

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE WAYTEMORE ROOM,
BISHOP'S STORTFORD ON TUESDAY,
27 JANUARY 2009 AT 7.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor C Woodward (Chairman).
Councillors N Clark, K Darby, A D Dodd, A M
Graham, Mrs D M Hone, S Rutland-Barsby
(Substitute for P Ballam) J J Taylor.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillors M G Carver, R Gilbert,
M P A McMullen, R L Parker, D A A Peek.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Committee Secretary
Valdis Belinis	- Community Planning and Partnerships Manager
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Will O'Neill	- Head of Community and Cultural Services
George A Robertson	- Director of Customer and Community Services
Tracy Strange	- Head of Health and Housing

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Keith White	- Head of Network Planning (Hertfordshire County Council)
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Xx APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillors
P R Ballam, P Grethe and from Environment Committee,

Councillor N C Poulton. It was noted that Councillor S Rutland-Barsby was substituting for Councillor P R Ballam.

xxx CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman welcomed Keith White, Head of Network Planning (Hertfordshire County Council), who had been invited as a expert witness in relation to agenda item 9 (Community Transport Initiatives and Allocation the Council's Bus Subsidies Budget from April 2009). The Chairman requested that, with the consent of Members, the order of the agenda be changed, so that this issue could be considered as the first item. Members agreed.

The Chairman commented that the new civic calendar to December 2010 had been agreed and would be circulated to Members shortly.

The Chairman commented that training on Covalent had been postponed and encouraged Members to attend once the date had been rearranged.

RESOLVED ITEMS

ACTION

xxx MINUTES

In relation to minute 347 (Developing the Council's Equalities agenda), the Head of Community and Cultural Services undertook to write to Members concerning the Council's decision to chose to publish equalities documents in Polish and Portuguese.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 21 October 2008 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

xxx HEALTH ENGAGEMENT PANEL: 8 DECEMBER 2008

Councillor K Darby, Chairman of the Health Engagement Panel (HEP), presented the minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2008.

Councillor D Hone requested that the minute 8 (Declarations of Interest) be amended by the deletion of "PCT" and insertion of "Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust".

Councillor Darby commented that there had been problems, in the past of numbers attending the Panel and that this might have been as a result of clashes with Town Council and parish meetings. This had been addressed within the context of the new civic calendar. She explained that it was still the intention of dovetailing the Panel's meetings with the County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee so that the view of the District could be reflected at those meetings. Councillor Darby commented that the issue of Mount Vernon was undergoing wide scrutiny and information could be found on HCC's website. A report would also be presented to the Panel at some future date, on Mental Health.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the Health Engagement Panel held on 8 December 2008 be received.

xxx COMMUNITY TRANSPORT INITIATIVES AND
ALLOCATION OF THE COUNCIL'S BUS SUBSIDIES
BUDGET FROM APRIL 2009

The Head of Community and Cultural Services submitted a report on the outcome, by Hertfordshire County Council, of a review of subsidised bus routes and options for the allocation of a subsidy in 2009/10 (and subsequent years). Members were reminded of the informal arrangement which existed between HCC and the district (specifically a 75%:25% split of costs), to continue to support and operate community transport routes when commercial routes were withdrawn because of the lack of economic viability.

As part of the Council's medium term financial plan, a budget of £86,650 for 2009/10 had been set. HCC subsequently undertook a review of its levels of subsidy to establish a new funding model which would secure a core, county funded service, leaving a set of routes outside of

the core which districts could fund at their discretion. Appendix A of the report now submitted, detailed those routes which HCC no longer wished to support. Appendix B of the report now submitted, detailed those routes which were commercial services and those which were considered to be part of HCC's core funded programme. Of the seven routes detailed in Appendix A of the report now submitted:-

- route 354 offered least value for money in terms of support cost per passenger from Buntingford to Harlow with a subsidy cost of £8.04 per passenger;
- route 21 was the most expensive per passenger and the least used was the taxi bus service from Dane End to Buntingford costing £44 per passenger; and
- SW1, SW2 and SW3 routes around Sawbridgeworth was the most used (16,000 passengers per annum) but the most costly in terms of overall subsidy at £48,300.

It was noted that to fund all of the services, would cost the Council £129,700. Views were sought on which services should continue to be funded by the Council.

Councillor N Clark commented that the Town Council was disappointed to learn of the proposals after their budget had been set and that there had been no early consultation. He commented that the reduction in subsidy for the SW1 SW2 and SW3 service was considerable in comparison to other services. In response to a query as to why there were large cuts proposed for these services, when no changes were proposed for the route 395, he was advised that Sawbridgeworth was unique in that it was funded from the Rural Bus Grant. This grant was no longer available. He questioned the methods of prioritisation given that 5,000 more people used the SW1 services than the 395 service.

Councillor A D Dodd commented that the SW buses served three different areas in a day including a housing estate on

the fringe of the town. He commented that the Town Council was aware that there was a problem and a shortfall in terms of funding. Other areas where the buses could stop, might include the Station and Hailey Day Centre. Increasing numbers used the service in relation to the Doctors surgery in Bell Street. Councillor Dodd hoped that some form of community sharing with Bishop's Stortford could be reached.

In response to a query concerning decision timeframes in relation to routes, Mr. White commented that Arriva were a flexible company but a realistic notice period was required which had to factor in planning and setting-up time for any replacement arrangements.

The Chairman commented that Bishop's Stortford Mini Bus Trust had spare capacity and would be interested in helping with the Sawbridgeworth routes and the 354 Hadham route.

In response to a query from Councillor A M Graham regarding the implementation of proposals, Mr White commented that the County Council was unable to give a clear indication of timeframes but stated that it was unlikely that anything could happen before April 2009. Councillor Graham asked that a further financial report be presented before action was taken regarding the proposals. He was concerned that the figures presented assumed all new arrangements would run from 1 April 2009. As the change in the SW buses would come later than that, additional funding would have to be found to continue existing service for the first few months of 09/10. As the budget had all been allocated, he was concerned which other services might suffer by having funding moved to cover the shortfall.

The Director of Customer and Community Services explained that recommendations would be presented to the Executive who would make a decision based on the budget which had been agreed.

Councillor N Clark requested that the service 21, with one passenger, be terminated with immediate effect. Members supported this.

Members noted the Council's bus subsidy budget of £86,650 for 2009/2010 set out in Appendix A of the report now submitted and requested that their comments as detail above be submitted to the Executive.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Executive be informed of the views of Community Scrutiny as detailed above;

(B) the Council's bus subsidy budget of £85,650 for 2009/10 be noted; and

(C) Officers work in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC) Passenger transport Unit (PTU) regarding new arrangements to provide alternative, refocused community bus service in Sawbridgeworth.

xx LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP (PRESENTATION)

The Head of Community and Cultural Services gave a presentation on the aims, aspirations and achievements of working in partnership with a number of organisations. This was achieved through a number of groups, specifically, the Local Strategic Partnership (Board), the Local Strategic Partnership (Group) and the Local Strategy Partnership (Forum). The terms of reference for each were explained.

In response to a query from Councillor K Darby, the Head of Community and Cultural Services gave assurances that Town Clerks and Parish Councils were included in the consultation process on a variety of relevant topics and invited to LSP Forums.

Councillor A D Dodd commented on perceptions of the fear of crime and the positive role of PCSOs. He commented on the need to continually support PCSO from a funding perspective and their work in schools was helping to encourage children to have respect for and support the law from an early age.

The Chairman commended the positive outcomes from this

way of working. He commented that by working in partnership across agencies in Bishop's Stortford they had funded a new PCSO and he was now working in partnership with others on the relocation of a GP surgery.

Councillors A M Graham and N Clark questioned whether funding the work of LSPs was an effective use of resources in terms of the time contributed by partners, Officers and the public's perception of partnership working. It was felt that measurable benefits should be achieved and made available. Councillor N Clark requested that the minutes of the Board should be updated on the website.

The Director of Customer and Community Services gave an undertaking to ensure that the Board's minutes were published on the Council's website. He commented that funding the LSP's came from a number of areas, and the sum of the whole could be more than the sum of the parts. He cited the new Credit Union as an example of how a more extensive outcome could be achieved together than by each trying to work alone to address a problem. He commented on the benefits of information sharing and "joined up" communication. The Director commented that funding the LSP should be considered in the context of the amount of funding brought to the table by HCC's Children Schools and Families budget and the PCT's budget and this helps them get better value for money.

Members received the presentation.

RESOLVED – that the presentation be received.

xxx OPTIONS FOR THE COMMUNITY MEALS SERVICE

The Head of Community and Cultural Services submitted a report on the options for the future provision of the Community Wheels service currently supplied by the Womens' Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS). Councillor R L Parker, Executive Member for Housing and Health, provided summarised the background to the service. It was noted that Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) was the statutory body for the provision of the service and

reimbursed the Council for 27% of the cost. The service currently delivered approximately 65,000 meals a year to 260 clients.

The Head of Community and Cultural Services explained that the contract with the WRVS would end on 30 July 2009. He commented that the probable net expenditure for 2008/09 had been revised and would be £167,130.

Options for the services were reviewed:

- Option A – to re-tender for a new three-year or longer contract;
- Option B – to extend the existing contract on a short term basis;
- Option C – to make no alternative arrangements;
- Option D – to hand over the responsibility for the service to HCC.

It was noted that HCC had invited all Hertfordshire District and Borough Councils to hand over responsibility for the delivery of community meals to the County who would work in partnership with a sponsored social enterprise, Hertfordshire Community Meals (HCM). HCM was a not for profit enterprise and currently provided meals for North Herts, Stevenage and Watford. Broxbourne and St Albans had also recently transferred to HCM. Should all districts sign up to HCM, then they would be providing in excess of 600,000 meals to vulnerable clients throughout the County and, at that level, real savings could be achieved through economies of scale and the quality of service could be more efficiently monitored and maintained.

The financial modelling arrangements were set out in the report now submitted. The serviced offered by HCM was comparable to that currently provided in terms of scope and quality. It was noted that the charge to the customer would be established at a rate approved by HCC.

Councillor A M Graham commented that Members broadly supported the Executive's view on transferring the service to the County. He felt that this was the best way forward. He commented that reduced levels of subsidy should not affect vulnerable people to the effect that the meals then became unaffordable. Councillor Graham commented that he would expect the Council to observe correct human resource protocols (TUPE) in terms of any transfer of staff to the new service.

The Director of Customer and Community Services commented on the cost per meal of the current contract arrangement and that the cost of the meals under the new service could fall, if HCM were providing meals for all 10 districts which might be in excess of between 600,000-700,000 meals.

The Executive Member for Housing and Health commented that the County were the responsible body for social services and that they were in the business of providing services at the best price. He commented that East Herts Council already knew the base price for one district and that to have 10 districts using HCM would achieve economies of scale.

Members stressed that they would not wish to see any reduction in the quality of service provision and requested that monitoring and customer satisfaction surveys be carried out independently. Councillor J J Taylor supported independent testing of meals in terms of quality of provision. She commented that many elderly people were incapable of complaining and were just grateful to receive a hot meal.

The Executive Member for Housing and Health explained that that during the testing phase of the Council's existing contract, three participants used the same provider for the meals but there were however, significant differences in the final presentation of the meals. He commented that the County had considerably more experience than the Council in making sure that the meals service was to a good standard. The Head of Community and Cultural Services

confirmed that he had taken part in testing meals which were of a very high standard. He confirmed that the delivery vans used were to a high specification making sure that the meals were cooked no longer than 20 minutes before they were delivered.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark requesting that any price increases should be staggered. The Executive Member for Housing and Health could not comment on this but stated that increased numbers in terms of meals provided, should achieve economies of scale. He confirmed that the County Council would have responsibility for the rate charged.

The Director of Customer and Community Services commented that any change in the price charged would be the subject of negotiation and arrangement.

In response to a query by Councillor K Darby on the additional services provided by the WRVS in terms of checking on an individual's welfare when the meal was delivered. The Head of Community and Cultural Services confirmed that HMC was a social enterprise which would meet the County Council's requirements including the checks Cllr Darby mentioned. He also said that meals would be delivered seven days a week. The Executive Director anticipated that hubs would still be used to secure efficient delivery throughout the District.

In response to a query by Councillor D A A Peek, the Head of Community and Cultural Services confirmed that there would be continuity of criteria in place, to establish a person's eligibility to receive the service.

In response to a query by Councillor Dodd concerning regular delivery of meals at set times, the Executive Director for Housing and Health confirmed that notwithstanding a van breaking down, meals were delivered at set times. If a meal could not be delivered within a quarter of an hour of the set time, the customer would be telephoned.

Members requested that the Executive be informed of the Committee's in principle agreement to Option D as outlined in the report and to accept Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC'S) offer to assume responsibility for the provision of community meals in the district at the end of the current contract with WRVS at the end of July 2009. Members also agreed that the Executive be requested that the Director of Customer and Community Services be given delegated authority to negotiate with the County Council to secure the most advantageous arrangements in the transfer of this service. Members further supported the extension of the contract for a further three months if HCC were unable to resume responsibility.

RESOLVED – that (A) Executive be informed of the Members' in principle agreement to Option D as outlined in the report now submitted, to accept Hertfordshire County Council's (HCC'S) offer to assume responsibility for the provision of community meals in the District at the end of the current contract with WRVS at the end of July 2009; and

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(B) the Executive be requested that the Director of Customer and Community Services be given delegated authority to negotiate with the County Council to secure the most advantageous arrangements in the transfer of this service; and

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(C) in the event that HCC is unable to resume responsibility for the contract on 1 August 2009, Members support the Executive's decision to extend the current contract with the WRVS for three months or until such time as HCC is able to commence the new arrangement.

xxx AFFORDABLE HOUSING OPTIONS IN THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CLIMATE

The Executive Member for Housing and Health submitted a report reviewing options for the provisions of affordable housing in the light of the economic downturn. He commented that some form of strategy needed to be

developed to help residents.

The Head of Health and Housing commented on the need to keep affordable housing available and to have services to be able to answer questions from the public regarding risk and finance.

It was noted that to achieve a target of 200 affordable homes per year in East Herts was becoming increasingly difficult in the light of the fact that there were fewer homes under construction. For homes becoming available, it was harder to set up a shared equity arrangement as fewer mortgage products available, less funding and borrowing terms had become harder to meet. The Head of Health and Housing explained how affordable housing had been delivered in the past and what was happening now in terms of action taken by landowners, Registered Social Landlords and developers. It was noted that from 1 April 2009, the Council was only aware of 94 affordable properties “in the pipeline”.

Options for Assistance were set out in the report now submitted. These included:

- Releasing Council land
- Requesting the release of County Council land
- Utilising newly built, unsold empty homes
- Individual site appraisal
- Relaxing affordable housing requirements
- Council purchasing existing properties
- Council funding deposits and mortgages
- Assist RSL's to purchase land

- Fund tenure changes

The benefits and disadvantages of each were discussed in detail. A capital allocation of £348,000 remained in the budget for this financial year, with a further £750,000 in 2009/2010 and £750,000 for 2010/11. There was no provision after that date.

Councillor A M Graham commented that there was very little the Council could do in isolation and of the need to work in partnership. This would also minimise risk. He commented on the need to help vulnerable people and especially over the next 12 months. He felt that utilising newly built empty homes and funding tenure changes were the only viable schemes of the options offered.

Councillor N Clark supported Councillor Graham in relation to using newly built empty homes and funding tenure changes as being the only viable options worthy of progressing. He commented that many of the other schemes would take years to come to fruition. He did not support the Council becoming a housing stock holder again nor of offering mortgages. He expressed concern about selling the Council's assets below market value. He also thought that placing pressure on County to release land for affordable housing was worth a conversation but unlikely to have any positive response.

The Executive Member for Housing and Health explained that the Council already released land to Registered Social Landlords for a "peppercorn rent" to facilitate the affordable housing process. The nomination rights process was explained. It did not sell land below market value.

Councillor J J Taylor supported the release of land below market value to Register Social Landlords and that a proposal to use newly built empty properties should be explored.

The Executive Member for Housing and Health explained that even if the Council could help RSLs acquire newly built empty homes, these may not meet the stringent social

housing build-quality standards which were applied by RSLs. In terms of targets to be achieved, had the Goods Yard site been completed, this would have taken the Council above the 200 target for this year. The Head of Health and Housing advised that the Council employed a part-time officer working on bringing empty homes back into use and made available for use by the Council / Registered Social Landlords. The Council was currently looking at developing schemes with partners to bring them back into use more quickly.

Councillor K Darby commented that using the properties which were already built was the better option, as all other options would take longer to implement.

Councillor J J Taylor expressed concern at the numbers of properties which were underutilised in terms of occupancy. She queried whether there were any options which could be explored to release these properties to the mutual benefit of all. The Executive Member for Housing and Health commented that there were already incentive schemes available for those individuals who wanted to move into smaller accommodation.

Councillor A M Graham commented that many elderly people would prefer to stay in the home that they had known for many years. Any change for them could be difficult.

Councillor D A A Peek commented that the subject of affordable housing was such an extensive subject that this should have been the subject of a Select Committee style enquiry. He referred to comments made by developers during a recent discussion on the subject of affordable housing in a sensitive market. He commented that developers did not like to build mixed developments but accepted they had a responsibility to provide affordable housing. He commented that all developers were amenable to the possibility of commuted payments for social housing.

Councillor N Clark commented that there had been a lot of

housing built in East Herts and that a lot of the problems had been caused by the banking system. He hoped that the Council would not have a “knee jerk” response to the current difficulties. He supported a proposal to explore options of using newly built empty homes working with partners to convert them to private sector leasing units. This was supported by Members.

On the issue of releasing land below market value, Members acknowledged that land was currently released to Registered Social Landlords at a “peppercorn rent” to facilitate affordable housing, but did not support the sale of the land below market value.

Members reviewed the options set out in the report now submitted. It was noted that of the options put forward, very few could be achieved in a short timescale. Members supported an option to appraise individual sites with a view of funding conversion of the units to either social and immediate rent or supporting RSLs in bidding to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). Members also requested Officers to work with developers to actively encourage the utilisation of unsold homes through innovative new schemes.

RESOLVED – that (A) Officers be requested to appraise individual sites with a view to funding the conversion of the units to either social and immediate rent or supporting RSLs in bidding to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA); and

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(B) Officers be requested to liaise with developers to actively encourage the utilisation of unsold homes through innovative new schemes.

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xxx COMMUNITY SCRUTINY HEALTHCHECK – APRIL TO NOVEMBER 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 November 2008.

It was noted that in relation to EHPI 213 (Preventing Homelessness) that a recommendation specifying amendments to the definition of the indicator to make it more meaningful, would be submitted **from** the PI task and finish group **to** Corporate Business Scrutiny on 14 April 2009 and not as detailed in the report.

Members received the report.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

Xxx WORK PROGRAMME 2008-2009

The Chief Executive submitted a report outlining the current work programme as a basis for planning future scrutiny work. Comments were sought on Members’ preferred timing and format in relation to receiving the Annual Report from the Citizens’ Advice Bureau (CAB).

Members agreed that the CAB report should be scheduled for a later date to allow their re-structuring to be completed. Members thought it would be helpful to have the CAB report in July 2009 when the Housing Associations’ reports were due to be submitted.

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.

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The meeting closed at 10.05 pm.

Chairman
Date