



Annual Scrutiny Report 2021/22



Introduction from the Leader of the Council **Councillor Linda Haysey**



The Covid-19 pandemic continued to impact the council, local business and our communities throughout 2021-22. In these challenging times, we've worked together with our local partners, including Hertfordshire County Council, to provide vital services and support to residents and businesses. We've also developed progressive, forward-thinking and innovative policies through our corporate plan, which includes several ambitious capital projects that will enhance the lives of East Herts residents for many generations to come.

What follows is a summary of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee's activities during 2021-22, starting with its first meeting on 8 June 2021. All reports and minutes are available on the council's website, including those of the Executive and Council.

Comments from the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee **Councillor John Wyllie**



As Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, I would echo the Leader's comments. As a council, we always endeavour to support residents, to provide services which go above and beyond, and to strive for better as our towns and villages grow. Our plans for the district and the provision of services are driven forward by the corporate plan which is based on our "SEED" principles: Sustainability, Enabling our Communities, Encouraging Economic Growth and Digital by Default. By regularly reviewing our corporate plan, we feel that the council is best placed to achieve its goals by responding not only to the external environment, but also internally to officers who continue to support the council's agile approach and vision with commitment and positivity.

8 June 2021

Environmental Stability: Action Update



Members were provided with a presentation on Environmental Stability, which explained the enhanced measures the council had taken over the last six to twelve months to step up engagement with stakeholders and highlighting the key priorities for 2021/22.

Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2022/23

As part of the annual review, Members were asked to scrutinise the current local Council Tax Support Scheme and debated whether any changes should be made for the civic year 2022/23 given that the current scheme had not changed since 2013. Many residents had been affected by increased living costs but the Committee was assured that the government's approach to topping up Council Tax support, payment breaks and other measures had helped to address this.

Following scrutiny of the proposed options, a decision was made not to change the East Herts Local Council Tax Scheme for April 2022 and this was supported by the Executive and approved by Council on 1 March 2022.



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Council Tax Long Term Empty Premium

Members of the Committee were asked to consider a number of options regarding the Council Tax Long Term Empty Premium. Members were concerned about the number of properties which had been vacant for long periods of time and legislation allowed local authorities to impose premiums on Council Tax for homes which had been left empty. As a result Members favoured the option which would increase the maximum premium to 200% for properties empty for between 5 and 10 years and 300% for properties empty for over 10 years. Members also asked that the Executive give consideration to introducing a discretionary arrangement to remove the premium for up to one year, should the owner be willing to occupy the property once renovations had been completed. The Executive agreed to remove the premium for up to 12 months when new owners occupied within 12 months of purchase.

Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) Policy Annual Review

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered an update report on the annual policy review following recommendations from the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO) in their report from 24 November 2019. Members noted that issues highlighted in that report had now been implemented and the new policy was in place. Members supported a recommendation to review the policy annually and this was scheduled to be considered in June 2022.

Data Retention Policy Schedule

A revised Data Retention Policy was presented to Members to ensure that the Council remained compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) which related to keeping data for only as long as was required and ensuring compliance regarding data subjects rights of erasure. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee recommended the report to the Executive, which was subsequently adopted.

Data Breach Policy and Procedures

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on a revised Data Breach Policy and related procedural documents to ensure that the council had robust reporting procedures in place in terms of reporting any breaches to the Information Commissioner's Office. Members suggested the need for additional e-learning and training courses for Officers. The Executive agreed the revised Data Breach Policy and related procedural documents without amendment.

Draft Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for East Herts





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A draft strategy was presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee prior to the document being sent out for consultation. The purpose of the strategy was to ensure that the council could evidence that it was meeting the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 in terms of making reasonable adjustments in service delivery. One “SEED” priority was to gather and analyse data on some hard to reach groups and of the need for proactive engagement with differing demographics. Members debated the report at length suggesting the need to engage with the National Autistic Society to future proof service provision by East Herts and the need to consider the possibility of mandatory training for Officers in terms of unconscious bias and in providing safe spaces. Concerns were expressed regarding the wider population within East Herts that might identify as disabled (but not necessarily in receipt of benefits) and of those who might have long term chronic health conditions and not identified as disabled. Following consideration by the Executive, the strategy was adopted by Council on 28 July 2021.

Annual Plan and Refreshed Corporate Plan

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed a progress report on the corporate plan and refreshed priorities for the civic year 2021/22. Members queried the revised priorities in relation to the Queen’s Canopy Project, Wildlife areas (and sustainability on a ward by ward basis) and discretionary grants. Members supported the refreshed Corporate Plan adopted by Council on 28 July 2021.

7 September 2021

East Herts Tenancy Strategy for 2021 - 2026



In keeping with the requirements of the Localism Act 2011, the council's five year strategy was submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for consideration. This strategy was part of a suite of housing strategies that were in the process of being drafted. The strategy provided guidance to Registered Social Providers (RSPs) on the types of tenancies the council would like to see on offer in the district including a focus on rent levels. Members expressed concern on a number of issues including the difficulties single and young people experienced in accessing property, whether the strategy had sufficient strength given that RSPs were only to have regard to the Tenancy Strategy, affordable housing targets and penalties for failing to meet targets. Of particular concern was the issue of rent levels, affordability, the ratio of houses to flats being built and housing allowance rates in calculating housing benefits. Questions were asked regarding East Herts' performance in relation to homelessness and temporary accommodation versus other local authorities. Members recommended the adoption of the Policy to the Executive, which was approved by Council on 20 October 2021.

Hertford Theatre and Hartham Leisure Centre



An update was provided on two of the council's capital projects, Hertford Theatre and Hartham Leisure Centre. It was highlighted to the Committee that the project had achieved an excellent rating in terms of sustainability and both projects would play a big role in delivering the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and corporate goals for residents. Members raised a number of issues about the costs and timing of the capital projects and the background to closing Hertford Theatre earlier than anticipated. The Theatre's budget and accessibility for people with disabilities were discussed at length including the possible use of the Theatre's grounds as open air theatres in the Summer 2022. These concerns were fed back to the Executive.

An all Member Briefing on Hertford Theatre was provided on 17 February 2022. Following considerable debate, Council on 1 March 2022 agreed that the increase be funded from the Capital programme contingency.

Update on Economic Development in East Herts



The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered issues which contributed to economic development in the district and queried what could be done to attract large sites for commercial development and the preservation of residential units in town centres. Members supported the suggestion that Officers should report annually on this issue.

East Herts Complaints 2020/21

The council's complaints system is monitored closely and an update was provided on the significant increase in the number of complaints which had been upheld in 2020/21. Assurances were provided that there was no correlation between the increase and that many officers were working from home under Government guidance at the time. There were however some issues in relation to call centre performance which was attributable to staff turnover and increased calls. The Committee asked Officers to keep the matter under review and report back annually.



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2 November 2021

East Herts Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy

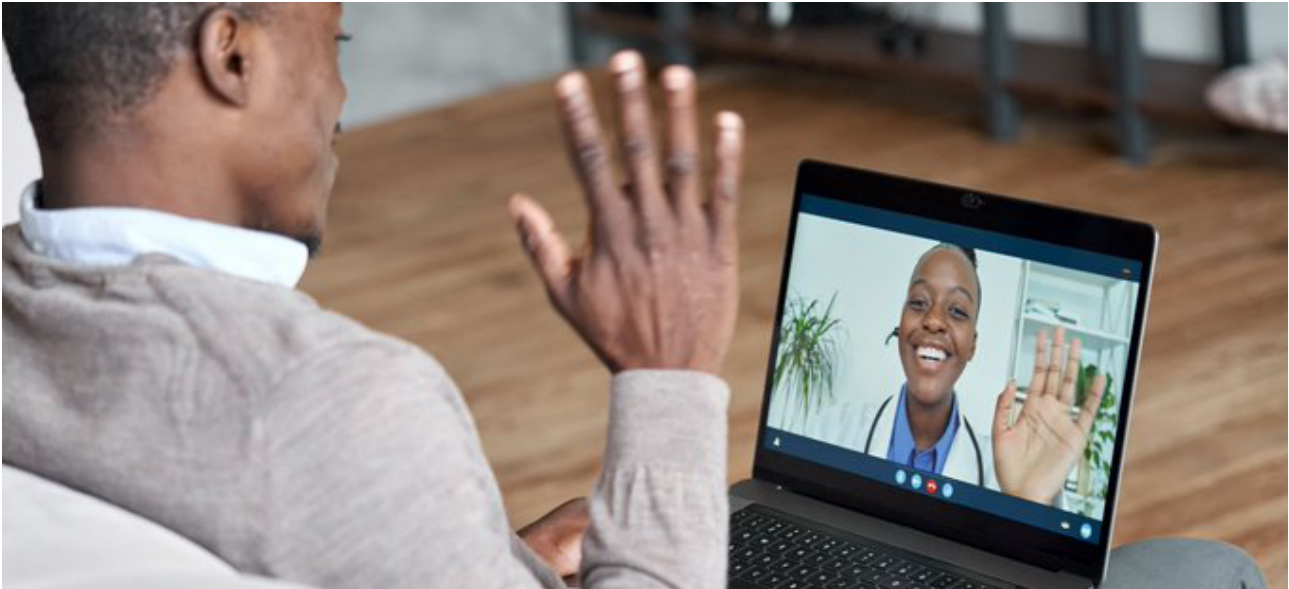
Members considered a report on a proposed East Herts Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy which detailed the way in which the Council provided financial and other assistance to owners and occupiers of private sector housing. The scheme had been drawn up working closely with partners and authorities across Hertfordshire. The main focus was moving away from a grant based system to a loans based system so that the council could help a larger number of vulnerable families. Members sought and were provided with clarification from the Executive Member for Neighbourhoods on:

- Whether housing associations could claim for the loans and questioned the process for those who did not qualify for a loan such as those in old properties and those with issues regarding cavity wall installation.
- Whether the scheme covered properties which were listed
- The position in relation to relatives being used to carry out work on any property
- Whether residents would be penalised if properties were difficult to insulate
- The set interest rate for Decent Home Loans and whether it would be prudent to have the interest rates set to track national interest rates.
- The importance of energy efficiency and how the Council could help those which were less efficient.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee gave, in principle, its support to the proposed new policy for Private Sector Housing Assistance subject to the change in wording regarding the inclusion of the word “proposed” in front of the reference to the “Housing Strategy”. Following comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Executive amended the recommendation to Council that the policy be amended to make it clear that any costs to the council associated with (A) placing a charge on the property to secure repayment to council funding and (B) recouping that funding are added to the sum repayable by the recipient. The Council adopted the Policy on 15 December 2021.

22 March 2022

Transformation Programme - Digital Exclusion



The Council's Transformation Programme and the "Digital by Default" principle within the Council's Corporate Plan ensured that the council continued to use and develop technology and connectivity to provide the best possible services for residents and businesses in East Herts. The council worked with partners to ensure that there were strong foundations to digitally enable communities. Those who were socially isolated and vulnerable were of particular concern to Members and at their request, presentations were provided by two external speakers from partner councils. These explained what actions were being progressed to maximise digital self-service through their respective websites, their successes and where areas for improvement lay and as partner / enablers building skills and confidence through others.

Of particular concern to Members was how people within East Herts who were less confident or less able to use digital services could be supported within its own overall approach to digital self-maximisation. Members acknowledged the issue of reduced staffing levels in customer services and how residents with complex queries impacted on telephone wait times and sought assurances that those who were vulnerable would continue to be supported and could receive advice via

telephone. The Committee felt that from the viewpoint of East Herts that it would be useful to be provided with figures and metrics. Of particular interest was the fact that there was a low online take up of business rates (6%) but that when a covid grant was offered to businesses the take up online was 100%. Members asked that the telephone system should be monitored to ensure that calls were answered quickly and that action should be taken to ensure that different software applications for resolving customer queries be effectively integrated systems where possible. Their comments were forwarded to the Executive for consideration.

Shared Waste Service: Governance Report



A report was considered which reflected on the future governance arrangements in relation to the Shared Waste Service arrangement from the viewpoint of contract performance and the alignment of services. Members were concerned about the differences between the aims and standards of both Councils and felt that there was a need to address the administrative function and how joint decisions should be made. They agreed that the service contract should be explored via the establishment of a joint cross party working group, with representatives from both East Herts and North Herts Councils and advised the Executive of their recommendation.

Street Cleansing Contract Performance



The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an overview of performance on street cleansing activities delivered by contractors on behalf of the council. Questions from Members centred on the cleaning of parks and open spaces, litter and dog waste bins, unblocking drains/gulleys, assisting community groups with local clearances, service tracking of missed bins, assisting Parish Councils and working with partners on the impact of street cleaning on the drainage system and what could be done to improve services. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked the Officers for the report.

Work programme – Civic Year

The issue of affordability of housing in East Herts had been a matter of concern for Members. While a Rapid Review of affordability of housing was proposed, the Housing Strategy had not yet been approved by Council and the Action Plans accompanying that Strategy were not yet operational. Members supported the suggestion that an in-depth report on the progress of those Action Plans be presented to the Committee at the September meeting.