# *Report to Local Council Liaison Committee*

**Epping Forest District Council**

# *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)**

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**Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

To provide a progress report to the Local Council Liaison Committee following on from the last report on 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 don 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