission was to help other community associations and vulnerable residents within the District, and to this end they had supported over 10,000 individuals, 700 organisations and had staged 150 activities.

3. The Chief Officer of VAEF reported that their core funding came from this Council (28%) and Essex County Council, and other funding was obtained from local organisations such as Loughton Town Council, the Jack Petchey Foundation, the Grange Farm Trust and Epping Forest College, as well as the Big Lottery Fund.

4. VAEF ran a number of services and activities for vulnerable residents within the District, of which the most popular were the Gardening Service which was currently supporting 115 people across the District, and the Handyman Service which supported 400 residents last year doing over 800 small jobs. Both services received referrals from the Council.

5. The Committee were generally appreciative of the services that VAEF provided throughout the District.

6. The Committee then considered the activities undertaken to date to establish a Group of companies wholly owned by the Council, which had been registered with the name 'Qualis'. The Group structure would initially contain three subsidiary companies:

(a) a services company (Qualis Management) to deliver the repairs service to the Council's housing stock when the current contract with Mears expired;

(b) a development company (Qualis Commercial) to undertake development

activity for the Council; and

(c) an investment company (Qualis Living) to hold property assets for long term rental.

7. The Committee was critical of some the aspects of this process, including the fact that the 3 Councillors who were members of the Steering Group were drawn from only 1 political group, the name 'Qualis' had no connection with Epping Forest as it was the Latin term for quality, and a perceived lack of information to allow proper scrutiny of the decisions being made by the Steering Group.

8. The Committee was reassured that the proposed model was based on best practice as many Councils were establishing these types of companies, all of the background papers in connection with the Group company were available from Democratic Services for Members to peruse, and that the Council's procurement rules had been followed for all appointments in connection with the Group company. Further progress with the establishment of the Group Company structure would be considered by the Committee at its next meeting on 28 January 2020.

9. The Committee went on to consider the process for the co-option of independent members to the Select Committees, and it was acknowledged that co-opted members on Select Committees could provide a useful function. It was agreed that a report would be considered at the next meeting of the Committee on the adoption of selection criteria for the co-option of independent members to the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Select Committees.

10. The Committee received a report relating to the viability and regeneration of local high streets. It was agreed to establish a Task & Finish Scrutiny Panel, for which the terms of reference was also agreed, which would commence its meeting schedule early in 2020 and report back to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in June 2020. Any Councillors interested in being a member of the Task & Finish Panel should inform Democratic Services.

11. The Committee reviewed the Quarter 2 performance of the Action Plan for Year 2 of the Corporate Plan 2018 – 23. This report was an exception report as the full report was considered by the Stronger Council Select Committee, and there were 2 Key Performance Indicators as well as 4 Key Programmes whose performance was below target. However, it was noted that 2 Key Performance Indicators for Waste Management were above target.

12. The Committee noted the current progress with the Accommodation Strategy, and the proposed layout plans following the refurbishment of the Civic Offices, which would utilise a 7:10 desk to staff ratio. It was also noted that all Committee meetings would be held off-site for a period of 7 months following the Annual Council meeting in May 2020, and further information regarding proposed alternative locations would be detailed in due course.

13. The Committee considered a report on the current progress with the People Strategy. Updates were given on the management restructuring and staff restructuring elements, as well as statistics on the current levels of staff turnover and sickness, and finally the proposed next steps for the Strategy. It was noted that there had been a slight increase in staff turnover but a substantial increase in sickness absence partly due to cancer related illnesses, but also including non-work related stress and mental health issues. A further report on progress was requested for the Committee's next meeting on 28 January 2020.

14. Other business considered by the Committee included: scoping exercises for the planned external scrutiny of Local Mental Health Services and Local Adult Social Care Services; the Cabinet's Programme of Key Decisions; the Overview & Scrutiny and Select Committee Work Programmes for 2019/20.