

Draft Annual Scrutiny Report 2020 – 21

Photo of the Leader

Introduction from the Leader of the Council – Councillor Linda Haysey

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact world-wide, including on the council and local business, not only economically but socially, as the Council continues to work with all its partners in trying to support those in greatest need. I am pleased to report that during these unusual times the Council has worked with partners such as Hertfordshire County Council and numerous support and volunteer groups, to reassure residents that no one will be forgotten. I am also happy to say that East Herts employees have embraced new methods of working mandated by the Government for the protection of all, with professionalism with no diminution in the provision of Council services – they all have my thanks together with those of the Chief Executive.

New legislation has allowed Local Authorities to hold remote meetings so that the democratic process can continue and that decision making remains transparent and publically accountable. Although main meetings of the Council have been live-streamed and available via YouTube, it is difficult to judge whether this has deterred public participation – it is my sincere hope that it has not and for those who feel that their voices have not been heard, I would urge them to maintain close contacts with your elected representatives.

The report author has explained to Members that many of the actions commenced in 2019 were concluded or may be ongoing in 2020. As a result there may be a consequent overlap of some actions and reports. It may therefore be helpful if this report is read

in conjunction with the 2019-20 Annual Scrutiny report, which was itself delayed due to the pandemic.

What follows is a summary of what the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has reviewed during the 2020-21, period commencing with its first meeting on 16 June 2020. All reports and minutes are available from the link below

[Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Browse Meetings](#)

16 June 2020

Revised Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) Policy and Use of Social Media in Investigations Policy

The Head of Legal and Democratic Services submitted a report proposing that the Council's Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) Policy, which had not been reviewed since 2010, be revised and updated taking into account significant legislative changes which had occurred in the intervening decade; and that a new Use of Social Media in Investigations Policy be adopted in order to deal specifically with investigations carried out by these means. The proposals followed an inspection of the Council in November 2019 by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO), whose resulting report gave a recommendation of 'critical', outlining several areas where the Council was not meeting legal requirement; and actions that were required by June 2020 to address these.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that the revised Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) Policy and the new Use of Social Media in Investigations Policy be reviewed and the Executive Member for Corporate Services and the Head of Legal and Democratic Services be requested to give consideration to the matters raised by the Committee prior to the final proposed versions and accompanying report being sent for adoption by the Executive.

This issue has been included on the work programme for Overview and Scrutiny Committee and will be reviewed annually and reported back each June.

Street Cleansing and Verge Maintenance Update

A report was submitted which provided an overview of the street cleansing service (shared with North Herts District Council) and the verge maintenance service (delivered by East Herts Council on behalf of Hertfordshire County Council).

Members sought clarification on a number of issues, including contractor performance, the ecological importance of wild flowers in relation of verge cutting, frequency of street cleansing, ways of improving the service in relation to weed spraying and leaf clearance in rural areas and emptying bins in rural areas.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the update.

Development Management – Pre-Application Advice services

A report provided information on the Council's Development Management Pre-Application Advice Service and of a number of issues with the current operation of the service including fees and performance targets. These were being reviewed with the aim of improving the overall operation of the service and encouraging more customers to use it. The intention was to implement changes from autumn 2020. Members sought clarification on a number of issues including fees for minor and household applications and the nature of pre-application discussions.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed a number of actions including providing more information on the website to guide applicants, how and whether to involve Members in the pre-application process, to seek survey feedback from applicants on the

pre-application advice service and for officers to consider the legal weight of pre-application advice should a planning application be received.

Street Trading Consent Policy

Members considered a report proposing a revision of the Council's existing Street Trading Consent Policy taking into account relevant case law and best practice, and ways in which the policy could further the Council's latest priorities and objectives. Proposed key changes to the existing policy were outlined, the anticipated potential impacts of these changes, the proposed changes to fees and the consultation undertaken.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed a number of actions including asking the Executive Member for Wellbeing and Head of Housing and Health to consider comments raised by Members prior to drafting the final version of the proposed Street Trading Consent Policy (for agreement by Council) such as: an extension of the new policy to include: Chinese Lanterns, Helium Balloons and Fireworks, to discourage street trading within Air Quality Management Areas and to give existing traders affected by the new policy should be treated with the maximum consideration to avoid any adverse impact on existing businesses.

Hartham Leisure update by the Executive Member for Wellbeing

The Executive Member for Wellbeing provided a verbal presentation on the Development of Hartham Leisure Centre. The Executive Members stated that the planning application for Hartham Leisure Centre had been deferred by the Development Management Committee in January 2019 as Members were concerned at the potential impact of the proposed development on the sensitive setting of the site and regarding environmental sustainability.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the update and thanked the Executive Member for his presentation.

East Herts Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2023 - Progress Report

Councillor E Buckmaster, Executive Member for Wellbeing, introduced the report which provided a review of progress to date of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2023 and the Council's response to Covid-19. The strategy was designed to address nine identified health challenges detailed in the report and referred to a number of successful initiatives introduced by the Council including community grants, dementia-friendly initiatives and the launch of healthy hubs.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the update and thanked the Executive Member for his presentation. Members asked that the Council should continue to reach out to the volunteer network in response to Covid-19 and support the relaunch of the "Forever Active" Programme.

Housing and Health Strategy 2016-21 – Action Plan Progress Report

A report set out the progress made in 2019/20 in delivering the strategic objectives stemming from the Housing and Health Strategy Action Plan 2016-20 and the proposed new actions for 2020/21.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the objectives achieved from the Housing and Health Strategy Action Plan 2016-21 and that any suggestions which contributed to the overall strategic objectives be passed to the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods and the Head of Housing and Health for their consideration.

15 September 2020

Enhancing the Council's working arrangements with Registered Providers - Report of the Social Housing Task and Finish Group

The Head of Housing and Health, on behalf of a Task and Finish Group, presented a report that made a series of recommendations on how East Herts Council could enhance the way it worked with local registered providers of affordable housing to maximise the quality of housing services for those wishing or needing to rent or buy an affordable home or who were already an affordable housing tenant in East Herts. A number of meetings were held with social housing providers and residents during 2020.

The Executive considered and supported a number of recommendations on this matter on 5 January 2021 – this is considered further in the Annual Scrutiny Report 2019/20 and in further detail here [Executive - 5 January and draft minutes](#)

Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2021/22

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were asked to consider the latest available information around the current local Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme at East Herts and whether any changes to the scheme should be considered for 2021/22. The scheme had operated since April 2013 and replaced Council Tax benefit under the provisions of the Local Government Finance Bill. The scheme was required to be confirmed by Council by the 11 March in the preceding financial year.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee asked that the Executive be advised that Members supported the continuation of the current Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2021/22 and that alternatives schemes be investigated beyond 2021/22.

Policy for Enforcing Standards for Private Sector Landlords

Members received a report from the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods which set out a policy for the enforcement of standards for private sector landlords in East Herts following new enforcement powers as a result of changes in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 for dealing with landlords and property agents.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested that the Executive be advised that Members supported the proposed new policies relating to housing standards enforcement and the adoption of the powers introduced in the Housing and Planning Act 2016.

Environmental Climate Change Forum Update

Members were presented with a verbal update on the actions of the Environmental Climate Change Forum; the forum arose from a recommendation of the Task and Finish Group set up by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to explore this topic.

Much of the work of the Task and Finish Group had been incorporated into both the climate change declaration that had been made at Full Council on 24 July 2019 and the commitments and action flowing from the declaration. For more detailed information this issue please refer to the Annual Scrutiny Report 2019-20 and the Minutes of the Council meeting : [link to Council Minutes 24 July 2019](#)

3 November 2020

Presentation by the Leader and Chief Executive - How the Council reacted to the Coronavirus Pandemic

The Leader and the Chief Executive gave a presentation that detailed the ways that East Herts Council had responded to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The Leader referred to the pandemic milestones and said that the process of moving into phase three and

the exit and into recovery would be the subject of a very long discussion. The Leader congratulated Officers on the transition to homeworking in very difficult circumstances.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked the Leader and Chief Executive and received the presentation.

Revenues and Benefits Annual Report

Members received a report updating them on the Shared Service in terms of performance reporting, other challenges and the budget outturn. Officers had achieved very good average performance figures over the year in respect of processing housing benefit claims and change events. The Head of the Shared Service said that this performance was key to minimising waiting times for customers experiencing financial difficulty and also maximised the subsidy the authority received from the government.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the report

Update on Sustainability Action Plan

Members received a report setting out the latest version of the East Herts Sustainability Action Plan. The action plan had been prepared in order to respond to the carbon neutrality commitment agreed in the Council's Climate Change Motion of 24 July 2019. [Link to Motion and Minutes](#)

Members' input was encouraged in respect of the proposed actions and whether these were sufficient to meet the broad objective of the Council's Climate Change Motion and that updates would be submitted twice a year with the website being continually updated.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee confirmed that the current actions included in the initial iteration of the Sustainability Action Plan met the broad objectives of the Climate Change Motion; that

reports should be submitted twice a year and to update Members on a reduction in carbon against target annually both in relation to the Council's activities and across the District as a whole.

East Herts Council Complaints 2019-20

Members were presented with a summary of customer complaints which had been submitted to the Council and which included a new vexatious complaint policy "The Unreasonable and Persistent Behaviour Policy" for their consideration and approval by Council.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the progress made and recommended approval of the Unreasonable and Persistent Behaviour Policy for approval by Council.

Corporate Plan Update

Members received a report that provided an update on progress towards meeting the actions and targets set out in the Council's Corporate Plan entitled "East Herts: A Place to Grow".

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the progress against the Corporate Plan.

8 December 2020

Presentation on Policing in East Herts

At the invitation of Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Hertfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner set out a contextual picture for the presentation to be given by Deputy Chief Inspector Stuart Orton and Police Crime Commissioner. Significant reductions in crime during lockdown had been recorded but had then increased following a relaxation of restrictions. The presentation covered a number of issues, including knife crime in the District and "cuckooing" (when homes, sometimes occupied by those

who are vulnerable, are taken over by individuals and used for criminal activities).

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the presentation.

2 February 2021

Cultural Strategy

Members received a report inviting them to comment on a draft Cultural Strategy ahead of its submission to the Executive and before its determination by Council on 2 March 2021. The Cultural Strategy presented a very broad overview of the role culture played in people's lives and highlighted visions and ambitions that required partnership organisations to work with the Council. The content of the Cultural Strategy was debated at length and a number of observations were made including report successes in funding, the need to work on inclusivity and to ensure that measurable targets and actions were monitored. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee made a number of observations for the Executive's consideration. Council on 2 March 2021 approved the new Cultural Strategy.

Planning Enforcement Plan - review and update

Members received a report setting out a new approach in relation to Planning Enforcement. The Head of Planning explained that the levels of enforcement complaints were high and that a majority of enforcement investigations did not result in any further action being taken and the pressure this placed on the service in terms of its resources. It was felt that that the current system needed to improve and a new "triage" approach was needed to improve the overall effectiveness of the planning enforcement service.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee debated the issues at length expressing concern at the impact this had on the service and supported a recommendation that this new approach to planning enforcement have an opportunity to “bed-in” and for Members to be provided with an update report in 12 months.