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Minutes of the meeting of the Essex Countywide Traveller Unit Joint Committee, held in the Chamber of County Hall, Chelmsford on Tuesday 23 November 2021

**Present:**

Cllr Mark Durham	Essex County Council
Cllr Jane Fleming	Maldon District Council
Cllr Godfrey Isaacs	Castle Point District Council
Cllr George Jeffery	Basildon Borough Council
Cllr Anthony McQuiggan	Essex County Council
Cllr Keith Parker	Brentwood Borough Council
Cllr Jannetta Sosin	Chelmsford City Council

**Also present:**

Paul Ashworth	Essex County Council
Alec Baker	Essex County Council
Gemma Bint	Essex County Council
Adrian Coggins	Essex County Council
Paul Downes	Essex Police
Matthew Harkness	Essex Police
Carron Nason	Essex County Council
Sally Mills	Essex County Council
Emma Tombs	Essex County Council

**1. Welcome, Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

The report of the Membership, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest was received and noted.

Apologies had been received from the following:

- Councillor Colin Day, Uttlesford District Council
- Councillor Robert Gledhill, Thurrock Council
- Councillor Paul Honeywood, Tendring District Council
- Councillor Beverley Oxford, Colchester Borough Council
- Councillor Wendy Schmitt, Braintree District Council
- Chief Inspector Terry Balding
- Colin Batchelor, Braintree District Council
- Tim Clarke, Tendring District Council

- Jane Gardner, Deputy Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner

There were no declarations of interest.

## 2. **Minutes of 1 July 2021 and matters arising from that meeting not covered in agenda.**

The minutes of the meeting held on the 1 July 2021 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

There were no matters arising.

## 3. **Operations Performance Update:**

### **Outreach Report**

The Committee received an update from Sally Mills, ECTU Outreach Officer, Essex County Council.

Employment: There had been a struggle with employment during the pandemic as there were high levels of people in the GRT communities that were self-employed, as a result of this a high number went onto Universal Credit and other benefits. However, recently a number of those people were starting to come off of those benefits as they had started work again.

Accessing benefits and services online was still a problem due to many from the GRT community having low literacy levels and limited access to the internet, multiple choice options over the phone could also be difficult resulting in them being unable to reach certain services such as housing and GP services.

Health: Weekly health days had started earlier this year on sites across Essex, six organisations were involved. The health days would help connect these organisations and the GRT community, building trust and cultural awareness. Unfortunately, some health days were cancelled due to a lack of staff or other access issues.

Concerns were raised in relation to the GRT community registering with GPs. It was confirmed that most of the GRT community were registered, but there was an issue with registering people who had moved into Essex. The majority of GPs refused to register them if they could not provide ID or proof of a permanent address, as this was not a requirement by law the ECTU was arguing this with GPs. It was highlighted that it was important for hospitals to not be overwhelmed and that GPs should deal with issues in the first instance if possible. It was also noted that within the GRT community there was a tendency to not go to a GP and instead present at hospitals with conditions that were then beyond treatment. The health days were set up to help resolve this issue, health professionals would be going onto the sites and to try and lower the number of hospital admissions.

Education: Many children from the GRT community were now back in school, although due to fears of Covid many did not return back until September. Many of the children were struggling since returning and were behind most of their peers due to not being able to access online learning during lockdown, either because of lack of devices or internet access or lack of parental guidance because of parents' own low literacy skills.

In response to questioning, it was confirmed that unfortunately a lot of the GRT children did miss out on the laptops that were distributed during lockdown, this was due to not knowing about the distribution scheme, the lack of Wifi and also parents not being able to log into the schools' systems. Where possible some schools were able to send paperwork out to the children. It was confirmed that the ECTU were supporting schools as much as they could in helping the GRT children catch up.

Most colleges had gone online which was also increasing barriers in regard to accessing college places. Due to a high number of applications, some colleges now required a basic level of Maths and English skills to get into basic college courses, this was an issue as some Travellers were now not getting a place due to the standards being changed.

The ECTU had continued to provide support via phone during lockdown, it was confirmed that this was slowly starting to go back to in person contact, appropriately socially distanced.

The Outreach Team were working on an Education project with the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Essex and five other counties across England to try and help GRT communities access education, including work on raising the number of GRT pupils transferring from Year 6 into Year 7. The Outreach Team were also developing e-learning packages in respect of cultural awareness to go out to schools and other services and organisations.

### **Unauthorised Encampments Report**

The Committee received an update from Alec Baker, ECTU Officer, Essex County Council.

The comparison between the June and October periods in 2020 and in 2021 showed that there was not much correlation between the encampments, the only similarity was in August for both years. There had been a reduction in the number of unauthorised encampments this year, particularly in September and October 2021.

The five-year trend showed a marked reduction of unauthorised encampments within Essex. The main reason for the reduction was likely that since ECTU had been established, the 6 main travelling families still travelled around the county but recently had not travelled to Essex. Other possible reasons for the reduction were Police engagement on Unauthorised Encampments and the impact from Covid.

In terms of Unauthorised Encampments, the four main places that were targeted between January and October 2021 were Basildon, Colchester, Chelmsford and Tendring.

In response to questioning, it was confirmed that Thurrock had not yet provided an update on the High Court 'full injunction' hearing that took place on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2021.

### **Rural Engagement Team Update**

The Committee received an update from Sgt Paul Downes, Essex Police.

There had been a reduction in unauthorised encampments since the Rural Engagement Team had started. The RET's application of legislation and national guidance had remained consistent and as a result there had been a firm but fair approach to the management of unauthorised encampments. Essex Police were involved in every encampment but would only intervene and use Section 61 powers when appropriate and justifiable.

In regard to new legislation, there had been a proposal of changes in relation to unauthorised encampments and proposed changes to Section 61 I which could address some of the issues that certain areas within Essex had been experiencing. An Essex working group as well as a national working group had been set up.

In response to questions, it was confirmed that the RET reports back to the ECTU and vice-versa in regard to encampments and that there were good working practices in place for sharing information. The ECTU send daily updates to the Customer Services team which get posted and there was an out of hours service for the weekends that dealt with encampments.

Members queried whether councillors could be kept more informed when there was a particular incident; a suggestion was made that a mailing list was set up for particular locations for councillors to receive basic information such as what was being dealt with, what was going to court and hearing dates.

Members expressed thanks to the Rural Engagement Team for their work and support across the county and thanked Sgt Paul Downes who was retiring from Essex Police for his support.

### **3 Finance Update**

The Committee received an update from Carron Nason, Management Accountant, Essex County Council.

Key information provided included:

- (i) **2021/22 forecast outturn position as at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021.** There was a forecast underspend of £42,697.
- (ii) **Essex County Council's contribution to the Essex Countywide Traveller Unit for 2021/22 was £306,145 across internal partners.** This was 77% of the total overall contributions received.
- (iii) **The 2021/22 budget was based on approved District/Borough Fees of £8,312 from 2020/21.**
- (iv) **Budget for 2021/22 and proposed budget for future years.** The assumptions around the 2022/23 proposed draft budget were outlined which included a 3.25% increase for Employee budgets (2% staffing and 1.25% NI Uplift) and a 4.1% RPI increase for Supplies & Services and Transport budgets.
- (v) **Supplies & Services budgets had been reduced to show an overall net-nil budget.**
- (vi) **The 2023/24 budgets, excluding membership contributions, had all been increased by the RPI figure which was currently 3.5%.**
- (vii) **Proposed 2022/23 Membership Fees.** It was proposed that there would be no membership fee increase and no increase to the Essex County Council contribution and the Essex Fire and Rescue contribution.
- (viii) **Balance Sheet – Reserves –** The opening balance for 2021/22 was a surplus of £185,26, as at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2021 there was a forecast underspend of £42,697, if all things remain equal then the closing balance for the year was anticipated to be £227,966.

It was **AGREED** by general consent to note:

- The financial update for the six months to 30 September 2021.
- The proposed budgets for 2022/23 and 2023/24
- The proposed 2022/23 Membership Fees
- The Balance Sheet Reserves.

It was **AGREED**, having been proposed by Councillor Fleming and seconded by Councillor McQuiggan that there would be no increase to the membership fees for 2022/23.

#### **4 Meeting Dates in 2022**

The next meeting date would be circulated in due course.

#### **5 Urgent Business**

A concern was raised regarding low attendance levels of Members attending the Committee meetings and a suggestion was made to send a letter to the Leaders of the District and Borough Councils to highlight the importance of the Essex Countywide Traveller Unit Joint Committee in terms of partnership working and the need for Members to send a substitute if they are unable to attend.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 15:05.

**Chairman**