

EPHING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY MINUTES

Committee:	Overview & Scrutiny Committee	Date:	Monday, 22 June 2020
Place:	Virtual Meeting on Zoom	Time:	7.00 - 9.10 pm
Members Present:	Councillors M Sartin (Chairman) R Jennings (Vice-Chairman) R Baldwin, P Bolton, L Burrows, D Dorrell, I Hadley, S Heather, S Murray, D Plummer, S Rackham, P Stalker, D Stocker, D Sunger, J H Whitehouse and D Wixley		
Other Councillors:	Councillors S Heap, C McCredie, R Bassett, N Bedford, S Kane, A Lion, J Mclvor, L Mead, R Morgan, J Philip, C Whitbread, H Whitbread and J M Whitehouse		
Apologies:	None.		
Officers Present:	G Blakemore (Chief Executive), T Carne (Corporate Communications Team Manager), J Chandler (Service Director (Community & Partnership Services)), V Messenger (Democratic Services Officer), S Mitchell (PR Website Editor), R Pavey (Service Director (Customer Services)), A Small (Strategic Director) and G Woodhall (Democratic & Electoral Services Manager)		

1. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Chairman reminded everyone present that this virtual meeting would be broadcast live to the Internet, and that the Council had adopted a protocol for the management and webcasting of its virtual meetings.

2. SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

The Committee noted that there had been no substitute Members appointed for this meeting.

3. MINUTES

Resolved:

- (1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2020 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

5. 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.

6. EXECUTIVE DECISIONS - CALL-IN

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

7. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME

The Chief Executive presented the Work Programme for the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for 2020/21.

The Chief Executive suggested that the Council's Covid-19 Response and Recovery should be added to the Work Programme as a standing item, which the Committee agreed. In addition, the Committee agreed that the other standing items on the Work Programme should remain in situ for the coming municipal year.

In respect of the items listed for the next meeting in July, a number of the Committee felt that the Local High Streets Task & Finish Panel should continue and be considering the longer term viability of the local High Streets; it should not be subsumed by the newly created Portfolio Advisory Group for Covid-19 Recovery. The Chief Executive advised the Committee that it was important to ensure that the work of the two Groups was aligned and work was not being duplicated. Cllr S Murray also opined that, whilst the work of the Task & Finish Panel was important, the same Officers were probably involved in the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group which should take priority at the current time. The Chairman reminded the Committee that this item could be discussed in detail at the next meeting.

In respect of the items listed for the remaining meetings in the municipal year, it was noted that the Work Programme was lighter than in previous years but the Committee did have five standing items on the Work Programme. The Chairman highlighted that other issues would arise throughout the year, and the Committee felt that a lighter Work Programme would provide flexibility for later in the year.

The Chairman observed that the planned external scrutiny of the Epping Forest Sixth Form Consortium had been carried forward on the Work Programme for some years now, and requested the Committee to consider whether it should be removed. Cllr S Murray, who had initially raised this item, stated that legally the Sixth Forms were operating as a consortium, but in reality they were operating as four independent Sixth Forms with a degree of co-operation. In addition, not all of the Sixth Forms throughout the District were part of the Consortium either. Given the current situation with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Committee agreed that this item was not a priority currently, and it should be moved to the Reserve List.

The Committee also agreed that the other item on the Reserve Programme List – external scrutiny of Essex County Council Children's Services – should remain there for the time being.

The Vice-Chairman suggested it might be useful to undertake external scrutiny of the London-Stansted-Cambridge Consortium. Cllr A Lion gave the Committee a very brief summary of the work of the Consortium and advised that it would be useful for the Committee to receive an update from the Director. The Committee noted that this item could also be linked to Covid-19 Recovery issues, as well as carbon emissions. Cllr N Bedford informed the Committee that Councillors could register to receive a regular update issued by the Consortium. The Committee agreed to add this item to the Work Programme at a future date to be agreed with the Consortium.

Resolved:

- (1) That Covid-19 Response and Recovery be added to the Work Programme as an additional standing item;
- (2) That the item concerning the external scrutiny of the Epping Forest Sixth Form Consortium be moved to the Reserve Programme List at the current time;
- (3) That external scrutiny of the London-Stansted-Cambridge Consortium be added to the Work Programme; and
- (4) That, revised as agreed above, the current Overview & Scrutiny Committee Work Programme for 2020/21 be noted.

8. CORPORATE PRIORITIES 2020/21

The Committee received a presentation from the Leader of Council on the Council's corporate priorities for the municipal year 2020/21.

The Leader informed the Committee that the following would be the priority for the Cabinet over the next twelve months:

- (i) to retain a strong financial position for the Council and support of local businesses;
- (ii) to benefit from the investment opportunities for the Council in its services and property assets through Qualis, to provide a long-term income stream for the Council;
- (iii) to complete the refurbishment of the Civic Offices to provide increased income streams and make available the Conder building for development;
- (iv) to progress the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, with local high streets as a priority and the introduction of new rates for parking to encourage this;
- (v) to implement the Local Plan, and address the issues raised by Natural England and the Planning Inspector during the Examination in Public;
- (vi) to progress the Council Housebuilding Programme;
- (vii) to link Community and Health issues with Housing issues, as good housing led to good health and good communities within the District; and
- (viii) to maximise the use of Council-owned assets in order to protect the Council's front-line services.

A number of Councillors supported the initiatives to aid the recovery of the District's high streets, including the reduction in parking fees although it was accepted that this did encourage the greater use of cars rather than alternative forms of transport. The Leader acknowledged the concerns of the Committee and reiterated that the priority was currently to protect the District's high streets. However, the Cabinet was always considering different ways of supporting green initiatives, and more people had been walking to their local high streets during the pandemic lockdown.

Cllr S Murray enquired why Epping and Waltham Abbey were deemed the priority for high street recovery grants? The Leader explained that Epping High Street had been

included in the Local Plan whilst Waltham Abbey High Street was the one most in need of regeneration within the District. Buckhurst Hill, Loughton High Road and Loughton Broadway had all benefited from enhancement schemes in the past, however, bids for other schemes throughout the District were being put together. There was a need to increase investment throughout the District and have a credible Economic Strategy in place.

There was some support from the Committee for the proposed new cinema in Epping to be an independent cinema rather than be part of a big, national chain, but the Leader stated that he wanted a viable cinema on the proposed site, regardless of whether it was an independent cinema or not.

Some of the Committee had concerns about the level of accountability of Qualis to the Council and Councillors, and that the decision-making needed to be more open and transparent. In addition, there were also concerns about Qualis possibly offering services in the future that were already being provided by more established companies, for example accountancy services. Qualis also needed to show that it could run projects on time and to budget before expanding into other areas. The Leader reminded the Committee that Qualis was wholly owned by the Council, and the income generated by Qualis would protect Council services and benefit residents. The intention in the future was for Qualis to provide a wide range of services, but the current focus was on the developments within the Local Plan and maintaining the Council's housing stock. The Leader felt that Qualis needed to prove that it was a profit-making organisation. The Leader also believed that Qualis was accountable to both this Committee and the Audit & Governance Committee, and it was intended to have a Councillor who was a non-member of the Cabinet on the Qualis Board in the future.

The Committee wished to place on record their appreciation of the efforts made by Officers to respond to the fire in Epping the previous day, and the Leader added his thanks to the Red Cross who were also on the scene to assist those who were affected. Cllr C McCreddie advised that the Epping Food Bank could support those residents displaced by the Fire.

Cllr D Wixley enquired if virtual meetings would continue whilst the Civic Offices was being refurbished? The Leader commented that it was his ambition for Committee meetings to be opened up to the public again, possibly in September when the Schools had re-opened; but the possibility of hybrid meetings had not been discounted. In respect of the Council's current financial position, the Leader stated that different scenarios were being examined but the Council was not looking to cut any services at the current time. The Council was fortunate to have strong financial reserves to fall back on in the next year or so, but the Cabinet would work hard to protect the Council's services. Finally, the Leader stated that he was keen to see the Apprenticeship scheme expand further.

Resolved:

- (1) That the presentation from the Leader of Council on the Corporate priorities for the municipal year 2020/21 be noted.

9. REVIEW OF CABINET BUSINESS

The Committee considered the Executive's current programme of Key Decisions.

Leader of the Council

When questioned about the proposed land sale of the Pyrles Land Nursery site in Loughton, G Blakemore undertook to issue a full written response to the Committee in the days following the meeting.

Cllr C Whitbread assured the Committee that public consultation and member engagement on proposals for the Epping development sites would be brought forward shortly.

Planning & Sustainability

Cllr N Bedford explained to the Committee that there was currently an issue with the access road for the Latton Priory Masterplan and that, as the Masterplan was part of the Harlow & Gilston Garden Town project, the Healthy Town framework also applied to the Latton Priory development.

In respect of the Mitigation Strategy for the Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation, Cllr N Bedford informed the Committee that the Strategy was in the process of being developed, and high level talks had taken place with the District's three Members of Parliament to make them aware of the ongoing issues with Natural England.

Finance & Economic Development

Cllr J Philip explained that work on the Council budget for next year was beginning, but the Council would not need to enact an emergency budget in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. This process would involve revising the Medium Term Financial Strategy, however, the exact timing had not been decided upon. It was intended to have the accounts for 2019/20 signed off by the end of October 2020.

Environmental & Technical Services

Cllr S Murray highlighted the Strategic Review of Waste Management item and commented that as this was one of the Council's key services then the review should have full member involvement and a public consultation if any significant changes were proposed.

Cllr D Wixley enquired if any changes were required to the Council's Procurement Strategy now that the United Kingdom had left the European Union? Cllr C Whitbread reassured the Committee that as the majority of the European Union laws were enshrined in British Law, considerable changes to the Strategy were not expected.

Cllr D Plummer asked if the Council had formally made any representations to the County Council to re-open the Recycling Centre at Waltham Abbey? Cllr C Whitbread stated that he believed social distancing was the reason why the Centre had not yet re-opened.

Housing & Community

Cllr D Wixley commented that, as the policy of the County Council was to keep people in their own homes for as long as possible, should more single-storey properties be considered as part of the Council Housebuilding Programme? Cllr H Whitbread informed the Committee that a full update would be presented to the Stronger Place Select Committee in July, but reassured that Councillor that the suggestion would be considered.

Cllr D Sunger asked if the bidders for the External Maintenance Repairs and Redecoration Programme contract had considered social distancing as some of the Council's tenants would still be shielding at home. Cllr H Whitbread undertook to provide a fuller response to the Committee but highlighted that Housing Officers had been fully socially distanced during the pandemic.

Commercial & Regulatory Services

G Blakemore drew the Committee's attention to a typographical error, as the entry for Qualis should have read "*The consideration of the business case for the transfer of Grounds Maintenance ...*". It was emphasised that the aim was to protect the Council's discretionary services. Cllr S Murray highlighted that the impact on local Town and Parish Councils would need to be considered if the Grounds Maintenance function was transferred to Qualis.

Resolved:

- (1) That the Executive's current programme of Key Decisions be noted.

10. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEES - MEMBERSHIP 2020/21

The Democratic & Electoral Services Officer presented a report on the membership of the Overview & Scrutiny Select Committees for the municipal year 2020/21.

The Committee was reminded that the Overview and Scrutiny rules set out within Article 6 of the Council's Constitution required the Committee to determine the number of Select Committees and review whether they should continue in being, at its first meeting of each municipal year. Additionally, the membership, Chairmanship and Vice-Chairmanship of the Select Committees were to be approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at the first meeting each year, as such appointments were reserved to the Committee and not made by the Council at its annual meeting.

The Committee was advised that no request for membership of a Select Committee was made by a Councillor that was not a member of a political group. Therefore, it had been proposed to retain each Select Committee at eleven members with membership on a pro rata basis between the different political groups. It was also highlighted that any member of the Audit & Governance Committee was not permitted to be a member of the Stronger Council Select Committee, under Article 11 of the Constitution.

Cllr S Murray was concerned that all four of the Council's Scrutiny Committees could be chaired by a member of the Conservative group, who also controlled the Cabinet. The Councillor felt that at least one of the Scrutiny Committees should be chaired by a member from a different political group, as this was an important point of Scrutiny and would also aid the transparency of the Council. It was highlighted that numerous other Councils followed this process and maybe this Council should consider it for the next municipal year. Cllr J H Whitehouse supported the principle outlined by Cllr S Murray and agreed that not all of the chairmanships of the Scrutiny Committees should go to the majority party.

Resolved:

- (1) That the continuation of the following three Select Committees be agreed for the 2020/21 municipal year:

- (a) Stronger Communities Select Committee;
- (b) Stronger Council Select Committee; and
- (c) Stronger Place Select Committee;

(2) That the membership of each Select Committee p be agreed as eleven members for 2020/21;

(3) That the following nominations for membership of each Select Committee for 2020/21 be agreed:

- (a) Stronger Communities Select Committee:

- Cllr A Beales;
- Cllr I Hadley;
- Cllr J Lea;
- Cllr J McIvor;
- Cllr A Mitchell;
- Cllr D Plummer;
- Cllr S Rackham;
- Cllr J Share-Bernia;
- Cllr D Sunger;
- Cllr J H Whitehouse; and
- Cllr D Wixley;

- (b) Stronger Council Select Committee:

- Cllr R Bassett;
- Cllr P Bolton;
- Cllr H Brady;
- Cllr R Brookes;
- Cllr D Dorrell;
- Cllr H Kane;
- Cllr S Neville;
- Cllr M Owen;
- Cllr S Rackham;
- Cllr D Stocker; and
- Cllr J M Whitehouse;

- (c) Stronger Place Select Committee:

- Cllr L Burrows;
- Cllr I Hadley;
- Cllr S Heap;
- Cllr S Heather;
- Cllr J Jennings;
- Cllr S Jones;
- Cllr H Kauffman;
- Cllr C McCredie;
- Cllr J McIvor;
- Cllr R Morgan; and
- Cllr R Bassett;

(4) That the following appointments to Chairman and Vice-Chairman for each Select Committee be agreed:

(a) Stronger Communities Select Committee:

- Cllr D Sunger as Chairman; and
- Cllr J McIvor as Vice-Chairman;

(b) Stronger Council Select Committee:

- Cllr P Bolton as Chairman; and
- Cllr D Stocker as Vice-Chairman; and

(c) Stronger Place Select Committee:

- Cllr R Bassett as Chairman; and
- Cllr S Heather as Vice-Chairman.

11. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY SELECT COMMITTEES - WORK PROGRAMMES

The Committee considered the current Work Programmes for the three Select Committees.

Stronger Communities Select Committees

R Pavey informed the Committee that the Work Programme would be reviewed and presented at the July meeting of the Select Committee, as there were still some items outstanding from the postponed meeting in April. Cllr S Murray suggested that the items in relation to the work of the Council-funded Police Officers and the presentation from the District Police Commander should be retained, as well as the Health & Wellbeing Strategy as that would be important for the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Cllr D Wixley also suggested that the item concerning the GROW Community Garden in Loughton was also linked to the Health & Wellbeing Strategy and should be retained. Cllr J H Whitehouse commented that she would prefer not to see so many quarterly reports at the Select Committees, and felt that there were too many presentations as well.

Stronger Council Select Committee

Cllr P Bolton stated that the Select Committee would be focussing on the People Strategy and the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on staff morale, as well as paying close attention to the Accommodation Programme. Cllr D Dorrell added that he would be particularly interested in the review of the Technology Strategy.

Stronger Place Select Committee

Cllr D Sunger advised the Committee that the recruitment to the new Climate Emergency Officer posts, the Green Agenda, Older People's Services and Air Quality would be significant issues for the Select Committee throughout the coming year.

Resolved:

(1) That the Work Programmes for the three Select Committees be noted.

12. EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

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

CHAIRMAN