

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee:	Overview & Scrutiny Committee	Date:	Thursday, 17 November 2022
Place:	Council Chamber - Civic Offices	Time:	7.00 - 9.02 pm
Members Present:	Councillors H Kane (Chairman), D Wixley (Vice-Chairman), R Balcombe, R Bassett, S Heather, J Lea, J McIvor, S Murray and J H Whitehouse		
Members Present (Virtually):	Councillors P Bhanot and E Gabbett		
Other Councillors:	Councillors S Kane, A Lion, D Stocker, C Whitbread and H Whitbread		
Apologies:	R Baldwin, I Hadley and R Jennings		
Officers Present:	G Blakemore (Chief Executive), A Small (Section 151 Officer), G Woodhall (Team Manager - Democratic & Electoral Services), V Messenger (Democratic Services Officer), T Carne (Corporate Communications Team Manager), P Seager (Chairman's Officer) and C Graham (Project Team Manager (Performance))		
Officers Present (Virtually):	J Gould (Interim Strategic Director), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services)), R Pavey (Service Director (Customer Services)), N Richardson (Service Director (Planning Services)), M Thompson (Interim Acting Service Director (Technical)), J Warwick (Interim Acting Service Director (Contracts)) and P Wharfe (Interim Service Director (Housing Revenue Account))		

45. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

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

46. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

There were no substitutions reported at the meeting.

47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made pursuant to the Council's Members' Code of Conduct.

48. MINUTES

It was noted that the minutes of the meeting held on 3 November 2022 would be confirmed at the meeting on 31 January 2023.

Reflecting on the 3 November meeting, the Chairman had noticed that members had some concerns about the transfer of services to Qualis. Councillor H Kane informed the Committee that after subsequently speaking

with S Jevans (Qualis Group Managing Director) and A Small (Strategic Director and Section 151 Officer), S Jevans would attend a future meeting of this Committee and report on the quality of the service and look at real figures rather than percentages (continued at Min no 52).

The Chairman clarified that following Councillor J H Whitehouse's question at the previous meeting for a review of the recommendations made by a past Task and Finish Panel on Services for Older People and Disabled People in 2007, relevant officers were looking into how this could be progressed. However, it was deemed more appropriate that an update report be made to a future meeting of the Stronger Communities Select Committee.

49. PUBLIC QUESTIONS & REQUESTS TO ADDRESS THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A member of the public, Mr T Blanks, asked the following question on safeguarding at the meeting, "Have any reports been made in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 8.2 of the Shareholders Agreement with Qualis Group Ltd since it was signed in February 2020?" On behalf of the Chairman, the Chief Executive, G Blakemore, replied, "yes".

However, in a follow-up question, Mr T Blanks inquired, "Does the report that you made include the matter that was mentioned in the Council's statement made in May 2022 which said that information had come to our attention involving a senior member of staff, but we are sorry as we are not in a position to provide information at this stage; speculation would be unfair. It is essential to follow HR protocols and procedures while advice is taken on the appropriate steps forward. In the meantime, we are being careful not to prejudice any investigation. In the event we are able to provide further information, we will update you as and when we can". A potentially affected party was defined as vulnerable adults, children and young people and the item on your statement in May would have included a potentially vulnerable person. "Can you tell me what the result of the investigation was?" G Blakemore replied that she was not in a position to discuss the investigation but on whether the report was included, the answer was yes.

50. EXECUTIVE DECISIONS - CALL-IN

The Committee noted that no executive decisions had been called-in for consideration since the previous meeting.

51. CORPORATE PLAN KEY ACTION PLAN YEAR 5 2022/23 - QUARTER 2 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE REPORTING

The Project Team Manager (Strategy, Delivery and Performance), C Graham, introduced quarter 2. The report detailed project status summaries, key milestones and RAG status for those projects identified as a 'priority project' within the portfolio aligned to the Council's corporate objectives. All KPIs regardless of status were also included.

(a) Priority projects – Quarterly progress updates

The Committee raised the following queries.

CPP009 Housing & Asset Management System

Why had this moved from green in quarter 1 to red in quarter 2? J Gould (Interim Strategic Director) replied that there had been a number of resourcing complications,

but a review of the project would be completed in a fortnight, and she was confident it would be back on track. It was noted that no information of this review had been included in the report.

CPP026 Waste Management Contract

Was the Council satisfied with the proposed changes in the contract and had any lessons been learnt from the existing contract? J Warwick (Service Director (Contracts)) replied that the Council would make improvements to get value for money, reassess how performance was managed, and focus on recycling and innovation. If the Council was successful in getting its own waste depot, it would be able to recycle furniture and have its own re-use workshop, as well as creating the potential for workforce skills development.

How would the pilot for a third bin fit in to the contract? The Interim Service Director (Contracts) advised that a recycling pilot was currently being rolled out in Theydon Bois, as the Council wanted bins to be used instead of plastic bags for recycling waste and was seeking residents to volunteer.

The Interim Service Director (Contracts) acknowledged that missed collections were a big challenge. There did not seem to be any consistent reason why some routes were continually affected while others had few disruptions. The Council had brought in another contractor to collect waste from routes badly affected by missed collections and had asked Biffa to address the problem.

CCP090 North Weald Master Planning/Enterprise Zone

What progress had been made as this was dependent on the Local Plan? The Planning Services Director (N Richardson) replied that the consultation had taken place. Planning Services had commented on the document and was waiting for the final amendment from the Council's consultants. However, the masterplan could not be adopted before the endorsement of the Local Plan. The North Weald Masterplan was not affected by the ongoing consultations on the second stage of the main modifications. It was noted that the latest version had been reviewed by Qualis, who was acting on the Council's behalf.

CPP135 Telephony Solution

The telephony project was under review particularly because of the financial crisis, so work was ongoing to improve customer contact with the public and members. Although the project was on hold, a few ways to deal with some issues had been found and a further update would be reported to members in January 2023. In reply to a query on the Omni channel platform and introduction of new channels such as AI and chat bots, R Pavey (Customer Services Director) explained that AI allowed customers calls to be handled by the website and the customer journey was being explored.

CPP156 – Revenue & Benefits SAAS Project – Cloud One

It was noted that this project had been completed on time and in budget one month ago. Although 59 reports remained, these were waiting for an upgrade from Capita, but this was not stopping officers doing their work, as the transition had happened.

(b) Quarterly KPI reporting

Customer Services: Overall customer satisfaction

It was noted that most customer service dissatisfaction was because of the missed waste collections. The Contracts Service Director advised that a number of defaults had been issued to Biffa and the Council was reclaiming money back regarding

bringing in an external contractor and extra staffing to deal with the situation, but it was an ongoing process.

Could the actual targets in the mid-50s percentages be improved upon if waste complaints were separated, so the 80% target was more achievable? The Customer Services Director advised that customer feedback was captured at the end of a call, but it might be useful if the breakdown was logged into channels and thus, being more informed.

Why was there public dissatisfaction with Ride London? The dissatisfaction had centred on opposition to the event itself as residents had reported being inconvenienced by the riders. J Gould advised that there would be a longer lead in time for the next Ride London. Officers had looked at improving the communications process for the cycling event by linking up with Essex County Council and amplifying this information to residents in addition to signposting people to the event website.

Why had there been dissatisfaction in relation to the 2022 Elections? This had been reported to the Committee at the 25 July meeting and was because of a formal complaint that had been received about lighting in the Conder building car park during the count and the noise of the generators.

The Customer Portfolio Holder, A Lion, acknowledged the difficulties in the first two quarters, mostly from the number of residents complaining about missed waste collections, but he was positive that customer satisfaction would improve, as more staff had been taken on. The average waiting time for people on the phone was four minutes in the queue, so this was improving. Staff working remotely would have all the information they needed wherever they worked, and this did not impact on their performance.

Community Health and Wellbeing: Number of homelessness approaches

What was driving the increase in homelessness approaches, how many did the Council have a duty to house and were there any Ukrainian people becoming homeless? J Gould replied the Council was seeing an increase in homelessness largely from the lifting on the moratorium of evictions during the Covid pandemic for people in private rented accommodation, which was more expensive. Friend and family licence terminations were the biggest cause of homelessness for the Council in addition to the higher cost of living and energy/fuel costs. Full homelessness duty was around 20% – 25%. The bulk of Ukrainians were living in the District under the Government's family scheme not the homelessness scheme. A lot of work to support Ukrainian families was being provided but with no information on homelessness numbers under the family scheme, J Gould would confirm this after the meeting.

Did the Council analyse the reason for increases in homelessness? J Gould confirmed this was tracked on a monthly basis and that there had been a steady increase, as a result of the Domestic Abuse Act that had come into force recently and the Council's duty under this legislation.

Contracts Waste: Reduction in household waste

Although above target, how could this be reduced? The Contracts Service Director reported this was largely due to missed collections, but the Waste Team was using more social media and other communications to encourage residents to reduce waste and recycle, as well as working with Essex Waste Partnership to reduce waste.

Housing Management: Rent arrears

What had been the system issues that had caused delays in posting payments and impacted on Housing benefit income? The Interim Housing Services Director advised that officers were working with Civica, the software service provider, to resolve some issues but more information could be provided after the meeting.

Planning and Development: Percentage of applications determined within agreed timelines: Minor

Why was this at red status? The Planning Services Director explained there had been a backlog in registering applications during the move from Northgate to using the Arcus Global planning software. Quarter 3 should see an improvement as staff had caught up with the delay in registering and getting applications to planning officers.

Does the Council monitor enforcement case records? The Planning Services Director replied that a KPI to monitor enforcement cases could be considered next year but there was also a scrutiny issue of how to record that. This was because some cases took officers a long time to gather information to get an enforcement notice in place and go to Court. Therefore, it was much harder to manage performance. The other Planning and Development KPIs were monitored to meet national targets. Information unrelated to performance on 'live' and 'closed' enforcements case numbers could be provided.

What was the Government's timeline that applications had to be dealt with by the Council? The Planning Services Director replied the 8-week timeline started when an application was registered. It did not allow for delays to the progress of applications that went to planning committees for determination, or a further delay if a site visit was requested.

People: Diversity & Inclusion – Percentage of workforce by ethnicity

Why was this KPI monitored as many employees were unwilling to disclose this information? P Maginnis (Corporate Services Director) replied that the Council liked to have an insight into who it employed in the workforce regardless of ethnicity. The People Team was looking at a suite of indicators for the next municipal year, and members could forward her their comments. The last time staff were asked to update their personal records was in the summer. Also, a new onboarding process being implemented this December, would allow applicants to have access to information on the Council as an employer and let applicants have early conversations with officers.

It was good that employees were given a choice but was this personal information useful and was there any feedback from staff in minority groups who might be concerned about disclosing such information? The Corporate Services Director replied there had not been any negative feedback. It was used on a self-serve basis and employees often forgot to fill out these details. This information was asked for several times through our pre-onboarding, onboarding and within our induction period and then every 6 months as a reminder. This was voluntary information and although this was positioned as high importance, the Council could not instruct employees to complete this information. There was no information to offer in answer to 'why' employees did not complete this information. There was an opportunity as part of our iRecruit review to look at the application form, and it was proposed that the monitoring questions were made compulsory but with a 'prefer not to say' type option. This might/might not improve the amounts a little more.

People: Staff turnover

A feature in a recent issue of the Council Bulletin detailed the results of a staff survey that had shown a breakdown of the length of time staff had been with the Council.

Some 50% had been working here for less than four years. The staff induction programme was important, but how many employees had come from local government compared to the private sector? The Corporate Services Director would provide this information for the minutes. The onboarding part of the induction process complemented the induction by managers when someone joined.

What was the process to decide if a post would be filled following a vacancy? The Corporate Services Director advised that a sign-off process would be completed by the relevant manager followed by the Executive Team checking if it was necessary to fill the vacant post and if there was a budget available.

People: Sickness Absence – average number of days per employee

Why was the KPI target based on 2020 data, and could more recent information be provided? The Corporate Services Director would provide this information for the minutes.

How was sickness absence measured when staff were working from home and was Covid included in this figure? The Corporate Services Director reported that staff would report their absence to their manager, but they might be able to work from home if they did not have to commute into the office and reduced the risk of passing on infections. Covid was a sickness reason and staff were asked not to come into the office over the five-day infectious period.

Was mental health absence factored in? The Corporate Services Director confirmed all forms of absence were reported but, for example, stress could be defined as work related or not. Since Covid there was a range of wellbeing resources including on winter wellness available to staff, which the People Team continually looked at. Perkbox also offered online counselling and was an occupational health provider. A Small, Strategic Director and Section 151 Officer, added that almost a 100 staff had completed Mental Health First Aid training.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee reviewed the FY 2022-23 Corporate Performance reporting for quarter 2.

Actions:

- (1) CCP135 Telephony Solution – that the Customer Services Director provide a further update report to members in January 2023;
- (2) Community Health and Wellbeing: Number of homelessness approaches – that J Gould confirm after the meeting the homelessness numbers for Ukrainians from the Government's family schemes;
- (3) Housing Management: Rent arrears – that the Interim Housing Services Director provide more information on the system issues;
- (4) People: Staff turnover – that the Corporate Services Director provide information for the minutes on the number of employees coming from local government compared to the private sector; and
- (5) People: Sickness Absence – average number of days per employee – that the Corporate Services Director provide more recent information for the minutes as the target was based on 2020 data.

(Post meeting updates:

Action (2): The Interim Strategic Director advised that the numbers were, as below:

21 Ukraine households approached since 1 April 2022 of which:

- Homelessness prevented: 4*
- Homelessness relieved: 3*
- Main Duty accepted: 3*
- Triage (currently open or now closed): 11*

Action (3): The Interim Housing Director advised that the arrears figures were no longer a problem and this KPI would be back to green status for quarter 3 because the systems issues had only been short term.

Action (4): People: Staff turnover – No, the Council did not collect this data and on research this was not relevant data to capture as it made no difference to transferable skills.

Action (5): People: Sickness Absence – This target was based on work that was carried out in 2020 and had not been reviewed since. Key objectives and KPIs would be reviewed for 2023/24.)

52. CHAIRMEN TO REPORT ON THEIR SELECT COMMITTEE BUSINESS**(a) Stronger Communities Select Committee**

Following the meeting on 15 November, Councillor J Lea reported on the Museum rationalisation project and detailed presentation. Lots of good work was being done on the collections by officers with the help of volunteers. The select committee reviewed the refreshed Epping Forest Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022 – 2026 and the associated revised partnership delivery structure arrangements. The Annual Lettings report for 2021/22 was also noted. The Housing and Community Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, acknowledged the very detailed rationalisation process being followed for items some of which might or might not be of any value but had a link to the Epping Forest District.

Qualis' performance on housing repairs (continued from Min no 48)

Councillor S Murray asked which scrutiny committee work programme should scrutinise housing repairs? Councillor H Kane advised that she had spoken directly with the Qualis Group Managing Director, S Jevans, on the quality of the service and how quantitative scrutiny could be undertaken. The Housing and Community Services Portfolio Holder added that there was a need for the Interim Housing Services Director to report in-depth data on the quantitative KPIs, so the Stronger Communities Select Committee could scrutinise performance. This could also include feedback on tenants' experiences. Councillor H Kane agreed it was more appropriate for this select committee to undertake in-depth scrutiny and decide whether to add it to the work programme. In addition, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would look at an overview of the service at the meeting on 31 January 2023, as public transparency was important. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager, G Woodhall, was asked to invite S Jevans to this meeting.

Epping Forest District Museum

It was noted the Museum had been awarded Hidden Gem status in Visit England's 2021-22 Visitor Attraction Accolades. Councillor S Murray remarked that a consultant had briefed the Cabinet on future ideas and models for the museum, but this information had not been shared. Could the select committee have access to the current thought processes? It would also be preferable to undertake early scrutiny before any decision was made by Cabinet on the museum's future plans. Councillor H Kane advised she had attended this meeting. It had not been a decision-making meeting but rather to explore future ideas. It would be for the select committee to decide how to scrutinise this.

(b) Stronger Council Select Committee

The Chairman advised that as the next meeting had been rescheduled to 24 November, there was nothing to report.

Mental health

Councillor J McIvor remarked this was an interesting subject, so a report could go to Stronger Council on the support that was available for members.

(c) Stronger Place Select Committee

Councillor R Balcombe reported the select committee's workload had been reorganised as the September meeting could not go ahead. There had been lots of discussion on the litter strategy, which was a working document and members' previous comments had been taken into consideration. The Committee raised concerns during the Leisure Services update about the effect of rising energy costs on membership fees. Also, as parking was an additional cost, the Committee thought it would be helpful if there were reduced parking charges for leisure centre members. During scrutiny of the Waste Management Contract update mostly concerns centred on the large number of missed collections.

RESOLVED:

That the select committee Chairmen reported on business undertaken at their last meetings.

Actions:

- (6) That the Stronger Communities Select Committee decide whether to add to the work programme scrutiny of the quantitative KPI performance data for housing repairs; and
- (7) That G Woodhall invite the Qualis Group Managing Director to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 31 January 2023, to give an overview of quality and quantity for the housing repairs service.

53. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME**(a) Current work programme**

The Committee work programme would be updated as the Qualis Group Managing Director would be attending the 31 January 2023 meeting. It was noted that Corporate Performance reporting for quarter 3 would also be reviewed.

(b) Reserve work programme

There were no reserve work programme items.

Induction of new staff

Councillor J H Whitehouse queried if this item could be added to the work programme, but Councillor H Kane stated that this service came under the remit of Stronger Council Select Committee's Terms of Reference.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee reviewed its current and reserve work programmes.

54. CABINET BUSINESS

Cabinet's Key Decision List (KDL) of 1 November 2022 was scrutinised by the Committee and the following points were raised.

(a) Portfolio – Contracts and Commissioning**Charging for additional Waste Containers**

Why should other residents have to suffer if someone, who did not want to pay to replace a damaged bin lid, put their waste in neighbouring bins? The Contracts Service Director advised that, where possible, the Council would look to fit a replacement bin lid. Residents were not charged for repairs, which helped to reduce the number of waste containers replaced. The contractor had to replace bins they damaged or broke.

Was charging for replacement bins a blanket policy or were some types of bin exempt? The Contracts Service Director replied charges were not levied for replacement bins for clinical and medical waste.

(b) Portfolio – Housing and Community**Resident Involvement Strategy**

As the Stronger Communities Select Committee meeting on 17 January 2023 had been cancelled and the next meeting was due in March, it looked like this would go to the Cabinet on 13 March with little time for scrutiny? A Small replied that officers would ensure there would be sufficient time to scrutinise the strategy before the Cabinet's decision. J Gould confirmed that as a broader consultation with resident groups would be undertaken, it would go to the Stronger Communities Select Committee meeting on 21 March and then to a later meeting of the Cabinet.

RESOLVED:

That the Committee reviewed the Executive's current programme of Key Decisions of 1 November 2022.

CHAIRMAN