

MINUTES OF A JOINT MEETING OF
SCRUTINY COMMITTEES HELD IN THE
COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS,
HERTFORD ON TUESDAY 12 FEBRUARY
2013, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor D Andrews (Chairman).
Councillors D Abbott, E Bedford,
E Buckmaster, S Bull, G Jones, J Mayes,
G McAndrew, W Mortimer, T Page, M Pope,
C Rowley, G Williamson, J Wing, M Wood
and C Woodward.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors P Ballam, P Moore, P Phillips
and P Ruffles.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Cliff Cardoza | - Head of Environmental Services |
| Simon Chancellor | - Head of Finance and Performance |
| Karl Chui | - Performance Monitoring Officer |
| Jeff Hughes | - Head of Democratic and Legal Support Services |
| Marian Langley | - Scrutiny Officer |
| Henry Lewis | - Head of Customer Services and Business Improvement |
| Peter Mannings | - Democratic Services Officer |
| Will O'Neill | - Head of Communications, Engagement and |

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Ceri Pettit | - Cultural Services - Corporate Planning and Performance Manager |
| George A Robertson | - Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services |
| Neil Sloper | - Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services |
| Kevin Steptoe | - Head of Planning and Building Control Services |
| Su Tarran | - Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service |
| Adele Taylor | - Director of Finance and Support Services |

594 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

It was proposed by Councillor G McAndrew and seconded by Councillor G Williamson that Councillor D Andrews be appointed Chairman for the meeting.

RESOLVED – that Councillor D Andrews be appointed Chairman for the meeting.

595 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillors W Ashley, R Beeching, Mrs D Hollebon, Mrs D Hone, N Poulton, J Ranger, N Symonds and B Wrangles. It was noted that Councillor C Rowley was substituting for Councillor Mrs D Hollebon.

596 MINUTES – 15 JANUARY 2013

In respect of Minute 541 – Fees and Charges 2013/14, the joint meeting agreed that the word “significant” in the 3rd paragraph be replaced with the word “insignificant”.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the joint meeting held on 15 January 2013 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the amendment now detailed.

597 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

The Chairman advised Members of temporary fire exit arrangements for Wallfields in the event of an emergency, as the staff entrance doors were currently out of action.

598 SERVICE PLANS 2013/14

The Leader of the Council submitted a report on Service Plans for 2013/14. The Service Plans are produced every year by Heads of Service and set out the key actions that need to be undertaken to deliver the corporate priorities and key objectives of the Council in line with the budget.

The joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees was invited to scrutinise the Service Plans and to make recommendations to the Executive.

In response to a query from Councillor G McAndrew, the Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service advised that the Local Council Tax Support Scheme had replaced the previous Council Tax Benefit arrangements following changes to government regulations.

In response to a query from Councillor M Wood, the Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service commented that East Herts Council was operating the same scheme as Stevenage Borough Council. Members were advised that there were a range of new schemes being put in place across the Hertfordshire Authorities.

Councillor G McAndrew commented on the action plan for the Council's website. The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services advised that the action plan would be submitted to the March 2013 meeting of the Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor J Wing commented that he found the Council's website challenging in terms of searching and finding information quickly. The Head of Environmental Services stated that the service plan action was about further improving the website to allow the public to book appointments online and pay online for Council services. He stated that the range of services available via the website was being improved.

The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services advised that the website needed to be compatible with web based search engines, as these were by far the most used by the public when accessing the Council's services. The joint meeting was advised that very few entered through the front page of the website.

Councillor C Woodward commented that he believed the Authority was falling short on its plans to maintain car parking income whilst encouraging the use of businesses in East Herts.

The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services stated that the council is faced with a challenging balancing act when trying to meet expectations in respect of Car Park Fees and Charges.

Members were advised that there was a very low level of complaints.

In response to a query from a Member regarding the development of communities and other projects with Section 106 funds, the Head of Planning and Building Control advised that local policies and supplementary planning guidance were in place to ensure that Section

106 monies were secured.

The Head of Communications, Engagement and Cultural Services advised that Officers always sought to ensure that Section 106 funding was used in a timely manner. Officers also worked in consultation with local ward Members to identify appropriate uses for such funding.

The Joint meeting resolved to recommend that the Executive approve the Service Plan activity for 2013/14.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be informed that the Joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees considered that the Service Plan activity for 2013/14 now submitted should be approved.

599 2012/13 ESTIMATES AND FUTURE TARGETS

The Leader submitted a report on performance indicators that the Council was required to monitor and publish annually in the Annual Report. The report advised Members of estimated performance for 2012/13 and the targets for the next three years.

Members were reminded that performance indicators were separated into national performance indicators (NIs) and local performance indicators (East Herts Performance Indicators or EHPI). Members were requested to note that all NIs were to be recoded to EHPI prefixes as national indicators were no longer required to be monitored, benchmarked and reported at a national level.

Councillor G McAndrew commented on the decline of under-16s using the East Herts leisure facilities for swimming. The Head of Environmental Services advised that this was not an unusual trend and similar declines were being seen nationally. Officers were working with the contractor to find ways of addressing this issue. Members were advised that Officers would report on this trend at Community Scrutiny Committee in March 2013.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service responded to a query from Councillor J Mayes by stating that Officers had, in the first two quarters, experienced a 55% increase in correspondence on Housing Benefit and Council Tax claims. Members were advised that the Authority had responded by allocating additional resources to address the increased demand.

In reply to a query from Councillor G Jones, Members were advised of the way Revenues and Benefits work was prioritised by Officers.

Councillor T Page supported a comment made by Councillor G Jones that the future target for NI181, the time taken to process housing benefit/Council Tax Benefit new claims and change events, should be revised back nearer to 10 days.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits Shared Service reminded Members that the waiting time included the time Officers had to wait to receive information back from the public regarding their benefit claims.

Councillor C Woodward stated that, in respect of EHPI64, an outturn target of returning 10 vacant dwellings to occupation or demolition was not sufficiently ambitious and should be revised upward. He was mindful of the limited Officer resource currently in this area and felt this should be increased to allow more work to be undertaken.

The Chairman commented on whether the Joint meeting should suggest to the Executive that the future target for NI181 be revised back to nearer 10 days. He also commented on whether additional resources should be put into a more ambitious target for returning vacant dwellings to occupation or demolition. Members supported these suggestions.

The Joint meeting decided to make the comments now detailed to the Executive.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be informed that (A) the Joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees have the following comments on the 2012/13 Estimates and Future Targets:

- the estimates and targets for 2012/13 be noted;
- in respect of NI181, additional resources be considered to ensure that that the future target for the processing of housing benefit claims and change events can be bought back to nearer 10 days;
- in respect of EHPI64, the outturn target of returning 10 vacant dwellings to occupation or demolition was not sufficiently ambitious and should be revised upwards through additional resources being considered for this area; and

(B) the recoding of national indicators (NIs) to East Herts Performance Indicators (EHPI) prefixes be agreed.

600 CAR PARK CHARGING POLICY

The Executive Member for Economic Development submitted a report presenting further information which would support the Executive in their decision making in respect of Car Park Charging Policy for 2013.

Members were reminded that the car park charging policy detailed in the report had been drawn up following the proposals approved by the Executive on 4 December 2012. The joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees was invited to scrutinise the suggested policy and to make recommendations to the Executive.

Councillor J Mayes commented that the £1 evening charge should be introduced in isolation and there should

be no reduction in day time charges.

Councillor J Wing expressed concerns that the proposals would not improve business in East Herts and there would be significant damage to evening trade in Ware.

Councillor G Jones expressed concerns that the proposed changes would have a negative impact on the night time economy in East Herts and particularly in Bishop's Stortford.

Councillor P Ballam, as a local ward Member not on a Scrutiny Committee, stated that she supported the comments of Councillor Wing and was against an evening car park charge in Ware.

Councillor M Wood welcomed the ideas detailed in the report, particularly for the larger towns. He stated that the proposals might go some way to preventing indiscriminate on street parking and the proposals should be implemented and enforced on a trial basis for 1 year.

Councillor J Wyllie commented on whether every town should be treated the same. He suggested that the evening charge should be 50p rather than £1.

Councillor C Rowley commented on whether there was any value in obtaining evidence of the effect of such proposals on shops and business by looking at the approach of Local Authorities with a similar demographic to East Herts.

The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services stated that Members were faced with a unique challenge in deciding on a future car park charging policy. He referred to the difficulties and risks in making geographic or demographic comparisons as every town and district was unique. Members were referred to Bishop's Stortford as an example, where the Chairman pointed out that the station car park charging for evening parking was very busy with people accepting the fee for the convenience of parking near the train station and cinema for their night

out.

The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services stated that empirical evidence from other Local Authorities could be examined. He stated however, that the economic landscape was complex and separating out the cause and effect of any changes would be a significant challenge for Members and Officers.

Councillor T Page stated that a far more radical approach was required, such as Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology or self enforcement. He commented that the effectiveness of residents parking schemes might be impaired by motorists seeking to avoid an evening charge.

The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services advised that there were pros and cons to all of the current methods of parking enforcement and increasing car parking charges carried its own advantages and disadvantages. The introduction of new technology in respect of car parking control would be considered by the Council in the near future as the current ticket machines were coming to the end of their operating life.

The Executive Member for Economic Development thanked the joint meeting for its comments. He stated that the debate had provided a useful opportunity for scrutinising the future car park charging policy of the Authority.

The joint meeting supported the introduction of a £1 evening charge in Hertford, Ware and Bishop's Stortford for a 1 year trial period on Mondays to Saturdays from 6.30 pm to 9.00 pm, along with associated recommended options for a reduction in day time charges as detailed in paragraph 2.4.6 of the report now submitted.

Councillors G Jones and J Wing requested that their dissent with this recommendation be recorded.

RESOLVED – that the Executive be advised that the joint meeting considers that a £1 evening charge should be introduced in Hertford, Ware and Bishop’s Stortford for a 1 year trial period on Mondays to Saturdays from 6.30 pm to 9.00 pm, along with associated recommended options for a reduction in day time charges as detailed in paragraph 2.4.6 of the report now submitted.

The meeting closed at 9.35 pm

| |
|----------------|
| Chairman |
| Date |