

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 18 January 2007

PRESENT: Councillor MP Howell – Chairman
Councillor R Hall – Vice-Chairman

Councillors:	RE Barrett	RF Bryant
	Mrs SM Ellington	Mrs EM Heazell
	SGM Kindersley	MJ Mason
	DC McCraith	Mrs CAED Murfitt
	CR Nightingale	AG Orgee
	Mrs HM Smith	RT Summerfield
	Dr SEK van de Ven	

Councillors JD Batchelor, Mrs A Elsby, RMA Manning and Mrs DP Roberts were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
	Simon McIntosh	Corporate Manager (Policy, Performance and Partnerships)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor DM Morgan.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 21 December 2006 were agreed as a correct record, subject to the following amendments:

- The inclusion of Cllr RE Barrett in the list of attendees
- The insertion of the word “not” in the first paragraph of minute 6, after the words “external organisation could”

It was noted that County Councillor John Reynolds had recently expressed reservations about the proposed access road to Addenbrookes Hospital.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors SGM Kindersley, DC McCraith and AG Orgee all declared personal interests as County Councillors.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

5. DRAFT AGENDA PROGRAMME

The Committee **agreed** to:

- Add Member/Officer Contract, which had been postponed from this meeting, as an item on February’s agenda
- Include an item on the Council’s Complaints Procedure at February’s agenda.
- Add an item on Grants to Voluntary Organisations to February’s agenda, on the

- request of the Community Development portfolio holder
- Add an item on Anti-social behaviour to the agenda programme, on the request of the Community Development portfolio holder
- Add an item on Community Call to Action for late summer/early autumn, on the request of the Community Development portfolio holder
- Remove East of England Plan Panel report from the agenda programme

The Committee would decide when to schedule discussion on Community Calls to Action following further information on when this new process was to be piloted.

It was noted that a special meeting might be convened in February to discuss the Corporate Government Inspectors' report.

6. REPORTS FROM MONITORS

Councillor Dr SEK van de Ven explained that the matter of exploring the possibilities of energy efficiencies in restorations of listed buildings would be raised at the Conservation, Sustainability and Community Planning portfolio holder meeting on 19 January 2007.

No portfolio holder meetings had been held since the last meeting of the Committee.

7. POST OFFICE CLOSURES

The Chairman welcomed Linda McCord and Dawn Giddens from Postwatch, an independent consumer body, not attached to the Royal Mail Group or the Government. Linda McCord then gave a presentation on the proposed closure plan and made the following points:

- The Government proposed that a maximum of 2,500 post offices be closed, 50% to be from rural areas
- This amounted to 17% of all post offices, which equated to 230 in the Eastern region
- The Access Criteria was to ensure that 99% of people will be within 3 miles of a post office,
- Closures could start happening from the summer of 2008, which was seen as too soon
- Voluntary redundancies of post masters would not be offered as the closure programme would be governed by the access criteria
- 500 alternative or outreach post offices would be set up in rural areas, to offset the closures and the Village Retail Service Association (ViRSA) were expected to be involved in this process
- Postwatch were in the process of contacting parish councils on the closure programme
- Closing date for the Government's consultation process was 8 March 2007

The closure programme of 2002/3 had demonstrated that a six week consultation period following the announcement of closures was insufficient and Postwatch would be campaigning for a 12 week period. It was understood that Postwatch did not have the power to veto proposed closures.

Linda McCord expressed concern that although the Government had recognised the social role of the post office, they had not specifically defined what that role was or how this could affect the closure programme.

Members of the Committee made the following comments:

- Clarification was required as to whether the three miles described in the access criteria was “as the crow flies” or via the available roads or footpaths
- Availability of public transport should be included in the Government’s access criteria
- Some villages were dependent on their post offices as it was their only shop
- Some shops were dependent on revenue from their post office duties
- The closure programme could have a severe impact on the District’s smaller villages
- The impact on small businesses should be considered
- The Government’s policies had ensured that post offices were less viable than before

The Committee **agreed** to set up an informal task and finish group of Councillors R Hall, Mrs EM Hezell, AG Orgee and Mrs HM Smith. This group will report back to the Committee on how best to respond to the Government’s consultation exercise, basing the proposed response on the Committee’s discussions. The response will be copied in to Postwatch.

The Senior Democratic Services Officer **agreed** to send the consultation form, with Postwatch’s two page explanation of the consultation process, to all Members.

8. LOCAL GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER

Councillor R Hall introduced his report which informed the Committee of the implications of the Government’s White Paper “Strong and Prosperous Communities” for the scrutiny function.

It was agreed that neither the Leader nor the Scrutiny Chairman should be elected for four years, as implied by the White Paper. Annual elections were more appropriate.

It was agreed that ex-members of Cabinet should be allowed to serve on the Committee, as their experience was invaluable.

The Committee discussed possible amendments to the Constitution regarding the scrutiny function and the role of the opposition.

The Committee **agreed** to appoint Councillors RF Bryant, R Hall and Mrs EM Hezell to a task and finish group, which will examine possible amendments to the Constitution to include the role of an official opposition.

Councillor Hall was thanked for the work he had carried out in compiling his report.

9. FUTURE REPORTING ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE AUDIT PANEL

The Committee **noted** the proposed changes to the terms of reference for the Audit Panel, which would be determined at the next meeting of Council on 25 January 2007.

10. SCRUTINY TRAINING AT YORK

The Committee considered whether to authorise the use of the Scrutiny contingency budget to allow the Vice-Chairman to attend a scrutiny training course at York and the following points were made:

- If sent on the course, Councillor Hall should compile a short report to ensure that

- all scrutiny members benefit from the training
- An Independent and Liberal Democrat councillor should also be sent on this course
- It would cost £1,500 to send three members on the course and this was prohibitively expensive
- It was important to bring new ideas to the Committee and training could provide this

A vote was taken and by 10 votes to 4 the Committee

AGREED to book Councillor R Hall on to an IDeA training course for Overview and Scrutiny Chairs at York at a cost of £500.

The £500 for this training will come out of the budget for member training, which will be compensated by the Scrutiny Contingency fund. The net cost to the training budget will be £0, but the expenditure will appear in the budget figures.

11. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee **NOTED** the following future meeting dates:
2007: 15 February, 15 March, 19 April & 17 May

The Meeting ended at 4.30 p.m.
