

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE
COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD IN THE WAYTEMORE ROOM,
BISHOP' STORTFORD ON TUESDAY,
26 JANUARY 2010 AT 7.30 PM

PRESENT: Councillor C Woodward (Chairman).
Councillors P Ballam, N Clark, K Darby,
A D Dodd, P Grethe, D M Hone, G Lawrence,
V Shaw, J J Taylor.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillors D Andrews, K Barnes, L O Haysey,
P A Ruffles and M Wood.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Lorraine Blackburn	- Committee Secretary
Mark Kingsland	- Leisure Services Manager
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Jane O'Brien	- Empty Homes Officer
Will O'Neill	- Head of Community and Cultural Services
George A Robertson	- Director of Customer and Community Services
Brian Simmonds	- Head of Community Safety and Licensing
Sheila Winterburn	- Environmental Health Manager - Residential

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Duncan Jefford	- Regional Director SLM
Mathew Nicholson	- Area Contract Manager SLM

519 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Councillor N P Clark declared a personal interest in Minute 524 - Review of Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan, by virtue of the fact that he was Secretary of the "Stop Harlow North" campaign.

RESOLVED ITEMSACTION520 MINUTES

RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the meeting held on 27 October 2009, be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

521 HEALTH ENGAGEMENT PANEL – 15 DECEMBER 2009

It was noted that Councillor D Hone had attended Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee on behalf of the Chairman of the Health Engagement Panel. Councillor Hone provided Members with an update of that meeting. It was noted that there would be further consultation in relation to the Urgent Care Centre in Bishop's Stortford, in March 2010.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Minutes of the Health Engagement Panel meeting held on 15 December 2009 be received; and

(B) the update of Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee be noted.

522 LEISURE CONTRACT – ONE YEAR ON

A report was submitted providing Members with the first annual review of the Council's contract with Sport and Leisure Management Limited (SLM) – Everyone Active. The essential reference papers set out SLM's performance against the main elements in the contract and the new

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facilities and services which would be delivered as an outcome of the £3.5Million investment.

Duncan Jefford of SLM outlined the current position in relation to Hartham Leisure Centre and Grange Paddocks. He stated that a smooth transition had been achieved and that the Council now had two fantastic facilities to take it through the next 9-10 years of the contract. There had been no redundancies and the business had managed to bring about 40 new jobs to the area.

Mr Jefford referred to the new Studio and Power Plate Studio at Hartham which had generated 327 new customers in week one and 449 new customers in week two. The Studio would offer over 30 classes per week. Hartham would close shortly for the final refit to open on 30 January.

Grange Paddocks was undergoing transformation in terms of the refurbishment of the gym changing facilities, reception area including new access and the redecoration of the pool hall. A new fitness suite had been created with 80 stations and a new crèche. 40 Group exercise classes would also be created. The facilities would be Disability Discrimination Action (DDA) compliant and there would be a grand opening of the facilities, on 6 February 2010 at 10.00 am.

In total, the gym membership was now 4,500 with an average number of between 55,000 – 60,000 visits across all centres. It was estimated that when Grange Paddocks and Hartham “go live” this would increase to 80,000. Six monthly health and safety monitoring inspections of the facilities would take place and these would be benchmarked across the other 66 facilities SLM managed across the UK. Customer satisfaction surveys would also be carried out twice yearly.

Mr Jefford explained that the Council’s new assets would last the Council longer than the remaining 9-10 years of the contract, would reduce the Council’s revenue expenditure

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and had created career opportunities by creating 40 new jobs.

In response to a question from Councillor A D Dodd about increasing the membership and capturing the membership from other facilities, Mr Jefford explained that the Council's new facilities offered very good value for money in comparison to other private clubs and commercial facilities.

Councillor K A Barnes congratulated SLM for managing each of the facilities during ongoing refurbishment.

In response to a question from Councillor N Clark concerning performance, Mr Jefford explained the benchmarking process SLM used across its 66 managed sites. The Director of Internal Services undertook to make the performance quartile figures clearer.

The Chairman referred to comments about staffing interaction and cleanliness which appeared on their June / July 2009 customer survey. Mathew Nicholson explained that new cleaners had been employed at Grange Paddocks and Hartham and that staff training was ongoing which would address comments raised. He was confident that matters had improved since the time of that first survey.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark about Leventhorpe Pool, Mr Jefford explained that the dual use of the site added to difficulties regarding cleanliness of the toilets although SLM did strive to keep them as clean as possible. The general manager of Leventhorpe would be meeting with the Deputy Head of the School shortly.

It was noted that SLM would be carrying out further customer satisfaction surveys in March 2010 and feedback would be circulated to all Members as soon as this was available. The Head of Community and Cultural Services commented that issues were also raised under monthly contract monitoring with SLM.

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In response to a query from Councillor N Clark regarding an increase in gym membership fees for Grange Paddocks and Hartham and whether this was included in their bid, Mr Jefford confirmed that this was included in their bid and that a survey of competitors' charges had been undertaken. The Nuffield for example, charged £70 per month whereas SLM were charging £39.50 for the same period and SLM allowed for casual usage paying facilities.

The Chairman, on behalf of Members thanked Mr. Jefford and Mr Nicholson for attending.

Members received the report and the positive progress made.

RESOLVED – that the report be received and the positive progress made by SLM be noted.

523 ROLE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF POLICE COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS (PCSOs)

The Scrutiny Officer submitted a report giving Members the opportunity to consider the role and effectiveness of PCSOs prior to Members and Officers attending an evidence gathering session with Hertfordshire County Council's topic Group.

It was noted that as part of their work programme, Hertfordshire County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee had identified the issue of "role and effectiveness of PCSOs" as one they wanted to review via a topic (task and finish) Group within HCCs priorities in terms of:

- Maximising independent living
- Securing a good education for all
- Promoting safe neighbourhoods

ACTION

Councillor M R Alexander, Executive Member for Community Safety and Protection, provided background information to the introduction of PCSOs in 2003 when 14 were introduced. There were now 261 funded by the County Council, District Council and Partnership working. Overall, the spending on PCSOs was £1.787Million. Much of the funding was match funding and from the Home Office, but that there were concerns that this funding might, in the future, disappear. At the present time, the Council spent £114,000 on PCSOs.

The Head of Community Safety and Licensing? explained the difficulties experienced in monitoring the work of the PCSOs. As they were not Police Officers, it was difficult to measure their worth. Outcomes were however, easier to measure. He referred to the existence of Service Level Agreements (SLA) which related to Officers patrolling specific areas, time spent in high visibility patrols, days off sick, days abstracted, the number of intelligence reports submitted and how many fixed penalty notices were issued. Statistics were provided covering these issues.

Additionally, and in terms of measures which could not be quantified, the Head of Community Safety and Licensing stated that PCSO offered a valuable service in terms of liaising with the community, in organising meetings with local residents and in supporting Police Officers during incidents and offering help at Police Surgeries and Police Operations. Working closely with the community, PCSOs were able to identify unknown offenders

Councillor N P Clark referred to the need to have a baseline figure in terms of performance against other Authorities, otherwise Members were unable to establish how good or bad the statistics were. The Head of Community Safety and Licensing explained that he was not aware of any other Council managing PCSO data in this way. He added that East Herts was using its SLA with the Police to monitor and benchmark performance of PCSOs in the hope that services and systems could be improved and

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the District Council could then use.

Councillor M R Alexander referred to the fact that PCSOs had limited powers of arrest and detainment and the frustrations that this caused to both the PCSOs and the public. Other issues of concern included the fact that the public were paying several times over for their services via taxes from Hertfordshire County Council, Parish and District Councils and Police Taxes. He questioned whether current policy was appropriate.

Councillor A D Dodd praised the work of PCSOs and especially their work in the community, in schools and working with the elderly. He added that they provided good value for money and would not support a reduction in their numbers. If anything, he would prefer to see an increase in them working with children of primary school age. He queried whether funding could be sought from the shopkeepers who benefitted from the service and referred to the shopping centre at Brookfield and the contribution it made to Broxbourne Council in relation to PCSOs.

Councillor N P Clark supported the work of the PCSOs and the significant contribution they made to the Sawbridgeworth area generally and in relation to anti-social behaviour. He questioned the issue of consistency of support, in that Officers with a great deal of knowledge of Sawbridgeworth had recently been transferred to Buntingford and of the local intelligence which was now lost.

Councillor P Grethe referred to the fact that PCSOs finished their shift earlier than the time when issues associated with underage drinking started later in the evening. She stated that she would like to see them dealing with anti-social behaviour and drug related issues. The Chairman commended the work of PCSOs and the work of a multi-agency approach.

Councillor J J Taylor praised the work of PCSOs and the difference they had made in Ware especially in the King

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George area and in working with young people.

Councillor M R Alexander commended the work of PCSOs generally and in adding that they provided an important role in the community in terms of the pub watch initiative CCTV system in recognising people local to an area who might be caught offending.

Members supported the work of PCSOs, citing the differences they had made in respective wards, in supporting HCC's priorities, and particularly in relation to supporting local communities.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report be noted; and

(B) the Executive Member for Community Safety and Protection be advised to consider Members' comments outlined above when framing his evidence to Hertfordshire County Council's topic group.

524 REVIEW OF EMPTY HOMES STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

The Executive Member for Housing and Health submitted a report on the current Empty Homes Strategy and Action Plan and proposed revisions to the Strategy and Action Plan covering the period of 2010 to 2015.

A review of the action plan, had highlighted areas where the expected outcomes had not been fully achieved. It was noted that more than 600 homes had been left empty for longer than six months and that of these, over 34 had been empty for 10 years. Following the appointment of the Empty Homes Officer, in 2004, 70 properties had been brought back into use. Notwithstanding this, the overall number of empty properties including the number of very long term empty properties, there was very little change – this is not a sentence.

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A revised policy and action plan had been produced which sought to address the need to balance the work done to maximise the number of empty properties bought back into use and target those which had been empty for the longest time. The revised objectives were set out in the report now submitted.

It was noted that whilst the previous approach aimed to deal with those properties which detracted most from their locality, the practicality of visiting all those “problem” properties to assess their condition required significantly more resources than those available. The additional work needed in these cases was the basis for Officers putting forward a reduced performance target (from 12 – 10) under the proposed new policy with its updated objectives.

The Empty Homes Officer reaffirmed the difficulties in dealing with more problematic properties and explained the main change in emphasis to the Action Plan, which was in summary, to bring empty homes back into use and to tackle those which were long term, problematic or could meet a specific housing need. The Empty Homes Officer referred to the Regional Spatial Strategy and pressures on the Council to build more homes when the Council still had 650 homes empty in the area.

The Chairman referred to the fact that the Empty Homes Officer worked on a part-time basis and of the need to ensure that more resources were directed in this area. The Environmental Health Manager (Residential) added that the figures for empty homes was likely to rise.

In response to a query from Councillor P Grethe regarding use of the properties for social housing, the Empty Homes Officer agreed to speak to the Member outside the meeting.

The Empty Homes Officer explained how the process of getting properties back into use, worked. It was noted that there was no budget for works in default. She explained

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the difficulties of contacting some owners who might be a registered offshore company. No properties had been compulsorily purchased.

In response to a query about progressing properties which had been empty for 20 years and whether there were sufficient resources to progress this, the Empty Homes Officer explained that it was a combination of issues, including the time taken to track down the owner and in making sure that the owner carried out the necessary works. Timescales became protracted. The Empty Homes Officer stated that enforcement action to carry out works, helped the process along.

Councillor N Clark referred to the Council's own Data Sharing Protocol and asked if this should be referenced when considering the draft policy section on "Use of Empty Homes Information" on page 8.33 of the report submitted to ensure compliance.

Members noted and supported the need for a revised strategy including the need to ensure that adequate resources were made available to support the Action Plan.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report and Action Plan be noted; and

(B) the Executive be advised of the need to ensure adequate resources were made available to support the new strategy and Action Plan.

DNS

525 UPDATE ON BETTER WAYS OF WORKING WITH PARISH COUNCILS

The Director of Customer and Community Services submitted a report updating Members on the progress made in developing measures to improve working relations with Parish and Town Councils, following consideration of the matter at the meeting of Community Scrutiny Committee on 27 October 2009.

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The Director referred to the letter dated 26 November 2009, which had been sent to all Parish and Town Clerks providing information on the services offered or provided by the District Council and how best to access those services, including a registration of interest in various initiatives. These were attached to the report now submitted. He provided a breakdown of the responses received so far.

Members considered the role of Parish and Town Councils in relation to development control issues and the need to develop protocols around planning issues including site visits. The Director of Customer and Community Services referred to the issues which were highlighted at the Rural Parish Conference in relation to planning and the fact that many Parish Clerks felt that their comments on a planning matter were not always given sufficient weight. Work was ongoing to ensure that the nature of any objections was made more effective.

Councillor A D Dodd referred to the fact that so many Parish and Town Councillors did not appreciate who provided particular services. He supported the intention to hold quarterly meetings with the Chief Executive and the Director of Customer and Community Services.

In response to a query from Councillor N Clark about providing a special phone line for Town and Parish Councils, the Director stated that the Council did not have the resources to provide a special "hotline" for Parish Clerks but had provided advice about how they might get the best from the Council's services. He added that customer service was something which was taken very seriously. It was the aim of the Council, to ensure that 80% of all calls were answered without the need to transfer the caller to another person.

The Executive Member for Community Development, Leisure and Culture advised that she attended the majority of her own local Parish Councils and of the close working relationship which existed between rural Parish and rural

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District Councillors.

Councillor N Clark referred to the difficulties which were caused when a clash in meetings occurred recently between Council and parish meetings. Councillor M Wood suggested that webcasting might help with this difficulty.

Members noted the report and the need to provide guidance to help Town and Parish Councillors in submitting comments in relation to planning applications and around protocols if they made site visits.

RESOLVED – that (A) the report be noted; and

(B) guidance be developed to help Town and Parish Councillors in submitting comments in relation to planning applications and when making site visits.

DCCS

526 COMMUNITY SCRUTINY CORPORATE HEALTHCHECK
SEPTEMBER – NOVEMBER 2009

The Director of Customer and Community Services submitted an exception report on the performance of the key indicators relating to Community Scrutiny Committee. An update of the graphs was tabled which corrected the scale of those contained in Essential Reference Paper 'B', attached to the report now submitted.

In response to a query from Councillor N P Clark concerning the SLM figures for November 2009, the Director of Customer and Community Services advised that the healthcheck figures covered the period September to November 2009.

RESOLVED – that the report be received.

527 WORK PROGRAMME 2009/10

The Chairman invited Members to review the work

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programme of Community Scrutiny Committee.

The Scrutiny Officer referred to the report considered by Audit Committee regarding the “Review of Scrutiny and Audit Committee Effectiveness Review” and the fact that Members of Audit Committee had requested that the report be submitted to all Scrutiny Committees. She referred to overcrowding of scrutiny agendas and reminded Members that this had been one of the points raised by the External Auditors. With the agreement of the Chairman, two issues would not now be submitted but would be reported in summary, within the twice yearly Service Plan Monitoring Report. In line with Members’ previously expressed concerns, this move would not affect any topic in relation to housing or homelessness.

The Scrutiny Officer sought Members views in relation to a choice of crime and disorder topic for scrutiny at the next meeting. She suggested that items for scrutiny might include Community Payback: LiFE (Local Intervention Fire Education) and / or Designated Public Place Orders. Background information on these topics was provided. At the request of Members, the Head of Community Safety and Licensing undertook to circulate to Members a copy of the current Crime and Disorder Partnership Strategy.

Members discussed the merits of what topics could be effectively scrutinised. Councillor N Clark suggested that in relation to the Designated Public Place Order (DPPO), this was the topic most likely to be influenced by this Committee. The other options were outside the remit of this Council. Members agreed and requested that DPPOs, including the issue of underage drinking, be added to the work programme of Community Scrutiny Committee for 27 April 2010.

The Scrutiny Officer suggested that the model of a “select committee” approach could be adopted in relation to questions being asked in relation to Housing Associations and the Citizens Advice Service. This method had been piloted by the Health Engagement Panel and had worked

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well. Members supported this approach.

Councillor J J Taylor sought an update in relation to the Meals on Wheels Service undertaken by Hertfordshire County Council. The Director of Customer and Community Services agreed to investigate this and advise Members.

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RESOLVED – that the Work Programme, as amended by approved.

The meeting closed at 9.45 pm.

Chairman
Date