

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE WAYTEMORE ROOM,
BISHOP'S STORTFORD ON TUESDAY,
21 OCTOBER 2008 AT 7.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor C Woodward (Chairman).
Councillors P R Ballam, N Clark, K Darby,
A F Dearman, A D Dodd, A M Graham, P Grethe,
Mrs D M Hone, J J Taylor.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillors L O Haysey, M Wood.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Claire Bennett	- Housing Strategy and Policy Manager
Lorraine Blackburn	- Committee Secretary
Janet Boyd	- Senior Housing Options Officer
Simon Drinkwater	- Director of Neighbourhood Services
Elizabeth Foy	- Housing Options Manager
Mark Kingsland	- Leisure Services Manager
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Will O'Neill	- Head of Community and Cultural Services
Mekhola Ray	- Community Projects Team Leader
George A Robertson	- Director of Customer and Community Services

342 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman commented that an item had been tabled in relation to Growth Items for consideration in relation to

Minute 348: 2009-2010 Service Options. The Chairman commented that time permitting, Members would be given an opportunity to debate the content, or alternatively, comments could be forwarded to the Director of Customer and Community Services' Personal Assistant. An update following the Budget Consultation Workshop held on 11 October 2009 had also been tabled.

RESOLVED ITEMS

ACTION

343 MINUTES

Councillor N P Clark thanked the Chairman for the written responses that had been provided.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2008 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

344 HEALTH ENGAGEMENT PANEL: 10 SEPTEMBER 2008

Councillor K Darby, Chairman of the Health Engagement Panel (HEP), presented the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2008. She commented that the last meeting had clashed with an emergency planning meeting called by Bishop's Stortford Town Council. This had had a negative impact on the Panel which had no formal substitute arrangements. Councillor Darby commented that this was particularly disappointing, as so much work had gone into setting up a forum for discussion and debate. As such, there were twice as many Officers contributing as Members.

It was noted that the HEP had piloted a new approach to evidence gathering, in that it had adopted a style similar to a Parliamentary Select Committee. Expert witnesses had been invited and questioned on "Promoting Physical Activity through Planning, Transport and the Physical Environment". The session had been received as being very informative and the subsequent "Question and Answer" session was felt to be more beneficial than a written report. Councillor Darby recommended that this

approach be tried out on an appropriate topic in a larger Community Scrutiny Committee setting when more Members could participate.

Councillor N Clark commented that the Panel was not politically balanced as the independents had not been invited to nominate a Member and would have welcomed this opportunity.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Health Engagement Panel held on 10 September 2008 be received.

345 REVIEW OF CHOICE BASED LETTINGS AND HOUSING REGISTER AND ALLOCATIONS POLICY

The Head of Health and Housing submitted a report on the impact of the new Choice Based Lettings Scheme following its implementation in April 2008. The Scheme had been introduced as a way of allocating all social housing to which it had nomination rights. The Council had consulted with partnerships, other local authorities and housing associations. Feedback received during the review process had been extremely positive with organisations stating that their staff and applicants found the scheme easy to use and that it was an “open and transparent system”.

Following the review, Officers felt that there was a need to amend some parts of the Housing Register and Allocations Policy. These included:

- An option to supplement points that can be awarded for homeless applicants;
- A revision of the definition of “local connection” and points awarded to ensure compliance with legislation. A reduction in the “local connection” points where the connection with East Herts is through employment;

- Increasing the number of points for medical priority;
- Expansion of social points to include applicants needing a management transfer from their existing housing association home to another;
- A delay in the award of 20 transfer points until applicants had held an assured tenancy or introductory tenancy of their current home for one year.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark about increasing mobility, Officers advised that the Government wanted to ensure that there was mobility across boundaries and that this could be achieved by opening up the housing register. The Officer commented that prior to the revision of the Policy, there had not been enough emphasis on “needs based”. In terms of demand, the Council was on a par with other authorities across the consortium.

The Chairman sought clarification in relation to people who were subjected to anti-social behaviour. Officers advised that the Government had a strict policy on those who could be restricted from the housing register and this depended on the content of the Anti-Social Behaviour Order. Other authorities were contacted when people moved across boundaries.

In response to a query from Councillor A M Graham, Officers advised that less than twelve occupants a year were excluded from the housing register and most of these were for a history of rent arrears/default in social housing.

In response to a query from Councillor P Grethe, Officers advised that some housing associations did provide introductory tenancies. Riversmead Housing Association offered a secure tenancy immediately.

In response to a query from the Chairman, Officers confirmed that the award of points in relation to local connection was in line with Government legislation. The position in relation to members of the armed forces was clarified.

Officers confirmed that there was no penalty or deferral from the Housing Register for an applicant who refused a property which they had successfully bid for unless the applicant was homeless. The rationale for this was explained in terms of the release of larger properties.

Officers commented that there had been an increase in housing and financial advice sought. The Options Team had referred many people to the Citizens' Advice Bureau for debtor advice and it was hoped that this would reduce the number of mortgage repossessions.

In response to a query from Councillor A M Graham, Officers confirmed that the new points system had been tested to assess its impact on existing applicants.

In response to a query from Councillor P Grethe regarding Key Worker accommodation availability, Officers confirmed that the Government's definition of Key Worker was very strict. Where housing associations could not find tenants to fit within the Government's definition, offers could be made to East Herts as its definition of Key Worker 2 was less restrictive.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark on the points system, Officers explained the transitional arrangements in relation to changes.

Councillor A M Graham sought assurances that people caught during the points transition would be treated sympathetically. He urged Officers to be flexible with applicants' applications during the transitional period.

Members noted that the new system had proved to be reliable and easy to use and had significant reporting abilities, in that it had enabled the Housing Options Team

to collect and report information on applicants where they were previously unable to do so. The scheme reflected the Government's aim that social housing tenants should have more choice and control over where they lived and its wish that local authorities link up individual schemes into sub-regional or regional ones.

Members received the report and requested that the Executive be recommended to adopt the revisions in the Housing Register and Allocations Policy as detailed in the report now submitted.

RESOLVED – that (A) the findings of the Choice Based Lettings be received;

(B) the Executive be recommended to adopt the Housing Register and Allocations Policy as amended.

346 LEISURE CENTRE CONTRACT MONITORING
PERFORMANCE MARCH 2008 TO SEPTEMBER 2008

The Head of Community and Cultural Services submitted a report detailing performance information in relation to the leisure management contract within established performance indicators. The report provided financial throughput and usage information and updates in relation to the Olympic flag hand over.

The Head of Community and Cultural Services commented that outturn for 2007/08 was favourable. Actual income and expenditure was expected to balance at the end of the year.

It was noted that casual swimming from April to September 2008 had increased and was up by 3% and not as reported. Officers reported that the direct debit memberships for the four gyms remained healthy. It was noted that the Olympic flag handover celebrations on 24 August 2008 and the free casual swim had been a good marketing exercise and had been very successful. Officers advised that the free swim and Olympic flag

handover was mentioned in a press editorial and within the Members' Information Bulletin.

Members were advised that following the award of the contract to Sports and Leisure Management Limited (SLM), reports to the Community Scrutiny Committee would follow a different format from January 2009, given that the contractors would be carrying the commercial risks.

Councillor N Clark commented that £71,000 (subsequently reduced to £65,000) should be added to the 2007/08 year end outturn to give a true performance. The rationale behind this was explained. The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that the receipt of late utility bills would have impacted on what was achieved.

In response to a query on an improvement on casual swimming figures generally, it was noted that this was against a downturn during 2007/08. Members commented on a decline in the number of direct debits for Grange Paddocks and a significant increase at Hartham Pool. Officers felt that this was attributable to the fact that Grange Paddocks had reached its capacity but that Hartham Pool still had potential to grow.

Assurances were sought that any proposed changes to schedules would be presented to Community Scrutiny Committee. The Director of Customer and Community Services confirmed this was the case.

Councillor L O Haysey provided updates in relation to the role of the County Council in promoting the Olympics from an economic, cultural and sports viewpoint. She said that the Council would welcome working with SLM and that reporting arrangements could be further developed.

Members welcomed the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

347 DEVELOPING THE COUNCIL'S EQUALITIES AGENDA

The Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report on the progress made in developing an equalities agenda. The new Community Projects Team Leader, Mekhola Ray was introduced. The Director commented that the Council had done much to promote the equalities agenda in the past and had much to be proud of, but that the scope of the equalities legislation had expanded significantly in recent years and continued to do so.

To keep one step ahead of the legislation, a generic and systematic approach to equalities needed to be developed and implemented. This should include the adoption of a policy, an equalities scheme and a subsequent action plan to make sure that the services the Council provided were provided on an equitable basis to all customers. Officers sought endorsement of the principles as a way forward.

The Chairman complimented Officers on the approach being taken. He further commented that the statistics did not support that the area was as diverse as many other Districts.

In response to a query from Councillor A M Graham concerning the Valuing Diversity Action Group, Officers explained that the organisational needs had changed but the different approach would not lose any of the gains already made.

Members noted that at the beginning of 2007, 30% of Members as well as 90% of Officers had undertaken an online training course in equalities. It was suggested that the Policy in relation to future training be amended to include Members. This was unanimously supported.

Assurances were sought and provided that the information collected would be acted upon. In response to a query on positive discrimination, Officers reported that the Council made sure of a level employment playing field.

Appointments were always made on merit.

The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that a systematic approach, which was service based, would provide the Council with the ability to measure outcomes by service user and by groups of society. The approach was necessary to comply with statutory obligations, and provide an audit trail of evidence and so reduced the risk of external challenge.

Members questioned why Polish and Portuguese were the two languages chosen to be used in the context of the Council's documents. Members asked what data was used to suggest that this were the most relevant ones. Officers undertook to provide a written response. DCCS

The Director of Customer and Community Services advised that comments from Human Resources Committee, via the Local Joint Panel, would need to be sought in relation to how the Policy related to workforce matters.

Members received the report and supported the approach outlined.

RESOLVED – that (A) the attached Comprehensive Corporate Equality Policy, Scheme and Action Plan be received;

(B) that Human Resources Committee, via the Local Joint Panel, be requested to comment on those elements affecting workforce matters; DCCS

(C) the Director of Customer and Community Services and the Portfolio Holder for Community Development be authorised to make such minor amendments to the Policy, Scheme and Action Plan as necessary; DCCS

(D) the Executive be recommended to approve the final Policy, Scheme, and Action Plan for adoption and implementation.

348 2009-2010 SERVICE OPTIONS AND BEYOND

The Executive Member for Resources and Internal Support Services submitted a report outlining efficiency savings for 2009-10. The report set out overall aspirational targets for savings over the next three years which would allow a balanced budget to be set and would allow further investment for priority areas identified in the Medium Term Financial Plan. A potential efficiency saving of £999,500 had been put forward for 2009-2010. Members were provided with a tabled item outlining Growth Items.

It was noted that a Budget Consultation Workshop had taken place on 11 October 2008. Members were provided with a tabled item detailing feedback.

The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that the report would be presented to Corporate Business and Environment Scrutiny Committees. Comments from those Committees would be referred to the Executive. The report sought Members' in principle support or otherwise of the savings outlined.

Members referred to the Appendix attached to the report now submitted and tabled information, and requested that the following comments be referred to the Executive:

Feedback on the Consultation Workshop

- that 30 people attending the Workshop was not representative of the community across the District;
- that it was well arranged and well organised and provided useful anecdotal information including good feedback from young people;

1 Comm Community Alarm Service:

- Agreed, however the costs and savings to be incurred in relation to the new contract were not an option, as the arrangement had been agreed by the Executive.

2 Comm Reduction in various Community Safety and Licensing Budgets

- Agreed, but the question was raised as to whether there were any other budgets where similar savings could be achieved?

3 Comm Additional Income through training courses

- Agreed, but the question was raised as to where people currently undertook training and was this need market tested?

4 Comm Increased Income from CCTV

- No consensus, the point was made that this would be viewed as a transfer of taxation ie locally to the Town Council.

5 Comm Increase in licensing fees income

- Concerns about taxi operators in the District, difficulties of operation in the current economic climate and the need to have a balanced approach rather than seeing this as an efficiency saving. Members requested this be reviewed and debated further.
- It was reported that Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee did not wish the Council to subsidise these charges. The Government were urging people to be sensitive about payments and mortgages.

Could these savings be achieved without causing undue hardship?

6 Comm Increase in Housing Benefits Overpayments

- Agreed.

7 Comm Staff changes in Community Services - Net Savings

- Agreed.

8 Comm Meals on Wheels

- The Budget Workshop viewed this as logical. The Head of Community and Cultural Services commented that this was an option, not a proposal at this stage as a report on the future of community meals would be presented to Community Scrutiny Committee on 27 January 2009.

9 and 10 Comm Savings from new leisure contract and capital investment

- Clarification was sought and provided in response to a question on how the savings figures had been calculated. The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that because of the way the contract was structured, the Council would not bear any risks apart from the Utility Tariff. He outlined proposals for capital investment and the positive effect this would have on the Council's costs.

Growth Items:

Licensing of Houses in multiple occupation - Additional income generated

- Agreed.

Additional Hours - food hygiene

- Agreed.

National Indicator 187 - Fuel Poverty

- Agreed.

Contributions to Countywide project, Big Lottery and Play Initiatives.

- Contributions to countywide projects were supported in principle. Clarification was sought and provided in relation to how other Districts fit in with this initiative and whether there were other initiatives which could achieve growth.

Licence to Join East of England Customer Profiling Project

- Following clarification of its role, this was supported as offering good value for money.

Loss of Income - Discount for purchasers of Pay and Display Smart Cards

- Supported but there would be a need to ensure that the Smart Cards were widely accepted and available.

Increase in marketing of Castle Hall - Additional income generated

- Concerns were expressed on the logic of spending vs income. Clarification of this was provided in that Castle Hall needed investment to achieve its potential and to increase audiences. At the present time, it was difficult to predict what income would be generated.

Consultancy re Parking Re-tender (Special one-off growth item)

- Agreed.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be informed of the Members' comments now detailed.

349 COMMUNITY SCRUTINY HEALTHCHECK – APRIL TO AUGUST 2008

The Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report on an exception basis, of performance indicators relating to Community Scrutiny Committee for the period April to August 2008.

In response to a question from Councillor N Clark, an Officer confirmed that the performance indicators under “what was build? and why?” would be moved to Environment Scrutiny Committee if the proposed changes to the Committee’s terms of reference were agreed as part of the Constitution currently underway. No decision on this had yet been made and until then, these performance indicators would continue to be reported to Community Scrutiny Committee.

In response to a query from Councillor A M Graham concerning the time taken to compile indicators, Officers advised that much of the information was available on Covalent and that different indicators were reported at different times of the year, i.e. some monthly, some quarterly.

Members received the report.

RESOLVED - that the report be received.

350 WORK PROGRAMME 2008/09

The Chief Executive submitted a report outlining the current work programme as a basis for planning future scrutiny work.

An earlier request by Councillor N Clark had been received requesting the inclusion of three items on the future work programme. Following updates from Officers, the Member was now satisfied that his earlier requests had been addressed and were now no longer necessary.

Officers requested that items programmed for the meeting on 7 April 2009 be amended by the inclusion of the Sustainability Communities Strategy. This was supported.

RESOLVED – that the report as amended, be used as a basis for reviewing the current work programme and planning the future work of Community Scrutiny Committee.

The meeting closed at 9.55 pm.

Chairman
Date