SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

At a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee held on
Thursday, 21 September 2006

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	Mrs HM Smith
	RT Summerfield	Dr SEK van de Ven

Councillors Dr DR Bard, JD Batchelor, SM Edwards, Mrs A Elsby, RMA Manning, Mrs DP Roberts and Mrs DSK Spink MBE were in attendance, by invitation.

Officers:	Patrick Adams	Senior Democratic Services Officer
	Greg Harlock	Chief Executive
	Gareth Jones	Head of Planning Services
	Simon McIntosh	Head of Community Services
	Dale Robinson	Chief Environmental Health Officer
	Tim Wetherfield	Head of Policy and Communication

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors PT Johnson and DH Morgan.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 July 2006 were accepted as a correct record subject to the following amendments:

- The inclusion of Councillor MJ Mason's apologies for this meeting.
- The penultimate heading on page 6 be amended to read: "Housing staffing".
- The first sentence under this heading be amended to read: "In response to a question concerning whether Councillor Mrs Roberts, now she was housing portfolio holder, still felt that the Housing department was overstaffed, Councillor Mrs Roberts explained that …"
- In the second paragraph under this heading the word McGuinness was amended to "Guinness" and expertise was amended to "knowledge".

The Committee queried the assertion made at the last meeting by the conservation, sustainability and community planning portfolio holder that Cabinet's decision not to establish a Climate Change Advisory Group and disband the informal Climate Change Group had been unanimous, as Councillor SM Edwards had proposed that a formal Climate Change Advisory Group be established, but with no seconder the motion had fallen.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The following Councillors declared a personal interest in item 7, as members of Parish Councils: Councillor RE Barrett (Balsham), Councillor Mrs SM Ellington (Swavesey), Councillor MJ Mason (Histon), Councillor CR Nightingale (Great Shelford), Councillor

Mrs HM Smith (Milton) and Councillor RT Summerfield (Milton).

Councillor DC McCraith declared a personal interest in item 7, as the Council's representative on CALC and as a County Councillor.

Councillor SGM Kindersley declared a personal interest in item 7, as the Clerk to Hatley parish council and as a County Councillor.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None.

5. DRAFT AGENDA PROGRAMME AND PROGRAMME OF KEY DECISIONS

Bus Services
The Committee welcomed the recent settlement regarding the concessionary fares bus scheme, but expressed the view that this was still a major issue and the following points should be discussed at the Committee's next meeting:

- Bus services to rural communities
- The bus service to towns outside the County such as Bedford or Letchworth
- The bus service before 9:30 am

Councillor Mrs DSK Spink, Planning and Economic Development portfolio holder, explained that the scheme, which had been agreed with other neighbouring authorities, was in place until 2008, full details of which were available on the Council's website. The Head of Policy and Communication suggested that the Committee focus on what the Council can achieve with its limited resources. The Chairman explained that the County Council would not be prepared to send either officers or councillors to a meeting of a District Council, which scrutinised a service that they provided.

Staff Sickness
With the agreement of the portfolio holder, it was decided that the Council's performance regarding staff sickness be examined at the next meeting.

6. REPORTS FROM MONITORS

The Chairman introduced this item which allowed monitors of portfolio holders to report on items of interest. He invited Members to put items on the agenda in future.

Assessing homelessness
Councillor Mrs EM Heazell opposed the referral of decisions on whether residents were intentionally or unintentionally homeless to officers. Under the old political structures a panel of members resolved these cases before the meetings of the Housing Committee and Councillor Mrs Heazell suggested that a panel of non-executive members be set up to assess these cases. Councillor Mrs DP Roberts replied that officers had an overview of the facts and so were best placed to make ruling on this issue. The decision to refer these matters to officers had been made after consultation with the Executive Director. Councillor Mrs Roberts volunteered to bring a report to the Committee at a later date.

The Committee **AGREED** that an item on how the Council assessed whether tenants were unintentionally or intentionally homeless should be received by the Committee in 6 months time.

Microphone system
Councillor MJ Mason supported the resources, staffing, information and customer services portfolio holder in his investigation into the continued failure of the microphone system and added that the hearing loops picked up distracting background noise, especially when made close to the microphones and their connections.

Plan-Web
Councillor Mason expressed his disappointment in the continued unavailability of the plan-web system to Members. Councillor Edwards, resources, staffing, information and customer services portfolio holder, explained that the security to the intranet had to be improved before Members could access plan-web from their homes, although the system was accessible from the office. He explained that he delayed the presentation of the ICT Strategy to Cabinet because he wanted to ensure the quality of the final report and he could do so without any serious consequences for the Council.

Milton Country Park
Councillor Mrs HM Smith stated that the decisions being taken with regard to Milton Country Park were piecemeal and so it was unlikely that any one decision would be brought before the Committee. She pledged to keep the Committee updated on further developments.

Choice based lettings
In response to questioning, Councillor Mrs DP Roberts explained that an Advisory Group on choice based lettings was in the process of being set up.

7. PRESENTATION FROM THE COUNTY SECRETARY OF THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS (CALC)

The Chairman invited Keith Barrand, Chief Executive of the Cambridgeshire Association of Local Councils (CALC) to address the Committee.

Mr Barrand gave a presentation on what CALC does and its relationship with the Council and the District's parish councils. He concluded that both organisations could achieve more by working together in partnership.

Contributions from District Councils
It was understood that the Council paid £1,500 per year to CALC, which equated to £15 per affiliated parish council. This was lower than other adjoining districts such as Fenland who paid £2,000 a year and over £100 per parish council and East Cambridgeshire who paid £1,700 a year and over £40 per parish council. Mr Barrand suggested that the reason for the discrepancies were largely historic with each authority giving a percentage increase of the amount awarded in the previous year.

Attendance at CALC meetings
In response to questioning Mr Barrand stated that in order to improve the debate at CALC meetings the agenda and reports were circulated in advance. He asked Councillor DC McCraith to provide his e-mail address as it appeared that e-mails from CALC to the Council's representative were not getting through.

Legal advice
Mr Barrand stated that CALC had taken on the responsibility of giving legal advice to parish councils in October 2005 and as a consequence the Council were receiving 1,000 less calls a year.

Mr Barrand explained that the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) had found

it difficult to keep to the terms of their Service Level Agreement and as a consequence important requests had been prioritised.

Quality Parish Status
Mr Barrand expressed his support for the Quality Parish Status scheme and he expressed pride in those Cambridgeshire parish councils who were applying for that status. He suggested that its importance may increase following the Government's white paper on "double devolution".

Training
Mr Barrand suggested that training on the Code of Conduct could be best provided by working in partnership.

Cambridgeshire Horizons
Mr Barrand explained that CALC had met with Cambridgeshire Horizons to improve communication and this should not be seen as an attempt to by-pass the proper planning authorities.

Footway lights
Mr Barrand recognised that the Council had made a difficult decision regarding footway lights, but he suggested that earlier consultation with CALC could have been beneficial to all involved. Councillor Mrs Spink stated that as the Environmental Health portfolio holder at the time she ensured that a letter was sent out in October 2005 to all parish councils informing them of the situation regarding footway lighting. It was understood that it would have been impossible to inform the parish councils any earlier as the decision had not been made. Mr Barrand stated that with hindsight it may have been better if the Council had shared information regarding its financial predicament earlier.

The Head of Community Service reported that he had attended a CALC meeting at the invitation of Mr Barrand where it had been suggested that the Council consult on its budget in November/December time instead of February.

Future of CALC
Mr Barrand explained that the number of enquiries received by CALC had increased by 50% in the last three years and that this justified the 4% increase in membership fees.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman thanked Mr Barrand for his attendance and informative answers.

8. PRESENTATION FROM THE PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Councillor Mrs DSK Spink, planning and economic development portfolio holder, thanked the Committee for asking her to give a presentation on her portfolio. She reminded the Committee that the Council's planning section had recently gone through a change in management, two audits and were currently going through the LDF process.

Concessionary fares
Councillor Mrs Spink listed the villages and towns for which residents could now travel to under a concessionary rate. It was noted that Letchworth, Bedford and Sandy were not included.

Financial constraints
In response to questioning, Councillor Mrs Spink stated that the challenges facing her portfolio were complicated by the financial constraints now placed on the authority. The

Head of Planning expressed the hope that funds could be secured that would allow the Council to purchase new monitors for the displaying of plans at Planning Committee meetings.

Major developments
The Head of Planning stated that the Council were proud of what had been achieved at Cambourne. Councillor Mrs Spink concurred and added that lessons had been learnt from Cambourne and the Council would work in partnership with other authorities in the delivery of major new developments. She also stated that the Council was benefiting from the experience gained by a youthful planning team.

In response to doubts over whether the Council had the resources to deliver the agreed development, Councillor Mrs Spink explained that the Council's aims were realistic and that efforts were being made to secure funding from Cambridgeshire Horizons and developers for additional staffing, without compromising the authority's independence. The Head of Planning added that the integrity and independence of officers was sacrosanct and that the current staffing levels were sufficient to deal with the existing pressures.

Traffic figures
The Head of Planning explained that the County Council had a simulation model that predicted the likely impact an application would have on traffic figures. Clearly they have to be satisfied with the data fed into that model. In instances where members are concerned about the accuracy of these figures, this should be raised with the relevant case officer in the first instance.

Affordable housing
In response to questioning, Councillor Mrs Spink concurred that local services and transport links influenced the location of low cost houses. The Head of Planning explained that under existing policies the Council could consider making exceptions to its planning policies if it meant delivering affordable housing.

Consultation by the County Council on the location of a recycling centre
The Head of Planning agreed to speak to Councillor Mrs Heazell outside the meeting on the subject of consultation by the County Council regarding the location of a recycling centre within the District.

Political decisions
In response to questioning, Councillor Mrs Spink explained that planning decisions taken by the Council were based on what was best for residents, not by manifestos drawn up by political parties.

Regional Spatial Strategy
The Head of Planning explained that the Council had taken the initiative with the RSS and included a number of possible locations for traveller sites. The Council had enjoyed the co-operation of parish councils in this initiative including Cottenham. The Head of Policy and Communication added that an article on the Gypsy and Traveller Development Plan Document had been included in the South Cambs Magazine.

Local Development Framework (LDF)
In response to concerns that the Council's LDF would not be accepted, Councillor Mrs Spink stated that the LDF had been examined by experts and she was confident that it would be accepted by the Government.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Mrs Spink and the Head of Planning for their

presentation and informative answers.

9. PRESENTATION FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PORTFOLIO HOLDER

The Chairman welcomed Councillor RMA Manning, environmental health portfolio holder, to the meeting. Councillor Manning explained that it was his responsibility to decide the priorities and the officers' responsibility to implement these decisions. He concluded that the overarching issue was a lack of resources and money to improve services and urged Members to accept that the Council had to get used to managing on less. He summarised the four priorities of his portfolio as:

- Collecting rubbish
- Street cleaning
- Drainage issues
- Food safety

Future challenges
In response to questioning, Councillor Manning stated that the main challenge facing him was the lack of resources and funding which meant that he had to try and deliver better services for less money. However, Councillor Manning assured the Committee that he would meet his budget.

Recruitment of staff
Councillor Manning stated that the recruitment of staff was a challenge facing the Council and in an attempt to tackle this, enhancements to in-house training for Environmental Health Officers, HGV drivers was being considered. The District was an area of low unemployment, which made it harder to recruit manual workers.

Street cleaning
It was understood that budgetary constraints and the difficulty in recruiting staff was an issue with street cleaning, where the Council's performance was in the bottom quartile with a 63% satisfaction rating. It was noted that this survey was last carried out in 2003/04 and would be done again in 2006/07. It was noted that the Council was not responsible for cleaning "special" roads or Motorways.

Plastic Recycling
Councillor Manning explained that the current contractor was struggling to collect from the plastic banks before they became full. This company was on a yearly contract but there were a limited number of organisations that could carry out this work.

Recycling
The Council had achieved beacon status for waste collection and recycling. Councillor Manning stated that the recycling rates could be improved further by contacting the parish councils who had lower recycling rates and encouraging them to improve. It was noted that recycling waste was often more expensive than dealing with all waste as refuse.

Waste collection
The Chief Environmental Heath Officer explained that ideally the same teams would always collect waste from the same areas, which would ensure consistency of service. However, due to the constraint on resources, teams would sometimes have to cover different areas, which could mean that bins, which were overfilled and had been collected before were now being left. It was understood that the decision to collect an overfull bin was at the discretion of the loader, especially for health and safety reasons.

Assisted collections
The Chief Environmental Health Officer explained that residents who wanted an assisted collection would be visited by staff if the request was not straightforward. He advised against asking Members to make these visits as the Council needed to be consistent. It was noted that new development in the District could lead to an increase in the number of plastic sack collections.

Enviro-Crime
It was understood that the Council were focussing on prosecuting fly-tippers and this strategy was being publicised.

Taxi-Licensing
Councillor Manning expressed disappointment in a recent news article on taxi licensing which failed to recognise that this Council carried out targeted inspections which focussed on the older licenses, compared to other authorities who merely carried out random inspections.

Street cleaning
Councillor Manning explained that the Council was responsible for cleaning the streets in the District, but the County Council was responsible for clearing the gutters of weeds. It was noted that at a recent CALC meeting it had been stated that the strength of weed-killer used by the County Council had been reduced for legal reasons.

Councillor Manning remarked that the Council were liaising with parish councils on the Cleaner Neighbourhoods and Environment Act. He remarked that if there were sufficient funding the Council could ensure that only local people worked on local streets, as this would foster pride in the work carried out.

Land drainage
Councillor Manning stated that flooding was a complex issue involving many partners and he suggested that drainage systems were better where the Council had responsibility for the watercourse. The Chief Environmental Health Officer added that one of the challenges was to ensure that owners of land that required drainage work took their responsibilities seriously.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Manning and the Chief Environmental Health Officer for their presentation and informative answers.

10. MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY SUB-GROUP

Councillor R Hall, the Vice-Chairman of the Committee and Chairman of the Sub-Group introduced this item on the recommendations made to the Committee.

Member Training
The Committee

AGREED that modules of the LGIU training course be sent to members of the Committee in regular instalments.

Webpage
The Committee **noted** that Councillors Hall and Mrs HM Smith were liaising with officers on ways in which the scrutiny webpage could be improved.

Committee layout
The Committee **noted** the Sub-Groups recommendation, agreed to by the Chairman,

that the table layout for the Committee be in a U shape. The Committee agreed that this was a superior layout to the previous formation and it

RECOMMENDED TO CABINET that the room layout for Cabinet be altered to a U shape.

11. TO NOTE THE DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee **NOTED** the following future meeting dates:
2006: 19 October, 16 November & 21 December
2007: 18 January, 15 February, 15 March, 19 April & 17 May

The Meeting ended at 5.30 p.m.
