

## **Stronger Communities Select Committee**

The Stronger Communities Select Committee held five meetings this municipal year. The membership was approved at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its first meeting on 3 June 2021. The first meeting was held on 15 June 2021 in the Conference Suite at the newly refurbished Civic Offices. Meetings resumed in the Council chamber from September.

### **Members for 2021/22:**

CHAIRMAN

**Councillor Jeane Lea**

VICE-CHAIRMAN

**Councillor Raymond Balcombe**

Councillors:

Heather Brady

Ian Hadley

Stephen Murray

Chidi Nweke

Dave Plummer

Sheree Rackham

Janet H Whitehouse

Ken Williamson

David Wixley



Councillor Jeane Lea



Councillor Raymond Balcombe

### **Chairman's foreword**

"The Police we fund do a marvellous job and in September last year we reviewed the six-month report on their work in the District. This was followed in March by the District Commander's presentation updating members on general policing issues and answering many questions. In September last year, members reviewed the consultation process and governance structure of the Allocations Scheme Review, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Review, Tenancy Policy review and Overarching Housing Strategy. In January the committee reviewed the HRA Business Plan, which will be used to provide us with a reasonable cashflow projection for the next 30 years."

The select committee encompassed the corporate aims and objectives for stronger communities – people live longer, healthier and independent lives; adults and children are supported in times of need; and people and communities achieve their potential. Most of the work programmes were not cyclical apart from quarterly Customer Services updates, and the six-monthly update of the Council-funded Police officers' work.

### **Council-funded Police officers 6-month report**

The six-month update detailing the range of work and highlighting operations the Council's funded Police team had been involved in was reviewed by the select committee in September 2021. The most significant work had been partnership working, responding to a county lines drugs supply in Waltham Abbey. When needed, the policing team had supported Council officers from Environmental Health, Community Resilience, Planning Enforcement and on joint visits at licenced and business premises suspected of committing COVID legislation breaches. Anti-social behaviour, distraction thefts, burglaries, frauds involving vulnerable victims were also targeted.



Chief Inspector Paul Ballard, Interim District Commander for Epping Forest and Brentwood, had been seconded to this position for some 5/6 months because Chief Inspector Ant Alcock was on secondment to the Major Investigation Team. At the 22 March meeting, he advised that over the last 12 months performance had been good, although the data had yet again been impacted by Covid. Anti-social

behaviour (ASB) had reduced by 51%, although this was probably due to Covid breaches being reported as ASB under Covid Legislation. Furthermore, there had been a 4% increase for all crimes, although this had been attributed to Covid and the impact of how crimes were recorded. Crime was down in Epping Forest for robbery by 11%, personal robbery by 14% and residential robbery by 24%. There had been increases of 17% in violence against person offences and 13% in violence with injury, but work was continuing in this area. Further work was ongoing to improve public engagement in the District. Members asked a range of questions covering domestic violence, rural crime, speed checks, road cameras, organised car crime and community engagement in the District, as well as about the Safer Essex Road Partnership. The minutes can be viewed here [Stronger Communities Select Committee 22 March](#)

### **Customer Services Updates**

Reported quarterly by the Service Director or Service Manager of Customer Services, these updates gave members the opportunity to hear 'what our customers were telling us'. At the 22 March meeting, there had been an increase in the footfall to the Civic Offices Community Hub for the quarter. Two new starters had joined the Customer Contact Centre in February and were undergoing training. The core vision of the Customer Service Strategy 2022/23 was to use digital methods to deliver the services our customers wanted, but it was also recognised that other people might still require additional support either by phone or face to face. To gauge feedback on our customers' digital habits, online engagement surveys had been carried out to help shape the strategy. Early indications showed our customers were well connected digitally, as 90% did shopping and/or banking online. There was a strong appetite amongst partners and voluntary organisations to adopt a collaborative approach to digital inclusion and the Council's role would be to facilitate this working group. Feedback showed the Council's website design was good and was presented in plain English. Some issues were reported on finding information using the search facility and online forms could benefit from a more consistent look and feel. The service plan included a website improvements project. Customer Services was also aiming to run a mystery shopper exercise in quarter 1 to obtain further feedback on our customer experience using an external consultancy.

### **Pre-scrutiny highlights**



#### **Review of the 'Big 4' Housing Strategies and Policies**

On 21 September 2021, the select committee reviewed the Allocations Scheme Review, Tenancy Policy Review, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy Review and Overarching Housing Strategy. The Community and Wellbeing Director, J Gould, set out the proposed changes, the recommendations and the next steps for the stage 2 consultations. The draft policies were pre-scrutinised on 1 March 2022 prior to decisions by Cabinet on 7 March. The **Allocation Scheme Review** would determine the priorities and the procedure to be followed by the Council, as a Local Housing Authority (LHA), when selecting a household to be offered a tenancy of Council owned accommodation or to be nominated for an offer of housing from another registered provider with stock in the District. A review was required every five years and was due for renewal in April 2022 along with the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, the Tenancy Policy and the Overarching Housing Strategy. The revised **Homelessness and Rough Sleepers Strategy 2022-2027** and the evidence base that supported the strategy, which included the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping review and the Public Consultation Outcome Report, was reviewed. The **Tenancy Policy Review** set out the matters to which the Council in relation to its own stock and the registered providers of social housing within its District were to have regard to when formulating their tenancy policies. The current Tenancy Policy was due for review by July 2022. The select committee's questions can be viewed here: [Stronger Communities Select Committee 1 March](#)

## HRA Business Plan

In January 2022, the Council's HRA business plan was reviewed that would provide a reasonable cashflow projection over the next 30 years and was based on evidential data from its current systems and projections for economic assumptions in the social housing sector. Officers had taken both a safe and prudent approach when developing the business plan, with a balance between borrowing, developing, and improving the housing stock. The report set out the context, background and what the decent home standard were, in conjunction with factors that would affect the plan including the Council's house building programme, major works, a stock and condition survey and a sector risk profile. The Housing Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, advised that it was a very detailed and complex report that provided regeneration. The Council's housing building programme would ensure that the more deprived areas of the community were invested in, and that it improved the health of those residents. The Cabinet decision was taken on 7 February.

**Other work programme highlights** undertaken at meetings during the year, included:



**Agendas and minutes**



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<https://rds.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=809&Year=0>

## Stronger Council Select Committee

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### Members for 2021/22:

CHAIRMAN

**Councillor Peter Bolton**

VICE-CHAIRMAN

**Councillor Tim Matthews**

Councillors:

Richard Bassett

Pranav Bhanot

Heather Brady

Rose Brookes

Jayna Jogia

Helen Kane

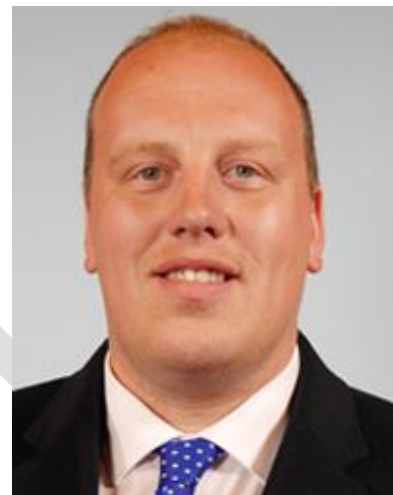
Richard Morgan

Steven Neville

Jon M Whitehouse



Councillor Peter Bolton



Councillor Tim Matthews

### Chairman's foreword

*"Our review of the Beyond the Pandemic employee survey during April-May 2021 in July, was used to help reshape the Council's future ways of working. The review of the four different elections in 2021 showed the successful 'one team' effort by those staffing the counts, and we reviewed the Accommodation Project closure report on the Civic Offices refurbishment, which the Chairman officially opened on 1 October."*

The select committee had an overview of the Corporate aims and objectives for a stronger Council – democratic engagement; the People Strategy and a culture of innovation through improved workforce skills and performance through innovation and technology; and financial independence with low council tax. Therefore, much of the scrutiny work was of a cyclical nature, as the select committee reviewed the following on a quarterly basis:

- ▶ Corporate Plan Key Action Plan
- ▶ Budget Monitoring Reports
- ▶ Financial planning
- ▶ People Strategy

### Pre-scrutiny highlights

#### Accommodation Project Closure Report

This project had set out to refurbish the Civic Building and 323 House, with the Conder building to be demolished and the rear of the Civic Offices site redeveloped for residential use in line with the Local Plan and crucial to the economic development aspirations for the District. In November 2021, M Hassall, Interim Service Manager / ICT Manager, reported on how the project had performed against its original objectives and the lessons learnt. It was on time and on budget. Members thought the Chamber should be updated / spruced up. The Civic Offices officially opened on 1 October 2021. Councillor Helen Kane, Chairman of Council, Leader of Council, Councillor Chris Whitbread, and the Rt Hon Dame Eleanor Laing MP attended the event, along with other councillors and staff.



## Our Ways of Working 2021-2022 Beyond the Pandemic

This employee survey was carried out from April and May 2021. In July 2021, J Budden, People Culture and Wellbeing Service Manager, reported that officers had not only provided business as usual in support of Epping Forest residents but assisted with other essential work on Project Shield and high street recovery projects. Staff had helped the Civic Offices refurbishment to finish on time and on budget. They achieved improved productivity and digitisation for residents and had also vastly improved employee engagement and wellbeing. During the Covid pandemic most employees had been working remotely and were no longer reliant on a fixed desk, in a fixed building, working fixed hours. When completing this survey, employees were encouraged to challenge their thinking, giving them the opportunity to give valuable feedback and insight to help inform plans for beyond the pandemic and help reshape the Council's future ways of working for them and the organisation.



## Review of Elections 2021

In September 2021, the select committee reviewed the planning processes and implementation of the 2021 elections held on 6 May. The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex, 21 wards of the District Council and 14 of the District's town and parish councils were postponed from their original date of May 2020 owing to the Covid pandemic. The Government decided to hold these elections in May 2021, and they were combined with the elections already scheduled for this date for Essex County Council. Covid restrictions were still in place during the 2021 elections, which necessitated certain changes to the arrangements for operating polling stations with 'one-way' systems being used for larger stations or a 'one-in-one-out' system for the smaller stations. The operation of the Count was also impacted by a requirement to ensure that the Count staff were socially distanced from each other whilst counting. In addition, with four elections being held simultaneously, the Count could not be completed in one session. G Blakemore, Returning Officer, reported that the planning, management and delivery of all relevant processes for these elections was effective, especially given the circumstances under which the 2021 elections had been held. The management and delivery of these elections had been reviewed by the Elections Planning Group, chaired by the Returning Officer. The select committee was also informed that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England intended to undertake a full review of the Council's size in terms of the number of Councillors and ward boundaries, which would culminate in all-out District Council elections in May 2024. The Council was overdue a review as the last such exercise had taken place in 1998. Members raised a number of questions about queues at very busy polling stations, the coldness of the hangar where the count was held, but there was overall support for the superb effort of staff and outside volunteers during the elections. As new legislation on election law was coming, the select committee requested a future report on the consequences of voter ID, how it would affect the Council and any financial implications.



## Draft Budget 2022/23

£ Cabinet's draft Budget proposals for 2022/23 were considered on 18 January 2021. The Interim Chief Financial Officer, C Hartgrove, introduced the report. It included the revenue and capital proposals for both the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account, a schedule of suggested Fees and Charges for the forthcoming financial year, and an updated Medium-Term Financial Plan covering the financial years 2022/23 through to 2026/27 that reflected both the impact of the draft Budget proposals as well as the latest intelligence available. Members were advised that the medium-term financial position was broadly unchanged since it was last presented in October 2021. The provisional Local Government Finance Settlement 2022/23 of 21 December 2021 was generally as expected and provided further assurance to the underlying financial sustainability in this draft Budget. However, the annual Settlement for 2022/23 had yet to be announced by the Government and a challenge was still anticipated in 2024/25 and 2025/26, as a consequence of the forthcoming new Waste Management Contract. Members questions included a query on the recent high rise in gas and electric prices and if the figures shown were current. C Hartgrove replied these were the figures he was given, but he would cross check them in the coming week.

The Strategic Director and 151 Officer, A Small, advised that inflation was one of the greatest risks facing the Council. There was doubt about energy prices and also about wage settlements. The Council had received a one-year Government settlement for the year ahead but had expected a three-year settlement to give some certainty. The government still intended to implement a 'fairer funding' change to the way it distributed grant settlements, but the Council did not know how that would impact upon it. The situation could have been worse. It justified having a council tax increase after many years and was the right time to build up the Council's balances. It was a sound budget.

### **Learning and Development Programme 2021/22**

P Maginnis (Service Director (Corporate Services)) introduced the report on the Learning and Development programme at 3 March meeting. The new learning management system had various virtual courses online for staff to complete. These ranged from the short 'Skill Pill' sessions to the wider leadership programme to the apprenticeship programme. The Council was also expanding the role of the mental health first aiders to also being dementia friends. The select committee asked how staff training needs were identified as most were working from home and they were informed that this was picked up in various ways by their managers, their requirements and the skills they needed. Managers would look at their corporate needs and identify needs via inductions for new starters etc. Some training was still carried out face to face. The report listed the current organisational training priorities, such as the development of the management spine, getting team management qualifications, developing new skills around agile working, upskilling our apprentices, and understanding the impact of Covid on our staff with training on mental health issues.

### **Employee Induction / Onboarding and Litmos Learning Management System**

Also, on 3 March, the Service Director (Corporate Services) introduced the report on Litmos, which would give new officers an understanding into how the Council worked and what the role of a councillor was etc. by generally giving them an insight into the political world of our organisation. This had now been built into the Council's onboarding process and was now part of its new Litmos system and the onboarding of new starters. The Council would be able to develop its own courses and host videos, policies and links. The Service Director reported that it was far more flexible and up to date than the previous system. Its functionality would help develop all employees. The new system would also allow members access to it, enabling them to have access to courses, such as members safety. Member Services could be trained to administer this part of the system and enable members to access the training.

### **People Strategy Overview (2022)**

The Committee reviewed the People Strategy on 28 April 2022. Regarding the Common Operating Model, consultation and recruitment were still underway to finalise the restructure process for the remaining teams/positions in the Legal Team and Housing Asset and Property Team service review. As the current People Strategy ended in 2022, an overview of successes delivered within the current People Strategy over its three-year term would be produced and would be launched as part of the new 2023-25 People Strategy. iTrent had redesigned the Employee Self Service (ESS) module. The new design included summary cards on the main dashboard for quick access to information, such as payslips, a new organisational chart view, improved response to the size of device being used and improved accessibility ensuring it was compliant with the latest web content accessibility guidelines. iTrent – iRecruit phase 2 facilitated letter templates for provisional offers of employment and reference requests with contract templates would follow shortly. The exit interview questionnaire had also been launched. The onboarding portal within iTrent – iRecruit phase 3 was expected to launch in mid-2022 along with the Register of Interests questionnaire, which had been delayed. The eLearning system on Litmos continued to be built. A new series of Skill Pills was being run for employees between June and December 2022. These 60 to 90-minute sessions were accessible to all employees and covered a variety of topics to support digital skills. The apprenticeship programme continued to be a great success. A new Mental Health First Aid training cohort started in April 2022 and would bring the total number to over 90. Currently 91% of employees had signed up to Perkbox to access the employee benefits and tools on offer. Our third Workbuzz survey opened on 1 March 2022 when employees told us what was working well and made suggestions for improvements and managers had received data from the December 2021

survey. Employees were more agile and creative in their ways of working, thinking and leadership, embedding the changes that Our Ways of Working and the Accommodation Project had started, to empower employees to evolve the culture of the Council.

### Corporate Performance Reporting

Throughout the year the Committee had reviewed on a quarterly basis, the Corporate Performance Report in relation to progress on the project delivery of the key corporate projects and the key performance indicators (KPIs) of the corporate workstreams. The progress of projects was tracked using the RAG status for risk (as shown opposite).

Green	Project on track to achieve milestones.
Amber	Project at risk of missing milestones.
Red	Project has missed milestones / project has serious issues.
Blue	Project complete/on-hold.
↔	Project status is unchanged since previous report.
↑	Project status has improved since previous report.
↓	Project status has declined since previous report.

Furthermore, following a review of the agreed list of priority projects by the Project Management Office in consultation with the Executive Management Team, the Committee considered a refreshed list of priority projects at the meeting on 28 April 2022. The list of projects detailed in the Corporate Performance Transition Report on the Committee's future reporting expectations were agreed by its members. The Committee also asked for a complete list of all projects being undertaken as they might wish to look at other projects not on that list.

**Other pre-scrutiny highlights** undertaken at meetings during the year, included:

<b>Capital Programme</b> Update 2022/23 to 2026/27 (November 2021)		
<b>Presentation from</b> <b>Council's Level 2</b> <b>Apprentices</b> (September 2021)		

**Agendas and minutes**



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CHAIRMAN  
**Councillor Alan Lion**

VICE-CHAIRMAN  
**Councillor Richard Morgan**

Councillors:  
Raymond Balcombe  
Richard Bassett  
Ian Hadley  
Simon Heap  
Steven Heather  
Judy Jennings  
Cherry McCredie  
Michael Owen  
Jo Share-Bernia



Councillor A Lion



Councillor Richard Morgan

### Chairman's foreword

"At the beginning of the new council year, with input from members of the committee, the Terms of Reference was reviewed and simplified to improve understanding. A work programme was developed with direct input by members. These were ratified by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Comments taken into consideration were to ensure all information and proposals presented were written papers and there was enough time to scrutinise proposals and incorporate comments and changes before presentation to Cabinet.

### Proposals scrutinised:

- Options for the new name for the Civic Offices Hub
- Pre-scrutiny of the waste and recycling collection service/street cleansing contract. This was in relation to the forthcoming review of the waste management contract. Generally, it was felt the contractor had performed well. As a cost saving measure, there was a proposal for the introduction of charges for additional, repaired and replacement bins. A breakdown of the costs for collecting fly-tipping and litter was requested. Before a charging regime was considered a more effective cost breakdown was needed. A full business case with accurate costing was requested.
- Epping Forest car parking tariffs were considered. Comments were made on increased costs and the potential impact on high streets.
- Essex County Council Highways - in November, select committee members questioned Essex County Councillor Lee Scott, Highways and Transport Portfolio Holder, on a range of highway maintenance issues."



The select committee covered the Corporate aims and objectives for a stronger place – delivering effective core services that people want; a District with planned development; and an environment where new and existing businesses thrive. Its definition encompassed Epping Forest District as a physical Place and to scrutinise the direction, policies and projects of the executive that affect the spatial and infrastructure requirements of the District. Scrutiny of the work programme included:

- ▶ Local Plan updates
- ▶ Council housebuilding
- ▶ Economic growth, skills and employment
- ▶ District-wide Waste Management provision
- ▶ Leisure Management Contract updates

## **Pre-scrutiny highlights**

### **Branding of the Ground Floor of the Civic Offices**

The Customer Services Director, Rob Pavey, outlined the proposed designs and names for the re-branding of the ground floor of the Civic Offices on 29 September 2021. This reflected the new community and collaborative purpose of the space and promoted the area as a new destination where EFDC services would work collaboratively with partners to provide wraparound solutions for residents and wider community activity. It was not a proposal to rename the Civic Offices but was for the ground floor area. The refurbishment of the Civic Offices had provided an opportunity to review how the building was used. The building had a reduced footprint for staff and the top floor was occupied on a commercial basis. The Service Director explained about the flow through of these ground floor areas and how the proximity and integration of the ground floor activity lent itself to a common brand. Members had been involved over the summer in the proposed designs and two branding options were presented – the Civic Hub and the Civic. The select committee recommended 'The Civic Hub' to Cabinet for consideration.

### **Essex Highways Update**

Cllr Lee Scott, Essex County Council Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transport, attended the meeting on 4 November 2021 and gave a brief overview of his remit which covered potholes, buses, transport, coastal erosion, cycling, walking and footpaths. He outlined his desire to meet with District and Parish Councils to gain an understanding of the issues across the County and suggested that a key issue for the County was flooding. The select committee was advised that he could be emailed directly, or through the Chairman, to address any issues. He reminded Members that there was a limited budget, so if something was dangerous it would be fixed, but this could not be guaranteed for other issues. Members asked a range of questions which can be viewed here [Stronger Place Select Committee 4 November 2021](#)

### **Review of off-street parking tariffs**

Also, at the same meeting in November, J Warwick (Acting Service Director) introduced the report on the tariffs for off-street car parks and advised members that the tariffs had not increased since 2015. The review aimed to ensure tariffs were set at a sustainable level to support the operation of car parks and to assist with budget pressures. Cost benefit analysis and consultation with officers and members had been carried out to inform on the proposed changes to off street parking charges, permits and seasons tickets. The car park payment machines would continue to accept cash and cards. The select committee welcomed the two hours free parking on Sundays but raised queries on the electric vehicle charging points in car parks and the increased fee for up to thirty minutes parking that could impact on businesses and revitalising the high streets. As members were concerned about the reduction in parking allocation at the Civic Offices, they were advised that a variety of options would be developed.

### **Additional waste container costs**

In January 2022, the Acting Service Director, J Warwick, advised about the proposal for residents to be charged for: the assessment, issuing and delivery of additional garden waste bins; the assessment, issuing and delivery of larger waste bins; replacement bin cost when the bin had been lost; and that repairs to bins would be the preferential option and remain free of charge. This

proposal had been referred to the select committee by the Waste Management Partnership Board and its recommendations would be submitted to Cabinet for approval. Details of the questions raised by members can be viewed here [Stronger Place Select Committee 13 January 2022](#)

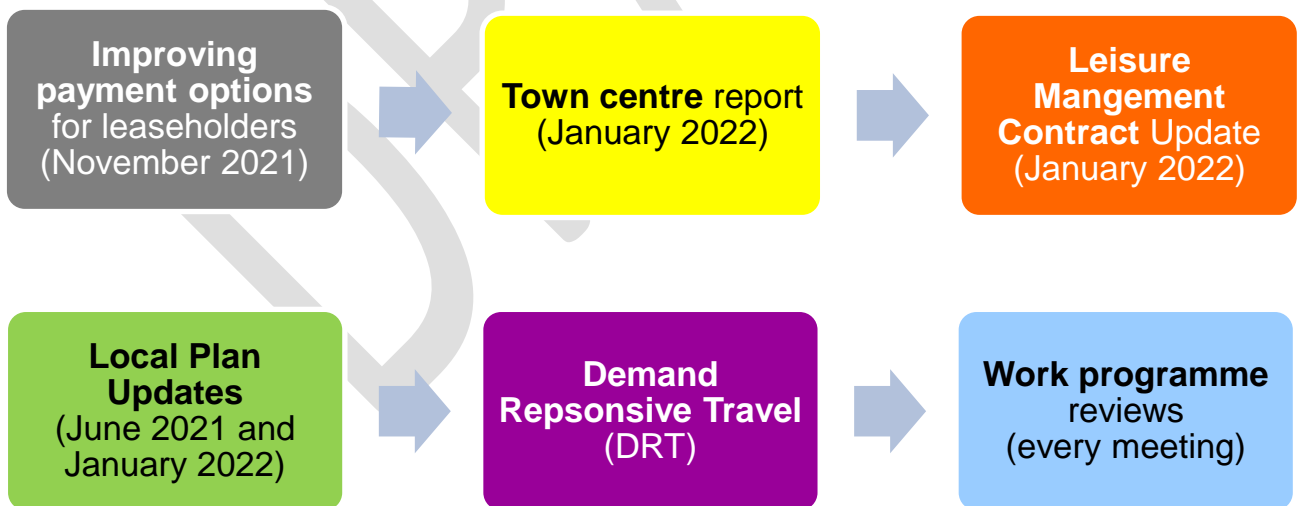
### Enforcement Review

Also at the 13 January meeting, Councillor L Burrows, Portfolio Holder, introduced this review and highlighted the potential costs of £250,000 for the implementation of a system for environmental health and technical enforcement. Key aspects included developing enforcement of parking at important junctions, footpaths and areas outside schools in partnership with the North Essex Parking Partnership (NEPP) and the County Council. Planning enforcement was outside the remit of this review. The focus was on actions that were, in the main, immediate and low cost, and included outline plans for improved technology, which could be brought forward in two stage. The select committee was advised that there were many aspects to enforcement activity and recourse to legal action was used as the last resort.

### Transport Strategy and Sustainable Transport

On 15 March, the Committee considered a strategic overview and status update. The Council was working to maximise use of its own land and assets to provide EV charging. Rapid 120kWh chargers would be supplied by Instavolt at Oakwood East car park in Loughton shortly. Instavolt's business model would generate site rental and profit share for the Council and did not involve upfront costs. Grant funding was being sought to convert empty garages on the Ninefields estate in Waltham Abbey to fast or overnight charging spaces. Over the next 2-3 years fast or overnight charging should be installed at a number of other car parks at leisure centres. EV charging would be built into major new developments. This would begin with the Epping Qualis developments, the multi-storey car park followed by major housing developments across the District. Thirty vehicles of the Council's fleet had switched to electric or plug-in hybrid models, as EV charging was available at all Council sites. The website had also been updated and information was live under the Parking and Travel menu option <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/parking-and-travel/electric-vehicles/>

Other work programme highlights included



**Agendas and minutes** →

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