

A stylized illustration of a forest scene. The background is a light blue sky with green rays of light filtering through the trees. The trees are tall and thin, with green foliage. In the foreground, two deer are silhouetted against the forest. The deer are dark green, and the ground is a solid dark green.

 Epping Forest District Council

Overview & Scrutiny

2021 – 22

Annual Report

Report by: V Messenger, EFDC Democratic Services Officer (June 2022)



Chairman's welcome and introduction

May I welcome members of Epping Forest District Council and introduce this seventeenth annual report of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Government's legislation of 4 April 2020 on the flexibility of local authority regulations that had allowed virtual meetings to take place during the Covid pandemic in 2020/21, ended on 7 May 2021. The 2021 elections including those suspended in 2020 were held on 6 May and physical meetings returned, spearheaded by Annual Council on 21 May 2021. Physical meetings restarted in the newly refurbished Civic Offices for all primary committees, including Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the select committees. Initially meetings were held in the Conference Suite on the first floor until the Chamber became available in August 2021.

This annual report highlights the work undertaken by the Council's scrutiny committees – Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the three select committees, Stronger Communities, Stronger Council and Stronger Place that are aligned to the Council's Corporate Plan ambitions. In December 2021, the Local High Streets Task and Finish was reconvened following its suspension in spring 2020 with the onset of the Covid crisis and lockdowns that ensued.

May I take this opportunity to thank the chairmen and members of the select committees and the task and finish panel in addition to, my special thanks for my Vice-Chairman, Councillor Bob Jennings for all his help and support throughout another challenging year, as we returned to physical meetings while Covid was still endemic.

And of course, I would like to thank all the officers who have worked so hard to keep the members of the scrutiny committees informed and their help in providing any background information that members needed to carry out their investigations.

Cllr Mary Sartin

Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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What is scrutiny

- ▶ Scrutiny in local government is the mechanism by which public accountability is exercised.
- ▶ In practice the purpose of scrutiny is to examine, question and evaluate in order to achieve improvement.
- ▶ Value of scrutiny is to use research and questioning techniques to make recommendations based on evidence.
- ▶ Scrutiny enables issues of public concerns to be examined.
- ▶ At the heart of all the work is consideration of what impact Cabinet's plans will have on the local community.
- ▶ Overview and scrutiny functions are not meant to be confrontational or seen as deliberately set up to form an opposition to the Cabinet. Rather the two aspects should be regarded as 'different sides of the same coin'. The two should complement each other and work in tandem to contribute to the development of the authority.

Alongside its role to challenge, the scrutiny function has also continued to engage positively with the Cabinet, which is why Cabinet members cannot be members of scrutiny committees, and there continues to be cross party co-operation between members on all panels. Scrutiny has continued to provide valuable contributions to the Council and the Cabinet remained receptive to ideas put forward by the scrutiny committees throughout the year. The Constitution also allows members of the public to address the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on any agenda item.

Scrutiny committees

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The main scrutiny committee has sole responsibility to discharge the Council's statutory duties and responsibilities under the Local Government Act 2000, as defined in the Constitution under [Article 6 – Overview and Scrutiny](#). All the scrutiny committees have a Terms of Reference. Their work programmes are continually updated throughout the year to reflect the progress of their ongoing scrutiny on Council business of the Executive including services areas, strategies, policies, and external scrutiny when appropriate.

The Committee regularly reviews the Cabinet's Forward Plan of Key Decisions to identify suitable matters for its work programme and for the overview of specific decisions being proposed. The Cabinet can equally ask Overview and Scrutiny to pre-scrutinise any of its business. Other ongoing work items include the Council's Covid response/recovery and group company structure business.

Select Committees

Restructured into three select committees at the start of 2019/20 municipal year, they are mainly aligned with the Council's Corporate Plan 2018-2023 and the three pillars of its corporate ambitions:

- Stronger Communities
- Stronger Council
- Stronger Place

Their Terms of Reference are agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its first meeting in the municipal year, which sets out a rolling programme of ongoing and cyclical issues specific to their corporate alignments. A lead officer of the Executive Leadership Team, appointed to each select committee, helps to facilitate this and co-ordinates member-led scrutiny throughout the year.

Task and Finish Panels

These panels can be set up by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to deal with ad-hoc projects or reviews that are included in the annual work programme for overview and scrutiny. The Panels are restricted to those activities which are issue-based, time limited and non-cyclical in character and also have clearly defined objectives.

Overview and Scrutiny Committee – year highlights

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee held eight meetings this municipal year. The membership was approved at the first (annual) Council meeting on 25 May 2021. The first meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was held on 3 June 2021 in the Conference Suite at the newly refurbished Civic Offices. Meetings resumed in the Council chamber from September.

2021-22 Membership

CHAIRMAN

Councillor Mary Sartin

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Councillor Bob Jennings

Councillors:

Roger Baldwin
Pranav Bhanot
Peter Bolton
Ian Hadley
Steven Heather
Jeane Lea
Alan Lion

Councillors:

Tim Matthews
Stephen Murray
Dave Plummer
Sheree Rackham
Paul Stalker
Janet H Whitehouse
Ken Williamson
David Wixley



Cllr Mary Sartin



Cllr Bob Jennings

External scrutiny highlights

Princess Alexandra Hospital Trust Senior Executive Team accepted an invite and Lance McCarthy (Chief Executive), Stephanie Lawton (Chief Operating Officer), Michael Meredith (Director of Strategy) and Jill Hogan (Communications (New Hospital)) attended the meeting on 7 December 2021. Two presentations were received on the new hospital development and the recent Care Quality Commission (CQC) report.



M Meredith outlined the new hospital development that was one of eight, national 'pathfinder projects' in the Government's new hospital programme. Extensive engagement had been carried out with staff, patient groups, stakeholders and through workshops. The Design brief was completed.

PAHT had high ambitions on the strategies produced on net zero carbon, facilities management, procurement, modern methods of construction, communications and engagement and digital.

Photo credit © Gilling Dod Architects and BDP

Courtesy of: Princess Alexandra Hospital Trust (image for illustrative purposes only and subject to change).

The PAHT Senior Executive Team answered many detailed questions on the new hospital development. It was in the final stages of completing the land purchase so that planning and works

preparation could be progressed. Further engagement on its website would be undertaken with the public and community groups on the final designs as well as briefing councillors in the district and finalising the transport strategy.

An overview of the CQC report was presented by L McCarthy. The inspection, carried out in July and August 2021, was based around five domains – were services safe, effective, caring, responsive and well-led. The impact of Covid had been significant on everyone. There had been a 19% increase in demand for care on the emergency services between April 2020 and now, so there was enormous pressure on staff to care for patients and use of PPE equipment to keep people safe. There was a separate emergency department for Covid patients to reduce infections, so having two emergency footprints was an additional strain on services. The CQC report detailed 18 must do's and 11 should do's but otherwise remained good on most services. The actions the PAHT must do were outlined in the presentation, which was attached to the minutes for information, and covered – themes of good practice, consistent themes for improvement, actions taken and work underway, and the next 12 months. Members' questions covered a whole range of issues, and it was timely that they had had this opportunity to receive answers directly.

West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group, Dr Rob Gerlis (Chairman), Peter Wightman (Managing Director) and Ian Tompkins (Corporate Services Director), attended the meeting on 27 January 2022.



Health & Care Partnership

During a presentation, the Committee heard that the Health and Care Bill published July 2021, set out proposals to reform the delivery and organisation of health services in England.

From 1 April 2022, Epping Forest District would become part of the Herts and West Essex Integrated Care System (ICS) along with other district and county authorities, all NHS Trusts in the area, the voluntary sector and Healthwatch. The ICS comprised two statutory parts – an Integrated Care Board, NHS Hertfordshire and West Essex, responsible for NHS functions and budgets; and the Integrated Care Partnership that brought together a wider set of system partners to develop a plan to address the broader health, public health and social care needs of the local population. The Hertfordshire and West Essex ICS would have three of these 'places' – two in Herts and one for West Essex. The West Essex 'place' was known as the One Health & Care Partnership. The Community and Regulatory Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor A Patel, Housing Services Portfolio Holder, Councillor H Whitbread, represented the Council on the Epping Forest Health and Wellbeing Board. During a detailed question and answer session, members asked about a range of health issues including: ICS' recruitment strategy; health equity work as there had been low uptake of the Covid vaccination especially in Waltham Abbey; public transport issues in rural areas accessing medical services; substance abuse; greater use of community hubs and pharmacies to promote wider access to health services; how these changes might improve socioeconomic inequalities; how Section 106 monies were utilised; and what councillors could do to help.

Epping Forest Youth Council annual report of activities

Youth Councillors – Sonny Bazzoni (Epping St John's School), Martin Prinsloo (Davenant Foundation), Daniel Turner (Debden Park High School) and Finlay Wallbanks (The Ongar Academy) presented the highlights of their work over the past year.



This centred on the following activities:

- ▶ **MiLife C19** – this 10-week schools virtual programme has given young people what they need to build their emotional resilience through a range of teacher led workshops. The website <https://www.rbf.org.uk/milife> incorporates bespoke resources directly relating to Covid 19 and its impact on young people, addressing good mental health and wellbeing. This also includes a variety of physical and cultural activities.

- ▶ **Youth Conference** – on 19 November 2021 the Epping Forest Youth Council hosted its bi-annual Youth Conference. The full day event saw 67 young people from five of the District’s secondary schools attend the Civic Offices for a day focussed on climate change issues and youth democracy.
- ▶ **Youth Elections** – Youth Councillors had been instrumental in recruiting potential candidates in their schools for the Youth Elections in February / March 2022.
- ▶ **Youth Activities Map 2022** – extensive research had been carried out to update the map. It was an excellent interactive resource and could be searched by address, place or by category. New youth projects can be added to the map, simply by completing the online form on the website at: <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/community/youth-projects/>
- ▶ **Awards** – 8 Youth Councillors received achievement awards from the Council Chairman, Cllr H Kane, at this year’s Civic Awards in March and 6 Youth Councillors received the Jack Petchey Achievement Award for their outstanding work.

Pre-scrutiny highlights

Pre-scrutiny of Cabinet decisions took a leap forward for all the scrutiny committees this year. The regular review of the Cabinet Forward Plan was an important function of the Committee.

Qualis Four-Year Business Plan

Councillor J Philip (Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development Portfolio Holder) clarified that Qualis has been set-up by the Council to be successful and to do the business it wanted Qualis to do although it was a separate development and property management company. Introduced by A Small (Strategic Director and 151 Officer), the Committee pre-scrutinised the Qualis Four-Year Business Plan 2021/22 to 2024/25, prior to Cabinet’s decision on 12 July.



It was a requirement of the Shareholder agreement that Qualis produced and presented each year to the Council, a one year and a four-year Business Plan for the Council to consider and sign-off. Details of future service transfers and a template for such business case transfers featured in the business plan. Councillor J Philip encouraged members to be positive about Qualis and look at what Qualis was expecting to undertake. He fully expected the one year and four-year Business Plan to be updated, as there might be changes along the way.

Sale of the Pyrles Lane site, Loughton, to Qualis

Qualis Commercial Development Director, S Rutter, outlined the redevelopment proposal, which was a Local Plan site and was at the pre-application stage in June 2021 with the Local Planning Authority. The scheme was to comprise 33 houses, which was increased to 37 sometime after the meeting, with a suitable access road. Members questioned the parking provision, the percentage of affordable housing, and that the carbon footprint should be kept as low as possible. There were also concerns that the water supply to the GROW community garden was not cut off but preserved and any damage caused by construction traffic would be rectified.

Town Centre Regeneration

At 8 June 2021 meeting, Portfolio Holder Councillor J Philip introduced the Town Centre Regeneration reports for Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping high streets. The District had more than one key town centre and they were all very different. A consultant, Mr P Messenger, was commissioned to produce detailed reports in the first half of 2021. He was appointed the Council’s Town Centre Project Manager and had looked at these as retail centres. Each one had its own characteristics.



The Broadway, Loughton

Queens Road, Buckhurst Hill



The reports provided a starting point of a localist approach. The Council instigated short term measures to deal with current challenges, as high streets reopened. It also proposed medium-term and long-term strategies to develop over time further initiatives and was one stakeholder in the partnerships. The Committee's pre-scrutiny highlighted many issues and concerns, including accessibility for people with disabilities. Consideration should be given to improvements that could be made which might be obstacles for people with disabilities.

View the minutes here [Overview and Scrutiny 8 June](#)

Climate change and sustainable transport update

The Committee considered progress on the climate change and sustainable travel agendas in October 2021. A public consultation on the draft Climate Change Action Plan took place from October to November, and a member briefing was also held. F Edmonds' (Climate Change Officer) update outlined a proposal to plant around 2,300 trees in Jessel Green (Loughton) to enhance the local environment, funded by a £65,000 grant from the Forestry Commission's Local Authorities Treescapes Fund. Members were concerned that the open aspect of the green might be compromised. They queried how officers would reduce the number of trees that might die, which could be achieved through only using hardy trees with a survival rate of 75%. The Portfolio Holder Decision on this was later called-in by five councillors (see overleaf). Other initiatives included the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery scheme which would help to raise the energy efficiency of lower income and low energy performance homes with a focus on energy performance certificate (EPC) ratings of E, F or G. Split into three phases, the first had been completed in August 2021 with nine properties upgraded. It was also reported that a carbon literacy toolkit had been trialled with some Service Managers that would be used to teach staff the basics of climate change science.

S Lloyd-Jones (Sustainable Transport Officer) outlined progress on electric vehicle charging (EVC) points in the District's car parks and an increase in the provision of on-site charging at the Civic Offices to accommodate the EFDC and Qualis fleet conversion to EV. A campaign was underway to understand incentives and barriers to the adoption of EV by minicabs and taxis. The use of streetlamps was not favoured by Essex County Council but at least 36% of local homes did not have access to viable off-street parking, which would seriously impede EV adoption within the next 18 months. General local commuting was still low as a result of hybrid / working from home and other major users like the elderly, who were still being cautious because of Covid. An EV bus would be trialled in November and December between the Broadway and the Epping Forest Retail Park in Loughton. Demand responsive travel (DRT) would be piloted in the District to Epping Green and Harlow. Work was ongoing as there was a demand from school pupils who needed to reach schools in Epping, Loughton and Chigwell. Members raised some interesting points, such as using Council-owned lamp posts for EVC, and that priority should be given to housing residents where it was not possible to charge at properties. The trial of E-on's vehicle to grid method at the Civic Offices could be a way to expand the system and there was a definite need for it by taxis and road fleets of small electric vans. Also, as disabled drivers might find it difficult to access EVC points, S Lloyd-Jones was looking into how different kits performed to national standards.

Climate Change Action Plan consultation update

The Climate Change Officer updated the Committee on 31 March 2022. The draft action plan had been approved by Cabinet and a public consultation was held last autumn. The methods, a summary of the responses received and changes to the Climate Change Action Plan were detailed in the report. The consultation survey included general questions around individual and community behaviours to understand the level of engagement with climate change in the District and to inform a behaviour change strategy for the future. The survey asked other questions related to

businesses, travel and the Climate Change Action Plan itself. The Epping Forest Youth Council also participated in the consultation and provided valuable input.

Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Transport Strategy

N Polaine (HGGT Director) and I Braddick (HGGT Lead) attended the meeting on 18 November. I Braddick introduced the report with a short presentation outlining the reasons and ambitions crucial to the endorsement of the HGGT Transport Strategy. It had been developed to meet the ambitions for sustainable movement set out within the HGGT vision, against the backdrop of the challenges of future travel demand linked to planned growth as set out in the Council's emerging Local Plan. The Council had declared a climate emergency in 2019. With transport now the largest contributor to UK greenhouse gas emissions, the HGGT transport strategy supported the highest commitment across the Garden Town Authorities to become carbon-neutral by 2030. Key to this was making it easier to choose to travel sustainably, by providing reliable and high quality sustainable and active travel routes, and by creating connected communities and safe, enjoyable streets that offered local facilities and travel options for everyday activities. The Committee pre-scrutinised the strategy, as Cabinet's decision was due on 25 January 2022.

Epping Forest Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) Strategy

Vicki Willis (Principal Planning Officer) introduced the detailed report concerned with the potential impact of residential development on the Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in relation to additional visitors using the Forest for recreational purposes. The Council had a legal duty as a 'competent authority' under the Habitats Regulations to protect such internationally important sites, which could be best achieved using measures put in place at the Local Plan level. The Partnership Agreement was jointly developed by the Council with other competent authorities, Natural England and the Corporation of London as the delivery body. It would replace the 'Interim Approach to Managing Recreational Pressure on the Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation' adopted by the Council in October 2018. The document outlined the updated SAMM Strategy for Epping Forest and the governance arrangements to ensure that financial contributions that had been / would be collected from developments were spent in accordance with the purposes for which they had been secured and that proper monitoring of spending would be put in place. Following a number of questions raised by members, the Chairman asked if the Committee's recommendations could be taken into account by the Cabinet at its meeting on 11 April 2022.

Terms of Reference revised – Stronger Place Select Committee

Last autumn the select committee reviewed and proposed updates to its Terms of Reference. As this was within the remit of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, members considered and approved at the meeting on 12 October 2021, the proposed changes the select committee had drafted. It was recommended that the other select committees review their Terms of Reference by the last meeting in this municipal year, so the Overview and Scrutiny could approve any amendments at the first meeting in the new municipal year, going forward.

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

Qualis 2020/21
Q2 monitoring report
(8 June 2021)

Covid-19
update
(12 October 2021)

Corporate Plan
quarterly performance
reports
(regular item)

Trees
- new policy on the
Council's approach to
trees impacting on the
safety of its assets
(3 June 2021)

Cabinet Forward Plan
Key Discision Lists
(regular item)

Local High Streets
Task & Finish Panel
(initial meetings held in
December 2021 and
March 2022)

Call-in – tree planting ➡

An informal but productive meeting was held on 1 November 2021 with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and officers, regarding the call-in by Councillor C C Pond and four other councillors of the Housing Services Portfolio Holder Decision PFH-004-2021/22 (Jessel Green tree planting following a successful grant bid). Although the councillors who called-in the PFH decision supported tree planting in Loughton, they were opposed to planting all the 2,300 trees of unspecified species on Jessel Green, as this would detract from the openness of this public



open space. A useful site visit took place on 25 November 2021 after the informal meeting, which resulted in the agreement that the allocation of the 2,300 trees should be shared between three sites – Jessel Green and Rochford Green in Loughton and Limes Farm in Chigwell. A revised PFH decision was approved, which identified additional tree planting sites in Debden and Chigwell. Also, approved was the future Housing Revenue Account budget provision for tree maintenance from 2025/26, the costs for which were expected to be approximately £5,000 per annum.

Public scrutiny questions ➡

Public scrutiny in action saw a resident submit two questions to the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in time for 1 July 2021 committee meeting. This was in respect of the Qualis Finance Report. The minutes (see pages 2 – 3) can be viewed at the weblink below [Overview and Scrutiny 1 July 2021](#)

Agendas and minutes ➡

Overview and Scrutiny Committee agendas and minutes can be accessed on the website at: <https://rds.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=395&Year=0>

Joint Meeting of Overview Scrutiny Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen

The joint meeting is held six-monthly. It provides the scrutiny chairmen and vice-chairmen with an opportunity to discuss any issues raised with the Executive Leadership Team and the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager. The joint meetings were held on 22 July 2021 and 20 January 2022. Discussion items raised included:

- ▶ Alignment of select committees' Terms of Reference with the Corporate Plan
- ▶ Attaining an equitable balance between the scrutiny committees' work programmes
- ▶ Role of the select committee chairmen reporting fuller progress report against their work programmes at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- ▶ External scrutiny options with suggestions
- ▶ Overview and scrutiny training – current and future requirements
- ▶ Local High Street Task and Finish Panel

Agendas and minutes ➡

Joint meeting agendas and minutes can be accessed on the Intranet at: <https://eppingforestintranet.moderngov.co.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=770&Year=0>

Task and Finish Panels

Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel

The panel had been suspended with the onset of the Covid crisis after its first meeting in February 2020. During the Covid pandemic, high street economic development initiatives were led by Councillor John Philip, Finance, Qualis and Economic Development Portfolio Holder.



Loughton High Road



Epping High Street

The panel was reconvened on 20 December 2021. Town centre regeneration in the District was being coordinated by the Economic Development Team, J Houston (Economic Development Specialist) and P Messenger (Town Centres Manager). They updated members at the meeting on progress made on the District's high streets. Members were seeking a further panel meeting but asked officers to draft a refreshed Terms of Reference with a new post-Covid timeframe.

Agendas and minutes



► **Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel** agenda and minutes can be viewed at this weblink: <https://rds.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/ieListMeetings.aspx?CId=819&Year=0>

Waste Management Task and Finish Panel

The Task and Finish Panel managed to conclude the bulk of its work as its last meeting was early March 2020 before the first Covid lockdown. At the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16 July 2020, a recommendation was made to reconvene the panel when there was any new information arising from the Environment Bill, which was re-introduced to Parliament on 30 January 2020 following the general election in December 2019, and /or any new legislation introduced by the Government.