

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT LOCAL COUNCILS' LIAISON COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 5 July 2012 **Time:** 7.30 - 8.47 pm

Place: Council Chamber, Civic
Offices, High Street, Epping

**Members
Present:**

Representing Epping Forest District Council:

Councillor(s): B Rolfe (Chairman) and Mrs P Smith

Other Councillors:

Councillor(s): R Bassett and C Whitbread

Representing Essex County Council:

County Councillor(s): G McEwen, V Metcalfe, C Pond and
Mrs J H Whitehouse

Representing Local Councils:

G Chambers (Buckhurst Hill West), Mrs K Canning (Chigwell Parish Council), R Alvin, A Tadjrishi (Epping Town Council), J M Whitehouse (Epping Hemnall), Mrs V Evans (Epping Upland Parish Council), Cllr S Weston (Loughton TC), Mrs E K Walsh (Loughton Town Council), Councillor Mrs J Bowerman (Matching Parish Council), R Morgan (Hastingwood, Matching & Sheering Village), Mrs L Peters (Moreton Bobbingworth & the Lavers), A Busch (Moreton Bobbingworth & the Lavers), Mrs S De Luca (North Weald Parish Council), Mrs S Jackman (Ongar Town Council), A Middlehurst (Ongar Town Council), R Northwood (Sheering Parish Council), Councillor J Harrington (Sheering Parish Council) and R E Russell (Stapleford Abbots Parish Council)

Apologies: Epping Forest District Council –

Councillor(s): K Angold-Stephens, B Sandler and Mrs M Sartin

Essex County Council –

Councillor(s): Mrs E Webster

Parish/Town Councils: -

N Moore (Buckhurst Hill Parish Council), Councillor B Miller (Epping Upland Parish Council), R Balcombe, Councillor Mrs N Bridge (Fyfield Parish Council), Mrs D Borton (Nazeing Parish Council), Councillor C Hawkins (North Weald Bassett Parish Council), B Surtees (Ongar Town Council), Mrs J Ballard (Roydon Parish Council), Miss H Nicholas (Roydon Parish Council) and Mrs K Richmond (Waltham Abbey Town Council)

Officers Present: I Willett (Assistant to the Chief Executive), R Palmer (Director of Finance and ICT), B Moldon (Principal Accountant), K Polyzoides (Assistant Director (Policy & Conservation)), A Hendry (Democratic Services Officer) and G J Woodhall (Democratic Services Officer)

By Invitation:

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE CHAIRMAN

The Assistant to the Chief Executive requested that the appointment of the new District Council Chairman be confirmed as the Chairman of the Committee for the municipal year. The appointment of a Vice-Chairman from amongst the Local Council representatives was also requested; Councillor S Jackman was nominated and seconded.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That Councillor B Rolfe be confirmed as the Chairman of the Local Councils Liaison Committee for 2012/13; and
- (2) That Councillor S Jackman be appointed as the Vice-Chairman of the Local Councils Liaison Committee for 2012/13.

2. WEBCASTING INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Services Officer 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.

3. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 22 March 2012 be agreed.

4. ISSUES RAISED BY LOCAL COUNCILS

The items raised by the Local Councils were: Local Planning (Neighbourhood Plans) and the DCLG Consultation on Localising support for Council Tax. Both these topics were listed further on in the agenda and the Committee were content to take them in turn as they came to them.

5. NEW STANDARDS REGIME

The Assistant to the Chief Executive updated the meeting on the new standard arrangements which were now in force. So far seven Parish and Town Councils have opted to join in with a Joint Standards Committee; four Parish and Town Councils are coming in with EFDC's arrangements; and two Parish/Town Councils are opting not to set up any committee arrangements.

So far eleven Parish/Town Councils are signing up to the Public Law Partnership (PLP) code of practice and one to the National Association of Local Council's (NALC) code and one was opting to write their own code. As for putting in complaints procedures,

eleven were adopting the PLP arrangements, and two were going to put in their own system as and when they get a complaint.

The schemes would be fine tuned at District level who will also put in a support system. A number of open surgeries for advice had been organised by Ian Willett. One will be held on 13 July between 10 and 12pm; the next one will be held on 16 July between 6 and 7pm and lastly on 18 July again between 6 and 7pm. He will of course, respond to individual calls and emails answering any questions and there will also be a further training course on interests held on 17 September at 7.30pm.

Councillor Sheila Jackman wanted to express her and the Liaison Committee's thanks Ian Willett and Colleen O'Boyle for all their hard work, advice and support over the this process, it was much appreciated.

The item was then opened to questions from the floor.

Q: Given that this was a three tier meeting, if someone wanted to declare an interest, which code should they use?

A: They should use the code of their own authority. There was a need to standardise things over time and this should be reviewed again in twelve months.

Q: What if my wife refused to respond to my request for her pecuniary interests for my declaration.

A: If you genuinely do not know then you can't declare it, but you must declare it if known.

6. LOCALISING SUPPORT FOR COUNCIL TAX

The Principal Accountant, Brian Moldon introduced the report noting the changes to the Council tax system. The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) published a consultation document on proposals for the localisation of Council Tax support for England setting out how the Government intended to implement the Spending Review commitment to localise support for council tax from 2013/14, reducing expenditure by 10%.

Local authorities are reimbursed currently at a rate of 100% for correctly awarded council tax benefit through submitting audited subsidy claims to the Department for Work and Pensions. Under the new scheme the Government will make funding available to Councils based on 90% of the forecast council tax benefit expenditure for 2013-14. The other 10% will need to be found from savings. Pensioners are excluded from this process.

The Council is currently working with other districts within Essex and major precepting authorities to design a scheme that gives the 10% savings. Following the completion of this exercise and a draft scheme being developed, consultation on the scheme will be undertaken with interested parties and it is proposed that the final scheme will go to Cabinet on 22 October and then onto Council on 18 December.

Mr Moldon also gave a sample calculation on what this new arrangement would mean for a parish / town council.

The meeting noted that it was currently not possible to detail the effect for each Parish / Town Council on their tax base until the scheme has been agreed. Also it was not possible to confirm what grant would be allocated to each parish until final figures are made available as part of Local Government Finance Settlement in December.

The meeting was then opened out to questions.

Q: Because the 40% discount for single occupancy was being ring fenced and because benefits for people of state pensionable age was being ring fenced, this would impact harshly on people of working age and low incomes. Some parishes would be markedly more affected than others and the effect on the district would be different.

A: Yes you are right, although I must point out that the changes to the tax base is 25%. But you are right in thinking it would have an impact on the areas you mentioned. However, we would not know what until we get the final information from central government in October or November. The number of claimants in each Town or Parish council area needed to be ascertained and the appropriate software incorporated into our computer system. This should be arriving at the end of this month or early next month. Officers were looking towards the end of the calendar year to have it all in place and running.

Q: How would you address the aspect of privacy for the smaller parishes and houses that are in part year occupancy?

A: The figures were taken as a snapshot, historically set at 1st October. Now Council Tax will fluctuate on a day to day basis depending on who claims benefits (or not). As for small parishes, it would not be possible to identify individuals.

Q: Would this scheme be local to Epping Forest or to Essex as a whole?

A: Every billing authority had to set their own scheme, however, there was good co-operation throughout Essex and we will be holding to the same style; although a part of the problem to this was the different demographic makeup of Essex.

Q: This seems to be a complex procedure, would some sort of training be offered to Town and Parish Councils?

A: That was partly the reason for this report and when we have more information we will as always share it with you. Also if you have a specific problem you can always call us.

The other Town and Parish Clerks agreed that they needed more than just the report offered here; they would need additional detailed help at District level to enable them to put their budgets together.

Q: The effect of this would be that Town and Parish's would not be able to set their precepts until later in the year, maybe mid to late January. Also all precepting authorities including Police, Fire and the County Council may have to have a greater increase in tax than they may wish. The report assumed a 96% collection rate, but this may not be paid as it may prove not to be affordable. A lot of people of working age are hard pressed already and this may prove to be the last straw. Is 96% a realistic figure?

A: 96% was just an indicative figure used in the calculations in this report. An overall collection rate would be calculated that would allow for low rates of collection in benefit cases and higher rates on other cases. There may have to be a greater provision made for non-payment. Our current load is just under 9000 for Council Tax benefit and a little over half are working age claimants so that would be around 4,500 people who would be effected by this.

Q: Would the established collection rate for each Town and Parish be available at the October Cabinet meeting?

A: That would be unlikely, but it would be available at the Council meeting in December.

Q: What information will go out with the Council Tax notices by way of explanation?

A: This has not been decided as yet as it would form part of the consultation process. But, we will write to people to make them aware of the coming changes.

Q: Do we have to pass this on to the rate payer, could we not find some other way to save money?

A: The Government required us to reduce the amount of Council Tax Benefit we pay to people. So in reducing the Council Tax Benefit people receive leaves them with a bill to pay. That's the National Policy we have been forced to implement.

Q: Was this transitional and if so how long would it last?

A: We are looking for it to be fixed for 3 to 5 years and then to look at it again.

RESOLVED:

That the changes to the system of support for Council Tax payments be noted.

7. LOCAL PLAN

The Committee received a report from the Assistant Director Policy and Conservation (Planning), K Polyzoides regarding the progress of the Council's Local Plan. The meeting noted that the 'Community Choices – Issues and Options' paper was due to be published for public consultation. Community Choices covered a wide range of issues including options for potential growth targets, possible distribution patterns and locations for growth. It also identified a number of policy issues which needed to be addressed, including Green Belt, historic and natural character, transport, economic development and the Community Infrastructure Levy. It was noted that this had recently been through the Local Plan Cabinet Committee and had been approved to go out for consultation

The proposed consultation period was from 30 July to 21 September 2012. The existing Local Plan could be used until March 2013. The consultation was to make sure that the council had identified all areas of the plan.

The draft document proposed for consultation is split into a number of chapters which set out the key issues and potential options for the district up to 2033.

Chapter 3 concerned the Green Belt and the character of the district. The continued protection of the Green Belt was the priority for residents of the district, and therefore this issue was addressed at the outset and the potential options for growth later in the document were included with this in mind. It was clear that amendments to the Green Belt boundary would be needed in the period to 2033 to accommodate the growth needs of the district. No significant changes to the Green Belt boundaries in the district had been made since they were first established, and no housing or employment land allocations had been made since the last full Local Plan was adopted in 1998.

Chapter 4 presents the reasonable options for the levels of growth that could be included in the Local Plan, and the potential strategies for distribution of this growth. In the longer term the East of England Plan (EEP) was due to be abolished, but this had not yet happened and no timetable had been published by CLG for this.

Key decisions that must be taken early in the preparation of the Local Plan are whether (i) growth on the periphery of Harlow should be supported, and (ii) land should be allocated for development on the boundaries of Harlow but within Epping Forest District.

Officers were aware that the consultation period (30 July to 21 September) covered the holiday period, which was not ideal; however, they had extended the period from 6 weeks to 8 weeks. They also offered the choice to reply online as well as by hard copy.

A briefing pack had been issued in mid-June to all Town and Parish Councils and officers also hope to hold workshops in September.

The Planning Portfolio Holder, Councillor R Bassett, added that the issues and options document was also available on the council's website. Other documents would also be published on the site. This consultation was just to put together information so that we would have options to discuss. It was for the Town and Parish Councils to look at what they wanted for their area and give us evidence and a realistic view on what should (or should not) be there.

Q: What would 6,000 or even 500 new properties look like, would there be a visualisation aid available for this? Also as this was a consultation it must be made clear that this was providing future options for our district.

A: The standards worked to was for 13.5 premises per hectare. Smaller houses would enable more per hectare, flats even more. We need to know what type of premises we need to provide before we can work out the land area needed. One of the sections in the document covers densities including images of low and high density buildings. In some areas higher density building may be more feasible.

Q: Would Transport for London be involved in this consultation?

A: Yes.

AGREED: The Committee requested that formal guidance should be issues to the Town and Parish Councils in regard to Neighbourhood Plans.

The Assistant Director Policy and Conservation (Planning) agreed to supply this to the local councils along with any other relevant information available and a list of relevant websites from which to gather further information.

Ms Polyzoides added that planning had been sending out information since last year including Rural Community Council of Essex guidance as this was a good guide breaking down the process into manageable chunks.

AGREED: Not all members of the Committee had received these documents and it was agreed that they would be reissued.

Q: How could local Town and Parish Neighbourhood Plans be fitted into this.

A: Neighbourhood Plans do not need to be put into the Local Plan. Anything brought out in Neighbourhood Plans would be retrospectively added to the Local Plan. Also, the more detail added in the Local Plan the less need for a very detailed Neighbourhood Plan.

Neighbourhood Plans could be sent in as part of the consultation where it would be taken into consideration.

Councillor Bassett warned the meeting that they should be aware that a Neighbourhood Plan had a big cost attached to it as it had to go through the same processes as a Local Plan and could cost up to £100k. Local Councils needed to be aware of this and needed a realistic, evidence based case.

A member from Loughton Town Council said that in reference to the 'Call for Sites', Loughton had put forward an area in 'class D' but it had not appeared in any plans

issued so far. In response Ms Polyzoides said she would look into this and get back to them.

RESOLVED:

1. That the "Community Choices – Issues & Options" document due to be published for public consultation be noted;
2. That the Sustainability Appraisal of the Issues & Options document prepared by Scott Wilson/URS due to be published for public consultation be noted; and
3. That the consultation period would run for 8 weeks from Monday 30 July to Friday 21 September 2012 be noted.

8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business for the committee to consider.

9. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the committee will take place on Thursday 8 November 2012 at 7:30 p.m. and then on Thursday 7 March 2013 at 7:30 p.m.

CHAIRMAN