

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MINUTES

Committee:	Overview & Scrutiny Committee	Date:	Tuesday, 19 November 2019
Place:	Council Chamber, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping	Time:	7.30 - 10.06 pm
Members Present:	Councillors M Sartin (Chairman) R Jennings (Vice-Chairman) R Baldwin, P Bolton, L Burrows, D Dorrell, I Hadley, Y Knight, S Murray, S Rackham, P Stalker, J H Whitehouse, D Wixley, H Kane and D Stocker		
Other Councillors:	Councillors N Avey, N Bedford, S Kane, A Lion, R Morgan, A Patel, B Rolfe, S Stavrou and H Whitbread		
Apologies:	Councillors G Mohindra, S Neville and D Sunger		
Officers Present:	G Blakemore (Chief Executive), T Carne (Team Manager (Corporate Communications)), J Chandler (Service Director (Community & Partnership Services)), N Dawe (Interim Strategic Director & Chief Financial Officer), G Gold (Assistant Community Health & Wellbeing Manager), A Hendry (Senior Democratic Services Officer), J Houston (Strategic Partnership Specialist and Economic Lead), S Jevans (Interim Strategic Director), P Maginnis (Service Director (Business Support Services)), S Tautz (Democratic Services Manager), G Wallis (Service Manager (Community & Partnerships)) and G Woodhall (Senior Democratic Services Officer)		

30. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman 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.

31. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee noted that Councillor H Kane had been appointed as a substitute for Councillor G Mohindra, and that Councillor D Stocker had been appointed as a substitute for Councillor D Sunger.

32. MINUTES

Resolved:

- (1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 July 2019 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(a) Pursuant to the Council's Code of Member Conduct, Councillor J H Whitehouse declared a personal interest in item 9, Voluntary Action Epping Forest – Scrutiny of External Organisation, by virtue of being a trustee of both Epping Forest Re-Use and Roding Valley U3A, who were both members of Voluntary Action Epping Forest. The Councillor had determined that her interest was non-pecuniary and would remain in the meeting for the consideration of this item.

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

The Committee noted that no public questions or requests to address the meeting had been received.

35. EXECUTIVE DECISIONS - CALL-IN

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

36. VOLUNTARY ACTION EPPING FOREST - SCRUTINY OF EXTERNAL ORGANISATION

The Democratic Services Manager introduced Ms J Foile, Chief Officer, and Dr M Gilbert, Chairman of the Trustee Board, from Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) to the Committee.

Ms J Foile gave a presentation to the Committee on the current work programme of VAEF, and highlighted the Handyman service, Befriending service, Gardening service, Benefits Advice & Information service, Winter Warmth campaign, Ace activities for learning disabilities, Time Bank project and the establishment of the West Essex Community Action Network with Rainbow Services, Harlow and the Council for Voluntary Services Uttlesford. The organisation had been running since 1993 and became a charity and Voluntary Action Epping Forest in 2004. However, the mission had always remained the same - to help other Community Associations and vulnerable residents; last year, VAEF supported over 10,000 individuals in various ways, 700 organisations and provided some 150 activities.

Ms J Foile emphasised that funding for the organisation was an ongoing challenge, and welcomed the Council being one of its core funders, along with Essex County Council. Other bodies such as the Big Lottery Fund, Loughton Town Council and Harlow District Council also contributed to the costs incurred by VAEF in providing its services. The organisation felt that it had a very good reputation throughout the District and provided very good value for money for the services that it provided; full audited accounts were available. VAEF was always interested in people sharing its news and stories throughout social media and other outlets, and if anyone had any spare time then they would be welcomed as new volunteers to help others throughout the District.

Dr M Gilbert added that she believed Ms J Foile to be an excellent Chief Officer, and that the Board of Trustees contained a wealth of business experience. The organisation was currently in the midst of a strategic review; VAEF did not have vast funds to spend so the aim of the review was to make VAEF leaner and make the best possible use of the available resources.

Councillor S Murray thanked Ms J Foile and Dr M Gilbert for their presentation, and expressed his appreciation for the efforts that VAEF made as he felt the statistics reinforced his view that VAEF helped thousands of people across the District in a structured and cost effective way. Councillor N Avey suggested that the Council should continue to support VAEF in the future, and added that he himself was a volunteer gardener with VAEF who gave up 2 or 3 hours of his time on Monday mornings.

In response to questions from the Committee, Ms J Foile stated that there was a long waiting list for the Gardening Service, with referrals for the Service coming from the Council's Housing Officers. A total of 115 people were currently being supported through the Gardening Service, which usually included at least 4 visits. The cost of the Service to the Council was £87 per visit with 2 or 3 Gardeners in attendance. An application had been made to the High Sherriff's fund for monies to keep the gardening tools in good condition, and the Service was always looking to recruit volunteers to provide more resource. The Service always looked to assist the most vulnerable in the community.

Ms J Foile informed the Committee that the Handyman Service supported 400 clients last year doing over 800 jobs, with many referrals from the Council's Housing Officers. VAEF did not currently have an app but was always looking for different ways to engage with people and reach more residents. The services provided for the District's residents was supported by the Team Manager for Health, Wellbeing & Grants at the Council, with whom there were quarterly meetings. VAEF was always looking for new partnerships with organisations, and there was currently a very good working relationship with the Council.

The Committee was reassured that the Council currently provided 28% of VAEF's annual budget, and that Council funding only supported Council residents. VAEF had a Funding Officer who assisted with the search for funding and the making of bids for grants and funding. Social isolation was also a big problem within the District. It could be difficult to reach some people and there was a need to get out into communities more to support these people. VAEF also used the Frontline referral system to refer people suffering from social isolation to other organisations.

Responding to further questioning from the Committee, Ms J Foile stated that VAEF currently had 60 active volunteers, as well as a database of potential volunteers at the Volunteer Centre. VAEF also did a lot of outreach work to promote volunteering and used social media to promote the benefits of volunteering. There was a requirement for some training to be undertaken by volunteers, on safeguarding for example, and volunteers were supported in their personal development – particularly those with mental health issues to find paid work in the future. Training was also offered to other charities as well. Officers from VAEF did not deliver General Data Protect Regulation (GDPR) training themselves, but had attended some voluntary sector training provided by Anglia Ruskin University on GDPR.

The Chairman thanked Ms J Foile and Dr M Gilbert for their presentation, as well as their patience in answering the many questions asked by the Committee, and members were recommended to sign up for the VAEF Bulletin as it was a very interesting read.

Resolved:

- (1) That the external scrutiny of Voluntary Action Epping Forest by the Committee be noted.

37. GROUP COMPANY STRUCTURE

The interim Strategic Director presented a report on the progress with the establishment of the proposed Group Company Structure.

The interim Strategic Director reminded the Committee that the Cabinet had agreed in July 2019 to establish a group of companies, wholly owned by the Council, to deliver the following services:

- (a) a Services company to deliver the Housing Repairs Service;
- (b) a Development company to directly undertake development activity for the Council; and
- (c) an Investment company to hold property assets for long-term rental.

The interim Strategic Director stated that a Steering Group had also been constituted to oversee the Group Company establishment, and consisted of three members of the Cabinet, the Chief Executive and the interim Strategic Director. Once the companies had been established, the Steering Group would be replaced by a formal Board structure. Up to this point, the Steering Group had concentrated upon the appointment of the specialist advisors to facilitate the Group Company set-up, including a consultant Development Director for the Development company; key decisions on governance, finance or land ownership had yet to be made. The model being used for the Group Company was based on best practice, as many Councils were setting up this type of company.

The interim Strategic Director then gave the Committee a short presentation on the initial design work that had been undertaken by Puttock Brown, the consultants appointed by the Council to provide the design and communication material for the new group of companies. This included the choice of 'Qualis' as the name for the companies: Qualis Group; Qualis Commercial; Qualis Living; and Qualis Management.

Councillor Murray opined that there was no information in the report to allow any proper scrutiny of the decisions made by the Steering Group, and highlighted the appointment of Puttock Brown as an example of this. The interim Strategic Director responded that the Steering Group had followed the Council's procurement rules for the appointment of all of the consultants, and the tender submissions for these appointments could be circulated to Members if they wished. The Deputy Leader of the Council, Councillor S-A Stavrou, added that the Steering Group had listened to the advice of their consultants and took a collective decision for each appointment. The section of the report outlining the skills and experience of the newly appointed Development Director was also highlighted.

Councillor Murray enquired if there would be any independent members of the new Group Company Board when it was set up? The interim Strategic Director replied that the formal Board structure was subject to legal advice, and the Board composition and structure had yet to be decided. The legal advisors were being requested to provide information about how similar such structures were operating elsewhere and what lessons the Council could learn. The Chief Executive added that independent board membership would be very important and it was being considered.

Councillor Murray stated that he was not happy with this process, as major decisions were being made by just three Members – all from the same political group. There had been no involvement by the other political groups with potential expertise from their individual Members.

The Deputy Leader reiterated that all of the background papers were available for perusal by Members, and questions could be asked of the Members and Officers involved in the Steering Group. There was never any intention by the Steering Group to be secretive, however the Council needed to modernise and reform to enable it to provide the services for our residents without funding from the Government. There

was a deadline of March 2020, which was when the Housing Repairs contract with Mears would expire. The interim Strategic Director added that the Services company would focus on providing the Housing Repairs service initially, but other Council provided services could be transferred to it in the future. With the current Housing Repairs contract expiring in March 2020, the aim was to have the group of companies established in the next two months.

Councillor H Kane pointed out that the proposed name of 'Qualis' had little relevance to Epping Forest, and Councillor Knight asked why Members at Council were not requested to suggest the company name? Councillor A Patel, one of the members of the Steering group, explained that the Steering Group was given three choices for the company name. It was necessary to proceed with the registration of the company, so the Steering Group selected the most appropriate of the three suggested names. The interim Strategic Director acknowledged that the selected name had little direct relevance to Epping Forest, but added that 'Qualis' was latin for quality and it symbolised the desire of the Council to provide quality services to its residents. The Group company names had now been agreed and registered, and it had cost the Council £4,900 to establish the name and logo.

The Chairman acknowledged that much had been completed to establish the Group of companies, and reassured Members of the Committee that further progress reports would be received for consideration at future meetings of the Committee. The Chief Executive reiterated that the background papers for the work undertaken so far were available from the Democratic Services section.

Resolved:

- (1) That the progress with the activities undertaken to date to establish a Group of companies wholly owned by the Council be noted.

38. CABINET BUSINESS

The Democratic Services Manager presented the Executive's current Programme of Key Decisions for the Committee to consider.

Leader Portfolio

Councillor J H Whitehouse felt that the report from the Local Government Association Peer Review should be submitted to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for consideration. The Chief Executive stated that approval for the Peer Review was granted by the Cabinet last night, and that once the Review was completed then a report would be produced and published on the Council's website; the report could be discussed in this forum if the Committee so wished.

Housing & Property Services

Councillor S Murray felt that the development potential of the Council's Sheltered Housing Assets should also be considered by the Committee in due course. Councillor H Whitbread, Housing & Property Services Portfolio Holder, reminded the Committee that this item was concerned with how to best utilise the sheltered housing assets as part of the Council's provision of affordable housing, and not simply developing or selling off the current assets. The proposed review would be undertaken in the new calendar year and the outcome would be reported to the Stronger Communities Select Committee.

39. LOCAL ADULT SOCIAL CARE SERVICES - SCRUTINY OF EXTERNAL ORGANISATION

The Democratic Services Manager introduced a report concerning the external scrutiny of local adult social care services.

The Committee was reminded that it had previously expressed a desire to undertake external scrutiny of the current provision, planning, management and performance of local health and adult social care services. Although the scrutiny of such matters was normally reserved for Essex County Council, they had generally been happy for this Committee to address any local concerns. The County Council's Director of Adult Social Care would arrange for suitable Officers to attend the Committee's meeting on 28 January 2020.

The Committee was requested to consider the scope of the external scrutiny activity of local adult social care services, and suggested the following specific issues:

- (a) the criteria applied by Essex County Council for home visits to be made to local residents for the provision of home-based adult social care requirements;
- (b) the types of adult social care services currently being provided within the Epping Forest District, who such services were provided for and who provided the services on behalf of the County Council;
- (c) how issues of isolation within the local population, particularly amongst older residents, were addressed by the County Council through the provision of local adult social care services;
- (d) how Epping Forest District Council could work effectively with Essex County Council to ensure that local residents with social care requirements were able to remain living in their own homes for as long as possible and how the Council's current review of the provision of its sheltered housing schemes could support this aspiration;
- (e) the support available from the County Council for residents (and the families of residents) suffering from conditions such as dementia (particularly in the early stages of the condition) and visual impairment, and opportunities for the roll-out of smart home technology to allow patients to stay in their own homes for as long as possible;
- (f) how the development of digital technology would support the County Council to provide innovative opportunities to improve local adult social care services, particularly in view of the planned withdrawal of the existing Careline service; and
- (g) how Epping Forest District Council could work effectively with Essex County Council to support the provision of local adult social care services and how the County Council intended to engage with this Council to ensure the best level of service provision to local residents.

The Democratic Services Manager added that further key issues for scrutiny would be sought from Members via the Council Bulletin nearer the time, and that if Members of the Committee had any further suggestions then they should inform the Democratic Services team.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Committee's suggested key issues for the scrutiny of the local adult social care services provided by Essex County Council be conveyed to the Director of Adult Social Care.

40. LOCAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES - SCRUTINY OF EXTERNAL ORGANISATION

The Democratic Services Manager introduced a report concerning the external scrutiny of local mental health services.

The Committee was reminded that it had previously requested the opportunity to undertake scrutiny of the current provision, planning, management and performance of local mental health services in order to better understand how different agencies could work together to share best practice and support residents. Although the scrutiny of this area was reserved for the County Council, it was generally not averse to this Council undertaking scrutiny of local issues. Representatives of the West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust had confirmed that they would be able to attend the meeting scheduled for 17 March 2020.

The Committee had identified the following key issues to be scrutinised in respect of the provision of local mental health services:

- (a) how issues of isolation within the local population, particularly amongst older residents, were addressed through the provision of local mental services;
- (b) how apparent mental health concerns amongst local students could be referred to service providers by primary and secondary schools in the Epping Forest District and how quickly such referrals could expect to be assessed;
- (c) Whether funding for local mental health services was being maintained or increased by the Clinical Commissioning Group, at a time when the mental health sector appeared to be under increasing pressure; and
- (d) How Epping Forest District Council could work effectively with the CCG and the NHS Trust to support the provision of local mental health services and how the CCG and NHS Trust intended to engage with this Council to ensure the best level of service provision to local residents.

The Democratic Services Manager stated that further key lines of questioning would be sought from Members via the Council Bulletin nearer the time, and if Members had any further suggestions then they should inform the Democratic Services Team.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Committee's suggested key issues for the scrutiny of the local mental health services be conveyed to the West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group and Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

41. CO-OPTION OF INDEPENDENT MEMBERS TO SELECT COMMITTEES

The Democratic Services Manager presented a report on the co-option of independent members to Select Committees.

The Democratic Services Manager reported that the role of co-opted members was to constructively challenge the Council and Officers on service or performance issues. However, it was also important that co-opted members were appointed on the basis of their level of knowledge and experience of relevant issues so that they could make an informed contribution to debates. Currently, the Council had co-opted members on the Audit & Governance Committee and the Standards Committee. In addition, the Remuneration Panel was entirely composed of independent members. Formal recruitment and selection procedures were in place for each of these committees.

The Democratic Services Manager reminded the Committee that Article 6 of the Constitution permitted the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to recommend to the Council the appointment of non-voting co-opted members, and this process was followed to appoint representatives of the Epping Forest Youth Council to membership of the former Communities Select Committee. In addition, the Chairman of the Tenants & Leaseholders Federation (TLF) was an active co-opted member of the former Communities Select Committee. With the introduction of the new Select Committee arrangements at the start of this municipal year, the Service Director for Housing & Property Services had suggested that the Chairman of the Tenants & Leaseholders Forum (what is now the TLF) should be co-opted onto the Stronger Communities Select Committee, whilst the Epping Forest Youth Council was also keen to secure co-opted membership of the same Select Committee.

Consequently, it had been recommended that a report be made to a future meeting of the Committee outlining proposals for appropriate selection procedures and criteria for the appointment of co-opted members to the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committees. This would bring the co-option of independent members for the Select Committees in line with the existing arrangements for the three committees described earlier. The Members' Allowance Scheme for the current municipal year provided for an annual allowance of £500 for co-opted members of an Overview & Scrutiny Committee; this allowance would only apply to a co-opted member formally appointed by the Council.

The Committee felt that it would be beneficial to have co-opted members on the Select Committees, as the Council was missing out on a potential wealth of knowledge – although it was acknowledged that the three new Select Committees had a wider area of responsibility than the four Select Committees they replaced. The Democratic Services Manager stated that he was examining examples of co-opted members on Scrutiny Committees at other Councils.

The Committee suggested that the allowance for a co-opted member could be linked to the number of meetings that they attended. The Democratic Services Manager stated that there would be budgetary considerations if a number of co-opted members were appointed, and the views of the Remuneration Panel would have to be taken into account.

Resolved:

- (1) That the current arrangements for the co-option of independent members to the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committees be noted; and
- (2) That a report be made to the next meeting of the Committee with proposals for the adoption of selection criteria for the co-option of independent members to the Council's Overview & Scrutiny Committees.

42. LOCAL HIGH STREETS - VIABILITY & REGENERATION

The Strategic Partnerships Specialist presented a report on the viability and regeneration of local high streets.

The Specialist reminded the Committee that members had been concerned by evidence showing the traditional role of high streets coming under threat from different sources, including online retailing. This District was different from many comparable areas in that it contained a range of market towns without a single large urban settlement, which posed particular challenges and opportunities. Previous research had indicated that the District's mixture of independent and chain high street stores offered a distinct experience and was appreciated by shoppers, whilst also highlighting the loss of retail spend to London due to the high number of commuters within the District. The Government had recognised this problem and had offered new funding to boost high street sustainability.

The Specialist stated that a four-phase approach was being suggested to support a programme of scrutiny activity on the viability and regeneration of local high streets. Firstly, the establishment of a Task & Finish Panel, for which agreement for the draft terms of reference was being sought. Secondly, an information / data gathering exercise to be completed by the Economic Development Team by the end of January 2020 when the Task & Finish Panel was due to start meeting. Thirdly, consultation with key stakeholders over their perspectives and potential future actions. And finally, the formulation of recommendations by the Task & Finish Panel, to be reported back to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee in May 2020. It was highlighted that there was an error in the draft terms of reference, in that the first meeting of the Task & Finish Panel would not be held until after 28 January 2020, and not by 10 January 2020.

Councillor J H Whitehouse felt that there was nothing in the draft terms of reference for the Task & Finish Panel which took account of the customer's point of view, and this should be added. However, it was pointed out that surveys were mentioned in the draft terms of reference, and that the data gathering exercise would include short high street surveys across the District to ascertain the views of shoppers.

The Vice-Chairman thanked Officers for progressing this scrutiny activity and looked forward to the establishment of the Task & Finish Panel. The Chairman reminded the Committee that Task & Finish Panels were not subject to the pro rata rules, so any interested member could sit on the Panel. The Specialist also reassured the Committee that the evidence from previous studies would be made available to the Task & Finish Panel.

Resolved:

- (1) That the review of the proposed programme of scrutiny activity relating to the viability and regeneration of local high streets be noted;
- (2) That the establishment of a Task & Finish Panel to review the viability and regeneration of local high streets be agreed; and
- (3) That the draft terms of reference for the Task & Finish Panel be agreed.

43. CORPORATE PLAN ACTION PLAN YEAR 2 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Service Director for Community & Partnerships presented a report on the performance of the Corporate Plan Action Plan Year 2.

The Service Director stated that the Action Plans provided a mechanism for reporting on the Council's Key Performance Indicators and Key Programmes of Work, which highlighted the Council's overall performance against the agreed corporate objectives. This Action Plan was for Year 2 of the Corporate Plan, which covered the municipal year 2019/20. Five of the listed Key Programmes were amber rated, and two of the Key Performance Indicators were currently behind schedule against their targets.

The Service Director also reminded the Committee that the full report had been considered by the Stronger Council Select Committee, whilst this Committee only considered an exception report.

The Chairman highlighted that two of the Waste Management Key Performance Indicators had exceeded their targets – Increase in Recycling, and Reduction in Household Waste.

Resolved:

- (1) That the performance in Quarter 2 of 2019/20 for the Key Performance Indicators and Key Work Programmes within the Corporate Plan be noted.

44. TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME - ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY

The interim Strategic Director presented an update report on the Accommodation Strategy. The proposed floor layout plans were also projected for Members to see.

The interim Strategic Director reported that the Cabinet at its meeting in October had agreed to not pursue the construction of new Civic Offices in North Weald, as new design plans had illustrated that all required Council staff could be accommodated in the Civic Offices – on a 7:10 desks-to-staff ratio – if the building was refurbished to create a more open plan space. This would also lead to the vacation of the Condor Building, which would then become available for redevelopment.

The interim Strategic Director stated that the proposed layout for the ground floor would see the creation of a large conference facility capable of hosting 200 people, as well as spaces which could be leased by partner organisations such as the Library and Citizens Advice. It was also intended to provide public access to the revamped café area. Council staff would occupy the office spaces on floors 1 and 2. A Decant Strategy was being prepared to move all staff to the Condor Building while the refurbishment works were being completed. The Council Chamber and Committee Rooms would also be unavailable, and plans were being drawn up to hold Member meetings at various locations around the District between June and December 2020.

The interim Strategic Director stated that it was estimated that the total cost of the refurbishment would be £6.6million. It was expected that this would create a 30-year lifespan for the Civic Offices. The Civic Offices was a listed building, so Listed Building consent would be required for the proposed internal changes; however, a full planning application would be required for the renovation of the café area.

Councillor H Kane enquired how happy were the staff with the proposed changes as it was not detailed in the report? The Chief Executive responded that a consultant engaged with the staff a while ago and that was how the 7:10 desks-to-staff ratio was decided upon, although there were examples of more aggressive ratios. The interim Strategic Director added that there was a Champions Group involved with the

refurbishment, and Managers were working with their teams on how to apply the 7:10 ratio.

Councillor J H Whitehouse expressed some concern at the lack of tables in the proposed layout for Epping Library. The Chief Executive informed the Committee that the Library had yet to respond with specifics for the layout; it was for Essex County Council to inform the Council of their requirements, and for the Council to decide whether the Library could be accommodated or not. However, the Library's preferred location was the bay area at the front of the building on the ground floor. It was acknowledged that the space for the Library within this building would not be as large as their current building, but an indicative cost for the Library had been calculated and they would lease the space they used.

The Chairman noted that the Council Chamber would be out of use for seven months and asked if suitable alternative venues for Council meetings had been found? The interim Strategic Director stated that it was essential for this building to be vacant during the refurbishment; the Decant Strategy would deal with Committee meetings and their location. Members would be provided with more detail in due course but meetings would be held in the Civic Offices until the Annual Council Meeting in May. It was also emphasised that Homefield House would be used during the decant period for Democratic Services, Electoral Services and as a Member space.

The Vice-Chairman queried whether the 200-seat conference facility was being provided at the expense of the comfort of the staff? The Chief Executive reassured the Committee that it would be a ground floor Committee Room space which could be leased to third parties but would also be used for Council events, such as staff briefings. The new office layouts had already been implemented for the Finance team and Leadership Team on the second floor of the Civic Offices, and it was not uncomfortable for staff. The interim Strategic Director added that there would be a tour of the new layouts on the second floor for members prior to the next meeting of the Committee in January 2020.

Resolved:

- (1) That the current progress with the Accommodation Strategy be noted.

45. TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME - PEOPLE STRATEGY

The Chief Executive presented an update report on the progress with the People Strategy.

The Chief Executive reminded the Committee that an analysis of the Council's staff structures by the Local Government Association had revealed a number of issues, including multiple layers of management, decision-making going up to the top of the organisation, and a Council working in silos. It was recommended that the Council should have a maximum of four layers of management: Strategic Directors (including the Chief Executive); Service Directors; Service Managers; and Team Managers. Recruitment to the three highest levels had been completed and recruitment was underway for the Team Manager roles. There had been a reduction of 53 management posts, resulting in a saving of £1.175million for the Council.

The Chief Executive stated that the next stage for the People Strategy would be the appointment to the staff roles. It was expected that the majority of staff would be directly assimilated into the new roles, although some staff would be assimilated on pay protection if their new role involved a drop in pay of one band, but a very small number of staff (less than 10) had been identified as potentially at risk as they were

facing a salary drop of more than one band. A 30-day staff consultation exercise was currently being undertaken on the new structures, and all vacancies had been frozen to ensure that as many roles were available for existing staff as possible.

The Chief Executive concluded that the number of staff leavers had not increased substantially this year compared to last – 105 in 2019 against 94 in 2018 – although sickness had increased from 1902 days to 3025 days and there had also been an increase in non-work related stress and mental health issues such as anxiety. Establishment figures for the new structure showed a reduction of almost 67 staff; however, previous figures included a number of holiday season staff as full-time employees which made the establishment figures artificially high.

In response to queries from the Committee, the Chief Executive provided further explanation for the four layer management model being used, and the management of the risks involved in the two Strategic Director posts being fixed term, interim appointments. The Committee was reassured that the management structure was close to being fully recruited to, with ten posts remaining to be filled out of a total of 90. The Council was also looking to get a substantial proportion of the staffing roles assimilated to before the Christmas break. It was also explained that for the small number of staff where the role available for assimilation had a salary drop of one band, that their salary would be protected at their current level.

In response to further questions from the Committee, the Chief Executive stated that she did not have any information to hand about the number of high performing staff leaving the Council, and the Council would not necessarily have any statistics on this anyway, but Senior Officers would know anecdotally about this. The Chief Executive also agreed that it was important to have visible structure charts for the public in the near future, for which Councillor Knight requested that the names of the relevant Officers also be included.

Councillor Wixley enquired how many employees were affected by the increase in figures for staff sickness and stress, and how the figures for non-work related stress issues were calculated? The Chief Executive apologised for only having the figures in hours, and therefore could not answer as to how many staff were affected. The Service Director for Business Services added that staff sickness figures had been reported to Members on a regular basis until Members requested not to consider these figures anymore during the last cycle of meetings. The People Team worked closely with managers over long-term and frequent absence issues, and any analysis of sickness issues used the reasons provided on the medical certificates.

Councillor H Kane stated that the new Member Contact system was working well. The Chairman opined that members were keen to keep a watchful eye on the People Strategy and requested that a further progress report be made at the next meeting.

Resolved:

- (1) That the current progress with the People Strategy be noted.

46. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME

The Democratic Services Manager presented the Overview & Scrutiny Work Programme for 2019/20, including the Reserve List.

The Democratic Services Manager reported that all-Member briefings were being investigated for item 10 – Essex Police / Essex Fire & Rescue Service – on 25

February 2020 and item 13 – Whipps Cross Hospital – Redevelopment Masterplan – on 28 January 2020 before the Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting that night.

The Chairman enquired about the possibility of a further all-Member briefing for item 14 – Transport for London – as they had attended meetings of the Committee previously to discuss the Central Line. Councillor H Whitbread also added that Transport for London had still not responded to the 10,000 signature petition that she had handed in. The Democratic Services Manager responded that the Service Director for Contracts & Technical Services had been in discussions with Transport for London in an effort to organise such a briefing.

When asked why the scrutiny of Epping Forest College had been removed from the list, the Chairman reminded the Committee that the College – now rebranded New City College – was not currently prepared to attend one of the Committee's meetings. However, the Chief Executive added that Officers were visiting the College next week to discuss some issues with the Principal.

Resolved:

- (1) That the current Overview & Scrutiny Work Programme for 2019/20 be noted.

47. SELECT COMMITTEES - WORK PROGRAMME

Councillor Y Knight introduced the Stronger Communities Select Committee Work Programme for 2019/20 and reported that everything was currently on target. It was highlighted that the local District Police Commander would be attending the Select Committee's meeting on 4 February 2020, and although there were some new items missing from the Work Programme before the Committee, the Select Committee's focus would be on mental health and wellbeing issues within the District during the remainder of the municipal year.

Councillor P Bolton introduced the Stronger Council Select Committee Work Programme for 2019/20. The Select Committee had completed its review of Polling Places, Polling Districts and Polling Stations in the summer, which had been very timely given the recent announcement of a General Election on 12 December 2019. The Select Committee had also agreed to a workshop event to informally discuss the People Strategy, which would be open to all Members and was liable to take place in January 2020.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Stronger Communities Select Committee Work Programme for 2019/20 be noted;
- (2) That the Stronger Council Select Committee Work Programme for 2019/20 be noted; and
- (3) That the Stronger Place Select Committee Work Programme for 2019/20 be noted.

48. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

The Committee noted that there was no business which necessitated the exclusion of the public and press.

CHAIRMAN