

## Questions and Answers from the Housing Webinar Wednesday 20 January 2021

Q) Has there been any further consideration for changes to do the payment system on the Epping Forest District Council (EDFC) website; showing account balances and statements - for transparency and ease.

A) Housing and Property Services are currently procuring a new housing management system. One of the requirements is to enable a customer portal through which rent statements can be printed, balances viewed, and personal information updated. Tenders have just been received and we are hoping that this new housing management system will be in place within 18 months.

Q) The formation of Qualis and its suite of companies is very interesting. Obviously, there are always costs in setting up and running companies in order to bring the benefits, including increased commercial opportunities. What is the estimated net financial gains of Qualis undertaking the various services (commercial and housing building) compared to the Council undertaking these itself?

A) The business plan for Qualis and associated business cases has been presented to Cabinet. Minutes and reports can be found [the Committee and panels webpage](#).

Q) How is Covid affecting the work required for empty properties to be re-let?

A) Currently we are undertaking all voids works. There are some national shortages of materials which are causing slow turnaround times.

Q) Can I ask if the national cladding problems affect any flats in Epping Forest, now that the Government is including lower height blocks?

A) There are no EFDC-owned blocks which use the type of cladding concerned

Q) Please can you tell me what happened to the old EFDC vehicles? What is the difference between Mears and the new Qualis operation please?

A) Please refer to [www.qualismanagement.co.uk](http://www.qualismanagement.co.uk) for this information

Q) If Covid is not an issue, how long before work is started once you are notified of an empty property?

A) Qualis is notified of the empty property once the keys have been returned; this is inspected the next working day, the required works are specified and then commenced as soon as possible dependant on the nature of the works

Q) Will Qualis be responsible for all repairs - plumbing, electrics, gas, carpentry, painting, structural etc.?

A) We currently undertake day to day repairs such as plumbing, electrics, carpentry. Decoration and gas, not currently.

Q) Can you tell me whether all the profits from all the Qualis companies will be reinvested back into the Council? Will directors be receiving dividends?

A) Yes, profits will be gifted back to the Council as the sole shareholder. Directors will not receive dividends as they have no shares.

Q) How often will tenant audits take place? Will it be on an annual basis? Seems like a lot of work with 6,000 properties.

A) Tenancy audits will take place on a rolling programme over several years. An officer has been assigned to carry out the visits as the main part of their role, with all officers in the Neighbourhoods team being trained to effectively increase the number of visits if and when required or to cover leave/sickness of the main officer.

Q) What is the annual take up of Right to Buy, on average?

A) Based on the previous 3 full financial years (up to March 2020)  
Average Applications = 55 per annum  
Completions = 29 per annum  
This current financial year (up to 31 December 2020)  
Applications = 31  
Completions = 11 (further completions with legal team pending)

Q) What is the policy on inheriting a property with overgrown trees please?

A) While an empty property is going through the void period, tree works of different levels take place, some minor and some major via our assets team. Once a tenant has agreed to sign the tenancy, they also agree to maintain trees in the future. Though in cases where trees are causing damage to Council land and/or property we, as a Council, will step in to protect our assets.

Q) I'm surprised to hear that EFDC has only just become a development partner of Homes England for its Housebuilding Programme. The Council was a successful Homes England partner a couple of years ago and received funding. Presumably there was a period when EFDC was no longer a partner?

A) Funding was offered for a scheme some years ago, however the offer was not taken up by EFDC. Right to Buy receipts were used to part fund the building programme. Our future programme will require additional funding hence our recent application.

Q) Please can Ward Members be informed of developments in their ward? In the past Councillors were often consulted but this rarely occurs now.

A) Absolutely, our plan is to speak with Ward Members/Councillors and residents using a consultation process on future developments. This will provide an opportunity for all to comment on upcoming developments.

Q) Previously (certainly 2 years ago), it was an MHCLG requirement that service charges for existing tenants (not leaseholders) could only increase by CPI+0.5% without consultation with the residents involved. Have the requirements changed? How do you get over this for overall service charge increases for tenants in excess of CPI + 0.5%?

A) The regulator provides rent standards that tell us how we need to set rents; this standard does not apply to service charges, where these are separate charges (as they are in Epping Forest). From April 2021 there will be a charge for rent and a charge for services you get from us e.g. communal lighting, cleaning, lift servicing etc.

The Social Housing Regulator says that such charges should be fair and represent the charges to us and that's why we're changing the charging regime, so it is fair to residents and you are paying for what you get.

Q) With regards to lighting and electricity consumption for communal areas. How often does the Council check to see if it is getting the best possible deals from utility companies so that these benefits can be passed to tenants and leaseholders?

A) Our current portfolio of around 470 electricity supplies and 22 gas supplies is managed by a company through an energy bureau service who check our invoices are correct based on the usage and will change suppliers (with our permission) based on best-value at the time. They also buy energy whole-sale prices to allow better value.

Q) Why was the Limes Farm chosen for refurbishing? Much of the housing stock on the Oakwood Hill Estate is a similar age and in need of refurbishing.

A) We have looked at complaints received and repairs costs at Limes Farm, and the Leadership Team has gone out to visit several estates, stock condition surveys have been carried out on a couple of sites. Limes Farm was found to have the most urgent works needed. We agree that a lot of estates need work and the Leadership Team is aware of this; all blocks will be surveyed and prioritised accordingly.

Q) The 'More Than Bricks and Mortar' Scheme sounds like an innovative and well thought through initiative. I am sure it will be welcomed by EFDC residents. Good luck with the project.

A) We are really excited about the project and working collaboratively with residents to improve the look, feel and lived experience of their Council housing estates.

Q) I'm concerned that the Debden Tenants Panel seems to have disappeared from the list, which is why only 6 are now referred to. As a Fairmead Ward Councillor, I'm concerned about this.

A) The Loughton Panel is not yet constituted so will not feature in year one of the project, however Loughton will not be forgotten. We are keen to reinvigorate interest in the Debden Panel and the residents of Loughton as part of our plans for resident engagement in the future.

Q) Can we receive email notifications for when webinars are coming up, without getting spam? (specified notifications)

A) Yes, the Housing Team intend to run more webinars in the future. To make it easier for residents to stay informed and be involved, we are working on a new webpage specifically focusing on resident involvement, where we can post information of interest to residents, such as up and coming webinars.

For residents who wish to be kept informed of future webinars, the Council will hold an electronic mailout list for those who wish to opt into that service. Residents who wish to opt in should email [getinvolved@eppingforestdc.gov.uk](mailto:getinvolved@eppingforestdc.gov.uk)

Q) I have been bidding [on a property] for some time, but the online feedback is not being completed.

A) The feedback is automatically generated once the property has been let. If no feedback is showing on the Home Option page, then the team is still working on shortlisting the successful applicant.