

MINUTES OF A JOINT MEETING OF
 SCRUTINY COMMITTEES HELD IN THE
 COUNCIL CHAMBER, WALLFIELDS,
 HERTFORD ON TUESDAY 10 FEBRUARY
 2015, AT 7.00 PM

PRESENT: Councillor G Jones (Chairman).
 Councillors P Ballam, E Buckmaster,
 G Cutting, Mrs D Hollebon, J Jones,
 J Mayes, P Moore, W Mortimer, T Page,
 M Pope, J Ranger, N Symonds,
 G Williamson, J Wing, M Wood,
 C Woodward and J Wyllie.

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors R Beeching, L Haysey, P Phillips,
 P Ruffles and S Rutland-Barsby.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Claire Bennett	- Manager of Housing Services
Emma Freeman	- Head of People and Property Services
Chris Gibson	- Head of Governance and Risk Management
Jeff Hughes	- Head of Democratic and Legal Support Services
Marian Langley	- Scrutiny Officer
Peter Mannings	- Democratic Services Officer
Will O'Neill	- Head of Communications, Engagement and Cultural Services
Ceri Pettit	- Corporate Planning and

	Performance Manager
Paul Pullin	- Manager of Economic Development
George A Robertson	- Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services
Brian Simmonds	- Head of Community Safety and Health 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
Karen Watling	- Interim Head of Strategic Finance
Ben Wood	- Head of Business Development

523 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

It was proposed by Councillor Mrs D Hollebon and seconded by Councillor J Ranger that Councillor G Jones be appointed Chairman for the meeting.

RESOLVED – that Councillor G Jones be appointed Chairman for the meeting.

524 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors D Abbott, S Bull, A Dearman, C Rowley, K Warnell and B Wrangles.

525 MINUTES – 20 JANUARY 2015

In respect of Minute 479 – Budget Report and Medium Term Financial Plan 2014/15 – 2018/19, the Chairman advised that he agreed with the amendment now detailed. This was supported by the joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees.

RESOLVED – that the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2015 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the amendment of Minute 479 – Budget Report and Medium Term Financial Plan 2014/15 – 2018/19 as follows:

Delete in 36th paragraph – ‘.....the Director of Finance advised Members that the Council was using some of its reserves and referred Members to Essential Reference Paper ‘K’ (Review of the Council’s Reserves) for more detailed information.’

Replace with – ‘the Director of Finance and Support Services assured Members that reserves would return to within the limits of the reserves policy by the end of 2015/16.’

526 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman advised Members that the Safety and Wellbeing training scheduled for tomorrow evening had been cancelled. He welcomed the Heads of Service to the meeting, particularly Ben Wood, the newly appointed Head of Business Development.

The Chairman apologised for the reprints to the original Agenda that had been issued to Members.

527 SERVICE PLANS 2015/16

The Leader of the Council submitted a report on Service Plans for 2015/16. The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager advised that the Service Plans set out the planned service activities in support of the Council's priorities as agreed last year.

The joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees was advised that the documents complied with relevant service plan guidance and the Service Plans were included in the supporting Essential Reference Papers. Members were reminded that updates would be provided to the relevant individual Scrutiny Committees every six months.

Members were advised that, as Corporate Business Scrutiny Committee had expressed an interest in having an opportunity to understand where dates had slipped on this year's plans and the reasons why, Essential Reference Papers 'C', 'D', 'E' and 'F' detailed the actions that were currently off target as at the end of December 2014.

Councillor C Woodward commented that the air quality management project needed to be a plan for action rather than just monitoring. The Head of Community Safety and Health Services stated that air quality matters were beyond the control of East Herts Council but the Authority would encourage other agencies to assist the Council.

Councillor M Pope queried the confidence level of Officers regarding the flood alleviation and surface water management plans for high risk areas. The Head of Community Safety and Health Services advised that East Herts Council was one of only two Councils in Hertfordshire with a dedicated flood alleviation team and the Authority had very experienced Officers. The grants for flood alleviation work were underspent but the fund had been ring-fenced to support further work in this area.

In reply to a query from the Chairman, the Head of Democratic and Legal Support Services confirmed that

the completion dates for Action Codes DLSS4 and DLSS5 in the Democratic and Legal Support Services Service Plan should be 31 March 2016.

In response to a query from Councillor M Wood, the Economic Development Manager explained the meaning of the Eastern Plateau title in the context of the ongoing rural development programme. The Chairman commented on whether the economic aspects of the programme would extend to initiatives specific to the 5 main towns. Members were advised that the intention was to support businesses in various ways and this would include transport infrastructure work and working with the towns.

In response to a comment from Councillor G Williamson regarding Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and farms, the Economic Development Manager referred to a new project whereby the Authority was supporting applicants that were rural businesses by identifying barriers to growth within the planning system.

The Economic Development Manager confirmed to Councillor Pope that the Authority welcomed the input of Parish and Town Councils to the production of the new 2015–2020 Economic Development Strategy.

Councillor J Wing referred to the issue of the lack of corporate signage in the Marsh Lane business area in Ware. The Economic Development Manager commented that the signage was the responsibility of the estate owner but East Herts Council could encourage them to improve the situation. The Executive Member for Economic Development stressed that it would be inappropriate for the Authority to fund improvements on a site owned by a private enterprise. He referred to a review of industrial land and estates which had previously been presented to Corporate Business Scrutiny.

Councillor Woodward welcomed the seeking of support for enhancements to the ancient monument of Waytemore Castle. He encouraged Officers to work with

the curator of the Bishop's Stortford Museum. Councillor N Symonds championed the reinstatement of the friends of Waytemore Castle. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services undertook to draw this suggestion to the attention of the relevant service.

Following comments from a number of Members regarding sports and leisure provision in East Herts, the Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services stated that the Authority already had a long list of priorities and service plan actions. Following a lengthy debate on the issue of leisure provision, the joint meeting agreed that the Executive be requested to approve an additional service plan action in respect of developing a business case for leisure development in East Herts.

Councillor N Symonds referred to the procurement and implementation of a new Choice Based Lettings Contract and the excellent work currently undertaken in this area. The Manager of Housing Services advised that the current contract was about to conclude and there would have to be a competitive tender process. She advised that Officers hoped to procure the same level of service with a few enhancements and the current provider was one of the companies involved in the tendering process.

Councillor Woodward referred to the importance of the Footway and Grass Verge Parking Policy in respect of limiting further damage to grass verges and enforcing pedestrian safety in collaboration with the Police. The Chairman stated that Environment Scrutiny Committee would be receiving a report in 2015/16 relating to this service plan action.

The Chairman expressed concern that progress in respect of residents' parking zones only seemed to be going forward and pushing the parking problem further out, and questioned the possibility of reversing them. The Executive Member for Economic Development reminded Members that the issue had been thoroughly investigated by Scrutiny and there had been some helpful suggestions.

In response to comments from a number of Members, the Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services reminded Members that resident parking schemes were only progressed where there was support from a majority of the residents living in the area concerned. Revoking such schemes would need to follow due legal process. Members were reminded that there was a long list of requests from the public for resident parking schemes due to concerns regarding congestion and pavement parking.

Councillor Wing expressed a number of concerns regarding website accessibility. He stressed the importance of consulting local people as well as utilising suggestions from website users rather than relying solely on the advice of website experts. The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services reminded Members that the website remained compliant with accessibility guidelines and the website accessibility review would go ahead subject to the revised procurement process. The company undertaking the review would be consulting on the basis outlined by Councillor Wing.

The Chairman reminded Members that a verbal update would be given at the 17 February 2015 meeting of Environment Scrutiny in respect of the Micro Hydro Project at Hertford Theatre.

The joint meeting resolved to recommend that the Executive approve the Service Plan activity for 2015/16.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Executive be informed that the joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees considers that the Service Plan activity for 2015/16, as now submitted, be approved; and

(B) the Executive be requested to approve an additional service plan action in respect of developing a business case for leisure development in East Herts.

528 2014/15 PERFORMANCE INDICATOR ESTIMATES AND
2015/16 FUTURE TARGETS

The Leader of the Council submitted a report advising Members 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 2014/15 and the targets for the next three years.

Members were advised that the performance indicators supported the Council's priorities and reflected the intended Service Plan Activity for 2015/16. The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager provided detailed information relating to all of the tables and graphs detailed in the report.

Members were reminded that the Council's Covalent System monitored long terms trends and there were 16 indicators expected to show a decline in performance over the long term. If performance continued to decline and targets either remained at current levels or increased, 13 of these indicators were at risk of moving to a 'Red' or 'Amber' status in future.

The Corporate Planning and Performance Manager concluded that targets were generally being met. However, the direction of travel showed that the number of indicators in the short term detailing a decline in performance was increasing and the number of indicators showing an improvement in performance was decreasing.

Councillor J Wyllie expressed concern that the number of invoices being paid on time was declining in the short term. He was particularly concerned that small businesses needed cash flow to survive.

The Director of Finance and Support Services advised that performance remained high in that over 95% of invoices were paid on time. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services stated that every directorate monitored performance as regards the

payment of invoices and this issue was taken very seriously by the Authority.

In reply to a comment from Councillor J Ranger regarding complaints in the context of the 'Here to Help' initiative and the importance of taking complaints seriously, the Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services reminded Members that the way complaints were handled had been endorsed by the Council's auditors and the Authority took the reporting of complaints very seriously. He further reminded Members that the level of complaints was low, especially at Stage 2, so that a change of just one or two cases could make a significant impact on the reported percentage figure.

Councillor J Wing expressed concern that whilst 90% of food establishments in East Herts were broadly compliant with food hygiene law, this meant that 1 in 10 were not. He felt that this figure should be 95% at least. The Head of Community Safety and Health Services stated that this issue was taken extremely seriously and most establishments were of a very high standard. He undertook to take Councillor Wing's feedback to the relevant Officers.

The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services undertook to provide a written response to Councillor J Jones in respect of the Customer Satisfaction survey of the public regarding the Council's leisure services.

Councillor Wing stated that he would expect to see a much higher figure than 75% in respect of EHPI 2.1d – Planning Enforcement Initial Site Inspections. He felt that the public expected a swifter response and with more development taking place across the District this would become increasingly important. He felt that the figure should be nearer 90% and the Authority should commit the resources to achieve this.

The Head of Planning and Building Control advised that the two elements to this target were how many working

days it took for an Officer response and also the scale of the planning control breach. Members were reminded that the ongoing staff resource issue for the Enforcement team should be addressed in the medium term in the next civic year.

The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services advised that if the target was to be more rigorous, Members would have to give consideration to a budget bid from Officers for additional resources.

The joint meeting of Scrutiny resolved that, in respect of EHPI 2.1d – Planning Enforcement: Initial Site Inspections, Environment Scrutiny Committee be asked to review the matter and consider, mid-year, raising the 2015/16 target from 75% to a higher figure.

The Head of Community Safety and Health Services undertook to provide a written reply to Councillor N Symonds regarding the numbers of vacant properties across the District and where they were located. . Members were reminded that bringing vacant properties back into use was very difficult to achieve.

The Director of Finance and Support Services advised Councillor E Buckmaster that the IT Helpdesk was now fully staffed and had a single system for all Helpdesk requests for East Herts and Stevenage Officers. She stated that performance in respect of EHPI 9.5 had showed an upward trend in January and should continue to improve rapidly.

The joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees resolved that the Executive be informed that the future targets for 2015/16 and 2016/17 should be approved. The Chairman thanked the Heads of Service for attending to answer Members' questions.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Executive be informed that the future targets for 2015/16 and 2016/17 should be approved; and

(B) in respect of EHPI 2.1d – Planning Enforcement: Initial Site Inspections, Environment Scrutiny Committee be asked to review the matter and consider the raising of the 2015/16 target from 75% mid-year to a higher figure.

529 EAST HERTS CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY

The Executive Member for Community and Partnership and Liaison submitted a report setting out the Council's Customer Service Strategy for 2015 – 2020. The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services stated that the Strategy would be evidence based and would formalise the Council's customer service standards.

Members were advised that the Strategy would also identify key areas of concern and would propose priority actions to deliver a step change in digital service organisation and delivery. The Head of Customer, Information and Parking Services stressed that this would not mean 'digital by default' as some services did not work that way.

He concluded that the Strategy would be entwined with the service planning process. This would enable the Authority to introduce targets based on what the Council expected when compared to the current situation in East Herts. The Authority would be able to improve service standards across all areas of Council business whilst introducing more channels for digital access to the Council.

Councillor C Woodward commented that this evidence based approach had resulted in a really useful document. He was advised that the survey backing up the strategy had been conducted by ORS involving 3,000 surveys of which 1,300 had been returned.

In reply to a comment from Councillor G Williamson, Members were advised that the Authority was committed to recognising what the public wanted and delivering a personal touch when it came to service delivery. The

Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services stated that 50% of customer contact was by telephone against a previous figure of 70%. Officers should be aware that e-mail was not always the most accessible contact method.

Councillor N Symonds was assured that a Planning Officer would be on duty at Charringtons House so long as there was a demand. A number of Members raised the issue of digitised plans for planning applications being very difficult to view on some media devices. Councillor W Mortimer believed that this was often influenced by the quality of the scanners used to digitalise the plans. The Head of Information, Customer and Parking Services undertook to pass all of these comments onto the Head of Planning and Building Control.

The joint meeting was advised that the Authority was in a unique position to act as a gateway to other services provided by other organisations and Officers always sought to direct customers to a website or hand over the call. The Chief Executive and Director of Customer and Community Services thanked Members for their helpful comments. He referred to the challenges and tensions involved in identifying the needs of customers.

The joint meeting of Scrutiny Committees resolved that the Council's proposed Customer Service Strategy should be recommended to the Executive for approval. Members also recommended that Corporate Business Scrutiny be asked to accept a report on the Customer Service Project Plan onto its work programme for the meeting due to be held on 26 May 2015.

RESOLVED – that (A) the Council's proposed Customer Service Strategy be recommended to the Executive for approval; and

(B) Corporate Business Scrutiny be asked to accept a report on the Customer Service Project Plan onto its work programme for the meeting due

to be held on 26 May 2015.

The meeting closed at 9.24 pm

Chairman

Date