

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT LOCAL COUNCILS' LIAISON COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 8 November 2006 **Time:** 7.00 - 8.20 pm

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

**Members
Present:**

Representing Epping Forest District Council:

Councillor(s): Mrs A Haigh (Chairman), Councillor J Salter (Vice-Chairman), R Morgan, Mrs C Pond and Mrs J H Whitehouse

Other Councillors:

Councillor(s): None.

Representing Essex County Council:

County Councillor(s): C Finn and G McEwen

Representing Local Councils:

Councillor Mrs D Borton (Nazeing Parish Council),
Councillor E Borton (Nazeing Parish Council),
Councillor Ms G Castle (Nazeing Parish Council), Councillor J Farren
(Stapleford Abbots PC), Mrs D Harris (Sheering Parish Council),
Councillor R Northwood (Sheering Parish Council),
Councillor R Pearce (Loughton Town Council), Mrs P Smith (Epping
Upland Parish Council) and Councillor Mrs J Woods (Loughton Town
Council)

Apologies: **Epping Forest District Council –**

Councillor(s): B Sandler

Essex County Council –

Councillor(s): A Jackson and Councillor C Pond

Parish/Town Councils: -

Councillor Ms J Hedges (Epping Town Council)

**Officers
Present:**

J Scott (Joint Chief Executive), P Sutton (Asst Head of Planning
Services (Forward Planning & Environment)), I Willett (Head of
Research and Democratic Services), R Jones (Tenant Participation
Officer), C Sobey (Principal Housing Officer (Information)) and
G J Woodhall (Democratic Services Officer)

By Invitation: None.

31. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2006 be taken as read and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

32. FORMER COUNCILLOR KEN PERCY

The Chairman informed the Committee of the death of former Councillor Ken Percy, who had been a respected member of the Local Council's Liaison Committee, had contributed to the Standards Committee, and had diligently served Fyfield and the District. The Vice-Chairman added that former Councillor Percy had died of cancer two weeks previously. There had been a private family funeral and a letter of condolence had been sent to the family on behalf of the Epping Forest branch of the Essex Association of Local Councils. There was a minute's silence in memory of former Councillor Percy.

33. DISTRICT, TOWN AND PARISH CHARTER REVIEW

The Chairman informed the Committee that the review of the District, Town and Parish Charter had almost finished and the Review Group had requested that an additional meeting of the Committee be arranged in December 2006 in order to consider and approve the revised Charter. All Parish and Town Councils would be encouraged to attend.

The Head of Research and Democratic Services stated that the operation of consultation arrangements over planning applications had been reviewed, along with the procedures for surplus land, restricted covenants and Quality Town or Parish Councils. Anti-Social Behaviour Orders had been added to the Charter, along with a list of which preserved trees were the responsibility of the District Council or County Council. As the Highways Agency had reverted to the County Council, this section had been radically reduced and rewritten.

The Vice-Chairman added that enforcement was a vital part of the planning process, and should be part of the Charter. The Charter was also based upon trust as there were no penalties within it for non-compliance.

RESOLVED:

That, in order to approve the revised District, Town and Parish Charter, an extraordinary meeting of the Local Councils Liaison Committee be held on Wednesday 6 December 2006.

34. PARISH AND TOWN COUNCIL ELECTIONS 2007

The Chairman asked the Committee to consider publicity measures in order to encourage more local residents to get involved with Parish and Town Councils. The Epping Forest branch of the Essex Association of Local Councils had already proposed utilising The Forester and the District Council's website, and had also indicated that limited grant aid might be available for this purpose. The Chairman suggested that case studies of Parish Councillors be placed on the District Council's website as well. The Head of Research and Democratic Services reminded the meeting that the deadline for articles for the Spring edition of The Forester was 28 November 2006.

RESOLVED:

That, in order to encourage more local residents to get involved with Parish and Town Councils, The Forester and the District Council's website be utilised for publicity purposes.

35. PLANNING SUB-COMMITTEES RESTRUCTURE

The Chairman of the Constitutional Affairs Scrutiny Panel reported upon the progress of the review of the District Council's Area Plans Sub-Committees. The Committee were informed that nine Parish and Town Councils had responded to the consultation letter, which had indicated unanimous support for the principle of local Area Plans Sub-Committees, as well as the principle that planning decisions should be made by the local District Councillors for the area concerned. In addition, it also emerged that Sub-Committee 'A' should probably remain unchanged whilst the areas should reflect the differences between rural and urban communities. The fundamental issues were whether the number of Sub-Committees should remain at four or be reduced to three, and what areas the revised Sub-Committees should cover.

The Panel had yet to reach a final decision, however the following options had been identified:

- 3 Sub-Committees, the present Plans A plus two new Sub-Committees based upon a rural/urban split;
- 3 Sub-Committees, the present Plans A plus two new Sub-Committees based upon a east/west split;
- 4 Sub-Committees, but amend the current boundaries to reflect community differences;
- 3 Sub-Committees, by combining Plans B and C; or
- No change.

The Panel was due to meet again on 4 December 2006 to discuss the options and make a final recommendation to the Council.

The Epping Forest branch of the Essex Association of Local Councils felt that the emphasis on determining planning applications within eight weeks had compromised the quality of decisions taken and that the emphasis should be on a balanced decision that was good for the District. However, a letter had been sent to the local councils in July 2006 that had suggested meeting the eight-week deadline for determining applications was no longer a priority. In respect of the future structure of the Area Planning Sub-Committees, the local councils had not reached a consensus on the best arrangement of area and sub-committee. However, it was felt that the current focus on only three sub-committees was wrong, and the retention of Sub-Committee 'A' in its current form would still see 40% of planning applications handled by one Sub-Committee.

The Joint Chief Executive (Community) responded that the District Council had not been meeting its targets in respect of determining planning applications, and hence it had been placed in special measures. The District Council was now meeting the Government's targets and had been taken out of special measures, but had not achieved top quartile status in respect of its best value performance indicators. The District Council needed to continue to meet the Government's targets in order to avoid more intensive Comprehensive Performance Assessments. However, Councils who achieve top quartile status generally refused more applications, and the District Council's quality of decision-making was generally good, as evidenced by the Council's performance at Planning Appeals. In respect of the future structure of the Area Plans Sub-Committees, it was for members to decide the number of Sub-Committees that there should be in the future.

The Assistant Head of Planning and Economic Development (Forward Planning) reminded the Committee that the Planning Delivery Grant received by the District Council was based purely upon the speed of decision-making rather the quality, with the Council meeting the eight-week target to determine the majority of its applications. The District Council had received in excess of £100,000 Planning Delivery Grant over the last four years, and this funding had been utilised to further improve performance.

Loughton Town Council suggested that Areas Plans Sub-Committee 'A' should be split into two sub-committees meeting fortnightly in order to allow all the members in the area to serve and to ease the time pressure for the determination of applications. The Chairman of the Constitutional Affairs Scrutiny Panel stated that the majority of the Councillors within the Sub-Committee 'A' area had opposed this idea, and further advised the local councillors to either consult their District Councillors or attend the meeting of the Constitutional Affairs Scrutiny Panel on 4 December 2006.

36. EXPANSION OF INDUSTRIAL AND COMMERCIAL USES IN FARM BUILDINGS

The Assistant Head of Planning and Economic Development (Forward Planning) reported that under Government guidance for the sustainable economic development of rural areas, there had been a number of planning consents for the conversion of agricultural and horticultural buildings to other uses, which had resulted in rural industrial sites producing unforeseen volumes of traffic on inadequate roads. It was highlighted that some of these planning consents had been granted on appeal. The Local Development Framework was in its early stages of development and the Committee was asked to consider whether to endorse a policy of not permitting any further new development to occur at such application sites within the Green Belt, for inclusion within the Framework.

The Epping Forest branch of the Essex Association of Local Councils stated that the aim of the Government policy was to encourage the use of redundant agricultural buildings, but some small industrial sites had been developed in areas where the local road network could not support the volume of traffic. The District Council currently had no policy to resist the growth of such sites. Some planning applications had already been lodged to expand these sites, and the local councils would be in favour of such a policy.

The Assistant Head of Planning and Economic Development (Forward Planning) added that with the new policy in place, planning applications to expand such sites would still be judged on its merits, however there would be a risk that these planning applications would be granted on appeal, as industrial use of the site would have already been established.

RESOLVED:

That a policy of not permitting further development of small industrial sites within the Green Belt be endorsed for inclusion in the new Local Development Framework.

37. PLANNING ENFORCEMENT

The Assistant Head of Planning and Economic Development (Forward Planning) reported that the Planning Enforcement team had suffered recently with staffing issues and had not been at full strength until this week. Information on planning enforcement performance had been regularly circulated every six months in the Members' Bulletin, and local councillors should contact the Planning Enforcement team if they had had any planning enforcement queries or concerns.

38. TENANT PARTICIPATION IN RURAL AREAS

The Tenant Participation Officer presented a report concerning tenant participation in rural areas. As part of the District Council's Tenant Participation Strategy, methods of encouraging greater involvement from tenants in the rural parts of the District had been investigated. To facilitate this process, a Rural Tenant Participation Focus Group had been established and had its inaugural meeting on 12 December 2005. At this meeting, it was agreed that the Tenant Participation Officer would liaise with all the Parish Councils within the District to explain the benefits of tenant participation and request assistance in establishing either new tenants associations or encouraging participation through a Rural Tenants Forum. The Rural Tenants Forum was in the process of being set up and a database of interested tenants had been established. The first meeting would be held at the end of November 2006 with tenants from Abbess Roding, Matching Tye, Moreton, Roydon and Sheering in attendance. A Rural Tenant Participation Strategy would also be introduced in order to facilitate this process, and it was hoped that the Rural Tenants Forum would expand to encompass all the rural areas within the District.

39. SUMMARY OF THE GREEN ARC PROJECT

The Assistant Head of Planning and Economic Development (Forward Planning) presented a report summarising the Green Arc project. The Committee were informed that the aim of the Project was to make the countryside more accessible and also improve its quality. This could include improvements to footpaths and footpath signage, land management and projects to improve understanding of the countryside. This would provide the Green Belt with a positive function in addition to its stated purpose of openness. A project team had been established hosted by Essex County Council, with a Steering Group of which the District Council was a member. The District Council's principal role on the Steering Group was to contribute local knowledge and expertise, as well as ensure that the project engaged with the local community in a proper manner. Significant funding had been made available to purchase land for the Green Arc to act as buffer land for the Green Belt, and land in Theydon Bois and Matching Green had been subsequently acquired. Current work included the development of a Communications Strategy to actively engage the community at all levels.

RESOLVED:

That the Project Director of the Green Arc Project be invited to the meeting of the Committee scheduled for 7 March 2007 in order to give a presentation regarding the likely impact of the Green Arc upon the protection of the Green Belt within the District.

40. WEST ESSEX AREA FORUM - JANUARY MEETING

The Joint Chief Executive (Community) drew the attention of the Committee to a letter that had been attached to the agenda regarding the scheduled meeting of the West Essex Area Forum on 29 January 2007. The letter invited Parish and District Councils to put forward items for discussion at the meeting as the County Council would put no reports forward for consideration. This approach had been taken to make the Forum more relevant to local councils in an effort to encourage better attendance and involvement.

One item put forward for possible inclusion by the Committee was a review of Mobile Libraries. The Chairman of the County Council stated that the scheduling of Mobile Libraries was currently being reviewed to improve their coverage of the county, and that

the Government was also due to produce a White Paper upon Libraries. Another possible item for inclusion was the condition of pavements and roads throughout the county and a review of the new Highways Agency arrangements. The Committee were informed that the programme of planned works for the next two years was available from the County Council.

41. FIFTY FAVOURITE TREES PROJECT

The Assistant Head of Planning and Economic Development (Forward Planning) informed the Committee about the Fifty Favourite Trees project that was being run by Countrycare and supported by a £25,000 Local Heritage Initiative Grant. The purpose of the project was to determine the fifty favourite trees within the District via nominations from the widest possible range of people and organisations within the District; sixty-six nominations had been received to date. A website for the project had been set up at www.favouritetrees.org.uk.

42. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Committee were reminded that funding was available from the County Council for projects that involved the planting of wildflowers.

43. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted that an extraordinary meeting had been arranged for 6 December 2006, and the next regular meeting had been scheduled for 7 March 2007; both meetings would be held in the Council Chamber and commence at 7.00pm.

CHAIRMAN