

## **EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES**

**Committee:** Stronger Council Select Committee      **Date:** Tuesday, 18 April 2023

**Place:** Council Chamber - Civic Offices      **Time:** 7.00 - 7.43 pm

**Members Present:** Councillors J McIvor (Chairman), R Bassett, R Brookes, S Heather, H Kane, R Morgan and J M Whitehouse

**Members Present (Virtually):** Councillors

**Other Councillors:** Councillors S Kane

**Other Councillors (Virtual):** Councillors A Lion

**Apologies:** S Patel, I Hadley and J Jogia

**Officers Present:** A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer), A Buckley (Higher Level Apprentice (Internal Communications)), J Budden (People, Culture & Employee Wellbeing Manager), S Kits (Lead Corporate Communications Officer - People) and P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services))

**Officers Present (Virtually):** R Perrin (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer)

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### **40. 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.

### **41. Substitute Members (Council Minute 39 - 23.7.02)**

The Committee noted that Councillor H Kane would substitute for Councillor I Hadley for the duration of this meeting.

### **42. Declarations of Interest**

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

### **43. Notes of Previous Meeting**

**Resolved:**

That the notes of the meeting held 24 January 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

#### 44. Terms of Reference & Work Programme

For the last time, the Select Committee noted their terms of reference and work programme.

The Committee wanted item 10 of their work programme “*Review of Officers appearing via Zoom at various meetings – especially Planning meetings*” (noting now that this would be on Teams and not Zoom), to be carried on and considered by another appropriate Scrutiny Committee in the new municipal year as it was considered an important item to be scrutinised.

#### 45. Launch of the new People Strategy 2023-2027

J Budden (Service Manager- People, Culture and Wellbeing) introduced the Peoples Strategy report. She noted that this People Strategy had been updated to reflect the revised Corporate Plan and aligns with the corporate objectives which take effect in April 2023.

The 2023-27 People Strategy focused on three main pillars:

- Maximising organisational capacity and capability
- Effective and inspirational leadership, values, and culture
- Enhancing employee experience and engagement.

The three pillars would include attracting and retaining talent by leveraging digital recruitment methods and establishing a strong employer brand and to retain the exceptional workforce, the Council would provide competitive employee benefits, flexible and hybrid working arrangements, and clear career progression pathways.

The Council would also support employees through the comprehensive workforce plan, by offering internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs, and by facilitating ongoing skill development and knowledge sharing.

The Council would prioritise our teams’ skill development, values, and behaviours by setting clear expectations and encouraging managers and leaders to provide consistent feedback. And, by fostering visionary leadership and culture, it will propel this local authority toward a sustainable future embracing new ideas and innovation.

The Council would focus on building an inclusive environment that fosters diversity and embraces the unique strengths and perspectives that each employee brings to the table. The local authority will establish diversity and inclusion initiatives to promote awareness, understanding, and acceptance of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and experiences.

By integrating these themes and actions into everyone’s responsibilities, we will all contribute to a stronger, more innovative, and sustainable Council for all.

The meeting was then shown a video encompassing the above precepts.

Asked how this strategy would be evaluated and scrutinised, J Budden said that this was a top-level strategy underpinned by an aspirational service plan with its own

objectives and projects. The strategy would change as the organisation changed, and this would be reviewed every quarter.

Members noted that the strategy did not discuss the Councillors. They had all the same problems and were put under a lot of stress. They were asked questions by the public but had great difficulty in relating this to officers. When officers had not come back with adequate answers it was difficult to know how to escalate this, other than by going to the Portfolio Holder or the Chief Executive. Also, new members would not know who to ask. This strategy should be expanded to cover the relationship between members and staff and how we get members trained in understanding the links between officers and members. Members were told that the People's Team were responsible for the staff but could work with member services. They can look at the member/officer protocol and revised it. They would take back the comments to customer services about who to speak to and how to escalate a query. There was also a mentorship programme between members and employees which was included in the strategy.

Members expressed their concerns about the staff, who had gone through restructure after restructure, and then some were made redundant. A lot of the staff were disenchanted. Exit interviews could be helpful as we have lost a lot of experienced staff some of whom said they were not welcome anymore. The Committee were told that exit interviews were carried out, and everyone was offered one when they leave.

Asked how many people took up this offer they were told that it varied and there were plans to improve this. Members thought that the council still had a long way to go as they were told that next year was going to be even harder as their experience was that the council was short on people, especially for tackling housing and Anti-Social Behaviour problems. This was also affecting the work life balance as there was so much to do and not enough people to do it.

The Internal Resources Portfolio Holder replied that one of the reasons they had drawn up this strategy was in recognition of some of the problems that members had been highlighting. We have had some difficult years with Covid, and our methods of working had changed dramatically in the last few years also the building that we work in has changed significantly. This strategy was in recognition of some of those problems and an effort to put them right.

Members noted that it was good to see the emphasis on skills as we need to grow our own and see them come up through the organisation. They hoped that the aspirations in the strategy was backed up by good action plans. It was not enough just to say the right things, what mattered was how people behaved, especially managers and senior managers, and the examples they set. What did not seem to come out in this document was what made the council different from other organisations. We were a democratic organisation accountable to our residents who we served and worked for. We needed to see them in this light and not as something that was in the way of doing the job. The report mentions their passion to revolutionise local government – can this be expanded on a bit more? They were told it was about improving and making the council people centric so they were at the heart of everything we did.

Members asked if we ever asked former employees to help out on a consultancy basis. They were told that not every service area would need this, but we do offer benefits such as flexible retirement and employ casual contracts, but there was always more work that could be done on this.

Members wanted to know if staff could feedback to HR if they were unhappy on work issues. They were told that there were various mechanisms by which they could do this, such as a survey, action plans or they could talk to their line manager or HR.

Members noted that the local parish and town councils feel that there has been a change and that they cannot easily contact officers anymore. They were told that they should feed this back through the Local Councils Liaison Committee.

Asked if there was any guidance given on how teams should meet up (such as once a week), now that a lot of them worked remotely. Big companies now want people to come into work as a team on a regular basis. They were told that flexible working was one of the biggest attractions for working for the council, but they also encouraged people to come together on a regular basis.

Asked to elaborate on what they meant in the report that said “and delivers exceptional services to our communities” and how this could be measured. They were told that it could be measured by feedback from our customers about our employees and their interaction with them. If this was positive this would show that we were doing things well.

The Chairman summed up by saying that the Committee welcomed the report as a good start and wished to see it progressed and how it would be reviewed. Also, they would like to see how it interacted and engaged with the elected members and enabled members and officers to work better together.

As this was the last meeting of this Select Committee the chairman thanked all participating members and officers over the years for their hard work and engagement with the processes of this committee.