

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Stronger Council Select Committee **Date:** Tuesday, 24 January 2023

Place: Council Chamber - Civic Offices **Time:** 7.00 - 8.27 pm

Members Present: Councillors J McIvor (Chairman), S Patel (Vice-Chairman), R Brookes, I Hadley, S Heather and J M Whitehouse

Members Present (Virtually): Councillors

Other Councillors: Councillors J Jogia, N Bedford, S Kane, A Lion, J Philip, C Whitbread and H Whitbread

Other Councillors (Virtual): Councillors S Murray

Apologies: R Bassett and R Morgan

Officers Present: A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), A Small (Section 151 Officer), J Budden (People, Culture & Employee Wellbeing Manager), A Cartwright (Corporate Business Partner), C Hartgrove (Interim Chief Financial Officer), S Kits (Lead Corporate Communications Officer - People) and R Moreton (Corporate Communications Officer)

Officers Present (Virtually): J Leither (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 (COUNCIL MINUTE 39 - 23.7.02)

The Committee noted that there were no substitute members.

32. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

33. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Resolved:

That the notes of the meeting held 24 November 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

34. TERMS OF REFERENCE & WORK PROGRAMME

The Select Committee noted their terms of reference and work programme.

35. ONBOARDING / INDUCTION

J Budden, Service Manager People, Culture and Wellbeing, introduced the report on Onboarding and Inductions. The report provided the Committee with an update on developments to the Onboarding/Induction process.

A live system demonstration was given by Andrew Cartwright to the committee showing the various element that went into this onboarding process. It was noted that a candidate forms an impression of an organisation throughout the recruitment process, and one element that was often overlooked was the period between job offer and start date where the offered applicant was working their notice, which could be a number of weeks or months.

Pre-start date onboarding was an opportunity for the organisation to help settle a new employee into the organisation and ensure they had everything they needed before their start date. It also supported the new employee in understanding more about the organisation's culture and values, as well as some of the more practical aspects that might otherwise be overlooked.

Asked if could be extended to new councillors as it looked to be useful, officers responded that it could be done, and they did have plans for a member induction via this system.

The committee noted that it went on over the internet and were concerned that it lost that personal touch. How could this be avoided. And was this training job specific. They were told that line managers would do the induction and the job specific training, this would be supplemented by this virtual process. Also, as a welcoming introduction, a member of the Senior Leadership Team would meet new entrants and answer any questions they may have.

The committee asked if this virtual information was filtered for (the then) non-staff members who would be looking at it before they got the job. They were told that this was for when they had been interviewed but before they had accepted a contract.

Asked if everyone was DBS checked the committee were told that would depend on what role they had in the council. Not everyone would have it done.

The committee noted that 11% of employees did not know where to find information, what kind of information was this and how often did they ask for feedback. They were told that they had 'Power-hours' where staff are invited to ask questions and give feedback. There was a lot more enhancement they could do to this system and use this feedback to improve it.

Resolved:

That the committee noted the work being done to utilise the HR/Payroll system iTrent regarding our Onboarding/Induction Process.

36. LAUNCH OF THE NEW EMPLOYEE WELLBEING HUB

J Budden, Service Manager People, Culture and Wellbeing, introduced the report on the launch of the new Employee Wellbeing Hub. She provided the Committee with an update on developments to the Wellbeing Hub and resources.

S Kits took the committee through a short presentation on the wellbeing hub. EFDC took great pride in its ability to provide excellent wellbeing resources and support for all employees and had been on an ever-improving journey since COVID hit in 2020. Communicating to ensure all employees understood there were resources, support, and information available has remained a constant priority.

In the last two years in addition to a fantastic Employee Assistance Programme (Perkbox) which offered counselling sessions and support for all employees and their close family members, EFDC had focussed on developing a solid network of individuals within the organisation to help support colleagues.

In 2020 an intranet page was created which listed a host of wellbeing resources for employees including support for mental health, physical and financial wellbeing, and support for families – called the Wellbeing Hub.

In September 2020 the wellbeing provision was extended by introducing Perkbox Medical, giving employees access to GPs 24/7 online, via an app on your phone.

In November 2021 the council announced the expansion of the Perkbox platform to include wellness resources via the Perkbox Wellness Hub, a space dedicated to FREE content that covers all aspects of wellbeing including resources to help you get fit, overcome anxiety, sleep well and more.

EFDC had trained over 90 employees to become Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs), providing employees with an experienced first point of call for anyone with concerns about any aspect of their mental health or their loved ones.

The committee asked for further explanation on the MHFAs and if they were a confidential service. They were told that anything could be brought to them. They were there to offer emotional support and signpost employees in the right direction for further help. This was a confidential service unless there was a risk to individuals, then they would contact Ms Budden.

The committee asked about the people that did not engage, could they be identified and engaged. They were told that they offer a lot more than what they had just highlighted and also relied on line managers to help.

The committee wondered if, during the current financial circumstances, more use was being made of the advice on offer and with many employees now working from home, how easy was it to identify employees having problems; also, how often did we update the information we made available to the staff. They were told that officer did research all the time on the information they put out and liaised with the appropriate charities. As for engaging people working from home, they did have virtual coffee mornings and have also upskilled the managers to educate them in mental health. These services had been successfully used by staff members.

Councillor S Kane asked if we were playing catch up with other authorities in providing wellbeing services or were we ahead of the field in this respect. He was told that EFDC was ahead of the field in this respect; other councils came to us for

advice and were close to being able to put these services up for an award, especially for our digital offerings and staff having 24/7 access to what they need.

Councillor Lion asked if this had any impact on staff retention. He was told that it did lead to a better understanding of what the staff wanted.

Resolved:

That the Select Committee noted the refreshed Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) Employee Wellbeing Hub.

37. QUARTER 3 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2022/23

The Interim Chief Financial Officer, Chris Hartgrove introduced the quarter 3 budget monitoring report for 2022/23. This report set out the 2022/23 General Fund and Housing Revenue Account positions, for both revenue and capital, as at 31st December 2022 ("Quarter 3").

In terms of General Fund revenue expenditure – at the Quarter 3 stage – a budget overspend of £1.313 million, with projected net expenditure of £16.944 million against an overall budget provision of £15.631 million, was forecast.

As with Quarters 1 and 2, the Q3 position is dominated by a range of substantial spending pressures.

The Council's budget for 2022/23 (both General Fund and Housing Revenue Account) was approved by full Council on 24th February 2022. This report updated the Select Committee on how the Council's services had performed against their budgets in the first nine months of the financial year, and projects forward to the anticipated outturn for the end of the financial year.

This was the third update for 2022/23 and includes the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account positions, for both revenue and capital, as at 31st December 2022 ("Quarter 3").

The Committee noted the general fund reserve of £4million will reduce to £3 million, and asked that when things got better were there plans to put it back up to £4million. The Finance Portfolio Holder said there was a desire to get back to our minimum balance, but without impacting on our services.

Resolved:

1. The General Fund revenue position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2022) for 2022/23, including actions being undertaken or proposed to improve the position, where significant variances have been identified, be noted.

2. The General Fund capital position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2022) for 2022/23 be noted.

3. The Housing Revenue Account revenue position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2022) for 2022/23, including actions proposed to ameliorate the position, where significant variances have been identified, be noted; and

4. The Housing Revenue Account capital position at the end of Quarter 3 (31st December 2022) for 2022/23 be noted.

38. DRAFT BUDGET REPORT FOR 2023/24

The Finance Portfolio Holder, Councillor Philip introduced the draft budget report for 2023/24. He noted that this had gone to Cabinet in December, with a final report still to come. The full report included revenue and capital proposals for both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account as well as a schedule of suggested Fees and Charges for the forthcoming financial year. An updated Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) covering the financial years 2023/24 through to 2027/28 was also included, which reflected both the impact of the draft Budget proposals as well as the latest available intelligence at the time.

The Cabinet had been advised by the Section 151 Officer at the December meeting that – as required by law – a balanced revenue position (eliminating a previously identified projected deficit of £4.126 million) had provisionally been reached for 2023/24 and that the medium-term financial position, although having a similar profile, had some differences compared to the position presented on 10th October 2022 (and subsequently to this Committee on 24th November 2022), with a particular challenge still anticipated in 2024/25 and 2025/26 as a consequence of the forthcoming new Waste Management Contract. However, some significant uncertainties remained.

The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2023/24 was eventually released just before Christmas 2022; the outcome for Epping Forest District Council was generally as expected and provided further assurance as to the underlying financial sustainability of the draft Budget proposals as currently presented.

The Committee noted the savings from vacant posts and the avoidance of redundancy costs, but it may also result in having no staff in roles that were hard to fill. Would we fill these internally or keep them vacant indefinitely. Councillor Philip noted that all savings were appropriate to the area where they came from, and they had been considered by the appropriate cabinet member. They were looking at essential posts that could be cut without affecting services.

The committee asked if the council was overstaffed before this. Councillor Philip there may have been some posts in the establishment that, if we had the same financial pressure as we do now, maybe should not have been there. But, we did not have this financial pressure at the time. As shown here overstaffing might have been in establishment but maybe not in terms in people in seats.

The committee then asked if they were planning to move forward on a more for less basis. Councillor Philip said that was a strange way to phrase it, people were generally working as hard and as smart as they could, but there were always efficiencies that we could put in place. We need to make sure that what we do in the future was better than what we did this time. We can always find things that we could do better and we must keep doing this year on year.

The committee wanted to know how many less staff were we looking at next year. They were told that it was a relatively small number, the age profile of the council was at a higher level and people would retire. They would like to avoid all redundancies, but suspected that they could not. We would be looking for voluntary redundancies but that may not be the case. Currently there were 18 roles involved in

the overall budget package, with up to 48 staff involved in the consultation exercise. The loss of staff will be much smaller than that and mostly voluntary.

The committee asked about the Master Planning budget which was a big saving and would like to understand a bit more about this £101k saving represented in practice. The council was also looking to the volunteer sector to pick up some slack, but we had cut that budget as well. And to what extent did we look at opportunities for income generation in the community programmes instead of just shutting them down. They were told that the Master Planning was complete at present but officer would have to detail the reasons. As for the community programmes it was clear it was not just about reductions in spending but also about revenue generation. As for grants we needed to decide if we would continue with them or lose a member of staff. It was not ideal, but it was where we were. It was also about driving better value from these organisations.

Asked if we were sharing services with other local authorities and if there were any examples the committee was told that there was nothing in this particular year that was deliverable. However, we do work with other organisations, and we were still looking for anything that could help us.

The committee wanted to know why there was a saving of £23,500 on planned maintenance, if this was planned, why do this; or did everything just move on to the next year. Councillor Holly Whitbread answered that some things would be postponed but the priority work would be done. There should be no big delays. We will do things when they need to be done and not just work to a schedule. We also had regular contact with our residents and carried out regular consultation exercises.

Resolved:

The Committee considered the Cabinet's draft Budget proposals for 2023/24 as set out and made such comments and/or recommendations as the Committee felt appropriate to assist the Cabinet in further considering the Budget on 6th February 2023.

39. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted their future meeting dates.