

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the Civic Affairs Committee held on
Thursday, 15 January 2015 at 11.00 a.m.

PRESENT: Councillor David Bard – Chairman
Councillor Kevin Cuffley – Vice-Chairman

Councillors:	Nigel Cathcart	Simon Edwards
	James Hockney	Sebastian Kindersley
	Douglas de Lacey	Deborah Roberts
	Bridget Smith	Jim Stewart
	Bunty Waters	

Officers:	Andrew Francis	Electoral Services Manager
	Fiona McMillan	Legal & Democratic Services Manager and Monitoring Officer
	Graham Watts	Democratic Services Team Leader

Advisors: Grant Osbourn Independent Person

Councillor Aidan Van de Weyer was in attendance, by invitation.

The Chairman opened the meeting by reporting that Grace Everson, former Parish Council elected representative on the Council's former Standards Committee between 2002 and 2008, had recently passed away. Members paid tribute to Grace's work on the Standards Committee and observed a moment of silence in her memory.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received by Councillors Alison Elcox and Ray Manning. Gillian Holmes, the Council's Deputy Independent Person, also submitted her apologies for absence.

Councillor James Hockney was present as a substitute in place of Councillor Ray Manning.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Sebastian Kindersley declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 6 as he chaired a working group at Cambridgeshire County Council that had considered issues relating to the electoral review.

3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 September 2014 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

4. RECORDED VOTES AT FULL COUNCIL

Graham Watts, Democratic Services Team Leader, presented a report which set out the following motion from Councillor Aidan Van de Weyer that was referred to the Civic Affairs Committee from the meeting of Full Council on 27 November 2014:

“This Council agrees that all votes, except for those taken by affirmation and for appointments, be recorded in the manner described in Standing Order 16.5 (Recorded Vote) and that the Constitution be amended accordingly”.

Councillor Van de Weyer explained that openness was very important and that, in his view, the way in which voting currently took place at meetings of Full Council was not fully transparent. He therefore wanted to see the names of Members and how they voted on individual proposals recorded in the minutes of meetings of Full Council for all votes carried out, except for those on appointments or decisions taken by affirmation.

In debating the motion, the following points were noted:

- nothing had changed since the last time this issue had been debated, so the original decision to retain existing arrangements should stand;
- recorded voting for the majority of decisions made by the Council might put pressure on individual Members in political groups to vote inline with the party rather than vote with their conscience;
- assurances had been given from the Leaders of political parties that no party whips were in place. The Council’s consideration of the Local Development Plan was evidence of this;
- the proposed change was unnecessary as the Council’s Standing Orders already included provision for recorded votes to take place as and when required;
- Members were elected to exercise their judgement on behalf of residents, so providing an opportunity for people to see how their local Member voted on a particular subject was an extension of that arrangement;
- Brandon Lewis MP, in his original letter regarding the new requirement for all votes on budget items at Full Council meetings to be recorded, made the point that the change was about transparency of decision making;
- local government was moving into a new realm of expectation. The Council had to respond to that and ‘secret’ voting was an old-fashioned way of working. Members should be completely accountable for their actions;
- social media was being widely used at meetings, reporting on who was in support or against specific proposals based on the content of their speeches. However, a Member saying they were in support of a proposal in a speech did not necessarily mean they would vote in favour.

Voting on the motion, with 4 votes in favour and 5 against, the Civic Affairs Committee **RECOMMENDED** that the motion be lost.

Discussion ensued on the related-issue of recording or webcasting meetings of Full Council and the Civic Affairs Committee **REQUESTED** that a report be submitted to its next meeting on the feasibility and options for recording or webcasting future meetings of Full Council.

5. PETITIONS SCHEME

Graham Watts, Democratic Services Team Leader, presented a report which provided the Civic Affairs Committee with an opportunity to consider a revised version of the Council’s Petitions Scheme.

The following points were noted during discussion:

- the revised scheme should make it clear that e-petitions could still be used, rather than petitioners having to solely submit paper versions of petitions;

- it would be difficult for some smaller Parishes to achieve the 100 signature threshold that would trigger a debate at a meeting of Full Council. A percentage based on the electorate for small Parishes should therefore be introduced;
- the Chairman should be able to use his or her discretion to allow debate to exceed the maximum time limit of 30 minutes, if necessary;
- in answer to a question regarding the Council's e-petition system, it was apparent that a process of verification needed to be investigated and introduced in respect of electronic signatories to petitions.

The Civic Affairs Committee **RECOMMENDED** the revised Petitions Scheme to Full Council for approval, subject to the following:

- (a) The inclusion of clear reference to the use of e-petitions, including a link to and instructions for the Council's e-petitions facility.
- (b) The inclusion of a Chairman's discretion enabling the debate of a petition at a meeting of Full Council to exceed a maximum of 30 minutes if necessary.
- (c) The replacement of the word 'unsatisfied' with 'dissatisfied' on the final heading of the Scheme.
- (d) The inclusion of a percentage-based trigger for smaller parishes in respect of petitions for debate at a meeting of Full Council.

The Civic Affairs Committee **REFERRED** the issue of e-petition verification to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate and Customer Services for consideration.

6. COUNTY ELECTORAL REVIEW

Andrew Francis, Electoral Services Manager, presented details of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's review of Cambridgeshire County Council. It was noted that the 12 week public consultation inviting proposals for new electoral arrangements closed on 19 January 2015, so the Civic Affairs Committee was invited to submit a response to the consultation on behalf of South Cambridgeshire District Council.

Members made the following points during discussion:

- the housing permissions and allocations included in the electoral forecasts for South Cambridgeshire District Council were inaccurate and did not reflect planned new developments, particularly the growth figures for Northstowe which had been incorrectly split between Longstanton and Oakington;
- there were a number of errors in the data for Parish Council sizes across the District, with Barrington, Girton and Melbourn cited at the meeting as examples. It was apparent, however, that many of the Parish sizes were incorrect in the document and there were also cases where Parishes had been identified as consisting of one Parish Councillor when in fact they had Parish Meetings in place. Mr Francis emphasised that this document had not been produced by South Cambridgeshire District Council and that his Elections Team had not been contacted or requested to provide any information as part of its production;
- Members noted that protecting the identities of local communities was one of the central aims of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and the Committee supported that principle. It was agreed that this should be reflected within the Committee's response, together with a request that this issue be considered very carefully as part of the boundary review.

The Civic Affairs Committee unanimously **AGREED** to submit a response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on the boundary review of Cambridgeshire, highlighting the following issues:

- (a) The Committee strongly disagreed with the housing permissions and allocations included in the elections forecasts for South Cambridgeshire.
- (b) The Committee expressed its disappointment at the inaccurate record of parish electorates by individual parish, particularly regarding Parish Council size.
- (c) The Committee asked that the principle of protecting the identities of local communities was considered very carefully as part of the boundary review.

7. UPDATE ON CODE OF CONDUCT COMPLAINTS

Fiona McMillan, Legal and Democratic Services Manager and Monitoring Officer, presented a report which updated the Civic Affairs Committee on complaints cases regarding alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct.

The report was **NOTED**.

8. MATTERS OF TOPICAL INTEREST

Fiona McMillan, Legal and Democratic Services Manager and Monitoring Officer, provided the Civic Affairs Committee with information on a case at another Council whereby the Crown Prosecution Service had instituted proceedings against the Leader of Dorset County Council for three offences under the Localism Act.

It was noted that this was thought to be the first case where powers under the Localism Act had been used to prosecute a Member in relation to failing to declare an interest.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting of the Civic Affairs Committee would be held on 23 April 2015 at 10.30am.

The Meeting ended at 12.30 p.m.
