

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 15 June 2006

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

Councillors:	RF Bryant	Mrs SM Ellington
	Mrs EM Heazell	PT Johnson
	SGM Kindersley	MJ Mason
	DC McCraith	DH Morgan
	Mrs CAED Murfitt	CR Nightingale
	Mrs HM Smith	RT Summerfield
	Dr SEK van de Ven	

Councillors Dr DR Bard, SM Edwards, Mrs A Elsby, Dr SA Harangozo, Mrs DP Roberts, Mrs DSK Spink MBE and JF Williams were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
	Claire Spencer	Senior Planning Officer (Transport Policy)
	Tim Wetherfield	Head of Policy and Communication

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor RE Barrett and Andrew Lansley MP.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 April 2006 were agreed as a correct record subject to the amendment of Jo Ungar's job title to Team Leader Housing Services.

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 May 2006 were agreed as a correct record.

Cambridgeshire Association of Local Councils (CALC)

The Committee agreed to invite Keith Barrand, the County Secretary of the Cambridgeshire Association of Local Councils (CALC), to the meeting on 21 September 2006. Mr Barrand will give a short presentation on the aims and objectives of CALC.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors SGM Kindersley and DC McCraith declared personal interests in item 7 as members of the County Council.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

It was noted that five public questions had been received, which all related to agenda item 7 on concessionary fares. It was agreed that these questions should be dealt with under agenda item 7.

It was understood that the large number of letters received by Members on concessionary fares was testament to the importance of this issue to the District's residents.

5. DRAFT AGENDA PROGRAMME AND PROGRAMME OF KEY DECISIONS

Presentation by portfolio holders

The Committee agreed that no more than two portfolio holders should give presentations at each meeting.

CRB Checks and protection of children and vulnerable adults

The Committee agreed to combine its discussion on the possible development of a policy on CRB checks with an examination of the Council's policy on children and vulnerable adults.

Financial Management Strategy

It was suggested that an examination of the Council's Medium-Term Financial Strategy should take place after Cabinet had discussed it in October 2006.

Lettings Policy

It was agreed that discussion on the Council's letting policy should be delayed to allow the new portfolio holder to gain more experience in the role.

Road use

The Committee agreed to add an item onto the agenda programme on the overuse of roads in the District, although it was noted that this was not a responsibility of the Council.

Recommendations of the Sub-Group

The Committee agreed to discuss the recommendations of the Sub-Group at its next meeting.

The Committee **NOTED** the agenda programme.

6. APPOINTMENT OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBER OF HEALTH SCRUTINY PANEL

Councillors Mrs EM Hezell and Mrs SM Ellington both volunteered to represent the Council on the Health Scrutiny Panel in the absence of Councillor RE Barrett.

A vote was taken and Councillor Mrs Hezell was duly elected as the substitute member on the Health Scrutiny Panel.

7. CONCESSIONARY FARES

The Chairman introduced this item on the implementation of the concessionary fares scheme by welcoming County Councillor John Reynolds and Mark Kemp, Director of Highways and Access from the County Council. County Councillor John Reynolds explained that both he and Mr Kemp supported the report written by the Senior Planning Policy Officer (Transport).

Implementation of the new scheme

Councillor Mrs DSK Spink, portfolio holder for planning and economic development, stated that the Council had received government guidance on the new scheme on 22 November 2005, with instructions to inform the bus operators of the arrangements for the new scheme by 1 December 2005. This had been a considerable challenge as the scheme affects 56 bus operators. Councillor Mrs Spink concluded that the Government were responsible for the current unsatisfactory situation as they had imposed an unfair system with insufficient time for consultation and an inequitable apportionment of funding. It was understood that due to the timescales imposed by the Government, the

District Council's budget had been set prior to the announcement of the detailed Government funding of the scheme.

Councillor Mrs Spink accepted that the new scheme was inferior to the half-fare scheme that it replaced. She concluded that the new scheme would run for 12 months and it was unlikely that there would be any major changes to the scheme during that time. County Councillor Reynolds explained that the County Council had lobbied the Government in an effort to secure a similar scheme to the one that operated in Wales and Scotland, which allowed free travel across council boundaries.

It was noted that the scheme operating in the District provided a larger concession than the statutory minimum and that the Leaders of all the District Councils in the County would be making a joint statement. It was understood that a meeting was due to take place between the Council and the bus operators later this month.

Number of villages without a bus service

Councillor Mrs EM Heazell asked how many villages in the District had no bus service and which villages were eligible for a multi-user saver ticket. The Senior Planning Policy Officer (Transport) agreed to find out the answers to these questions and report back. It was suggested that all villages had some form of bus service, but for some villages this was only one bus a week.

Working with the bus operators

County Councillor Reynolds warned that a requirement of the scheme was to ensure that the bus operators neither profited nor incurred any loss. This meant that the bus operators could claim "additional costs" for setting up and operating the new scheme from district authorities. The total amount for these costs was not known. However, it was noted that the current scheme would end on 31st March 2008, when a national scheme would be implemented, so fears of year on year costs were unfounded. The Government had not specified what would replace the existing system.

The County's Director of Highways and Access explained that ticket information from bus operators would be forthcoming and would be shared with the other councils in the County. This would provide an indication of whether the estimated cost of the scheme was accurate. He explained that the statutory minimum imposed by the Government was for free travel within the District after 9:30am. It was noted that the District Council was providing a service above the statutory minimum. He assured the Committee that the County Council was working closely with the operators to get a uniform service throughout the District. It was understood that the bus companies were commercial organisations and local authorities could not dictate bus routes or services.

Councillor CR Nightingale asked whether action could be taken to ensure that all the bus companies implemented the scheme in the same way. County Councillor Reynolds explained that bus operator staff had been trained and any reports of bus operators failing to implement the agreed system were dealt with on a case by case basis.

Allocation of funding from the Government

In response to questioning County Councillor Reynolds suggested that the Government should have awarded funding directly to the County Councils, as the authority responsible for transport. He added that in his experience Government funding never matched the cost of the service to be implemented. It was suggested that the grant money from the Government should have been "ring-fenced" for concessionary fares. County Councillor Reynolds explained that this would require primary legislation, which would need to be introduced as a bill in parliament. The earliest this could happen was October 2006.

Work by the consultant

The consultant employed by the County Council had estimated that it would cost the District Council £559,000 to implement the scheme for this year. The Senior Planning Policy Officer (Transport) agreed to examine why the cost of a free countywide scheme was over three times the cost of a half-fare scheme, when layman's logic suggested it should only cost twice as much. In response to questioning County Councillor Reynolds praised the work carried out by the consultant, who had done his best with the information available.

Park & Ride

County Councillor Reynolds explained that Park and Ride carried over 1.6 million fare-paying passengers in 2005 and he remained committed to promoting public transport in Cambridge, as an alternative to travelling by car. It was understood that nationally some Park and Ride sites had free parking whilst others charged for the parking but had free bus travel.

It was noted that the bus stop for Trumpington Park and Ride was just outside the District's boundary.

Additional costs

It was understood that the local authorities were liable for the additional costs from the bus operators arising as a direct result of the implementation of the new scheme. The Committee expressed concern at how much this will cost the Council; the current cost was £21,000 and Stagecoach, the largest operator in the District, had not yet claimed.

Compiling statistics on concessionary fare usage.

It was suggested that many bus users were not bothering to use their concessionary fare bus passes when it offered no discount. It was therefore possible that the actual costs of implementing a county-wide scheme were being hidden. It was therefore suggested that all concessionary bus pass holders show their passes, even if it offered no discount, as this would allow accurate figures on concessionary bus pass use to be compiled. However, there was no evidence that the Government would use this information when awarding funding for future schemes.

Funding from parish councils

In response to a question from Ickleton Parish Council, Councillor Mrs Spink stated that while it would be possible in principle for parish councils to subsidise the concessionary fare scheme, in practice it would require all 101 parish councils to contribute £5,280 each to provide free travel for all residents in the District. It was very unlikely that all parishes would agree to such a scheme and it was equally unlikely that the bus operators would agree to a piecemeal scheme which offered different deals to residents of different parishes.

County Council budgets

In response to questioning County Councillor Reynolds explained that the County Council's efficiency savings of approximately £1 million, out of a total budget of £511 million, would not be spent on subsidising the concessionary fares scheme. He added that the County Council's reserves were well below average.

Calculating funding

On the invitation of the Chairman, Mr Ian Tyes from the COPE Transport Committee, addressed the Committee. He expressed doubt over the accuracy of the consultant's figures in table 1 on page 18 of the agenda and doubts over the fairness of the allocation of funding to each district. Councillor Mrs Spink stated that the local authorities did not

know how the Government had calculated the apportionment of funds to the local district authorities and she encouraged all interested parties to write to the Government to express their concerns over the scheme.

Alternative scheme

Mr Tyes suggested that all eligible residents should be given a free week's bus pass. However, it was understood that the local authorities currently had no option but to work within the parameters of the existing scheme.

In conclusion Councillor Mrs Spink stated that the lack of funding from the Government meant that the Council was unable to provide the level of service that it wanted to give.

The Committee **RECOMMENDED** that

- (a) The County Council continue to work with each district authority and start to look ahead to next year with the aim of implementing of a county-wide scheme under the auspices of the County Council.
- (b) All stakeholders continue to liaise with central government, in particular with regard to the allocation of funding, to attempt to implement a county-wide scheme.

The Committee **AGREED** that the appropriate officer liaise with Councillor Dr SEK van de Ven regarding a possible rewording of the FAQs on concessionary fares scheme displayed on the Council's web-site.

The Chairman thanked County Councillor John Reynolds and Mark Kemp, the County Council's Director of Highways and Access, for their attendance and comprehensive responses to the questions asked.

8. MONITORING THE EXECUTIVE

The Senior Democratic Services Officer presented this item by explaining that the Scrutiny Sub-Group had recommended that the Committee agree to a formal monitoring of the executive, with two members, ideally from different political groups, monitoring each portfolio. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman would deputise in the absence of one of the monitors. It was envisaged that the monitors would attend portfolio holder meetings.

Councillor DH Morgan expressed his opposition to this recommendation and asked for the notes of the Sub-Group meeting to be amended to register this fact.

Cabinet opposition to the scheme

Councillor Mrs DP Roberts, housing portfolio holder, asked how the monitoring of portfolios would benefit the Council and expressed concern that individual monitors could seek to unfairly influence the Committee by reporting issues out of context. She asserted that both monitors should attend portfolio holder meetings to prevent misrepresentation. Councillor Mrs DSK Spink, planning and economic development portfolio holder, informed the Committee that attending portfolio holder and Cabinet meetings was only part of the duties for a member of the executive. Councillor SM Edwards, resources, staffing, information and customer services portfolio holder, welcomed the attendance of non-executive members at his portfolio holder meetings, but could see no reason why a formal monitoring system should be introduced by the Committee.

Members of the Committee suggested the following benefits for a monitoring system:

- It suited the new political situation, with one group in opposition
- It was common practice in other authorities
- It would help to ensure that the work of every portfolio holder is scrutinised
- It would help to educate each monitor on the work of the portfolio holders
- The monitors would help to ensure that the Committee is better informed
- The empowerment of the monitors could lead to future positions on the Cabinet

Other Members of the Committee made the following comments against the Sub-Group's recommendations:

- It should be the responsibilities of each political group, not the Committee, to appoint monitors
- All members were able to attend portfolio holder and cabinet meetings
- The Weekly Bulletin informs Members of all the executive decisions taken
- The call-in procedure could be invoked if more discussion was deemed necessary
- A formal monitoring arrangement would constrain Scrutiny members on what they could scrutinise.

A vote was taken and on the deciding vote of the Chairman, after 6 votes were received both for and against the recommendation, the Committee

AGREED

- (a) to appoint two monitors to each portfolio, with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman to deputise in the event of absence of the monitor.
- (b) That if possible the two members should be of different political groups
- (c) The decision to allocate the monitoring roles should be deferred to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman.

Members of the Committee were asked to contact the Senior Democratic Services Officer to express their preferences regarding the monitoring roles.

9. PRESENTATION FROM THE LEADER

The Chairman invited Councillor Dr DR Bard to give a ten-minute presentation on the challenges that he expects to face as Leader for the coming year. This was followed by a question and answer session.

Transformation Project

Councillor Bard stated that the duties of second tier managers were being reviewed and the Council needed to ensure that following the implementation of the project it continued to deliver value for money services.

Financial Management

Councillor Bard stated that the Council needed to try and improve its financial management. In response to questioning he explained that he had mentioned the audit score of 2 out of 4 for Financial Management as an example of the importance of this issue and he quoted a recent £339,000 underspend to illustrate this point.

Public Opinion

Councillor Bard expressed his concern regarding the cynicism of residents for the political process, as recent research showed that less people felt that they could influence local decision making now, than three years ago. He stated that communication had undoubtedly improved and praised the Communication Team for the production of the South Cambs magazine and the other work they carried out to

achieve. However, it appeared that better communication had led to an increase in expectations. He concluded that it was imperative that local people were included in the decision making process and cited the example of Green Road, Sawston where local residents felt that they had not been kept properly informed. He hoped that this breakdown in communication would not re-occur.

Councillor Mrs Heazell, as the former housing portfolio holder who had been involved with the decision at Green Road Sawston, asked for an apology from Councillor Bard, because nothing had been authorised before the Sawston residents had been consulted at a number of group meeting. Councillor Bard suggested that there had been a misunderstanding and explained that he was concerned with the public perception of the district's residents. He concluded that on this issue the public perception was that they had not been properly consulted on this matter.

Contact Centre

Councillor Bard recognised the Contact Centre as an effective way of communicating with residents. In response to questioning, he suggested that communication between officers in the Contact Centre and officers at the main office, needed to be improved.

Performance Indicators

Councillor Bard appealed to the Committee to assist the executive by scrutinising performance management. This task could become easier if the number of performance indicators was reduced.

Recycling

Councillor Bard praised the Council's record on recycling and suggested that more partnership working on this issue was required.

Sustainable Development

Councillor Bard stated that the Council should focus on the ways in which energy efficient features could be installed in new houses. In response to questioning he expressed the hope that this was an issue where there would be cross-party support.

Councillor Bard concluded by thanking the staff for their efforts.

10. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the future dates of the Committee:

2006: July 20, August 17, September 21, October 19, November 16 & December 21

2007: January 18, February 15, March 15, April 19 & May 17.

All meetings to be held at 2pm.

The Meeting ended at 5.50 p.m.
