

East Herts

Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24



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Councillor David Andrews

Introduction from the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

It is my pleasure as Chairman to provide a summary of the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee over the last 12 months. The District Elections in 2023 culminated in a change to the political make-up and Leadership of the Council. Notwithstanding this political change, the Council remains committed to providing its residents with the best service it can and is committed to challenging accepted norms and practices to achieve value for money for its residents in the face of an ever financially challenging economy and world events. I am confident that this good work will continue, supported and encouraged by our cohort of new Members with guidance from the Council's corporate plan.

This report summarises the committee's activities during 2023-24, starting with our first meeting on 20 June 2023. All reports and minutes are available on the council's website.



20 June 2023

East Herts Climate Change Strategy

Ever conscious of the need to support environmental issues and sustainability initiatives, Members were provided with an update on the Climate Change Strategy which detailed the Council's vision and what changes would be made between now and by 2030 to achieve its goal of being carbon neutral. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee sought assurances that other district council climate strategies had been reviewed when developing its own. Members stressed the need to reduce emissions, the promotion of car sharing and the need to provide electric vehicles for officer business related use. Members challenged the consultation exercise and debated the strategy at length seeking assurances on the need to include the Sustainability Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in the District Plan, to review the need for paper and plastic recycling and the need to work with its partners in achieving carbon neutrality.

Members endorsed the draft Climate Change Strategy 2022–26 for consideration by the Executive.



Waste Shared Service: Client Team and Corporate Support Service Arrangements

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report which detailed the outcomes of the Member-led working group between East Herts Council and North Herts Council (as part of the shared service arrangements) and workshops held with senior managers. This centred on the governance and corporate support arrangements to support the new waste, recycling and street cleansing contract effective in 2025. The background was to be able to support goals in relation to digital transformation and to ensure that residents received a consistent service across both East and North Hertfordshire. Processes and policies such as customer service provision would be aligned to support the new contract and minor updates had been made to service policies which would later come into force.

Members debated the report at length seeking clarity and assurances in relation to software integration, inter authority working and communication between service teams, staffing and ongoing issues in relation to recruitment and retention.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee supported the recommendation to approve the updated waste service policy statements from May 2025, that each Council lead on their own customer service provision and interactions, to identify resources and costs for integration into the customer relationship management system with Waste management IT system. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also recommended that the Executive support the proposed updates and changes to financial management and governance arrangements and subsequent changes to the Inter Authority Agreement outlined in the report.

Council Tax Support 2024-25

Members were presented with a report on the latest information around the current Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme at East Herts and considered whether any changes to the scheme should be considered for 2024-25. Officers explained that the scheme had been the same since 2013 and that there were no persuasive arguments to change the CTS scheme for 2024/25 thereby giving a certain degree of certainty to residents.

Clarity was provided in relation to the level of bad debts, issues in relation to those claiming Universal Credit and responsibilities in relation to council tax. Assurances were provided that the benefits team worked closely with those residents who were struggling.

Members supported the recommendation that there should be no changes to the East Herts local Council Tax Support Scheme for 2024-25.

12 September 2023

Pedestrian safety

Following a request to review the issue of pedestrian safety specifically in the Hertford Castle Ward, two Hertfordshire County Councillors were invited along to the Committee to provide an insight into Hertfordshire County Council's travel policy.

Members questioned whether equal consideration was given to pedestrians and cyclists and how this was reflected in budgets and specific funding for pedestrians and pavement repairs. A County Councillor provided a detailed update on the budgeting process for road and footway repair, repairs to cycleways and how schools featured in the criteria for a 20mph speed limitation. Members expressed their specific concerns regarding pedestrian safety, pavement and road conditions throughout the district. The development of a Local Cycling, Walking and Infrastructure Plans (LCWIP) was explained which would help support the Council in securing Government Grants. From the viewpoint of enforcement, Hertfordshire Police provided an update on their role and the use of speed camera traps and traffic speed boards to control speeding.

Members debated the report at length seeking clarification in relation to footpath clearance, pavement parking, enforcement of double yellow lines and the role of parents in educating their children about pedestrian and road safety.

Members agreed that it would be useful for the issue of pedestrian safety to be re-considered following further discussions between the Chairman and Vice Chairman with the possibility of a further report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee at some future date.

Air Quality in East Herts

Overview and Scrutiny Members were presented with a report which provided an update in relation to Air Quality matters in the three Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) in East Hertfordshire and on a proposed new Air Quality Action Plan. It was noted that although cars were producing lower emissions, there were more cars on the road adding to air pollution. The report was debated thoroughly including the importance of behavioural change.

Members were concerned that given the Climate Change Emergency, the Action Plan had insufficiently detailed content and therefore could not be submitted to the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) for their consideration. Members asked that a report and clearly defined Action Plan be re-submitted to their 16 January 2024 meeting.

Community Grants Policy and Priorities 2023-24

Members considered a revised community grants policy which would replace the maximum grant limit with a range of £500 – £3,000 which would enable the council to make a significant number of grants. An update was provided on what other projects from community groups would be eligible for grants from the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation. Suggestions were put forward on funding priorities including supporting young people in gaining employment. Grants were also available from the Stansted Airport Consultative Committee. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee debated how the revised policy would affect Town and Parish councils from the viewpoint of precept arrangements.

Members supported a recommendation to the Council to approve the revised Community Grants Policy including priorities for 2023-24.

Draft "A Listening Council: East Herts Council's Principles for Information Giving, Engagement and Consultation" Document

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report proposing a set of principles for adoption which would govern how the Council will inform, engage and consult residents, businesses and stakeholders. The report had been driven by the low electoral turnout at the District Elections in May 2023 and the need to engage in a more diverse manner with residents at the earliest opportunity especially on key issues such as housing, planning and licensing in order to hear more diverse views.

Following extensive debate, Members made a number of suggested changes to the document for further consideration by the Executive. Members also felt that it was important that consultation letters engaging early with residents, should be written clearly and concisely without jargon; this it was felt would be reflected in better election turnout figures. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also felt that it was important that the proposal would not impact financially on the council.

Members welcomed the approach and agreed that their comments be submitted to the Executive for consideration and decision by Council.



Community Forum and Development Management Forum

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on a proposal to develop community and development forums for strategic development sites in the district. It was felt that the establishment of regular community forums for large strategic sites for developers, residents and community groups to engage with one another over the lifetime of a development, would enhance the quality of community life and communication and impact positively on the number of complaints Members receive from residents. Additionally, the development of a Development Management Forum for planning applications of 50 homes or more would enable residents to share their views in an open and transparent way.

The proposal was carefully considered, resulting in Members making a number of recommendations which were referred to the Executive for consideration. Members also felt that this issue should be included on their work programme and reviewed in two years' time to allow the collation of meaningful data.

30 November 2023

Waste recycling and street cleansing contract service design

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the waste recycling and street cleansing contract service design. The Executive had agreed the service design for the new waste recycling and street cleansing contract on 25 October 2022. Members' thoughts were sought on the service design options which would be taken forward as part of the joint working arrangements with the intention of supporting the long-term financial sustainability of the service and the Council. Members were informed that new legislation on resources and waste strategy had been published on 21 October 2023 which may necessitate further consultation and a further report to Members.

Members sought clarification on a number of issues which were provided at the meeting and later agreed that these comments be referred onwards to the Executive.



16 January 2024

Thriving Together 2024-27: A new Health and Wellbeing Action Plan

Members were presented with a new health and wellbeing action plan for East Herts. The report set out the work which had already been undertaken with partners in the wider health and wellbeing services and ways to include residents whose comments had been included as part of the consultation process. Members welcomed the document but felt that there should be enough flexibility in it to allow various agencies and communities to engage. They also felt that measurable baselines should be introduced to establish the social and community benefits including the need to engage with young people.

Members noted that the Action Plan to support the new approach was in progress and of the need to ensure realistic timelines to achieve defined actions. The importance of investing in preventing illness was highlighted.

The “Thriving Together Health and Wellbeing Action Plan” was welcomed with Members recommending that their comments be forwarded to the Executive Member for Health and Wellbeing prior to its submission to the Executive for their consideration.

East Herts Air Quality Action Plan

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee received the final draft version of the Air Quality Action Plan following public and stakeholder consultation. It was noted that within the three Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) the main source of air pollution was attributable to vehicles and diesel cars. Members were keen to ensure that the Action Plan needed to be an evolving document over a period of five years.



The Overview and Scrutiny Committee debated the document extensively, specifically:

- That the Council's limited resources should be targeted to actions which had the most significant impact on the three AQMAs;
- Of the need to continually liaise with Hertfordshire County Council in terms of the public health to oversee progress on the AQAP;
- Of the need to encourage the public to change behaviour such as the use of wood burning stoves and anti-idling;
- To use funding sources for public health benefits such as Section 106 monies from planning developments;
- How a reduction in speed limits can impact on air pollution;
- Explore whether the Council can include enforceable air quality relation conditions on planning applications;
- Can the Council engage more with local MPs to overcome obstacles it faces when trying to improve air quality?
- The need to ensure sufficient staffing resources to implement and monitor the AQAP;
- A review of school travel plans to include schools from across the whole town not just those near AQMAs;
- To focus on pollution inside vehicles;
- That the Action Plan should include reference to the national move from fossil fuel vehicles to electric vehicles as mandated by statute;
- Whether NHS data on respiratory illnesses could be used to encourage engagement with air quality initiatives;
- To consider whether on street parking for bicycles be increased around flats, business and local tourist hot spots?

Members agreed that their comments be referred to the Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability for consideration prior to the Action Plan being presented to the Executive.

5 March 2024

UK Shared Prosperity Fund Update

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee were provided with an update on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and its delivery. Members were advised that East Herts was not considered to be an area of need. It would, however, receive an allocation of £1.77M based on a population formula payable over three years, which would be spent within the priority areas and on individual projects agreed at Council in January 2023. These priority areas and projects also had the agreement of the Executive Members following the May 2023 elections. Long time sustainability of supported projects with an aim on leaving a legacy were key match funding requirements given that there was uncertainty over future Government funding.

Despite efforts to contact all Parish and Town Councils to highlight the UK Shared Prosperity Funding availability, only 14 applications had been received from the 37 villages and towns with only six parish councils receiving UKSPF monies. Members noted that it was important to ensure that the right project was chosen for the right community so that it gave something back to the community.

The report was considered with Members highlighting some of their key concerns. The Chairman hoped that Members could be given a reasonable amount of time after the meeting to submit further funding suggestions to the lead Executive Member. Members asked that their comments be forwarded to the lead Executive Member for consideration and that Overview and Scrutiny Members be allowed a reasonable amount of time to come forward with suggestions for the use of the funding.