

EPPING FOREST LOCAL COUNCILS' LIAISON COMMITTEE

NOTICE OF MEETING

Place: Council Chamber, Civic Offices,
High Street, Epping **Date:** Thursday, 8th November, 2012

Room: Council Chamber **Time:** 7.30 pm

Democratic Services Officer: Mark Jenkins (The Office of the Chief Executive)
Tel: 01992 564607 Email: democraticservices@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Members:

District Council Representatives:

Councillors B Rolfe (Chairman), K Angold-Stephens, B Sandler, Mrs M Sartin and Mrs P Smith

Local Council Representatives:

Clerks and Chairmen/Members of Parish and Town Councils

County Council Representatives:

Members for the following divisions:

North Weald and Nazeing:	Councillor A Jackson
Loughton Central:	Councillor C Pond
Ongar and Rural:	Councillor G McEwen
Epping and Theydon Bois:	Councillor Mrs J Whitehouse
Buckhurst Hill and Loughton South:	Councillor V Metcalfe
Chigwell and Loughton Broadway:	Councillor J Knapman
Waltham Abbey:	Councillor Mrs E Webster

**PLEASE NOTE THE START DATE OF THE MEETING
COFFEE/TEA WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE FROM 7.00
P.M IN THE MEMBERS ROOM**

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2. MINUTES (Pages 3 - 10)

To confirm the minutes of the last meeting of the Committee held on 5 July 2012 (previously circulated) and matters arising.

3. ISSUES RAISED BY LOCAL COUNCILS (Pages 11 - 24)

To discuss the following matters raised by Local Council's:

- (1) Standards Committee

To receive a verbal report from the Assistant to the Chief Executive.

- (2) Local Highways Panel

County Councillor G McEwen, Chairman of the Local Highways Panel, will be present at the meeting to answer queries regarding the membership of the Panel.

- (3) Local Plan

To receive a verbal update regarding the current situation for the Local Plan.

- (4) iPlan Update

To receive a report regarding the iPlan.

4. POST OFFICE

Mr Gary A Herbert, Senior External Stakeholder Manager – East Network Services and Transformation, Post Office Ltd, recently attended the District Council's Management Board on 3 October 2012, to give a presentation regarding the Post Office's plans for modernization and service provision. Management Board requested that Mr Herbert be invited to attend the Local Council's Liaison Committee and give his presentation there. Officers extended an invite to Mr Herbert, however he is unable to attend but will try and attend the committee in March 2013.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the Committee is scheduled for 7 March 2013.

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

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Report to Local Council Liaison Committee



Date of meeting: 8 November 2012

Subject: Parish Council Liaison regarding the iPlan

Officer contact for further information: Peter Millward (4338)

Committee Secretary: M Jenkins (4607)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To provide a progress report to the Local Council Liaison Committee following on from the last report on 3rd November 2011. The following issues were identified as key areas of importance by the i-Plan Liaison Group regarding the use of i-Plan and electronic planning records.

1. That the use of i-Plan constitutes an important element of planning meetings held by Parish Councils along with access to planning information in the wider context by Parish Council residents. A major concern of the Liaison Group centres on improving access to i-Plan as well as the quality of plans and documents displayed online.
2. That there are still a number of significant limitations in the use of i-Plan along with associated electronic planning documentation by Parish Councils. It was agreed generally that the way forward is to continue to provide paper copies of planning documentation to Parish Councils and at the same time encourage the use of electronic planning records to complement and improve the Parish Council planning committee process.
3. That the suggestion of targeting the more well resourced Parish Councils to move towards an element of holding planning meetings using electronic planning records and complementing this with existing paper records has merit. In addition as part of this process steps should also be taken by the EFDC to identify those less well resourced Parish Councils that may need support in the future in utilising electronic planning records.

4. Joint Working i-Plan User Group.

4.1 It was agreed that the nominated members for the Parish/Town Councils would seek to renew their mandate to represent Epping Forest District Parish/Town Councils.

4.2 The nominated representatives are;

Richard Witham – Lambourne Parish Council,
Brian Surtees and/or Eileen Gough – Ongar Town Council
Joan Bowerman – Matching Parish Council
Chris Pond – Loughton Town Council
Adriana Jones – North Weald Parish Council.

4.3 Two meetings have been held, one on the 14th November 2011 and a further meeting on 26th September 2012 with the Business Manager Planning and Economic Development, assisted by a group of officers from Planning and Economic Development. This also included a representative from Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) ICT.

5. i-Plan User Group Meeting 14th November 2011

At the meetings on the 14th November 2011 the following issues were raised and discussed;

- 5.1 Stephen Bacon, Senior Systems Support Officer, EFDC carried out a presentation on the proposed new EFDC website and i-Plan. Part of this presentation acknowledged that the current website was outdated and not as good as it could be. Stephen Bacon went on to explain that the funding for the Consultation Hub that would have been an integral part of the system had been withdrawn by the Government and as a result ICT had been looking at ways to improve the website. This included responding to feedback on the current website by implementing changes such as, improving searches by address as well as the facility to enable online comments regarding planning applications. In addition it proposed to update the EFDC Website and remove irrelevant content by April 2012. It was also proposed that the Council will be working to install an in house online mapping program to replace Pinpoint mapping, which has had consistent data problems. The benefit is that as this will be an in-house program with the Council being able to fix it internally as well as making it more interactive for public use.
- 5.2 There was a discussion regarding the use of i-Plan with issues raised such as searching for planning applications with no results and quality of scanned information. The Loughton Town Council representative said that they had tried using only scanned images for 2 months, but experienced a number of difficulties such as legibility and scaling problems. As a result frequent reference was required to be made to paper copies. The Business Manager responded and advised that steps had been taken to improve the quality of images as a result of feedback and Planning Officers may decline to validate an application if the plans are not legible or of poor quality.
- 5.3 The North Weald Parish Council representative supported the scanning processes at Planning and said that during the time she worked with the scanning team, scanned images were good on Information@Work but that the quality seemed to be reduced when it appeared on the website. The Business Manager noted that the planning software is based on Adobe PDF images, and that Microsoft Office is not compatible with this. Stephen Bacon advised that ICT had been looking at practical solutions which included phasing out Adobe 10 and looking at alternative solutions. In addition the new version of the website will be tested on Safari, Google Chrome and other internet search applications to see which is best. The Loughton representative pointed out that they use Google Chrome and that it cannot retrieve the web-casts. Stephen Bacon responded that ICT will investigate this. The Lambourne representative noted that if text was zoomed in on scanned plans it was often badly pixellated. The Business Manager said that Planning were making efforts to improve the image quality of documents but that resource issues had made this hard to progress. Stephen Bacon added that more storage capacity had been added to Planning's systems which may well result in an improvement in the quality of documents.
- 5.4 The Loughton representative mentioned that it was annoying to search on older applications and get no results. The Business Manager responded and advised that in many cases historical records were held on microfiche records and these had not yet been electronically converted for viewing on the EFDC Website. The high cost for capturing these records had originally made scanning the microfiche unthinkable, however recent changes in technology had now made this possible but this would need to be planned over a multiple year period subject to resource availability.
- 5.5 Stephen Bacon also gave some indications as to the future issues that they wished to resolve regarding the website to deliver an improved and enhanced service. ICT would be looking at developing the search capability of the website where a wild card (%) would not need to be included along with looking at the feasibility of users being able to download all information with a single click. The Ongar representative indicated that it was difficult to find a document that was needed as many of them had the same title. The Business Manager said it was something that had already been raised with all staff in the Planning Support Team looking at ways to see if improvements could be made regarding this particular issue.

6. i-Plan User Group Meeting 26th September 2012

At an i-Plan User Group Meeting on 26th September 2012, the following issues were discussed.

- 6.1 The Business Manager advised that plans were in motion to provide District Councillors with 'read-only' access to the EFDC document imaging system Information@Work, which will provide them with limited access to planning information not currently published on the website. The second phase would be to roll this out for Parish Councillors to gain access to objection letters and associated planning information.
- 6.2 Stephen Bacon reported that colleagues in Environmental Services are currently developing an open-source mapping system for the EFDC website which would replace the old inaccurate 'Pinpoint' mapping system. In response to the issue raised about the EFDC watermark obscuring text by the Ongar Town Council representative, Stephen Bacon responded that ICT would investigate whether the watermark could be made more transparent to resolve this. The Lambourne Parish Council representative indicated that it was frustrating that in the search results on the Planning Explorer you still had to look through every document line by line, and that you couldn't download all the documents at once. Stephen Bacon advised that ICT would investigate what could be done to make this process easier.
- 6.3 The Loughton Town Council representative noted that there was a recent application where an important element for a decision relied on a linked application from 30 years ago. However, the Clerk was unable to find it using the 'search parish' parameter as it had been incorrectly assigned to another parish. Theresa Parker, Senior Technical Officer in Planning stated that this could be an ongoing problem from Plantech, the previous system used by the Council that was transferred to the current Northgate system. Questions were also raised about the progress regarding microfiche information for the website. The Business Manager reported that quotations were being obtained to get them scanned and indexed, with the oldest records to be prioritised as the first to be converted to PDF documents which are the pre 1974 fiches of approximately 21 000 Microfiche Jackets containing between 30 and 50 images each.
- 6.4 Nigel Richardson, Assistant Director Development Control reported that anomalies in information supplied by applicants on submitted plans had been raised at the recent Chair/Vice Chair meeting. These issues are due to be raised at the next Agents forum. He was currently awaiting information from the Government about standardisation of plans, which had indicated that there was too much delay at the validation stage, and will pass on that advice at the next meeting.
- 6.5 The Loughton Town Council representative raised the issue of sharing resources needed to display images for meetings between the Parish Councils at the last EALC meeting. However, objections were raised from some of the rural parishes who met mainly in hired halls and found that there was no facility for accessing the web. The Business Manager suggested that perhaps if the bigger Town and Parish Councils were encouraged to move towards using electronic records as major component of their planning meetings, then it would be easier to identify what resources would be required to assist the smaller Parish Councils to eventually do the same. The Loughton Town Council representative indicated that there was a real difficulty regarding the legibility of scanned plans. The Business Manager agreed that there was a need to raise standards at Validation stage to encourage greater quality of plans and documents to be submitted. It was agreed that the Business Manager would meet with ICT to discuss ways to improve the quality and legibility of images on i-Plan.

- 6.6 The Loughton Town Council representative asked whether adjacent area consultations were being scanned. Andrew Rich, Trainee Technical Officer (ICT) Planning, noted that they were scanned onto the back-office system, but not published to the web. The Business Manager said this information should be available on the read-only access to the back-office system previously discussed. Chris Redman Management Assistant in Planning advised that the recent application for Fieldes Lock had been placed on the website as a news item, with the links to the adjacent authority's website.
- 6.7 Stephen Bacon stated that since the new website went live, there had been 99.95% uptime with very little downtime experienced. In addition the benefits of designing and producing the website in-house had made a saving of £18,000 per year and saved £50,000 in Capital Procurement Costs. The next step would be to look at hosting the site externally for extra security. The Loughton Town Council representative noted that information about the Parish Councils was not yet included on the website and Stephen Bacon said that this would be updated in the future as so much of the previous information was out of date.
- 6.8 The Business Manager said that there not been many recent visits by Parish/Town Councillors and Parish Clerks to Planning and he was keen for these visits to continue. The Loughton representative noted that they had 4 new Town Councillors for Loughton, and would try to arrange a visit. Stephen Bacon also mentioned that if extra training support was needed he could see if he could put together a training package in the Council's IT room if there was enough demand.

7. Reason for this report

To report the progress made and provide feedback in terms of the setting up of the iPlan User Group as requested by the Local Council Liaison Committee on 9th March 2011.

Consultation undertaken: N/A

Resource implications: N/A

Personnel: N/A

Background papers:

i-Plan Users Group Meeting Minutes 14 November 2011

i-Plan User Group minutes - 26 Sept 2012

iPlan Users Group Meeting held on the 14 November 2011
in Committee Room 2

- Chair:** Peter Millward (PM) – Epping Forest District Council
- Attendees:** Nigel Richardson (NR) – Epping Forest District Council
Stephen Bacon (SB) – Epping Forest District Council
Theresa Parker (TP) – Epping Forest District Council
Mavis Bird (MB) – Epping Forest District Council
Ann Wood (AW) – Epping Forest District Council
Andrew Rich (AR) – Epping Forest District Council
Richard Witham (RW) – Lambourne Parish Council
Brian Surtees (BS) – Ongar Town Council
Adriana Jones (AJ) – North Weald Parish Council
Marie Hatch (MH)– Ongar Town Council
Chris Pond (CP) – Loughton Town Council
Chris Redman (CR) Minutes – Epping Forest District Council

PM welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Action/s

1. Apologies:

- Joan Bowerman (JB) – Matching Parish Council

2. Report by Stephen Bacon on the new EFDC Website and iPlan

PM introduced Stephen Bacon (Senior Systems Support Officer, EFDC), who gave a presentation to the group on the EFDC website and iPlan. SB began with an apology that the current system was rather outdated and not as good as it could be. He explained that the funding for the Consultation Hub that would have been an integral part of the system had been withdrawn by the Government, and so ICT had been looking over the last year at how to make more of the website. They had studied feedback on the current website, and look at how issues could be improved. This would include:

- How to improve a search by address. The new website will include a street finder – a ‘drop down’ list of street names in the EFDC area that would always be consistent, and all the user would have to do is input the property number. This would hopefully eliminate grammatical errors such as apostrophes in the wrong place and misspelt street names that would not yield good results. There will also be a facility for a free-text search. This will be the first option on the site showing that this is the most effective way to search.
- Improved facilities for online comments to applications. At present the

system for inputting online comments is rather long-winded and unwieldy and requires a lot of effort on the part of the user. The new system would include an 'add comments' button – when a letter is sent notifying consultees of a new planning application, a unique reference number will be generated and printed on the letter. This reference number can then be inserted into the 'add comments' and all personal details will automatically be added to the system rather than the user having to type them all in. These numbers can also be generated for the Planning Weekly List for the Parish Councils to insert. BS commented that this could make more work for the Parish Councils, as at the moment they just email their comments – SB said that we can accommodate both systems, and it was up to the user to see which was the better option for them. This should also stop the system timing-out on searches - SB added that we are just waiting for Northgate to implement the changes. BS asked if there could be a screen showing that the system has timed out – SB said that that they would push Northgate for this and that we could suggest changes, but ultimately Northgate were in charge.

SB

- A complete update of the website to be rid of irrelevant content by April next year. An open-source format will hopefully be adopted which should prove to be a cheaper option – this will be going to Finance and Performance Management tomorrow to be discussed. It should also prove to be user friendly and the aim is for a minimum of 3 'clicks' to get to where you want to on the website. It will be based around living, visiting and doing business, and could also include Parish Council sites too.
- Use of our own online mapping program to replace Pinpoint mapping, which has had consistent data problems. As it will be an in-house program we will be able to fix it ourselves should anything happen, and we can also make it more interactive for public use. The Planning Directorate will also have greater control over the Planning pages – news can be updated daily, text size, text to speech, colour etc should be easy to change to help users. Photographs of different Parishes could be uploaded, and projects like 50 Favourite Trees could be hosted here rather than externally. You should also be able to get to the Planning back in 1 click, rather than the current 4 clicks
- A single search box for the application number if it is known to the user. BS asked if it could be pre-populated with the EPF prefix to show that the user is on the right track. SB said that he could get Northgate to try, but that it might affect searches for historic applications that may begin with a different prefix e.g. CHI.

SB

SB finished the presentation by looking at what the future would bring with the new website. The old website came with Northgate automatically as the back-office system, and had not been looked at critically before. Items on the wish-list for next year would include the ability to search without using the wild-card (%) and the ability to download all information in a single click. BS noted that sometimes it was difficult to find the document that was needed as many of them had the same title, and PM agreed that it was something that had already been raised and that this was being examined to see if improvements could be made. on. AJ wondered if the document lines could change colour to show that a document had been looked at, and SB thought that might be possible with Northgate's help. NR raised the fact that we were now indicating whether plans were existing or proposed, as we scan them and PM noted that there had recently been a lot of refinements in the way documents were indexed – previously it was mainly about getting the information in the system.

CP mentioned that it was annoying to search on older applications and get no results. PM said that this was because the microfiche records had not been placed on the system except for the registers. The high cost for capturing these records had originally made scanning the microfiche unthinkable, but changes in technology had now made this possible – however, recruitment restrictions, resulted in some limitations in the amount of resources available for this project. Currently spreading this project and cost over a three to four year period was being investigated.

Problems with image quality on scanned documents were then discussed. CP mentioned that they had experimented with just using scanned images for 2 months, but they had difficulty mainly with legibility and scaling problems and had to refer to paper copies many times. PM noted that steps had been taken to improve the quality of images because of feedback – officers may now decline to validate an application if the plans are not legible. AJ supported Planning and said that during the time she worked with the scanning team, scanned images were good on Information@Work but that the quality was reduced when it appeared on the website. PM noted that our software is based on Adobe PDF images, and that Microsoft Office is not compatible with this. SB has been looking at practical solutions, and says that Adobe 10 will not be used any more, that alternatives will be tried until one is found that is most compatible. The new version of the website will be tested in Safari, Google Chrome etc to see which is best. CP pointed out that they use Google Chrome and that it cannot retrieve the web-casts – SB said he would investigate. RW noted that if text was zoomed in on scanned plans it was often badly pixellated. PM said that we were gradually improving image quality and DPI, but the resource issues in the last couple of years had made it hard to progress. SB added that we now have more storage capacity than we had, which may result in an improvement in the quality of documents. He suggested in the meantime that images were scanned in greyscale, and to avoid images being too large to process by avoiding scanning in colour for colour's sake.

The group thanked SB for his presentation, and SB left the meeting.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

Page 1 Officer Introductions – RW would like the word 'projects' removed after 'iPlan' from his introduction, so that the paragraph now reads '...and has worked on iPlan in the past with EFDC'.

Page 5 Any Other Business – It was mentioned in the previous minutes that AJ would be submitting a report of her experience at EFDC. She has since decided that a report would only be specific to her experience as everyone would experience the visit differently, and so instead of a report she would like to encourage other Town and Parish Councils to visit EFDC. PM agreed and added that a visit was not just about iPlan – Trees and Landscape, Forward Planning and Enforcement were other areas to meet, and on their recent visit Theydon Bois had met the Contaminated Land Officer – Planning are happy to facilitate requests that may include special interest areas and that visits to Planning that included a flexible structure had proved to be very productive.

The group agreed the rest of the minutes of the previous meeting.

4. Items raised by Parish Councils regarding iPlan, Electronic Planning Records and the Corporate Website.

4.1 CP raised an issue about scale bars on scanned plans. He commented that when iPlan was first introduced, scale bars were often missing – he noted that this has improved considerably. However, when plans are projected he has found it difficult to try and measure the plans unless they use a pair of blackboard dividers, and wondered whether there were any practical suggestions. NR said that we could ask for measurements to be included on the plans, but that this could result in a confusing image. Perhaps the answer was to have measurements between buildings – CP agreed that this might help as it was often difficult to get a relationship with other properties. NR also mentioned that block plans were often out of date when they have been submitted – it was not until the officer was out on site that these problems were picked up. BS thought that critical distances could be useful if marked on the plans e.g. this wall is 3m from that wall etc. NR said he would look into it, but that agents may get frustrated as we would have to update the validation checklist. AJ thought there may be a governing body that deals with quality issues such as this – other Councils may be experiencing similar problems. Perhaps there could be a national standardisation on plans, or a national architect body. BS agreed that the reduction of anomalies would be in everyone’s favour. NR and PM to check with PAS who have links with the Planning Portal.

NR/PM

4.2 BS wondered what the timescale was for when an application is received to when it potentially goes to committee – sometimes they had only a weeks notice and they were finding it hard to get people to the committee if the notification was received late. NR thought it was 9 days before the meeting, and MB added that once an officer puts a recommendation that the application was going to committee it was immediately on the website as an unofficial notification. BS said that unfortunately it doesn’t show the date of the meeting – MB and NR noted that it was published but you would have to search by EPF. BS asked if other consultees were informed by letter? NR said that neighbours and the applicant were. MB suggested that she could communicate and e-mail this to the Town and Parish Councils with details of all applications that are going to committee – this would give potentially 2 weeks notice, and all agreed that this would be a good idea.

MB

4.3 CP asked what the mechanics were for receiving online comments of object/support/no comment. TP answered that they were inputted to Northgate, and emails to officers were also put into the back-office system. BS asked whether other options were preferred e.g. support with comments, but all agreed that they were fine as they were and assured the group that they were relayed to the planning officers.

4.4 CP also raised the point that on the notification system, often there were not many neighbours notified about a rear extension – as you would need 4 objections to get this application to committee, often 4 people were not notified and so it could prove hard to get this sort of application to committee. CP also wondered if a picture could be taken of the yellow site notices as often these were missed, and use the GIS system on the phone to tell users exactly where it is? NR to look into this.

NR

4.5 **Any other business**

JB asked how smaller Town and Parish Councils could pay for broadband connections needed to display scanned images, as they do not often meet and it is not something they can all afford. BS said a mobile broadband dongle could be purchased for around £30 that would solve the problem. PM asked whether the smaller Parish Councils had thought of sharing resources, and CP mentioned that he could bring it up for discussion at the next EALC meeting. All agreed that shared use of equipment could be the way forward. BS asked for some information to be supplied about the best software to use for the different systems to be sent with the agenda pack, and PM said he would liaise with SB on this.

CP

PM

BS thanked EFDC for creating the iPlan User Group and its help in facilitating ideas to take things forward. CP agreed, and said that things had already moved forward because of the group.

Next meeting to be confirmed by PM

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**Minutes of an iPlan Users Group held on 26 September 2012
at 10:30am in Committee Room 2, Civic Offices, Epping**

Chair: Peter Millward (PM)

Attendees:

Richard Witham (RW) – Lambourne Parish Council
 Chris Pond (CP) – Loughton Town Council
 Joan Bowerman (JB) – Matching Parish Council
 Eileen Gough (EG) – Ongar Town Council
 Stephen Bacon (SB) – Epping Forest District Council
 Nigel Richardson (NR) – Epping Forest District Council
 Andrew Rich (AR) – Epping Forest District Council
 Theresa Parker (TP) – Epping Forest District Council
 Mavis Bird (MB) – Epping Forest District Council
 Chris Redman (CR) Minutes – Epping Forest District Council

PM welcomed everyone to the meeting.

		Action
1.0	APOLOGIES –	
	Brian Surtees (BS) – Ongar Town Council, Adriana Jones (AJ) – North Weald Parish Council	
2.0	MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING	
	All approved the minutes of the previous meeting.	
3.0	FEEDBACK REGARDING USE OF IPLAN / WEBSITE	
3.1	Navigation of Website	
	CP noted that the EFDC website had changed in its format, but was finding it more difficult to navigate the system. He had found it hard to bookmark when using several computers, and that although the new website looked better it was hard for the user to get to where they would want to be. SB commented that the home page now had a direct link to the Planning Explorer for ease of use. The layout of the home page had been amended by senior management just before the system went live, and this was now going to be changed back to how the Website Team had originally wanted it. There will be 3 task boxes below the banner, with the links to the top 5 or 6 tasks in each topic. The decision of where to place consultations by the Council would always open to debate, and there would be some thought in the future about where they could be placed. The Website Team were checking where visitors to the website were going and monitoring the situation, and at that point there had been over 10,000 hits with not too many problems. Extra pages created by the Directorates that were now deemed unnecessary would be removed to ease the navigation tabs.	
3.2	Read-only access to Information@Work	

	<p>PM mentioned that plans were in motion with District Councillors to gain read-only access to the back-end of the system (Information@Work), to allow them to have access to certain other planning elements not currently published on the website within the next few weeks. The second phase would be to roll this out for Parish Councillors to gain access to objection letters etc, and this would need a group of volunteers to pilot the scheme. RW wondered why objection letters could not be sent out with the other notifications? NR noted that we would have to print all the letters at a considerable cost. CP asked if they could be published on the website with the other documents, but PM stated that they would have to be redacted to comply with the Data Protection Act and that EFDC did not currently have the resources for this. PM asked the iPlan Users Group representatives to nominate Parish Councillors to pilot the read-only access scheme for potential future use of this scheme.</p>	All
3.3	Use of WiFi	
	<p>RW wondered why there was not public WiFi at the Committees, as this would prove useful to view other applications that may be linked to those being discussed. SB replied that it was on its way, but was awaiting the go-ahead from the new Chief Executive. They were working on getting Modern.Gov, the Committee system used by the Council, onto Android, which should cut down on paper usage, but advice was currently being sought because of the legal obligations to provide paper at the moment.</p>	
3.4	Mapping Systems	
	<p>SB talked about the developments with the new mapping system for the website. Colleagues in Environmental Services had been developing an open-source mapping system that will be hosted internally, and a demo version should be released within the next 2 weeks for testing. PM noted that this could potentially replace Pinpoint mapping, that was removed from the old website due to inaccuracies.</p>	
3.5	Search results	
	<p>CP asked whether there had been any developments on the search facility on the Planning Explorer, and whether it was possible to search without the percentage sign? SB commented that the database supplied by Northgate for this system was awkward to manipulate to remove this function, but that there is a 'quick search' by application number that is more visible now on the new website. CP noted that when using this there is not another option for further searching, which leads to a potential dead end – SB to look at amending this. CP also wondered if the search results button could be moved from the bottom of the screen to the top to make this clearer – however, SB had tried this previously, but this had broken the system. RW noted that there were 2 lines of text on each search button that were unnecessary – SB to change to read 'quick search' and 'advanced search' only.</p> <p>EG had noticed that when search results were produced that the EFDC watermark was more prominent and sometimes obscured the text – could it be removed? SB stated that it needed to be on plans and maps to stop others from re-using them, but the watermark could be made more transparent. CR to liaise with Shipra Bhajpai in IT to dial back the strength of the watermarks.</p> <p>RW found it frustrating that in the search results on the Planning Explorer you still had to look through every document line by line, and that you couldn't download all the documents at once. SB to see if anything can be done to resolve the situation.</p> <p>CP noted that there was a recent application where an important element for a</p>	<p>SB</p> <p>SB</p> <p>CR</p> <p>SB</p>

	<p>decision relied on a linked application from 30 years ago. However, the Clerk was unable to find it using the 'search parish' parameter as it had been incorrectly assigned to another parish. TP stated that this could be an ongoing problem from Plantech, the previous system used by the Council, that was updated to the current Northgate system. SB agreed, and said that the pre 1987 registers should be reliable, but from 1987 to the period Plantech finished could contain errors. CP suggested that some text could be added the 'search by parish' function stating that it should be not used between these dates – AR to implement.</p>	AR
3.6	Microfiche	
	<p>CP asked about the progress with the unscanned microfiche for the website. PM reported that quotations were being obtained to get them scanned and indexed – PM would look to prioritise the oldest, and would be looking initially at the pre 1974 fiches. A full audit had revealed there are over 21,000 fiches with 30 to 50 images per jacket – authority has been granted to bring forward some of the scanning budget to cover the process, and it was hoped that by the end of the financial year this first phase will have been scanned. By the end of 3 or 4 years, it is hoped that all the microfiches would have been scanned and indexed.</p>	
3.7	Issues with browsers	
	<p>CP noted that issues with browsers had largely been resolved and that the system worked better with Google Chrome. SB mentioned that this had been tested and was working well, and that they were now working to make webcasts become more Apple-friendly.</p>	
3.8	Standardisation of plans	
	<p>NR mentioned that the anomalies in information supplied by applicants on submitted plans had been raised at the recent Chair/Vice Chair meeting. These issues were due to be raised at the next Agents forum, but this had not yet taken place, and he still had to talk to the planning agents. He was currently awaiting information from the Government about standardisation of plans, who have said that there was too much delay at the validation stage, and will pass on that advice at the next meeting.</p>	NR
3.9	Notification of applications to Committee level	
	<p>MB asked whether the list of all applications going to Committee she had started sending was useful to the Town and Parish Councils? All agreed that it was helpful and should continue.</p>	
3.10	Site notices	
	<p>In the previous meeting CP had wondered whether pictures could be taken of the yellow site notices that were often missed, and whether the GIS system could be used to tell users exactly where the notice was? NR said that this had not progressed any further, and may prove difficult to roll out.</p>	
3.11	Shared resources/legibility of plans	
	<p>CP had raised the issue of sharing resources needed to display images for meetings between the Parish Councils at the last EALC meeting. However, objections were raised from some of the rural parishes who met mainly in hired halls and found that there was no facility for accessing the web. PM thought that if they targeted the bigger Town and Parish Councils to paperless meetings, then</p>	

	they could help out on the resources for the smaller meetings. CP thought that the matter had got worse because of the legibility of scanned plans – if the Council could accept a delay in comments from Parish Councils on a legibility basis, then they may be able to try to push more paperless meetings. NR wondered if the delay was because of the legibility of scanned plans, and how this could be resolved? Sometimes the quality of the original plans was questionable and should be resolved at the validation stage. CP noted that some plans produced by particular people (e.g. Colin Southgate) were particularly bad. PM asked the iPlan representatives to identify those that were consistently problematic and that these could be targeted first to improve the service. SB noted that if a PDF is losing its quality, this could be resolved by the Parish Council's using TIFF images. PM to meet with SB to see how the images could be further improved.	All PM/SB
3.12	Adjacent area consultations	
	CP asked whether adjacent area consultations were scanned? AR noted that they were scanned on the back-office system, but not published to the web – PM said that this information would be available on the read-only access to the back-office system previously discussed. CR mentioned that a recent application for Fieldes Lock had been placed on the website as a news item, with the links to the adjacent authority's website, and all agreed that this had worked well.	
4.0	VISITS TO PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BY PARISH / TOWN COUNCILLORS AND	
	PM thought that there had not been many visits by Parish/Town Councillors and Parish Clerks to planning recently, and was keen to have some new visits. CP noted that they had 4 new Town Councillors for Loughton, and would try to arrange a visit. SB also mentioned that if some extra training support was needed he could see if he could put together a training package in the Council's IT room if there was enough demand.	CP
5.0	PROGRESS REPORT ON EFDC WEBSITE AND	
	Much of this already covered earlier in the meeting. SB stated that since the new website went live we have had 99.95% uptime - CP and RW agreed that downtime was much improved. The benefits of designing and producing the website in-house had made a saving of £18,000 per year and saved £50,000 in Capital Procurement Costs. The next step would be to look at hosting the site externally for extra security. CP noted that information about the Parish Councils was not yet included on the website – SB said that this would be updated in the future as so much of the previous information was out of date.	
6.0	ANY OTHER BUSINESS	
	PM asked the members of the group for confirmation of their continued representation, and all agreed.	
7.0	DATE OF NEXT MEETING	
	January/February 2013, PM to confirm date.	
	PM thanked everyone for attending. Meeting closed 11.50am	