

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee: Cabinet**

**Date 27 July 2017**

**Subject: Planning & Governance Portfolio Holder**

**Portfolio Holder: Councillor J Philip**

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## **Recommending:**

That the report of the Planning & Governance Portfolio Holder be noted.

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## **1. Development Management**

### **Building Control**

Building Control has been much in the news over recent months. The tragic loss of life at Grenfell Tower has focussed attention on all aspects of the construction industry, including the role of Building Control in ensuring safe buildings in which people live, work and relax. Understandably in the immediate aftermath emotions run high and the quest for immediate answers although understandable, cannot always be satisfied. Of course, any applicable lessons learned or changes to standards as a result of the forthcoming public inquiry will be acted upon; in the meantime the in house team continues to advise internal and external clients in the timely and professional manner which has led to their recent successes.

At the Local Authority Building Control regional awards, held at Kings' College, Cambridge on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2017, the team and partners with whom they work were shortlisted finalists in multiple categories, including Best Individual Builder or traditional craftsman, (Paul Blatch), Best Partnership with a local authority building control team, and Best Inclusive Building – both involving Weston Homes. The Inclusive Building is the impressive Taylor Centre at St Clare's Hospice. To quote from the nomination, 'Epping Forest District Council was the chosen Building Control Body and the close working relationship we have with their team through our partnership working, was invaluable in achieving our targets and goals.' The winning entry for best individual dwelling was won by 'Hanlin', Albion Hill, Loughton and the Building Control Manager, Jeff Dixon was proud to be called upon to collect the award.

This excellent team continues to generate increased income of £58,495 (budget £44,210) for April 2017 and £52,420 (Budget £37,110) for May 2017. This is an excess over budget of nearly £30,000.

This is very encouraging for Building Control as it demonstrates the value of the work sought through partnership working – including with the private sector.

It is important to acknowledge achievement and in the current climate of concern to reassure the public as to the positive contribution a properly resourced and qualified team can make to the safety and sustainability of buildings in our District and beyond.

### **Development Control**

Income for April 2017 (Budget £74,560) was £75,267 which was on budget for the month. However, May saw an inevitable dip with income of £47,593 (Budget £78,790).

Whilst DC income has been rising, the budget targets have also risen from an annual target set in April 2015 of £595,000 to an increased budget target set in January 2017 of £970,000. Normally increases in income are difficult to exceed in following years. However, DC have been able to do this and are confident that overall they will be able to meet the revised budget target of £970,000.

Experience in both 2015/16 and 2016/17 showed that income exceeded £90,000 in three separate months, which illustrates how DC income fluctuates.

In addition, the levels of Pre-Application Advice Income budgeted level of £8,740 per month has been exceeded by our monthly actual average of £9,082.

## **2. PR and Information**

### **Viral Social Media Video**

A misleading social media video posted over a weekend at the beginning of June was taken down after interventions by the Council's PR and Communities teams. The video purporting to show the destruction of a council house by a new tenant was posted by a neighbour. It contained a strong and incorrect commentary suggesting the new tenant was foreign and wrecking the interior of the house. The video quickly went viral with 700,000 views and almost 500 comments, many of which carried potentially racist overtones.

The video was picked up over the weekend by the Council's out of hours social media monitoring team coordinated by PR. It also came to the attention of several Waltham Abbey councillors.

Although concerned about the apparent destruction of a council house, the social media team had perhaps greater concerns around peace and social stability in the area of the house.

However, timely communication with officers in the Communities Directorate established that the property was in fact empty, the previous tenant having recently passed away. The work assumed to be destruction in the video was in fact the clearance of old fixtures and fittings as a precursor to refurbishment and re-letting to a family on the Council's waiting list.

The Council took a multi-faceted approach to correcting the misinformation and reassuring the local community. The Council's PR team contacted the author of the video, following which the video was taken off-line. The Council posted correction comments on the author's timeline and across our own social media outlets. The message was reinforced with traditional media releases carried by the local press and in online newspaper coverage.

This episode is a graphic demonstration of the rapidly changing media environment. Citizen journalism carries hidden dangers, not just for organisations such as the Council but also for the authors of such content who may not appreciate the potential legal and social consequences when a small incident goes viral. In addition to reassuring local residents that there was no cause for alarm, the Housing Portfolio Holder also issued advice through the PR team on the danger of posting online content without fact checking first.

The incident also demonstrated the good work of the Council's staff out of hours, whose efforts by their nature usually go unnoticed.

### **3. General and County Council Elections – 2017**

Electoral Services Staff, together with support from staff from Democratic Services, Public Relations and from staff across the wider Council, successfully delivered two sets of Elections during May and June.

The calling of a general election, so close to scheduled elections in May was a challenge made more difficult by the overlapping of the election organisational processes. In May we opened 74 polling stations across the district, a total of 486 different jobs were undertaken, in June, for the General Election, Epping Forest Constituency used 45 stations and due to the higher level of turnout used a total of 477 different jobs. These range from the Returning Officer to those delivering poll cards.

Debden Park provided facilities for the Count Centre and in June the Count was completed at 2.00 am, much earlier than 2015.

As is the usual practice, the Returning Officer is undertaking a review of both sets of Elections. A report will be made to the Governance Select Committee in the autumn. Members will be consulted during the next few weeks. However, if members have observations on potential improvements or how they saw the organisation of the elections or polling stations, they can email Simon Hill ([shill@eppingforestdc.gov.uk](mailto:shill@eppingforestdc.gov.uk)).

### **4. Update on the Local Plan**

- a. Since my last report to Council on 25 April 2017, the Cabinet considered a report on 15 June 2017 on the implementation of the Local Plan which agreed to establish the appropriate process and arrangements and put in place the necessary resources, agree the approach to the production of Strategic Masterplans and the introduction of Planning Performance Agreements. As part of this work a review of the skills within the Council is underway in order to identify the resources and skills required to take this work forward to deliver the Local Plan. This work is critical for the Council as it must be able to demonstrate at public examination how the proposals and site allocations will be delivered so that the local plan can be found sound at examination.
- b. A report to Cabinet on 11 July 2017 set out the detailed findings of the Regulation 18 Draft Local Plan Consultation that took place between the 31 October 2016 and 12 December 2016. The Council received 3,387 responses from 3,072 respondents. A summary of the key issues raised, together with the Council's response to these issues was provided and the Consultation Report from Remarkable which provides both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the feedback received to the consultation.
- c. Work is progressing to inform and support the Pre-Submission Publication Plan. The key workstreams are:
  - Site selection – work has commenced on the assessment of approximately 169 sites comprising a mix of new or amended residential/traveller sites and employment sites. The methodology for the process has been published on the Council's website.
  - Transport modelling
  - Open Space, Playing Pitch and Indoor Sports Facilities Studies
  - Further work on the Infrastructure Delivery Plan

- Local plan viability work
  - Joint work to update the employment need within the Functional Economic Market Area and the District to inform the work on site selection
  - Sustainability Appraisal and Habitat Regulations Assessment
- d. The key issues in managing the programme relate to resources, the ability of external organisations, such as Essex County Council, in providing timely inputs into plan preparation (largely outside our control) and the interconnectivity of the various workstreams. The importance of maintaining a full team of appropriately skilled and effective officers and consultants cannot be underestimated and there have been resource concerns with staff leaving/going on maternity leave. In addition, the avoidance of diversion of resource to other tasks is a key concern yet matters such as neighbourhood plan advice, development monitoring and assistance do need to be provided. Whilst progressing the Local Plan, officers are also working to progress the delivery of the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town and to take forward the Developer Forum and other work as reported to the Cabinet on 15 June 2017.

## **5. Housing White Paper**

The Government published the Housing White Paper '*Fixing Our Broken Housing Market*' on 7 February 2017. This sets out a broad range of reforms that Government plans to introduce to help reform the housing market and increase the supply of new homes. One of the proposals set out in the White Paper was to introduce a standardised methodology for the calculation of objectively assessed housing – the Secretary of State confirmed on 4 July 2017 that the Government will launch a consultation this month on a new way for councils to assess their local housing requirements to ensure transparency and consistency. He also announced that plans will need to be reviewed at least every 5 years.

## **6. Garden Town Funding**

The Council was successful (together with East Herts and Harlow Councils) in securing initial Garden Towns funding of £675,000 from DCLG for the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town to support the delivery of strategic sites in and around Harlow for 2016/17. A further application has been made to secure funding for 2017/18 and a decision is awaited. Work has been commissioned to prioritise the establishment of interim governance arrangements, prepare a project programme (including a proposed structure of the team), establish a Quality Review Panel and undertake work on the proposed sustainable transport corridor. Consultants have been appointed to prepare a spatial vision and design charter for the Garden Town.

Interim Governance arrangements are being proposed and will be considered by the Cooperation for Sustainable Development Board at its next meeting on 31 July 2017. The paper includes a proposal to extend the existing EFDC Local Plan Developer Forum to encompass all the sites in and around Harlow and to operate as a Garden Town Developer Forum. This will provide a basis for the long term planning and implementation of sites identified for allocation in the Local Plan and provides a basis for the coordination and management of Strategic Masterplans.

## **7. Community Housing Fund**

EFDC has received funding from DCLG under the Community Housing Fund to promote self-build and community led housing schemes. The Council has agreed to work with Uttlesford, Harlow and East Herts Districts on a joint project and reached agreement that the resources allocated to each individual Council will be pooled into a joint fund. This amounts

to a total of £102,672. Work has now been commissioned to undertake a research project looking at all aspects of community led housing including self-build and Community Land Trusts. This project will identify existing and new participants for these models of housing delivery. The research will include a series of events and provide information to inform Councillors, Parish Councillors, Neighbourhood Plan groups, self-builders and local residents, about the objectives, benefits and potential, community led housing schemes can bring to communities and local authorities.