

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF EAST
HERTS COUNCIL HELD IN THE
COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS,
HERTFORD ON WEDNESDAY 14
DECEMBER 2005 AT 7.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor A L Burlton (Vice-Chairman in the Chair).
Councillors M R Alexander, W Ashley,
P R Ballam, H G S Banks, K A Barnes, S A Bull,
N Burdett, M G Carver, D Clark, R Conway,
R N Copping, A F Dearman, J Demonti,
A D Dodd, G L Francis, R Gilbert,
Mrs M H Goldspink, J Hedley,
Mrs D L E Hollebon, Mrs D M Hone, A P Jackson,
G McAndrew, M P A McMullen, R L Parker,
D A A Peek, L R Pinnell, J O Ranger, D Richards,
P A Ruffles, S Rutland-Barsby, G D Scrivener,
J J Taylor, J D Thornton, M J Tindale, N Wilson,
M Wood.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Philip Thomas	- Interim Executive Director
Simon Drinkwater	- Director of Corporate Governance
Jeff Hughes	- Head of Democratic Services
Martin Ibrahim	- Senior Democratic Services Officer
Lorraine Kirk	- Senior Communications Officer
Dave McRobbie	- Head of Customer Relations
David Tweedie	- Director of Resources

ACTION515 MINUTES

In respect of Minute 397 – Community Development Portfolio Report, the Executive Member for Community Development corrected his statement in relation to the licensing of houses in multi-occupancy. He stated that the new regime would apply to houses of more than two floors where more than five people resided and not three floors.

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the Council meeting held on 2 November 2005, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Vice-Chairman.

516 VICE-CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Vice-Chairman encouraged Members to attend the Covalent training sessions that had been arranged for January 2006.

He referred to the Chairman's progress and passed on his seasonal greetings to all Members.

The Vice-Chairman referred to the staff drinks which would be held on 22 December 2005, and informed Members that exact details would be circulated by e-mail in the next day or so. He requested Members' support for the events that would be held at Wallfields and the Council's offices in Bishop's Stortford.

The Vice-Chairman read a statement on behalf of the Chairman in respect of the progress made in setting up the East Herts Fund for the Future.

Members recalled the generous donation from the David Webster Group, which along with further donations, had enabled the Endowment Fund to get under way. The Grant Advisory Panel had that day, recommended the first grant from the Fund. The first recipient would be CHIPS (Children's Integrated Playschemes), who would be receiving a cheque for £500 to facilitate 'revenue funding'.

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The Chairman believed that Members would agree that this was a most worthy cause.

The challenge for the New Year would be to build up the Endowment Fund. The Chairman was aware that the St Albans Fund had raised over £132k over the previous three years, which had enabled them to start awarding up to ten grants annually.

On 4 February 2006, the Fund would be hosting an Inter-Parish Quiz at Wodson Park. It would be great if Members could promote this event by encouraging those Parishes who had not yet responded to become involved.

The major fund raising event in August 2006 would be a Charity Golf Classic Day at East Herts Golf Club and further details would follow.

Finally, the Vice-Chairman wished everyone a merry Christmas and a happy New Year and invited Members and Officers to join him for light refreshments that would be served after the meeting.

517 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor M P A McMullen declared a personal and prejudicial interest in the matter referred to at Minute 473 – Markets Issues, in that he sold goods on a stall at Dane End market. He left the chamber whilst this matter was considered.

Councillor S A Bull declared a personal interest in the matter referred to at Minute 410 – Community Meals Service, as his wife was involved in the delivery of meals on wheels.

Councillor S A Bull declared a personal interest in the matter referred to at Minute 483 – Citizens Advice Bureaux Business Consultancy, although the nature of that interest was not disclosed.

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Councillor M R Alexander declared a personal and prejudicial interest in the matter referred to at Minute 482 – CCTV Control Centre, as he was Chairman of Ware Town Council.

Councillor D A A Peek declared a personal and prejudicial interest in the matter referred to at Minute 410 – Community Meals Service, although the nature of that interest was not disclosed.

Councillor D A A Peek declared a personal and prejudicial interest in the matter referred to at Minute 482 – CCTV Control Centre, as he had been a member of the working party.

Following various Members' queries, particularly in respect of Minute 410 – Community Meals Service, the Chairman reminded Members that declarations were not necessary in respect of resolved items. However, if there was any substantial debate on the matter, Members should declare any interest at that point.

518 PETITION – BYELAWS AT ST MICHAEL'S MEAD

The Vice-Chairman advised that a petition comprising 541 signatures had been submitted as follows:

'Keep the park open as it is today, we want to continue to use the park for playing ball games and fishing'

Mr C Tuson, who had submitted the petition on behalf of the signatories, informed Members that the petition had been instigated by a number of children who enjoyed fishing and ball activities. Although there was a designated area for ball games, there was no area set aside for fishing. He suggested that rather than prohibiting these popular activities, an area should be designated for fishing.

Mr Tuson referred to the care taken by the children in

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looking after the area. Also, he commented that he had encountered only two people who supported the proposed byelaws banning fishing. He concluded by asking for a designated area for fishing to enable children to continue to enjoy the area.

In response, the Executive Member for Environmental Management thanked Mr Tuson for the petition and expressed his pleasure that the consultation on the proposed byelaws had engaged so many people. He informed the meeting that he would be submitting proposals on this matter to the Executive meeting scheduled for January 2006.

519 MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Councillor M Wood asked the Leader of the Council to update Members on the costs incurred by this Council in relation to the recent High Court action by this Council against Hertfordshire and Essex Newspapers Group.

In response, the Leader stated that, at this stage, the exact costs were not known as some invoices had yet to be received. However, it was believed to be in the region of £20,000, which could be met from within the sum previously allocated for the consultancy costs arising from the recent management issue.

In response to a supplementary question seeking clarification on the previous allocation of funds, the Leader reminded Members that the previous decision was for *up to* £120,000 to be allocated. This had included provision for the costs of any possible appeal.

Councillor G L Francis asked the Leader of the Council if he would join him in wishing the residents of East Hertfordshire a green and happy Christmas and an environmentally friendly and prosperous New Year.

In response, the Leader stated that he would be delighted to do so, especially as the Council would be enhancing its

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Recycling services in 2006.

As a supplementary question, Councillor G L Francis asked if the Leader recognised that Christmas was not an environmentally friendly time and suggested that people should be encouraged to give energy saving light bulbs as presents.

In response, the Executive Member for Environmental Management commented that Christmas trees could be taken to Recycling centres and that the Council was again promoting a Christmas card recycling scheme in partnership with W H Smith and Tesco.

Councillor G L Francis asked the Executive Member for Community Development whether the licensing of multiple occupancy properties would result in additional checks for fire safety, environmental health and parking problems and why only properties of more than two floors needed a licence.

In reply, the Executive Member for Community expressed surprise that this question had been asked, given that, at the previous meeting, he had advised that further information on the new legislation could be obtained from Officers. He informed Members that the new legislation applied to larger properties and sought to ensure a safe escape from fire. No additional checks would be required and there was no reference to parking within the regulations.

In response to a supplementary question on whether this could be seen by small businesses as another tax, the Executive Member agreed that it could. He reiterated that this was another responsibility handed down by the Government, which local authorities had to action.

Councillor G L Francis asked the Executive Member for Environmental Management in respect of the removal of abandoned vehicles, to outline the timescales involved, any targets set and whether this Council was meeting its targets.

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In response, the Executive Member for Environmental Management stated that this area was now subject to a new Best Value Performance Indicator, for which targets would be set at the end of this civic year. The Council would be required to monitor the number of new reports investigated within 24 hours and the number of abandoned vehicles removed within 24 hours of being entitled to. At present, the Council was achieving 40% and 70% respectively on these two indicators.

The Executive Member commented that, due to the size of the district, the targets set would be challenging, especially where reports were received late in the day. He referred to the procedures Officers were required to follow before removing vehicles and reminded Members that Officers did not have powers to remove untaxed vehicles.

Finally, he stated that he was looking at the possibilities for using the Cleaner Neighbourhoods Act in this area and would be submitting a report once the statutory guidance had been issued.

In response to a supplementary question concerning a particular vehicle, the Executive Member advised Members to contact him directly with details of any problems.

Councillor G L Francis asked the Leader of the Council if he agreed that the recent controversy involving this Council was an embarrassment to the Council and whether the Council should be more vigilant and open in the future.

In response, the Leader accepted that the recent controversy had been embarrassing and that he would try and be more open. To this end, he announced changes to the portfolio arrangements whereby Councillor D Clark, the Executive Member for Regional Development, would become the link between the Executive and Members generally, ensuring that all Members were fully involved and re-engaged with the Council's work.

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He believed that recent events had been painful, but it was now important to learn lessons and move forward to serve the community. He encouraged all Members to work with the Executive.

In response to a supplementary question on whether the Leader had considered his position, the Leader replied by referring to joint responsibilities and the need for the whole Council to share the blame. He stated that everyone had to move forward to ensure that the Council's corporate interests were being looked after.

Councillor L R Pinnell referred to the raising of the Stort sluice gate in Bishop's Stortford, some four or five years ago as a flood prevention measure, since when the Causeway Stream, or Castle Moat, in Bishop's Stortford had been little more than a ditch. Earlier this year, a great deal of money had been spent on dredging and widening the stream to obtain a decent flow of water. Since then, it had deteriorated and was, once again, becoming just an overgrown ditch with stagnant water. Residents of the town wanted to see this stream reinstated for historical as well as for aesthetic reasons. Therefore, he asked the Executive Member for Environmental Management how much the recent dredging had cost and when this important local feature was likely to be reinstated.

In reply, the Executive Member for Environmental Management referred to the protracted history of the issue and the various agencies involved. He stated that £24,350 had been spent on clearance work and that the next stage of reinstatement works was subject to planning approvals. A full report had been prepared and he undertook to share this with Councillor L R Pinnell.

Councillor L R Pinnell referred to his driving through neighbouring authorities where it had been noticeable that the majority of roundabouts were sponsored by some local organisation and were clean, tidy and colourful. In East Herts, the roundabouts were just as noticeable, but by being a disgrace, particularly during the summer months with

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overgrown bushes, weeds and dangerously high grass. For some years, town centre managements and various stakeholders had been trying to have roundabouts sponsored. He asked the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance if he could inform Members why this authority seemed to have a block on sponsored roundabouts, how that block could be removed and if not, why not?

In reply, the Deputy Leader and Executive Member stated he shared some sympathy with Councillor L R Pinnell's sentiments. He stated that some work had been carried out and that Officers had been requested to look at increasing opportunities in this area. He hoped to have some further news on this in early 2006. He reminded Members that the Council had no responsibilities for any roundabouts on major roads within the District, as these were managed by Hertfordshire Highways. He undertook to explore sponsorship opportunities with them.

Councillor L R Pinnell stated that, at nearly every Committee and Council meeting, Members heard that consultants had been retained for a particular project or specific reason. He referred to traffic consultants, parking consultants, planning consultants and consultants for just about every purpose with the list seeming endless. He asked the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance to inform the Council of the spend on consultants since this Council's term began in May 2003, not counting the amount spent recently on the legal consultant, which he considered to be a special and isolated case.

In reply, the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance referred to a complete list with particular details, which he stated he would pass to Councillor L R Pinnell and all other Members. He outlined the total expenditure for each year as being £418,000 for 2003/04, £311,000 for 2004/05 and an estimated £301,000 for 2005/06.

He reminded Members that some consultants had been paid for by other agencies, such as Hertfordshire County Council

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on parking enforcement and the Government for the Bishop's Stortford Transport Study. He believed that the basic principle applied, was to engage consultants for projects of a one-off nature when the required skills were not available in-house. In other cases, it was more cost effective to engage consultants, for instance in dealing with development control appeals. He also referred to the need to engage consultants when the Council was required to carry out statutory consultation in relation to Government initiatives.

In response to a supplementary question, the Deputy Leader and Executive Member for Finance agreed that the Council needed to be aware of opportunities for partnership arrangements with other local authorities where the expertise existed.

Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink stated that on legal advice, she had agreed to withdraw her two questions reluctantly.

520 REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE

The Leader of the Council reported on the work of the Executive and presented the Minutes of the Executive meetings held on 8 November and 6 December 2005.

The Leader expressed his seasonal greetings to all staff, Members and constituents. He also spoke of his best wishes for a speedy recovery by the Chairman and hoped that he would be back in the Council Chamber soon. Finally, he advised that the process to appoint a Chief Executive had now commenced.

In response, the Leader of the Opposition concurred with the Leader's seasonal greetings and echoed his comments in respect of the Chairman.

ACTION

In respect of Minute 407 – Local Plan Upkeep Budget 2005/06, Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink referred to the use of the word ‘additional’ in the recommendation as being misleading. Having sought clarification at the Executive meeting, the recommendation sought a transfer rather than an additional sum. She requested that future reports of this nature be clearer in their recommendations.

In reply, the Deputy Leader and Executive Member agreed to this request.

In respect of Minute 410 – Community Meals Service, Councillor Mrs M H Goldspink asked if there had been any progress on the possibility of providing a 7 day a week service. The Executive Member for Community Development stated that discussions were ongoing and he hoped to report on this matter to the Executive meeting in January 2006. He reminded Members that the current Saturday and Sunday service was provided by the County Council and that this would continue.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Executive meetings held on 8 November and 6 December 2005, be received, and the recommendations contained therein, be adopted.

521 MINUTES OF COMMITTEES

(A) DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE
– 9 NOVEMBER 2005

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Development Control Committee meeting held on 9 November 2005, be received.

ACTION(B) CALL-IN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 14
NOVEMBER 2005

The Committee Chairman congratulated Officers for the record of the meeting.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Call-in Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 14 November 2005, be received.

(C) POLICY DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
– 15 NOVEMBER 2005

Council noted that Councillor Mrs D L E Hollebon had been present at this meeting.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Policy Development Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 15 November 2005, be received.

(D) DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE
– 22 NOVEMBER 2005

In respect of Minute 455 – Bishop's Stortford Football Club – Confiscation Proceedings Post-Conviction, Councillor K A Barnes requested that the document tabled at the meeting should be circulated to those Members not present at that meeting. Officers undertook to circulate this as requested.

DCG

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the Development Control Committee meeting held on 22 November 2005, be received.

(E) LICENSING COMMITTEE – 23 NOVEMBER 2005

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Licensing Committee meeting held on 23 November 2005, be received.

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(F) DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE
– 7 DECEMBER 2005

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Development Control Committee meeting held on 7 December 2005, be received.

(G) PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
– 8 DECEMBER 2005

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 8 December 2005, be received.

The meeting closed at 8.21 pm

Chairman
Date